

'Small step' taken toward wildlife refuge

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"A first small step" toward establishing the proposed Grand Kankakee Marsh Fish and Wildlife Refuge is being taken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said John Rogner, wildlife refuge landscape conservation coordinator for the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes.

FWS is accepting the donation of "a little over 70 acres" of high-quality natural habitat in the northeast corner of Iroquois County from Friends of the Kankakee, an organization formed in 2005 and dedicated to acquiring lands to be donated to this cause.

That's a grain of sand in the 1997 FWS proposal to create a 30,000-acre refuge along the Kankakee River in Indiana and Illinois. However, it is part of the black oak savanna and sand prairie area that is "the best kept secret in Illinois," said Rogner, former assistant director of the state Department of Natural Resources and a professional wetlands scientist.

"It is beautiful country and much of it is in pre-settlement condition. This is a really unique place."

While the original FWS vision included Indiana as part of the refuge, it is limiting the plan to Illinois now and will work with other landowners and local officials to continue the effort, Rogner said.

He has met with Kankakee County planning director Mike Van Mill, Pembroke Township Supervisor Sharon White, Hopkins Park Mayor Mark Hodge and representatives of The Nature Conservancy, which owns just over 1,400 acres of natural areas in Pembroke and 600 acres in adjacent St. Anne Township. FWS also has briefed U.S. senators and representatives from Illinois, he said.

Public meetings have not been scheduled, yet, but Rogner did announce the renewal of the plan at the annual meeting of Friends of the Kankakee in April.

However, opposition that stalled the project in 1999 seems likely to greet it again. The Kankakee



Wildflowers brighten the landscape in a restored portion of the Kolar Savanna in the northeast corner of Iroquois County, one of the properties donated by Friends of the Kankakee as a "first small step" in creation of the proposed Grand Kankakee Marsh Fish and Wildlife Refuge of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

County Board voted 21-2 in August 1998 to oppose the larger, two-state refuge. Concerns remain the same, Van Mill said — loss of potential for development, possible loss of property rights for neighboring homeowners and farmers, loss of tax base for local governments and schools, and potential loss of local planning and infrastructure development authority.

He cited opposition to the proposed Illiana Expressway for its potential impact on the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie at Wilmington as a case in point. "How much can they ultimately dictate land use and development processes to the communities?" he said. "We want to make sure there is balance."

White and Hodge also expressed concern about potential loss of tax base, home sites, development potential, local control and even community survival.

The Kankakee County Farm Bureau opposed the refuge in the 1990s and would have the same concerns — potential interference with land drainage and possible loss of farmable land, said FB vice president Paula Karlock, of rural Momence.

Bureau Manager Chad Miller "is going to start researching some of the material we used last time," she said. "We never got clear definition for what they consider marginal land. Maybe all of our land is marginal. My great-grandfather came here and bought swamp land."

Following early public meetings in 1998, FWS reported that public comments were running 8-1 in favor of the refuge, but opposition was widespread and vocal on both states. The plan was scuttled in 1999 by former U.S. Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Kokomo, Ind., by defunding it in the Interior Department appropriation.

The land donated as that "first small step" for the refuge is two sites already protected by Illinois Land and Water Preserves, just east of the state's Hooper Branch Savanna Nature Preserve and less than a mile from Indiana.

They're just over a mile south of the village of Leesville on Kankakee County Road 17000 E, which starts as a solid gravel road that turns to sand, and recently to rutted mud.

You'll pass a couple other state nature preserves before you come to Friends of the Kankakee's Anderson and Kolar savannas, donated by a couple founders of the organization.

South of the Kolar entrance, purple blazing star stand against yellow flowers and the green of distant trees. They're part of a new restoration area over a "blind ditch" that was a hunting club's attempt to attract ducks, said Marianne Hahn, of Homewood, president of FOK and one of its founders. She's seen it grow from talks by "a handful" of founders 15 years ago to more than 100 members and volunteers in both states. With donations and grants from the Illinois Clean Energy Foundation, they have put together and are restoring about 250 acres of habitat in the area just west of the state line.

Their tracts contain many state threatened and endangered species and others of special conservation

interest, Hahn said.

The "first small step" toward the Grand Marsh refuge "is just fantastic to pass on these lands for future generations and to preserve habitats for all these species that are being pushed into smaller and smaller habitats."