

PRIVATE LAND STEWARDSHIP

I would like to thank James Bullock and James Cummins for their contributions to this column. Both of these articles illustrate the big picture view of the importance of private lands and touch on major federal programs that focus on private land conservation. In this article, I hope to “get in the weeds” and highlight other programs and resources available to landowners, provide a list of important contacts, and present some personal examples regarding private land ownership and enhancement on Michigan properties. My goal is to encourage our readers to engage themselves and become good stewards and preservers of their land. As Bullock and Cummings mention in their respective articles, our efforts will extend well beyond our property lines, and are an important part of the bigger conservation picture, as most of the United States is privately owned. No single agency, group or individual can do it alone. Today, conservation is a collective effort—partnerships and networks being key—and can only be achieved from a united front.

MICHIGAN PROGRAMS

Since I am a Michigan resident and landowner, I have listed Michigan-specific programs here that serve as resources for private landowners.

- **Qualified Forest Program**
- **Forest Stewardship Program**
- **Landowner Incentive Program**
- **Wildlife Habitat Grant Program**
- **Wetland Mitigation Banking**

If you are interested in discovering what programs are available for the type of land you own then I suggest you contact your local DNR or Fish and Game regional office where your land is located. A personal visit with the appropriate agency representative will assist you in choosing the program(s) that best complement your land and your personal objectives.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

- **The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency** administers the **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)** and its many forms that vary by State. CRP is a “set aside” program, which means that land must be actively farmed and taken out of production for a period of time in order to be eligible for enrollment. Contact your local USDA Service Center or Conservation District for more information.
 - **The USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)** administers the **Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs (ACEP)**, which includes programs and protection for wetlands, grasslands, and forest lands. The focus of the **Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)**, formerly **Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)**, is to restore and protect degraded wetlands. To qualify, the land must have altered hydrology, such as ditches or tiles, or be farmed wetlands. There is also protection for working land in the **Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRLPP)**, which promotes wise
- land use and protection of conservation areas for species or habitats at risk; an example is sage grouse and range land management in the Great Basin area. The **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** also administers the **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**, which is a program focused on improving farming practices. EQIP has taken over **Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)**.
- **The USDA Forest Service (USFS)** offers the **Forest Legacy Program (FLP)** and **Forest Stewardship Program (FSP)**, which are grants given to state agencies aimed at sustainable and wildlife friendly forest management and protection on private forest lands.
 - **The Department of Interior’s (DOI) US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** has two private land habitat programs; 1) the **Coastal Program**, which can be on public or private land involving coastal habitat concerns regarding federal trust resources (e.g., migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, fish, and rare and declining habitats); and, 2) the **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW)**, which is one of the most flexible and landowner-friendly programs available. PFW benefits federal trust resources on private land. PFW funding is at least 50 percent non-federal, making it tax payer friendly.

GETTING STARTED

There is not enough room in this article to properly cover the specificities of each program. Thus, I urge you to

FROM THE
PRESIDENT



Morrison Stevens, Sr.
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make contact with the agency office that has jurisdiction for the land that you own or want to enhance. They will be eager to help you due to the private property presence in the United States and its importance in the sustainability of our land and wildlife resources. To get you started, I list here some potential points of contact.

- **Non-Profit Conservation Organizations (NGOs):** Many of us are also members of other conservation organizations. Most of these organizations partner with state or federal conservation programs to ensure that their objectives are covered. Being involved with these NGOs can help keep you informed.
- **Conservation District Offices:** Sometimes called **Soil and Water Conservation Districts**, these are typically located in every county and are often co-located with the **USDA Service Center**. They are a hub for many private land conservation programs.
- **USDA Service Centers:** Usually co-located with **Conservation Districts**, house both **FSA** and **NRCS**.
- **USFWS State Private Lands Office:** Assistance for the **PFW** and **Coastal Programs**.
- **State Wildlife or Natural Resource Agency:** For state specific programs.
- **University Extension Services:** Offers programs and consultation that vary by state.

