

SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM
STATE OF ILLINOIS

BACKGROUND

The Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended, to implement the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). The program provides grants to State and Tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately-held farm, ranch, and forest land to make land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, and other compatible recreation and to improve fish and wildlife habitat on their land. Administrative authority for the program initially was delegated to the Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA awarded a VPA-HIP grant to the State of Illinois, through the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), in 2011, resulting in FSA preparing a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). FSA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Illinois program in May of 2011.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2014, the Secretary delegated administrative authority for the VPA-HIP to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). IDNR applied for and was awarded another grant. The NRCS is adopting the FSA 2011 Programmatic EA for the Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program for the State of Illinois. Through the 2011 grant, the IDNR established a new public access program known as the Illinois Recreational Access program (IRAP), to provide more opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching, and other compatible wildlife related recreation. IDNR used grant funds to expand its IRAP program Statewide to enroll more private lands than would otherwise have been possible, and thereby maximize the number of individuals able to use public lands for recreation. It also afforded more landowners an opportunity to receive payments through the IRAP for opening their lands for public recreation.

NRCS is supplementing the 2011 EA to clarify the habitat improvement activities and analyze their potential effects, paying particular attention to compliance with the Endangered Species Act and Historic Preservation Act.

NEED FOR ACTION

The need for the 2014 VPA-HIP grant in Illinois remains substantially the same as the 2011 grant. As stated in FSA's Final Programmatic EA, the purpose of the Proposed Action continues to be to utilize VPA-HIP grant funds to increase public access and improve wildlife habitat on private farms and forestland in the State of Illinois. The need for the Proposed Action remains unchanged: to increase hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreational opportunities throughout the State. VPA-HIP funds would also

allow the State to fund IRAP Coordinators, contract with the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) to promote the program and target and enroll landowners, make annual access lease payments, develop printed informational materials, and provide assistance and funding for habitat restoration and enhancements on private land.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action:

The NRCS proposes to award the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) a VPA-HIP grant in the amount of \$1.74 million to continue and expand the Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP) with three public access campaigns to provide new and expanded opportunities for youth and adult turkey hunting, deer and upland game hunting, fishing, non-motorized boat access, and outdoor naturalist activities. The program is currently offered in the 68 CREP-eligible county area with plans to expand to the entire State of Illinois. The IRAP also would use 2014 VPA-HIP funds to expand the technical and financial assistance available to landowners to improve habitat management on enrolled lands.

Landowners enrolling in IRAP may have a management plan created or updated, all liability for the associated activities removed, and would receive a stipend based on the enrolled acreage and activities. Some participants would also receive cost share payments to assist them in implementing their habitat management plan. Approximately 60 percent of the proposed funding is expected to go towards planning and habitat management improvements.

Properties are ranked for habitat management funding based on criteria developed by IDNR personnel. The criteria are geared towards landscape level management.

Ranking criteria include:

- the number of IRAP landowners within a certain distance,
- other conservation areas (State parks, federal land) in proximity,
- whether the project meets the goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan,
- the size of the project to be completed,
- whether the project reduces soil erosion and improves water quality, and
- the practices to be implemented.

Management activities will be conducted in accordance with NRCS conservation practice standards (CPS). The primary practices for habitat restoration or enhancement will include the following NRCS CPS's:

- 314 – Brush management
- 315 – Herbaceous Weed Control
- 327 – Conservation Cover
- 338 – Prescribed Burning
- 394 – Firebreak
- 490 – Tree/Shrub Site Preparation

- 561 – Heavy Use Area Protection
- 612 – Tree planting
- 645 – Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 666 – Forest Stand Improvement

The practice standards and specifications as modified for use in Illinois are found at: http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx?map=US. In order to access the standards: click on the state, county; select “Section IV” from the pick list, and then “Conservation Practices”. Practices are listed in alphabetical order.

VPA-HIP funds will also be used to hire an IRAP coordinator and IRAP Forester who will write the habitat management plans and work with landowners to enroll them into the program. These individuals will also work on implementing plans on IDNR private land program sites as time permits. They will focus on CREP permanent easements that are enrolled into IRAP, but can work on all land enrolled into the program.

No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would result in the 2014 VPA-HIP project not being implemented in the State of Illinois. Expansion of the IRAP would not occur and habitat improvement projects would not be conducted on enrolled acreage. The program has enrolled over 13,000 acres to date, with the majority of landowners signing up for at least one turkey season, and many enrolling for all three seasons for a three year period. Currently, IRAP is working with over 65 private landowners in Illinois, and each leased parcel size ranges from continuous 1,019 acres to 15 acres. IRAP currently leases property in 29 different counties across the State, with the majority being in the western part of the State. The No Action Alternative does not meet the need of the Proposed Action, but serves as reference point to illuminate the net difference in effects between those that will occur without NRCS action and those that will occur by implementing the proposed action.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

This supplemental EA analyzes potential environmental impacts at a broad program scale, identifying the qualitative effects that are a reasonably foreseeable result of each alternative. NRCS will rely on environmental review processes to be conducted by IDNR on each site that will identify the resources present and the potential effect of planned actions and provide for site-specific avoidance or other mitigation of adverse effects as required by NRCS policies.

