

Resurrecting the Grand Marsh

Robert Themer

rthemer@daily-journal.com

815-937-3369 | Posted: Friday, April 3, 2015 8:29 am

A glimmer of hope for the resurrection of the Grand Kankakee Marsh Fish and Wildlife Refuge, proposed in 1999, was signaled at last weekend's annual meeting of Friends of the Kankakee, an organization created to support the proposed refuge.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service "has dusted off the proposal" after 13 years, John Rogner, FWS landscape coordinator for the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes, told FOK on Saturday.

Rogner, who joined FWS two years ago after serving as deputy director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, said FWS started talks about 18 months ago with Indiana DNR officials.

They're working on "broader partnerships" with other potential conservation partners including the Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited and the Natural Resources Conservation Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he said.

The refuge was proposed in 1999 for an estimated 30,000 acres along the river. Acquisition of natural lands east of Momence was launched by a coalition of Illinois state and local partners.

However, federal land buying was quickly derailed by refuge-stalling language inserted into the Interior Department appropriations by then U.S. Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Kokomo, Ind.

Still, project planning moved forward, project managers were appointed and land acquisition was projected within 18 months.

Then, the project was shelved.

With the proposal being "dusted off," FWS staff has again "identified land for acquisition by the FWS and DNR," Rogner said.

U.S. Department of Agriculture programs also have been identified that could be used to advantage, he said.

"Agricultural land is so valuable we have no interest in taking a lot of land out of production," he said in a phone interview Wednesday. "We would like to work with agriculture to control bank erosion and sedimentation. Nobody wants sediment in the river."

On Saturday, he said FWS is "moving on our end to re-motivate and reinvigorate the idea of establishing the refuge. There would be a role for Friends of the Kankakee and The Nature

Conservancy."

FOK continues advocacy

"Friends of the Kankakee has already decided if we get this refuge, we will continue on as an advocacy group and in land acquisition," said Marianne Hahn, president of FOK. "We can act quickly to acquire properties. The Fish and Wildlife Service cannot."

FOK has been buying and preserving natural areas in the river basin with the idea of contributing them to a federal refuge. The organization and The Nature Conservancy have been buying and preserving the world class black oak savannas of Pembroke Township and other properties in Indiana.

TNC owns the 7,800 acre Kankakee Sands Efroymsen Family Prairie Restoration in neighboring Newton County, north of Morocco in the former Beaver Lake area. It is described as "a birder's and wildflower enthusiast's paradise" with "an amazing array of birds, wildflowers, plants and animals that fills the prairie with song and sights to behold. As a restoration project, the beauty of the Sands will only get better for generations to come."

The featured speaker for the FOK annual meeting was Fran Harty, special projects director for The Nature Conservancy of Illinois for 10 years.

Hahn introduced him as "the godfather of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie," for his role leading to the creation of that 19,000 acre U.S. Forest Service facility, where bison are expected to be reintroduced later this year. The last recorded bison shot in Illinois was killed in 1837 near the village of Troy Grove, about 10 miles north of LaSalle-Peru, Hardy would note in his presentation.

As a 25-year Illinois Department of Natural Resources employee, Harty was one of the champions for preservation and restoration of what became the first national tallgrass prairie in 1996.

Preserve the precious

His program on "The Greater Kankakee Sands Ecosystem" could itself could be a partial justification for the preservation of 30,000 acres of what was once the million acre Grand Kankakee Marsh, stretching from Momence to South Bend.

The river itself still contains unusual fish species and "maintains one of the most diverse and viable mussel populations in Illinois," he noted.

His list of the region's threatened and endangered species of plants, birds, mussels, fish, insects, snakes and turtles totals 58.

"The remarkable thing about the Pembroke savannas is that they are still there; just as they were described in 1833" by the first U.S. government surveyors to measure out townships in the region, he said. With a "remarkable cultural and ecological history" the area "is truly one of *Illinois' Last Great*

Places," he wrote.

"The Grand Marsh may be almost gone, but not all is lost," he wrote. "As remarkable as the draining of the Grand Kankakee Marsh was In the 1800s, there is a modern day opportunity of equal singularity to protect and restore thousands of acres of black oak sand savannas, pin oak flatwoods, floodplain forests, sedge meadows and sand prairies that still exist in the Greater Kankakee Sands Ecosystem. Many areas have already been protected by the Indiana and Illinois Departments of Natural Resources, Kankakee and Will County forest preserves districts and private organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and Friends of the Kankakee.