WHAT WE DID

I want to provide you with real life examples of how a team put together a number of these programs and contacts to use on a hunting property that I own with five other partners in northern Michigan. The Tuttle Marsh Club in north-eastern Michigan is a 400-acre hunting camp that I have been a part of for almost 40 years. It is surrounded by the Huron-Manistee National Forest, which is designated as the Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area. This is a 5,000-acre area that is managed by the US Forest Service (USFS) primarily for wildlife habitat. The USFS has improved over 400-acres of wetland and has also established a couple hundred acres of native grassland in the area. The FS is devoted to keeping the forest young and vibrant for the benefit of wildlife.

Understanding that my team is a part of a larger landscape and that collective management is important, the first thing we were advised to do was to develop a forest management plan. This was facilitated and completed by a professional forester, and was cost-shared through the Forest Stewardship Program with the Michigan DNR. First, our club had to prioritize our management goals. Our goals were to improve habitat for wildlife with an emphasis on game such as deer, grouse, woodcock, and turkey, and to generate revenue while maintaining forest aesthetics around the lodge.

The forest management plan provided a baseline and template of a process to achieve those goals. The plan outlined specific areas and techniques for habitat improvement such as tree plantings, timber harvests, forest opening improvement, food plot establishments, nesting structures, fruit tree establishment and maintenance, and forest edge improvement. With the plan as our guide and

with some additional support from a USFWS Biologist, we implemented many of the suggested practices and performed several others as opportunities arose.

First, we established food plots and mineral licks in key locations. Second, we planted conifer trees, fruiting shrubs, and apple trees along the edges or our larger openings. We also installed an annual apple tree management plan for pruning, fertilizing, and spraying. Third, we worked with the USFWS to improve our larger fields by controlling invasive knapweed and establishing diverse native grasses and wildflowers, which met both federal objectives and our own by providing benefits to migratory song birds and pollinators, as well as water, food, and cover for our game. Fourth, we enhanced several wetland areas on the property through the PFW program. These wetlands provide critical habitat for a wide array of species, not just ducks. Fifth, we conducted two timber harvests; one to regenerate aspen and young forest while maintaining mast producing trees. The other was a timber stand improvement, or thinning, to improve understory cover and mast production. As part of the timber harvest we installed more food plots and trails and seeded them to clover. Using revenue from the timber sale we planted more conifers and fruiting shrubs in the cut over understory. Sixth, we established nest boxes for wood ducks and bats around the wetland areas. Seventh, we found a beekeeper to put hives on the property in an effort to improve pollination and fruit production of our apple trees and fruiting shrubs. Eighth, we worked with the PFW program to perpetuate alder and aspen that were not commercially viable and declining in value to wildlife. Strips were clear cut,

basically mowed using a hydro-axe or forestry mower, to regenerate the young trees and shrubs. These species need to be occasionally cut down in order to maintain optimal habitat for woodcock and golden-winged warblers, which have national importance, but also provided great habitat for grouse, deer, rabbits, and turkey of interest to our club.

These outcomes did not occur overnight; in fact, our first step, the Forest Management Plan, took place back in 1998, but over the years we have become more educated as a club and can readily see the difference our efforts have made in the land and the wildlife.

In 2001, a resource professional from the Conservation District approached my family with a proposal to place our family farm land in a “set aside” program. The program was called the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program or CREP, an enhanced version of CRP. His plan was to restore the hydrology by breaking some tiles and doing shallow excavation to mimic land formation, similar to what might have been there prior to land grading and farming, to create some open water, and to plant the fields to native grasses. CREP, which is a DNR and USDA cooperative effort, offered a substantial annual soil rental rate plus incentive payments to take our land out of production for 15 years. After the 15 years we could farm it again if we desired. This seemed to make sense not only financially, but also to improve the land for wildlife, hunting, soil conservation and water quality—so we signed up!

