

# Conservation Showcase

United States Department of Agriculture



*Helping People Help the Land*

## Pokagon Tribe Uses WRP to Restore Cultural Land Uses

Prior to European settlement, the Potawatomi Nation traditional territory extended from the southern shores of Lake Erie in Ohio west to the Mississippi River in Illinois, halfway into Michigan's lower Peninsula to the north and south to the Wabash River. These territories were lost during the removal period and treaty-making with the U.S. government in the late 1700s and into the 1800s. While most of the Potawatomi were removed west of the Mississippi River, chief Leopold Pokagon negotiated with the U.S. to allow the Pokagon Band and its allied villages to remain within the Great Lakes region. Beginning in 1996, the Band



began to restore its land base for the benefit of the tribal government and its citizens. Included in its purchases were 1,450 acres of land along the current Kankakee River, and land which was within the former Kankakee River marshland area near North Liberty, IN. Historically, the former marsh provided hunting, gathering, and fishing areas for our ancestors. The Band is utilizing the USDA-NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to help re-connect to its ancestral cultural uses and activities.

### COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Through the WRP program, NRCS staff recreated marsh areas and established vegetation patterns over 1,147 acres of the Band's property to emulate the historic marsh and associated habitats.

Approximately 683 acres of warm season grasses and forbs were planted to by Pokagon Band Environmental Department and Land Maintenance Department staff to establish mesic prairie conditions.



The grasses include Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Sideoats Grama, and Switchgrass. Wildflower species include New England Aster, Black-eyed Susan, Purple Coneflower, Illinois Bundleflower, Partridge Pea, Purple Prairie Clover, and Canada Tick Trefoil. The planting was accomplished through valuable assistance presented by the St. Joseph County Chapter of Pheasants Forever, the St. Joseph County Soil and Water Conservation District, and the St. Joseph County NRCS. In addition to the native grasses and

wildflowers, Wild Rice was also established in this area. Wild Rice holds a cultural significance to the Pokagon Band as it will be utilized as a food source in tribal ceremonies.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL GAINS**

The experiences gained from the WRP activities offer conservation opportunities for the Pokagon Band. The planting and establishment of native vegetated prairies is transferable to the installation of conservation practices, such as filter strips, vegetated swales, and native vegetated prairies to protect water quality. These conservation practices can be integrated into agricultural practices and development projects to manage stormwater in ways that protect water quality. Demonstrating the Band's increased capacity to protect water quality, the Band utilized funds from a US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant to purchase a Truax FLX-II seed drill. Also, skills gained in wildlife habitat restoration/creation and management can be applied to other Pokagon Band properties in the future.



## **FUTURE OF THE POKAGON BAND PROJECT**

Over the long term, the restoration will provide a Tribal land preserve. The preserve is envisioned to offer recreational, cultural, and educational opportunities which can enhance the quality of life for Tribal citizens.

The WRP project provides benefits to the Band's local and regional neighbors by helping reduce the severity of flooding by retaining water on the Band's property that would have been conveyed to the Miller Ditch. The wildlife habitat created by the project provides a corridor link to surrounding State Conservation Areas, State Parks, and other private landowner efforts.