

News

Wetland restoration options for landowners outlined at workshop

[Print Page](#)

By David Johnson
News Editor

Published: Wednesday, January 4, 2012 1:43 PM EST

NEW TROY — About 50 people filled the New Troy Community Center gym on Dec. 8 to learn more about a pair of voluntary federal programs designed to restore wetlands, prairies and other natural habitats on private land, often at little or no cost to the property owner.

Those attending learned that sometimes it even pays to restore a lost wetland.

Jim Hazelman of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service talked about the agency's Partners for Wildlife program, which evaluates properties for wetland potential, then plans and completes a restoration.

Next up was Sherman Reed of the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service Berrien Springs office. He outlined the Wetland Reserve program, another way to have a wetland restoration done on private property.

The Wetland Restoration Workshop was organized by the The Conservation Fund, and the non-profit organization's Midwest Director Peg Kohring began the post-dinner portion of the evening by noting that 23,000 acres, or 57 percent, of the pre-settlement wetlands in the Galien River Watershed have been filled or drained. She said "vast wetlands" once existed between Three Oaks and Galien.

Kohring said the losses have reduced the watershed's ability to hold floodwater by 72 percent, adding that the situation is "only going to get worse" if existing wetlands aren't protected and lost ones aren't restored.

"As landowners you have been invited either because you have a wetland on your property or you have a potential wetland that could be restored," she said to those attending the workshop.

Hazelman, assistant state coordinator for the Michigan Private Lands Office, said the Fish & Wildlife Service's main mission is managing Fish And Wildlife Refuges on public land such as the Seney NWR in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (U.P.) and Shiawassee NWR near Saginaw, Michigan.

He said the agency's Private Lands Program was founded 23 years ago.

"If we're going to make an impact on a lot of these areas around the state ... our National Wildlife Refuge state areas at most are worth 21 percent. You're not going to make a big impact on large areas if you're not going to deal with private land."



Jim Hazelman of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service makes a point during the Restoration Workshop. - photos by David Johnson

He said the same is usually true when it comes to native species, most of which live on private land.

While a lot of natural wetland areas remain intact in the U.P., Hazelman said the loss of pre-settlement wetland acreage in the southern part of the state where agriculture and development are common can reach 80 to 90 percent.

Through its Private Lands Program, he said the Fish and Wildlife Service is attempting to make up for those losses while helping landowners.

"We just restore the habitat. The landowner is giving us use of the land for 10 years, 20 years, whatever we're restoring. We'll then provide the technical assistance and guide that landowner through the whole process."

Hazelman said the Private Lands Program has two main goals in the southern part of Michigan — restoring wetlands and bringing back native prairie grasses.

"We've lost 99 percent of our prairie," he said, adding that a savannah mixing tree canopy and prairie grasses also is a rare habitat in Michigan.

Hazelman noted that the greatest population decrease for Midwest birds has come among species that depend on grassland communities.

"We're trying to provide nesting habitat for our waterfowl as well as habitat for songbirds and neo-tropical migrant birds that rely on them," he said.

Stream restoration to benefit the native brook trout, often by removing impediments to up- and down-stream movement, is a big part of the job farther north in the state.

Hazelman said the Fish and Wildlife Service seeks to provide habitat for species such as the eastern massasauga rattlesnake and various rare plants. He later noted that the state's largest population of massasaugas is in southeastern Michigan, and they're so rare and shy that he's never seen one in the wild.

"A lot of times when we restore a wetland or a wet meadow, the landowner will never, ever see it (the massasauga) unless it's on the road basking," he said.

Hazelman said another rare reptile that the FWS seeks to create habitat for is the copper-bellied water snake. He said the snake gets its food on isolated woodland wetlands because the more common northern water snake dominates larger bodies of water.

"This guy is less aggressive, so over time he's become the nomad and travels through the woods from isolated wetland to isolated wetland, usually with two feet or less of water," he said.

In addition to restoring wetlands for the snake, Hazelman said tree-planting to create corridors for movement between wetlands is sometimes needed.

He said the goal in most wetland restorations is not to create a lot of open water, but rather the shallower areas filled with grasses and sedges that benefit ducks and other wildlife.

"Anything deeper than 16 inches, they're (most Michigan ducks) not going to get any food value," he said.

Hazelman said most of the wetland restoration projects are 1 to 3 acres in size with depths averaging less than three feet. Large ones are sometimes created, including a 90-acre project earlier this year.