It took a few years to implement the program, but once it was complete we immediately saw the benefits for deer, turkey, waterfowl, and even some pheasants and

quail. Plus, we no longer had to worry about losing the crops to floods. Our 15 year contract is due to expire soon, so we are now pursuing permanently protecting the land in order to continue these resource benefits in perpetuity. This land serves as a perfect example of the old conservation slogan, “farm the best, and conserve the rest.” Even though the land has productive soil to grow crops, it still floods annually, which makes the land difficult to farm and contributes to water quality problems. We have decided to be good stewards and protect this land permanently by enrolling in the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program.

Through the WRE program, we hope to further improve the wildlife habitat and restore it to a more natural floodplain plant community. We look forward to the satisfaction of knowing that its benefits will long outlive all of us. We will give up some of our land ownership rights, but we will also retain the rights to hunt, fish, and control trespassing, which is ideal for our situation.

Neither of these examples would be presentable without assistance from professional natural resource folks such as foresters, resource professionals, and wildlife biologists. Nor would we have had the financial incentives to do the right thing, as land management can be very expensive with little economic return on investment. I encourage you, especially if you are a landowner, to find the right program or person to help you meet your goals. It is your duty and responsibility as a landowner to be a good steward of the land. If you seek professional assistance you, too, can be effective. Spread the word! ■



THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE LANDS TO WILDLIFE

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From its inception, the Boone and Crockett Club promoted the scientific management of wildlife and wildlife habitat throughout the United States. Much of the Club's focus has been on wildlife management and conservation on public lands in states west of the Mississippi River. This emphasis was driven in part by the large amounts of land in public ownership in the western U.S., and also by the first tenet of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation, which states that wildlife belongs to the public and is managed as a public trust resource. In recent years, the Club has renewed its commitment to natural resource conservation, and strengthened its support for science-based management of those resources on both public and private lands.

BUT, WHY PRIVATE LANDS?

While wildlife is publicly owned, most of the nation's wildlife habitat for game and non-game species is in private ownership. Approximately 1.42 billion acres or 73 percent of all land in the United States is privately owned. Almost 88 percent of the annual rain and snowfall each year is on private lands. About half of all federally listed, threatened, and endangered species have at least 80 percent of their habitats on non-federal lands,

the vast majority of which is privately owned. Over 100 bird species have more than half of their breeding grounds on private lands.

Draw a line from the Dakotas, south to Texas, and in every state east of that line except Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, and New York, private land ownership exceeds 80 percent. While private landowners have various reasons for owning land, the three major land uses are forestry, agriculture, and ranching. The Boone and Crockett Club has the opportunity and also the challenge of serving as the national leader in balancing land use objectives with conservation priorities; ensuring that wildlife habitat and fair chase hunting experiences will exist for future generations of hunters and conservationists.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

The Boone and Crockett Club is uniquely positioned to integrate science with management of wildlife and natural resources on private lands. Dr. E.O. Wilson, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, recently attracted attention with his writings about a "long landscape" corridor strategy for conserving up to half of the country for wildlife habitat. While his overall goal is ambitious, the core idea is sound, and is one that translates well to a landscape conservation strategy for the Club. The first step is to identify priority areas for private land wildlife management initiatives that promote habitat for big game and other wildlife species. Then assemble the public and private landowner stakeholders to the table to identify opportunities for meaningful conservation and habitat management. Lastly, work using existing programs and policies, as well

as new administrative efforts and programs to incentivize the project, particularly on private lands. Throughout this process there is a need to build support at the grass-roots levels—support from landowners, academia, local politicians, hunters, and other land users. I have observed this approach to be effective for the conservation of black bear and restoration of long-leaf pine in the southern United States, and I believe it could be an equally effective model for future conservation efforts in which the Boone and Crockett Club can have a meaningful role every step of the way.

