

STATE WILDLIFE GRANT

State of Illinois SWG 08 Grant Segment

PROJECT TITLE: FARM BILL BIOLOGISTS B GRAND PRAIRIE AND SOUTHERN TILL PLAIN GRASSLAND WILDLIFE VENTURES

PROJECT NUMBER: T-64 - D

NEED:

Illinois' nickname "The Prairie State" evokes an image of a vast, unbroken landscape of tallgrass prairie, but because of prairie conversion to agriculture and wetland drainage, vistas of corn and soybeans now exist. Less than 2,600 acres of high-quality prairie currently remain and most grasslands are small, isolated and poorly managed. Thus, prairie is the most severely diminished habitat type in the state and the associated grassland wildlife populations have declined rapidly.

To address these rapidly declining wildlife populations, the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) was developed to establish goals to prevent further population declines. As part of this plan, actions were developed under the Farmland and Prairie Campaign to guide wildlife managers with the development of strategies to improve the quantity, condition, and juxtaposition of grassland, early successional/shrub, and wetland habitats in prairie landscapes Section III, Part E, pages 71-76.

The Department and its habitat partners (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever, Illinois Audubon, Quail Forever) developed two strategies focusing on two different Natural Divisions and on two different groups of grassland wildlife. These initiatives are designed to benefit both game and non-game to broaden public appeal and engage a broad diversity of partners. The Grand Prairie Grassland Wildlife Venture focuses on providing high quality habitat for ring-necked pheasants and other farmland wildlife, Section IV, Part B, pages 130-140, and the Southern Till Plain Wildlife Initiative focuses on the greater prairie chicken and associated grassland wildlife, Section IV, Part K, pages 203-212, both in the Illinois WAP.

Farmland/Prairie Wildlife Partnership believes the restoration and management of grasslands/shrubland/wetlands wildlife focus areas within the agricultural landscape and identified by the two Grassland Wildlife Ventures and will result in improved wildlife populations as well as environmental and socioeconomic benefits for the State. This effort represents the first statewide scale project concerned specifically with grassland wildlife habitat restoration. Following is a brief summary of strategies recommended by the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, pages 73-74, and supported by the Farmland and Prairie Wildlife Partnership Partners to meet these habitat goals:

- 1) "Through incentives-based programs and technical assistance, establish or restore grassland, early successional/shrub, wetland, and riparian habitat" - These programs would:
 - a. emphasize treeless grasslands larger than 0.6 mile wide and ecological connectivity among grasslands and other habitat patches to conserve grassland species of greatest need of conservation.
 - b. Establish additional shrub/successional habitat with native species, and use prescribe fire

and mechanical disturbance to manage habitats.

- c. Work with conservation partners and private landowners statewide to enhance small woodlots and forest with native shrub-dominated, early successional edges and perennial herbaceous borders.
- d. Unlike guidelines for forest where large unfragmented patches are desired, expanses of row crop cultivation ought to be integrated with grassland shrub/successional and open woodland habitat to increase wildlife access to land area and beneficial values of cropland.

2) Through incentives-based programs and technical assistance, moderate disturbance regimes and enhance the condition of farmland habitats.”

Only 3% of Illinois is under public ownership. If the above goals are going to be met, much of the work must occur on private lands. The federal Farm Bill programs can be significant tools to achieve these goals. The State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), CP-38 practice was developed within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). In Illinois, SAFE is used to meet the habitat goals of the Farmland and Prairie Campaign. Based upon those goals, 22 township-sized focus areas in the Grand Prairie Natural Division (28 counties in central and northern Illinois) for restoration of grasslands and wetlands in prairie landscapes for pheasants and other grassland wildlife (10,300 acres). In the Southern Till Plain Natural Division, 9 focus areas have been established (8 counties in south-central Illinois) for restoration of grassland habitat for greater prairie chickens (10,300 acres). A map for these SAFE areas can be found on IDNR’s website (<http://www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/safe/>) or Appendix A. CRP practices that are eligible for SAFE are as follows:

