

## **Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area – Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Who are we and what is the National Wildlife Refuge System?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is an agency of federal government responsible for the conservation of the nation's fish and wildlife. Our mission is "working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." The refuge system is one way we meet our agency mission. It is a system of public lands for the purpose of conserving and restoring fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the benefit of present and future Americans.

### **What is the history of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area project?**

In 1996 we started a planning process to look at the feasibility of developing a new national wildlife refuge in the Kankakee River Basin in northwestern Indiana and northeastern Illinois. The process started in response to the declining status of numerous fish and wildlife resources for which we have stewardship responsibility.

In August 1999, the planning process concluded with the preparation of a National Environmental Policy Act Final Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. While that action officially authorized the development of a new national wildlife refuge in the Kankakee River Basin, it was not until May 25, 2016, that we formally established the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area when we accepted a 66-acre donation from Friends of the Kankakee. This started the process of developing detailed planning in Illinois. The name of this project was changed to emphasize our intention to use a public-private partnership to achieve this project's goals.

### **What is the purpose of the Project?**

Based in law, the purpose of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area is "for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources" (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956) and for "the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions..." (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986).

The project's mission is to facilitate protection, restoration, and management of high quality habitats that benefit listed species, waterfowl and other migratory birds, native fish and mussels, and diverse flora and fauna populations, while providing, to the extent possible, high quality wildlife-dependent environmental interpretation, education, and recreation experiences that foster an understanding and appreciation for these resources, and the role humankind plays in their stewardship.

### **How is the National Wildlife Refuge different from the Conservation Area?**

The National Wildlife Refuge part of this project refers to lands sold or donated to us by interested landowners within the bigger Conservation Area. The Conservation Area is the larger area where we will work with interested people to meet the goals of wildlife conservation. Together we work to conserve and manage land, support conservation practices, and engage in voluntary conservation, restoration, and improvement of private land for the benefit of both people and wildlife. By working together we can keep working lands working and maintain and enhance local economies and communities.

### **What are Focus Areas?**

Focus areas were identified during the initial planning process in 1999. They represent large areas in the Kankakee River Basin that contain significant existing and/or restorable natural resource values (e.g., wetlands, grasslands, oak savanna) where future detailed planning would focus. They are the Planning Units for the current detailed planning effort.

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Focus Areas are not Refuge boundaries because much of the land within focus areas will not meet the refuge goals of existing or restorable habitat. We have no intention to acquire all of the land within the Focus Areas.

### **How will we acquire land for this project?**

We have a longstanding policy to only acquire land from people interested in selling to us. Participation in the project is completely voluntary. We will not use eminent domain or condemnation to acquire lands for this project. We will acquire land from interested landowners within the focal areas who wish to sell or place easements on their land for the conservation of wildlife. If a landowner is interested, we offer landowners fair market value for their property based on a professionally prepared appraisal. Landowners can refuse an offer they do not like.

### **Can we manage land for wildlife conservation without owning the land?**

Yes. We have several different ways we can help landowners to conserve wildlife *on their land* if they are interested. The property remains in private ownership.

- Our Partners for Fish and Wildlife program works with interested private landowners to improve fish and wildlife habitat on their lands. We provide technical assistance and sometimes cost-share these activities. More information can be found at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/partners/index.html>.
- Cooperative agreements are agreements between us and interested landowners that identify management actions or habitat restoration practices that we both agree to. For example, a landowner may agree to delay mowing hay until after a certain date to allow birds that nest on the ground to hatch their young before equipment is run across an area.
- Lease agreements are short-term agreements with interested landowners to manage a piece of land for a specific use to benefit wildlife in return for an annual rental payment to the landowner.
- Conservation easements are voluntary agreements where we purchase permanent property rights from an interested landowner to restrict certain uses, such as development, for habitat conservation. In this case, the agreement is recorded with the county as part of the deed. Properties with easements can be sold or transferred like any parcel of land, and the conditions of the easement remain attached to the land.
- Other voluntary, individual and community-based stewardship activities for fish and wildlife conservation, including providing technical assistance for things as simple as rainwater and natural gardens, and bird feeder and house plans.

### **Will lands we own be open to the public for recreation?**

Yes. We plan to provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation. Hunting, fishing, nature observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation are allowed on most lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System. We will open parts of the project area to these public uses when a large enough block of land is in federal ownership or agreement so that these activities can be carried out safely and without negative impacts to neighboring properties. The needs of people with disabilities will be considered during planning access to these activities and facilities. The 66-acre parcel donated to us in May 2016 is already open to nature exploration and turkey and deer hunting according to state regulations.

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### **Do your property rights change because you are in a focal area or if your neighbor voluntarily sells to us?**

No. Landowners located in the focal areas or adjacent to lands owned by us retain all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership. We recognize that every landowner within the project area has the following rights:

- The right to retain all privileges and responsibilities of private ownership.
- The right to sell their land to anyone of their choice and the right to not sell their land.
- The right to receive a fair market offer for any property they are interested in selling to us.
- The right to control access on their land.
- The right to provide input on management plans and to be regularly informed about project activities.

### **Can we flood your land if your neighbor decides to sell to us?**

No. It is our policy not to restrict the flow of waters from other lands, even if that flow passes through our lands. If we inadvertently create a water-related problem for any private landowner (flooding, soil saturation, increase in water table height, etc.) from our management, we will correct the problem at our expense. To prevent problems, we perform site-level studies and detailed planning before we undertake any management activity affecting drainage of private land.

### **Will current public access to the river or travel on public roads be restricted when we own land in the area?**

State, county, and township roads that traverse the project area would remain open to public traffic. Private roads and trails on lands sold to us may be closed. However, areas large enough will be open to the public for wildlife-related recreation including river access for fishing, hiking and wildlife observation, where feasible.

### **How will the area's tax base or individual property values be affected?**

Land where an easement has been purchased from an interested landowner remains on the tax rolls and in private ownership. The landowner pays the property taxes and assessments. If we acquire a piece of land from an interested landowner, the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of June 15, 1935, as amended, provides for annual payments to counties based on the value of land appraised at its highest and best use. Annual payments in Illinois are calculated at 3/4 of 1 percent of the appraised (not assessed) value. Lands are re-appraised approximately every 5 years to reflect current market values. Studies have shown that the value of properties near conservation lands tend to remain the same or increase.

### **Will there be public involvement during our detailed planning?**

Yes. We are committed to working with the local communities and landowners as an important source of input to our detailed planning. Detailed planning will identify criteria for what lands we would like to conserve and restore for wildlife; public use opportunities we plan to provide; and management actions that would achieve our goals. A Land Protection Plan will be written and available for public review.

### **How do I contact the Fish and Wildlife Service about this project?**

You can contact Jeanne Holler in our planning group. She can be reached by email at [r3planning@fws.gov](mailto:r3planning@fws.gov); be sure to add "Kankakee NWR&CA" into the subject line. You can also write to: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System - Conservation Planning, Attention: Jeanne Holler/Kankakee NWR&CA, 5600 American Blvd. West, Suite 990, Bloomington, MN 55437-1458.