OUR TIME IS NOW

The time is right for the Boone and Crockett Club to increase our conservation and stewardship mission on private lands, especially in the eastern and southern United States; and to emerge as a thought leader for science-based wildlife management and conservation of natural resources on private and public lands. How can we succeed?

The Boone and Crockett Club and our members need to be engaged thought leaders in major conservation initiatives. Landscape-scale wildlife conservation strategies that retain working forests, working farms, and working ranches, and that promote science-based wildlife management of our natural resources are some of the best ways to unite wildlife professionals and private land owners. The Boone and Crockett Club and our base of regular and professional members, is uniquely positioned to move this strategy forward.

Advocacy will play a major role in furthering wildlife management on private lands. Legislation or policy that provides incentives for

private landowners to manage their lands in a way that benefits the public trust doctrine of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation can pay huge dividends to all of us who own, manage, or hunt on private lands; while legislation or policy that increases the regulatory burden on, or cost of ownership of private lands can cripple conservation or habitat initiatives on those lands, or even worse, result in unintended conversion of those lands to a use not compatible with wildlife management.

The Club must remain true to the vision of our founders; a vision that has carried the club forward since 1887. The mission of the Boone and Crockett Club includes the phrase, "...promote the conservation and management of wildlife, especially big game, and its habitat; to preserve and encourage hunting; and to maintain the highest ethical standards of fair chase and sportsmanship..." Club members as far back as founder Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold were strong advocates for science as a base for natural resource management decisions.

As a natural resources manager, a certified wildlife biologist, a hunter, and a professional member of the Boone and Crockett Club, I believe we must be involved in conservation and management of private lands. If we can meet the challenge of engaging as a thought leader on natural resource issues and strategies, and be tireless advocates for legislation and policy that encourages science-based wildlife management on private lands, and if we remain true to the vision that is the Boone and Crockett Club, we will successfully meet the challenge of maintaining wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities on private and public lands. ■

STATE BY STATE BREAKDOWN PRIVATE LAND VS. PUBLIC LAND

| | |
|-----------|------|
| | USA |
| % Public | 39.8 |
| % Private | 60.2 |

US BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 1991 (11TH ED.) WASHINGTON, DC, 1991, P.201.

| Rank | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|----|------|----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| State | AK | NV | UT | ID | OR | AZ | WY | CA | NM | CO | WA | MT | NY | FL | MI | MN | HI | NJ | NH | WI | AR | VA | WV | PA | VT |
| % Public | 95.8 | 87.8 | 75.2 | 70.4 | 60.4 | 56.8 | 55.9 | 52.1 | 47.4 | 43.3 | 41.9 | 37.5 | 37.1 | 29.2 | 28.1 | 23.5 | 19 | 18.3 | 18 | 17.8 | 17.3 | 17.1 | 16.5 | 16.1 | 15.8 |
| % Private | 4.2 | 12.2 | 24.8 | 29.6 | 39.6 | 43.2 | 44.1 | 47.9 | 52.6 | 56.7 | 58.1 | 62.5 | 62.9 | 70.8 | 71.9 | 76.5 | 81 | 81.7 | 82 | 82.2 | 82.7 | 82.9 | 83.5 | 83.9 | 84.2 |

| Rank | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 35 | 36 | 37 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| State | NC | TN | KY | SC | MO | MS | LA | GA | ND | SD | MD | DE | AL | MA | CT | ME | OK | IN | OH | TX | IL | IA | NE | KS | RI |
| % Public | 14.6 | 14.1 | 11.8 | 11.8 | 11.2 | 10.9 | 10.7 | 9.7 | 9.1 | 8.9 | 7.6 | 7.4 | 7.1 | 6.3 | 6.2 | 5.7 | 4.6 | 4.5 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.1 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 1.9 | 1.5 |
| % Private | 85.4 | 85.9 | 88.2 | 88.2 | 88.8 | 89.1 | 89.3 | 90.3 | 90.9 | 91.1 | 92.4 | 92.6 | 92.9 | 93.7 | 93.8 | 94.3 | 95.4 | 95.5 | 95.8 | 95.8 | 95.9 | 97.2 | 97.2 | 98.1 | 98.5 |

PRIVATE LANDS POLICY AND WILDLIFE

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All too often we associate public land with wildlife, but private lands are vitally important to the conservation of wildlife in the United States. Private lands constitute 73 percent of the land ownership in the lower 48 states. In addition, 50 percent (890 million acres) of the land-base in the contiguous United States is managed as cropland, pastureland, and rangeland.