- CP9 - Shallow water wetlands – This practice results in the development of a shallow open wetland which average 6” to 18” in depth for the majority of the year. These wetlands are formed by excavations and/or impounding existing drainage ways.
- CP23A - Wetland restoration, non-floodplain - The hydrology of the site is restored by this CRP practice to its original hydrology. Typically, artificial surface or sub-surface drainage is removed or “plugged” and buffer vegetation is planted around the wetland.
- CP1 - Cool season grasses and legumes - Introduced grass and legume plantings are established for a variety of wildlife by this practice. These planting can be done by a drill, broadcasting or aerial seeding.
- CP2 - Warm season grasses - Native grasses and forbs are established using a native grass drill or broadcasting seed.
- CP4D - Permanent wildlife habitat – A wildlife habitat planting is combination of grasses forbs, legumes, and/or shrubs that are designed to produce habitat for a variety of wildlife. This practice follows grass and forb planting as outlined by CP1 and CP2.
- CP10 - Established grassland – This practice allows the removal of undesirable plants and using mowing or burning to maintain the grassland.

- CP25 - Declining habitats - The rare and decline habitat practice allows the planting native grass and forbs for a variety of wildlife, especially upland game birds.
- CP33 - Upland bird field borders (Grand Prairie Project Area Only) - This practice allows the establishment of habitat buffers for the northern bobwhite and ring-necked pheasant.

So far only 2,121 (10.3%) of the available 20,600 acres have been enrolled. The two primary reasons cited for this low participation are landowners' lack of knowledge of the SAFE program and the dramatic spike in farm commodity prices in 2008. We have no control over commodity prices, but hope to encourage producer enrollment by providing clear information about the program and quality technical support. We hope to accomplish this by placing qualified biologists in the county offices.

Other states have successfully teamed with Pheasants Forever to do just that through their Farm Bill Biologist (FBB) Program. Farm Bill Biologists are typically housed in county NRCS/SWCD offices where they can directly provide service to producers and cooperators. FBBs typically answer technical wildlife questions, write wildlife plans and provide follow-up. We would like to fund up to five FBBs (2 in the Grand Prairie and 3 in the Southern Till Plain) to focus on Farmland and Grassland Campaign goals within designated SAFE areas and within the counties in which they are located.

OBJECTIVES:

Our primary objective is to increase grassland acreage within selected SAFE areas. We would like to identify landowners in the selected SAFE areas and provide them with quality wildlife planning and technical support. Using a prioritized approach, we would also like to provide technical support to cooperating agencies (primarily NRCS and SWCD) and landowners found within the selected SAFE counties, but outside the SAFE boundaries. We also hope to achieve better management of existing CRP grassland by encouraging and providing technical support for mid-contract management. Specific objectives for this project are as follow:

- 1) Within year one, at least six workshops on the SAFE program will be conducted
- 2) Within year one, make at least 350 landowner contacts and develop plans for 5,000 acres of wildlife habitat.
- 3) Within year two, make at least 400 landowner contacts and develop plans for 6,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

Progress towards these objectives will be monitor through monthly reports from each of the Farm Bill Biologists.

To achieve these objectives

The grant will assist the Department with achieving the following goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan:

- 1) Use of grassland habitat by migratory grassland sparrows, bobolinks, and meadowlarks has increased by 20% (IWAP, Section III, Part C)
- 2) Implementation of the greater prairie-chicken recovery plan is completed including

recovery of northern harrier, short-eared owl, upland sandpiper, Henslow's sparrow, loggerhead shrike and other endangered species (IWAP, Section III. Part C)

- 3) Add about 124,000 coveys to the pre-hunt autumn population, estimated at 95,000 coveys in 1999. This population could support an annual harvest of 876,000 birds (Section III, Part C).
- 4) Increases the autumn pre-hunt flock of wild ring-necked pheasants to 2 million birds from an estimated current 800,000 birds (Section III, Part C).
- 5) An additional 1 million acres of grassland, emphasizing upland, treeless grasslands larger than 0.5 miles wide and ecological connectivity among grasslands and other habitat patches, are established and maintained (Section III, Part C).
- 6) Five additional "ecological pattern" grassland Bird Conservation Areas have been established (Section III, Part C).

