

Grassroots effort could revive Grand Kankakee Marsh



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The rains have created a small, watery refuge for a dozen visitors on a portion of farmland next to the Kankakee Sands restoration project in Newton County.

Peering through binoculars from inside his hybrid car, Jim Sweeney declares the tall-necked waders are trumpeter swans, a rare sight in the Hoosier state. The sighting by the local director of the Izaak Walton League was

especially apropos based on statements he made earlier while driving through the rain-drenched environs that once formed the Grand Kankakee Marsh.

"I want to be part of bringing the trumpeter swan back to Indiana," said the gray-haired wetlands advocate, who later added prairie chickens and other species that once flourished in the area to his wishlist.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service once hoped a refuge in Northwest Indiana might provide some additional habitat for such birds and other local wildlife, but the proposal was viewed as an unwelcome intrusion by some deep-rooted residents of the area who have turned much of the wetlands into productive farmland.

Restoration of the restoration effort may depend on a grassroots effort and changed attitudes by both sides.

"We definitely have not dropped our interest in the area," said Tom Larson, chief of the division of conservation planning for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Larson said various options for the area are being considered and any preservation effort would be more of a partnership effort. He emphasized officials are still in the discussion stage.

If the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decides to restart efforts in the region, the land acquired might not even be called a refuge but something like a conservation area. For some people, he said, a refuge has the connotation of locking the land up away from public use, although that is not the case.

The Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge was seen as a way to restore and preserve 30,000 acres of the watershed in Northwest Indiana and northeast Illinois. Larson said the refuge was to be part of a larger effort that overall could have preserved about 100,000 acres. A lot of these other preservation efforts have been moving forward over the last 20 years.

In 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a preliminary project proposal for a refuge that would restore a percentage of these wetlands and a planning team was assembled in 1997. The federal agency saw the loss of wetland as a serious threat to the region, estimating 85 to 90 percent of the wetlands had been lost in the watershed.

There was some stringent opposition to the plan, however, as some people viewed it as a land grab by federal bureaucrats. The Indiana Farm Bureau opposed it on the grounds it could increase flooding.

Officials insisted landowners would not be forced to sell land, nor would the service have the authority to impose any restrictions on private land within the proposed refuge. Sweeney also believes restoration of some of the wetland could ease flooding in the area rather than increase it.

Sweeney believes part of the problem with the way the initial proposal was greeted was the way it was suddenly thrust on people. He also said the agency did not have someone readily available to answer people's questions about the project.

A lot has changed since the project was put on hold about 14 years ago, including the feeling of some farmers who realize having wildlife nearby will not have a negative impact on them.

Jeff Kiefer, Indiana private lands coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, believes Sweeney might be correct based on the number of landowners who have chosen to participate in the service's program.

In the meantime, various government and private programs during the past 20 years have been able to preserve thousands of acres in the area. Kiefer said about 70 to 75 landowners, some of them farmers, have participated in the agency's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program in the last 14 years, creating about 2,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

Federal conservation programs

Federal funds have been used in conjunction with state and private money to preserve thousands of acres in the Kankakee River Watershed. These include:

- **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program:** About 2,000 acres. Under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife program, a section of land is dedicated to habitat for 10 years or, in some cases where trees are planted, 15 years. Landowners often retain the land in habitat even after the program ends on their property.
- **Wetlands Reserve Program:** About 10,000 to 12,000 acres. Permanent conservation easements acquired through U.S. Department of Agriculture money.
- **Indiana Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project:** 8,000 to 9,000 acres. A public-private partnership, including the state, local governments and groups like Ducks Unlimited. A competitive grant program using matching funds.

Some of the money available through these programs was used for some of the Nature Conservancy's 7,800-acre Kankakee Sands project in Newton County.