

Appendix K: Habitat Conservation Options

Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge

Options for Fish and Wildlife Habitats

This Habitat Conservation Options presents habitat conservation and restoration options available to the Service and landowners on public and private lands within the authorized Refuge boundary. The Detroit River environment has been heavily altered since the time of European settlement over three centuries ago. Shoreline vegetation, shrubs and trees long ago gave way to intense agricultural use and later industry and a modern metropolis. Environmental contaminants remain a concern in river sediments, former dredge disposal areas, and operating and abandoned industrial sites. The limited amount of remaining coastal habitats, high recreational use on the water, and contaminants provide unique challenges to broad scale conservation efforts.

I. Options for Land Conservation

Land conservation options vary from written agreements on land management to outright purchase of the land. Land may be acquired in fee title by several methods including exchange, purchase or donation. Conservation or non-development easements can also be purchased by the Service or donated by a landowner. Each parcel of land has unique resource values and circumstances that determine the desired level of conservation.

Traditionally, most people think of full acquisition of lands, or fee title, when they hear about a new refuge. However, land purchase is only one of many options for developing a wildlife refuge. Various options for habitat conservation and restoration could be used in concert with fee title acquisition to achieve refuge goals. In particular, the prevalence of Detroit River lands with environmental contaminant issues will make less-than-fee approaches the only option available to the Service and landowners on many properties.

Fee Simple Purchase: The Service could purchase land from willing sellers within the authorized Refuge boundaries. The land would be appraised at market value and a written offer presented to a landowner. Full rights and title to purchased property would be vested with the United States as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Land acquisition funds are limited and allocated on a nationwide basis. Each Service Region must compete for appropriations from Congress under the Land and Water Conservation Fund and for Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (Duck Stamp) allotments. Annual land acquisition funding cannot be assured for each refuge requesting it.

Conservation Easements: Conservation easements are a popular method for land conservation used by private individuals, land trusts and governments. Conservation easements involve the acquisition of specific land rights for the purpose of achieving defined habitat objectives. Easements can either prohibit or encourage certain practices. For example, wetland easements usually involve the right to drain, burn and fill a wetland. Grassland easements usually cover the right to place timing restrictions on hay mowing to benefit wildlife. A Purchase of Development Rights, or non-development easement, precludes construction of buildings and facilities on a property. Easements become part of the title to the property and are usually permanent. If a landowner sells the property, the easement continues as part of the title.

Cooperative Agreements: The establishing legislation for the Refuge encourages the Service to enter into cooperative management agreements with private landowners and public land managing agencies. The Service can offer free technical advice, materials and restoration assistance to property owners through a cooperative agreement. The Service can agree to develop wildlife or land management plans, or do wildlife surveys on private lands and provide detailed information to the landowners. These cooperative agreements are formal, written documents, and usually place no legally binding restrictions on the land. No money is involved and either party may cancel the agreement with adequate notice to the other party. A cooperative agreement would not affect the tax status of the land.

Technical assistance for sensitive habitat management will be available through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and from future Refuge staff. A future Friends group for the Refuge could operate a Heritage Registry similar to a program at Minnesota Valley NWR. In that program, landowners make a verbal commitment to conserve and preserve the land to the best of their abilities, notify the Friends of any potential threats to the area, and notify the Friends of the intent to sell the property. In return, landowners are provided with educational information on stewardship techniques, incentives (books and plaques) and public recognition of their efforts.

II. Options for Habitat Restoration

Partners for Fish and Wildlife: This program is administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service and offers technical and financial assistance to private landowners to voluntarily restore wetlands, native grasslands and other fish and wildlife habitats. The Service, along with a wide variety of partners, provides assistance and cost-sharing to complete work if the landowner agrees to maintain the area for a period of 10 years or more. Partners who contribute time and funds for these efforts include local conservation organizations, universities, businesses, school groups, other government agencies and private individuals.

Wetlands Reserve Program: The Wetlands Reserve Program is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. The program focuses on providing financial incentives to landowners in exchange for wetland restoration or enhancements. Three options are available: permanent easements, 30-year easements, and restoration cost-share agreements for a minimum 10-year duration. The landowner retains title to the land and may lease it for hunting and fishing. Additional activities, such as haying, grazing or timber cutting may be permitted if the uses are fully consistent with conservation and enhancement of the wetland.

Technical Assistance: Several programs exist for people who want to improve wildlife habitat on their land. Financial assistance for habitat improvements is often available on a cost-sharing basis.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program: Participants work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to prepare a wildlife habitat development plan in consultation with the local conservation district. The plan describes the landowners' goals for habitat improvement and sets a schedule for implementation. Cost-share agreements under this program generally last from 5 to 10 years.

Private Conservation Efforts: In recent years, conservation organizations have been effective in promoting wildlife habitat improvement on private lands. Collectively, these local, regional or national organizations are a great source of financial and technical assistance for the private landowner who wishes to improve lands for wildlife. Some of the organizations active in the Midwest include The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation

Fund, Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Izaak Walton League, Audubon Society, Trust for Public Lands, Ducks Unlimited, and Pheasants Forever.

In addition, local hunting, fishing, and conservation organizations often are willing to assist private landowners with wildlife habitat improvement projects. Many of these organizations have substantial financial and technical resources and are often a dedicated source of energy for wildlife habitat improvement on both private and public lands.

III. Recommended Land Conservation Levels

The draft Environmental Assessment recommends Alternative 2 which has a Refuge land conservation goal of up to 40 percent of the remnant wetland and island habitats. In addition, up to 2000 acres of degraded habitat would be restored or managed for fish and wildlife. Any fee or easement purchases, cooperative agreements, or other measures mentioned above would be on a willing participant basis. If a landowner of identified land is not interested in a fee title sale, the Service would consider other options such as conservation easements or assistance with private conservation measures if these were of interest to the landowner. No landowner will be forced to participate in any of the conservation programs mentioned above.

The Service would not seek to acquire State lands already managed for wildlife habitat. Instead, we would like to work in concert with State land managers to enhance wildlife habitat measures on adjacent federal and state lands.

IV. Land Conservation Priorities:

The Service's highest priority (Priority 1) lands for purchase and restoration are identified in Chapter 4 of the CCP (see figures 9 and 10). These include the largest remaining wetlands in private ownership on the U.S. side of the River and select coastal and island properties. Lands that could be restored and managed under private ownership through cooperative agreements or partnerships are the second highest priority (Priority 2).

