



SE Indiana GRP goat pasture. Photo taken by Robert Zupancic, NRCS Grazing Specialist



Planting sedges on HFRP shallow wetland. Photo by The Nature Conservancy



This publication is the second issue of a direct mail piece intended to provide information to holders of NRCS **Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP)** and **Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)** easements, and to identify the activities that are taking place with respect to easements across Indiana. This publication replaces the certified letters that have been sent to easement holders in the past.

GRP/HFRP

INDIANA ● GRP/HFRP ISSUE 2 ● JANUARY, 2014

Easement Owner Newsletter

IN THIS ISSUE...

Contact Information

Find out who to contact in case of easement questions.

Bigger Picture

Learn how many acres are enrolled in GRP and HFRP as of the start of 2014.

Species Focus

Learn how HFRP is helping to save the copperbelly water snake.

Reminder!

When in doubt whether or not an activity is permissible - ASK FIRST.

IS YOUR MANAGEMENT PLAN UP-TO-DATE?

GRP and HFRP are working lands programs. Each year, as part of a viable conservation practice, it is important for landowners and NRCS to review and evaluate current plans and determine if they are still meeting the goals and objectives of the operation and easement.

Prior to implementing any changes to your conservation plan, please contact your local NRCS office to schedule a time to review the desired modifications. Whether it is changing the forage composition of a GRP pasture, or planning a timber harvest, it is crucial NRCS is involved in the process to ensure that the new management plan meets the program intent, operation needs, and protects valuable natural resources. For HFRP landowners, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is required to review and approve any activity, including timber harvest, in order to maintain Safe Harbor protections offered through HFRP.

SUCCESS STORIES NEEDED

Throughout this newsletter are photos from around Indiana, but we are always looking for more. Please submit photos and success stories regarding your GRP or HFRP easement to the Indiana State Easement Program Specialist at brianne.lowe@in.usda.gov. Stories and locations used in future publications may remain anonymous upon request.

2014 MONITORING BEGINS

NRCS annually inspects all of its easements. Inspections may occasionally be done remotely using aerial photography, but in many cases the monitoring will be completed on site. This is a great opportunity to meet with NRCS to discuss any concerns you have regarding your easement. You will be notified if your easement is selected for onsite monitoring and given the opportunity to participate. Of course, even if it is not selected, please contact NRCS regarding any concerns or questions you may have about your easement.



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HFRP and GRP EASEMENTS - PART OF THE BIGGER PICTURE

At the end of 2013, Indiana had over 884 acres protected through Grassland Reserve Program easements. An additional 174 acres are proceeding through the acquisition process for the Healthy Forest Reserve Program, and will be added to the over 1100 acres already enrolled. Combined with nearly 62,000 acres Wetlands Reserve Program, and 8,000 acres Floodplain Easement Program easements, over 72,150 acres of land are protected through NRCS conservation easements in Indiana, resulting in healthy, productive grazing and forest lands, habitat for threatened and endangered species, flood retention, erosion protection, and water quality improvement for generations to come.



SE Indiana GRP cattle pasture.
Photo by Robert Zupancic, NRCS Grazing Specialist



Copperbelly Water Snake.
Photo by Dr. Omar Attum, Indiana University - Southeast



Planting trees on HFRP.
Photo by Beth Warner - The Nature Conservancy

HFRP SPECIES FOCUS: COPPERBELLY WATER SNAKE

In some ways the Copperbelly Water Snake is a very strange water snake. This non-poisonous snake spends a large part of its life in upland forests, moving from wetland to wetland looking for frogs and tadpoles, its main food source. Named after one of its most distinguishing features, its bright-orange (and at times, red) underside, Copperbellies make their home in small wooded wetlands and buttonbush swamps that are surrounded by forests.

Why should I care about this snake? The Copperbelly is listed as a "Threatened" species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which means that it is in danger of becoming extinct. Because of land-use changes such as converting forest land to agriculture, housing developments, and roads, its habitat is shrinking. And most of the remaining habitat needed for the Copperbelly to survive is located on private land. Best estimates are that only a few hundred snakes are left in this area. In addition, Copperbelly habitat is also home to frogs, turtles, fresh-water mussels, waterfowl, deer and several other endangered wildlife such as the Indiana Bat.

How can I help? If you are one of the HFRP landowners, you are already making a difference for this unique snake. You join others from Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio who are working to provide much needed habitat for this threatened species. Other steps you can take to protect this species include:

1. Brake for snakes! Because most of its habitat is crisscrossed by roads, many Copperbellies are killed trying to cross roads.
2. If you own agricultural fields, consider adding buffer strips along field and wetland edges.
3. If you own wetlands, avoid deepening shallow wetlands. Deep water tends to support fish which feed on the frogs and tadpoles needed by the Copperbelly. Also consider leaving or adding logs and woody debris to your wetlands for use as sunning areas and cover.
4. When possible minimize land-disturbing activities between April 1 and October 31.

REMINDER - ALWAYS ASK FIRST!

REMINDER- When in doubt whether or not an activity is permissible- ASK FIRST. If you are unsure whether or not a planned activity is permitted under the Conservation Easement Deed, please contact NRCS. We can review the Conservation Easement Deed recorded for your property,

and let you know what is permissible. Not all Conservation Deeds are the same, and they have changed over time; be sure you are looking on the deed tied to your land. Please contact your local NRCS field office prior to beginning any activity. www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/contact/local/