EXPECTED BENEFITS AND RESULTS:

The expected result is an overall increase in high-quality grassland habitat established within the selected SAFE areas. Grassland wildlife populations should increase as a response to the new grasslands on the landscape. Soil erosion should also be reduced in these areas. Landowners and cooperators will also receive quality technical support and advice on establishing wildlife habitat.

The goal of this project is to contact 400 landowners, annually and encourage them to enrolled in CP38 practices, plan for 11,000 acres of grassland/wetland wildlife habitat, and establish 9,500 acres of habitat.

APPROACH:

The Farm Bill Biologists (FBB) will be employees of Pheasants Forever. They will be housed in NRCS/SWCD county offices. Two FBBs will work all SAFE areas in the Southern Till Plain (tentatively stationed in Effingham and Marion Counties) and will be assigned 3 to 4 SAFE areas each. Two FBBs will be assigned to the southern half of the Grand Prairie (tentatively stationed in Ford and Tazewell Counties) will cover at least 5 to 6 SAFE areas apiece. FBBs will provide the IDNR with a monthly report of their activities.

The minimum qualifications for a FBB will be a B.S. degree in wildlife or other environmental degree, basis knowledge of Federal Farm Programs and knowledge of habitat management. Each FBBs will be employed for two years and paid \$37,861 (including benefits) the first year and \$42,740 (including benefits) the second year. The job responsibility for a FBB will be to 1) promote, coordinate and implement the conservation provisions of the Federal Farm Bill and other related wildlife conservation programs, 2) to carry out habitat planning, program promotion, contract coordination, conservation plan modification, site assessment and reporting activities, and 3) provide technical assistance for wildlife habitat enhancement techniques to private landowners and public organizations.

The total cost of this project will be \$450,000 of which \$225,000 will be federal share and the state match will include \$112,500 from the Wildlife and Fish Fund and \$112,500 from the State Pheasant Fund.

BUDGET JUSTIFICATION:

Contractual:

The request includes \$450,000, federal and state match, to contract with Pheasants Forever to provide \$322,404 salaries and benefits for 4 Farm Bill Biologists and \$127,596 operational costs (i.e., travel, office supplies) to implement the proposal.

BY OBJECT CATEGORIES	FED SHARE	STATE SHARE	TOTALS
SALARIES, WAGES, & FRINGE BENEFITS (see note 1)	\$161,202	\$161,202	\$322,404
TRAVEL (see note 2)	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$40,000
EQUIPMENT (\$5,000+)	\$0	\$0	\$0
SUPPLIES/COMMODITIES (see note 3)	\$16,000	\$16,000	\$32,000
CONTRACTUAL (see note 4)	\$27,798	\$27,798	\$55,596
<hr/>			
TOTAL DIRECT CHARGES:	\$225,000	\$225,000	\$450,000
INDIRECT COSTS	\$0	\$0	\$0
<hr/>			
TOTALS	\$225,000	\$225,000	\$450,000
	@ 50%	@ 50%	100%

PROGRAM INCOME: NONE

NOTES:

- Salaries, fringe, and benefits for 4 biologists @ approx. \$37,861/person the 1st year & \$42,740/person the 2nd year.
- Travel, lodging, and per diem expensed for 4 biologists @ approx. \$5,000/person/year X 2 years.
- 4-computers @ approx \$2500 each, 2-printer/scanner/copiers @ approx. \$500, and general office supplies (ie. paper, ink, pens, etc.) @ \$10,500/year X 2 years for 4 biologists.
- Administrative expenses, overhead, and promotional program expenses for Pheasants Forever to operate the program for 2 years.