Impacts of the Proposed Action:

All habitat improvement activities carried out with 2014 VPA-HIP grant funds will follow NRCS conservation practice standards that have been adopted for use within the State of Illinois for the primary purpose of restoring healthy ecosystems and/or creating suitable habitat for desired wildlife species. Each CPS contains information on the purpose of the practice, conditions where the practice is to be applied, and sets forth the minimum quality criteria that must be met during implementation. To illustrate the chain

of expected direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of applying each conservation practice NRCS has developed network effects diagrams according to the standard for the land use on which it is intended to be applied. Copies of the network effects diagrams are available on the NRCS website.¹

Because all habitat improvement projects will use NRCS CPS and will be for the purpose of restoring healthy ecosystems and improving habitat on existing agricultural and non-industrial private forestland, these projects fall within existing NRCS NEPA categorical exclusions. Specifically, all projects will fall in one or more of the following categories of actions found to have no individual or cumulative significant effect on the human environment:

- Planting appropriate herbaceous and woody vegetation, which does not include noxious weeds or invasive plants, on disturbed sites to restore and maintain the sites ecological functions and services;
- Restoring an ecosystem, fish and wildlife habitat, biotic community, or population of living resources to a determinable pre-impact condition;
- Undertaking minor agricultural practices to maintain and restore ecological conditions in floodplains after a natural disaster or on lands impacted by human alteration (e.g., mowing, haying, grazing, fencing, offstream watering facilities, and invasive species control that are undertaken when fish and wildlife are not breeding, nesting, rearing young, or during other sensitive timeframes).

The focus of the habitat improvements will be on promoting native species and conducting the management necessary to maintain a high level of plant biodiversity. Each site will be evaluated individually to establish appropriate management objectives. IRAP and IDNR personnel will determine what type of restoration or enhancement is possible based on existing land use, historical land cover, and soil types.

Brush/herbaceous management will be conducted in a couple different ways. Some areas receive a foliar application while others receive a cut-stump treatment. Sometimes grinding machines and other light equipment is used in management. This may be restricted if necessary to avoid or otherwise mitigate potential adverse effects on protected resources. For example, forest stand improvement and edge feathering will only be conducted each year from Oct 15 – April 1 in order to mitigate bat roosting habitat degradation and loss. In addition, prescribed burning will be utilized as a management tool only when deemed biologically necessary by IDNR/IRAP personnel. In such cases, each site will be evaluated individually and an IDNR prescribed burn crew will conduct the burn. All permits are obtained by IDNR personnel on properties where IDNR personnel conduct a fire.

To ensure environmental requirements are met, IDNR will review all properties on which habitat management work is to be carried out using its Comprehensive Environmental

¹ *Practice Network Effect Diagrams* are available at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/technical/cp/ncps/?cid=nrcs143_026849

Review Process (CERP). The CERP coordinates reviews of actions that are funded or performed by IDNR and disturb land, water or air to ensure that they comply with relevant State and Federal environmental requirements. For projects funded using the 2014 VPA-HIP grant, CERP staff will review the proposed action for potential impacts to threatened or endangered species, natural areas, wetlands, cultural resources and other resources such as migratory birds, fisheries, forests, prairies, streams, and riparian corridors.

After this review is done for each property, a letter is issued that identifies any special restrictions that must be observed in order to conduct management on private property. These generally include stipulations such as minimizing soil disturbance or avoiding certain areas or timeframes. Because the purpose of the actions to be carried out with VPA-HIP funds is to improve ecosystem health and wildlife habitat, the majority of the management activities conducted through the program normally are planned such that they protect affected resources and do not require additional restrictions. However, to the extent mitigation measures are identified, IDNR will integrate those measures into its site-specific plans. To facilitate planning, NRCS will designate IDNR as its non-federal representative to conduct informal consultation under the Endangered Species Act in the event a planned action may affect a threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat and IDNR will incorporate into its plans any conservation measures that may result from that process, as well. For Cultural Resources, all projects are subject to evaluation and approval by the NRCS State Archeologist. NRCS does not expect projects are likely to result in adverse effects to resources protected by the National Historic Preservation Act, however, as most projects are expected to be implemented on previously disturbed ground.

Any required project modifications will be discussed with the IRAP participant and must be agreed to before the project can proceed. If a project must go to construction bid, the modifications must be included in bid specifications. If the project cannot be modified to mitigate for the adverse action, the action will be abandoned.

Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

If the Illinois VPA-HIP is not implemented, the State of Illinois will not expand the (IRAP) public access campaigns to provide new and expanded opportunities for youth and adult turkey hunting, deer and upland game hunting, fishing, non-motorized boat access, and outdoor naturalist activities. The program is currently offered in the 68 CREP-eligible county areas will not be expanded to the entire State of Illinois.

95% of land in Illinois is in private ownership and there exists a huge public demand for access to land for outdoor recreational use. The IRAP will not have the capacity to further satisfy public demand with improved opportunities for the citizens of Illinois, in addition to assist in the management of wildlife for private landowners.

Without continued funding, access leases will expire next year. Management activities that have been started on many sites, including completion of 2,500 acres of forest management and the planting of over 250 acres of native prairie grasses and forbs will not be completed.

AGENCIES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

Matthew R. Judy USDA, NRCS, Central National Technical Support Center
Ecologist

Andree DuVarney USDA, NRCS, Ecological Sciences Division
National Environmental Coordinator

Tammy Miller IDNR, Office of Resource Conservation
IRAP Manager