The successes in conservation and wildlife management we have been able to achieve in this country are anchored by key pieces of legislation that have been passed in the last 100 years. One such critical piece of legislation is the Farm Bill, which had its beginning in the 1930s. Back then, it was known as the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

This initial legislation was intended to help steer the country out of the Great Depression. It addressed widespread domestic hunger, falling crop prices for farmers, and the catastrophic Dust Bowl that resulted in massive soil erosion. This act restricted agricultural production by paying farmers subsidies to

not plant part of their land, to let natural vegetation grow, and to remove excess livestock. The purpose was to reduce the surplus of agricultural commodities and therefore effectively raise the value of crops. Periodically the legislation is re-authorized, often improving conservation policy, addressing commodity payments such as disaster assistance payments and crop insurance, as well as supplemental nutrition assistance programs.

The recent Farm Bill is a compilation of many different acts that have been passed by the United States Congress to enhance agricultural productivity and conservation on private lands. The Farm Bill is not a single piece of legislation but a dynamic series of acts implemented over the past eight decades that include new programs or revise existing ones. The Farm Bill affects every citizen. Each Farm Bill has a name and a five-year shelf life before it requires any reauthorization by Congress.

From a sportsmen's perspective, the most effective conservation provisions of the Farm Bill are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). These provisions directly impact wildlife habitat and the health of upland game bird, waterfowl, and big game populations.

The CRP has been the

single largest contributor in securing upland bird habitat, as well as native grass food sources and cover for whitetail deer, mule deer, and elk. The WRE has restored over 1 million acres of bottomland hardwoods and wetlands in the Lower Mississippi River Valley, which is aiding in recovery of the federally threatened Louisiana black bear. The WHIP is a cost-effective program that has helped install a variety of fish and wildlife improvement projects on approximately 7 million acres under 40,000 different contracts.

Landowners enrolled in these programs receive incentives for land conservation practices. These include native grass establishment, wetland restoration, and forest restoration or enhancement. These programs gained traction in the 1980s, after the prevailing farming practices of the 1970s, when farmers began to cultivate fencerow to maximize production. These practices removed what native habitat was left for wildlife to survive, which also had a detrimental effect on soil quality.

The Boone and Crockett Club's Conservation Policy Committee, under the leadership of Bob Model, has left its mark on past Farm Bill legislation. In 1996 the Club played an active role in getting WHIP included as part of the Farm Bill. In 2005 it was active in including provisions in CRP to conserve bottomland

hardwoods, as well as establishing the Healthy Forests Reserve Program. In 2008 the Club was able to include provisions for an emergency forest restoration program and endangered species recovery.

The 2014 Farm Bill, which also involved the Boone and Crockett Club, consolidated 23 existing conservation programs into 13 programs, while strengthening tools to protect and conserve land, water, and wildlife, as well as reduce the federal deficit by \$23 billion. By streamlining programs, the Farm Bill provides added flexibility and ensures conservation programs are working for producers in the most effective and efficient way possible.

Other important private lands policies include the USFWS's Partners for Wildlife Program, conservation easements through the federal tax code, and environmental asset mitigation programs such as those for wetlands and streams, as well as carbon, water quality, and threatened and endangered species.

Theodore Roosevelt, said, "There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country." While our country is facing some mighty grave issues, I just have to believe TR would be proud of how America has advanced the system of conservation he created to expand beyond lands the government owns to those of the private landowner. ■