"We don't dig ponds, what we try to do is take a degraded area .. plug the tiles, plug the ditches and restore that area."

He said very little planting is necessary for most restored wetlands unless an invasive species is involved.

"What we do is break the tiles, build the berm, just add water and stir Mother Nature ... there are wetland seeds that will last 70 years in a farm field. They just sit there being turned."

Hazleman said the biologists will walk landowners "every step of the way" through the whole process.

And once a project has been completed, it usually doesn't take long before it starts being recognized as quality habitat.

"If I restore it in June or July, it will be flooded that fall ... you're going to see instant wildlife response."

When it comes to prairie restoration, Hazleman said the goal is to plant a good mix of wildflowers with the grasses that grow at different heights with gaps in between to provide different types of habitat and room to seek food in the same area.

Hazleman said four staff members cover the southern part of the state, mainly dealing with wetlands and grasslands.

"When a landowner calls us we'll meet with him, we'll do the evaluation, we'll tell him about our program, do the designs, we'll sit and visit with the landowner after we do the designs ... we'll find out what you want and we'll tell you what we can do and, hopefully, find a happy medium," he said.

Contractors also work with landowners, and FWS personnel are there throughout the process. It's cost-share program, he said, with the FWS usually paying around 90 percent of the cost of a wetland restoration.

"We'll let the landowner's share be in-kind work, site clearing and maybe cutting some trees, doing that kind of stuff — seeding the berm when we're done. We're real flexible, and we get grants to try and offset the landowner's costs as well."

He said the split is more in the 60-40 range when it comes to native grasslands.

The landowners' role includes signing a 10-year or longer agreement to allow the agency to monitor the site (which he said mirrors the USDA program). "Once we're done, it's yours" — but can't impact neighbors unless they give the OK and get on board.

He added that a lot of people enroll in the USDA program after the FWS restoration work is done. The big difference, according to Hazleman, is that the USDA program focuses restoration work on lands with an agricultural history, while the FWS efforts often take place on properties that don't.

He also noted that no one is completely immune from some red tape.

"Anything we do on a wetland design, we have to get permits through the state just like anybody else."

Hazleman said he works out of East Lansing, but spends most of his time in Hillsdale, Branch, Lenaway, Jackson and other mid- to west-Michigan counties. His office can be contacted by calling (517) 351-6235.

Reed, district conservationist for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), said he works out of a local three-person office Berrien Springs

"He's worked with a number of you on wetland preservation and also some of the Department of Agriculture programs," noted Kohring.

Reed said the 20-year-old Wetland Reserve Program helps property owners restore, protect and enhance their wetlands and wildlife.

In exchange for allowing Wetland Reserve personnel access to the property to help manage the site, landowners receive restored wetlands in areas that had been drained. He listed some of the benefits of restored wetlands, one of which is offering farmers an alternative to flooded crops.

According to Kohring, the Natural Resources Conservation Service offers up to \$5,000 per acre for a permanent Wetland Reserve Easement. In addition, she said all the costs of restoration are paid by working through the NRCS for qualified areas. There are also 30-year easements available that

pay less money per acre and contribute less of the restoration cost.

She said the NRCS conservation easements give landowners the right to sell their property and control who comes on the property, while also allowing their recreational uses such as hunting, fishing and trapping.

Kohring noted that NRCS has an open sign-up going on now, adding that Reed encourages landowners to check with the NRCS Berrien County Office by calling (269) 471-9111.

In Michigan, Reed said there are currently 470 easements covering nearly 40,000 acres and 34 restoration agreements covering a little over 1,000 acres.

Like the Fish and Wildlife Service's Private Lands Program, Reed said the NRCS's emphasis on wetland restoration projects has shifted from maximizing surface water for attracting ducks to creating lost habitat by re-establishing original vegetation communities and hydrology to the maximum extent practical.

Other organizations listed on a Galien River Watershed fact sheet offered at the workshop for those interested in finding out about options for land protection or restoration were the Lakeside-based Chikaming Open Lands conservancy (269-469-2330) and Ducks Unlimited (734-623-2000).

Sponsors for the Wetland Restoration Workshop were the Berrien Conservation District, Chikaming Open lands, the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy and Michigan's Nonpoint Source Program.

Copyright © 2012 - Harbor Country News

[x] Close Window