LOCATION: The map of the SAFE areas can be found at <http://www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/safe/> or Appendix A

Farm Bill Biologists will likely be assigned to the following SAFE areas:

Southern Till Plain	Grand Prairie
Montgomery-Cranfill	Livingston
North Muddy	Ford-Livingston
Winterrowd	Ford Sibley
Prairie Ridge- Jasper County Unit	Iroquois-Loda
West Liberty	South Central Iroquois
Sailor Springs	McLean-Saybrook
Little Prairie	Champaign-Perdueville
Prairie Ridge – Marion County Unit	Tazewell-Manito
South Shore	Southwest-Tazewell
North Prairie	Mason-Logan
	Logan-Dewitt
	Logan-Sangamon

PROCEDURES:

Farm Bill Biologists will:

1. Develop a list of the landowners located within their assigned SAFE areas and provide them with information on the SAFE program.
2. On a prioritized basis, provide technical assistance to landowners within their assigned counties. Landowners within the SAFE areas will receive top priority.
3. Assist with hosting informational workshops on the SAFE program.
4. Provide technical assistance to cooperating agencies within their assigned SAFE counties.
5. Promote proper management of existing CRP fields by encouraging mid-contract management.
6. Provide accurate records of their landowner contacts and wildlife plans written.
7. Conduct site assessments to determine if wildlife habitat plans are implemented and provide monthly report on the amount of habitat created and/or managed.

The Farm Bill Biologists will follow procedures outlined by the SAFE proposal, NRCS, and Pheasants

Forever.

SCHEDULE: 1 October 2009 B 30 September 2011

PROJECT SCHEDULE:

Task	10/ 09 – 12/09	11/09 – 6/10	07/10 – 12/10	01/11- 6/11	07/11 – 09/11
Hire Farm Bill Biologists	X				
Develop landowner lists and provide Information	X	X	X	X	X
Technical assistance to landowners and partners		X	X	X	X
Report landowner contacts and wildlife plans written		X	X	X	X

PERSONNEL: The following person from the Division of Wildlife Resources, Office of Resource Conservation will be managing this project:

John Buhnerkempe
Chief, Division of Wildlife Resources
Office of Resource Conservation
One Natural Resources Way
Springfield, IL 62702
217-557-5059
John.Buhnerkempe@illinois.gov

The following person will provide administrative supervision of the FFBs:

Aaron Kuehl
Director of Conservation – Illinois
Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever
PO Box 50
Oakford, IL 62673
217/635-5207
akuehl@pheasantsforever.org

COMPLIANCE:

The IDNR will use its CERP (Comprehensive Environmental Review Process) as a tool to aid the Department in meeting NEPA compliance for the project outlined under this grant proposal. It is the Department's policy to require CERP applications for all land disturbing activities unless those activities are covered by CERP exemptions.

All planned activities will also be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. All determinations and documentation will be in accordance with the current established U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protocols for section 7.

All planned activities will be in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and the Council on Historic Preservation Act. All determinations and documentation will be in accordance with the terms of the Programmatic Agreement, as amended, effective September 23, 2002.

When applicable, those planned activities which involve a floodplain and/or jurisdiction wetlands will be done in accordance with Presidential Executive Orders 11988 and 11990.

When applicable, those planned activities which involve programs and/or site improvements will be done in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

When applicable, those planned activities which involve the use of pesticides, herbicides or other comparable chemicals will be done in accordance with current state and federal regulations to assure the safe and legal application of those chemicals. All chemicals will be applied in accordance with the manufacturers label instructions. All persons applying chemicals will be licensed by the Illinois Department of Agriculture as a chemical operator along with a licensed applicator, in accordance with Illinois state law.

Grant Proposal Support Documentation:

The following documents are attached in support of this grant proposal:

1. Application for Federal Assistance (Standard Form 424)
2. Grant Agreement - Budget Information
3. Federal Aid Section 7 Evaluation Form
4. Illinois Clearinghouse Response per Federal Executive Order 12372
5. NEPA Compliance Checklist and Environmental Assessment
6. Location Maps.