

Frequently Asked Questions

Regarding the Establishment of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

What is the history of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) involvement in the Kankakee River Basin?

In 1999, the Service authorized the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana, to provide habitat restoration and wildlife management within the Kankakee River Basin. The goal in 1999 was to establish partnerships, easements, and land purchases on up to 30,000 acres, within 14 identified focal areas, to become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

In 2001 the refuge concept was put on hold, but the Service continued to provide and support conservation efforts in the Kankakee River Basin. Some examples include: Service funding and technical assistance to landowners to develop wetland and upland areas for wildlife on private property; collaboration with partners to receive North American Wetland Conservation Act grants for conservation activities; USDA payments to landowners to enroll wetlands and uplands in farm-related conservation programs; and purchase of natural resource lands by the states, counties, and conservation organizations.

To show the commitment by the Service to future conservation efforts in this area of high natural resource value, we re-engaged in the refuge concept in 2015 within the 1999 focal areas in the state of Illinois. We changed the name to the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area (NWR&CA) to reflect the Service's commitment to work with others in the area to achieve wildlife conservation through partnerships and recognize there are upland areas outside the historic marsh, in the project.

The Service formally established the Kankakee NWR&CA on May 25, 2016 through the acceptance of a donation of land from the Friends of the Kankakee (FOK) in northeastern Iroquois County.

What are focal areas and how were they chosen?

Focal areas are specific areas selected as the most important places to meet the conservation goals of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The focal areas were selected in 1999 and still remain important today. They were chosen by natural resource conservation experts using the best available data during the 1999 planning effort. They are also areas within which the Service has been approved to purchase property or easements from landowners interested in voluntarily selling title or certain rights to their land (willing sellers). The designation of a conservation focal area does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over the land. Land would become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System only when and if it is purchased from willing sellers or if the Service purchases an easement (agreement) on private land from willing participants to provide conservation practices.

What is a Conservation Area?

A Conservation Area (CA) is an area where the Service agrees to work with people to meet the goals of wildlife conservation. In a CA, the Service and partners work together to protect and manage land; support conservation practices, including those on agricultural land; and engage in voluntary protection, restoration, and improvement of private land for the benefit of both people and wildlife.

How is the National Wildlife Refuge part of the project different from the Conservation Area?

The National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) part of the project would refer to Service-owned lands within the bigger Conservation Area.

Why is the Service moving forward with the establishment of Kankakee (NWR&CA) now?

Although the refuge was approved in 1999, lack of funding and other priorities kept the Service from starting the NWR&CA. The Service is now in a position to refocus its planning efforts on areas previously identified as being of natural resource importance, like the Kankakee River Basin.

What will be the size of the Kankakee NWR&CA?

In 1999, a total of 30,000 acres were approved for protection within 14 focal areas in Illinois and Indiana that were identified as supporting exceptional natural resource value. At this time, the Service has decided to develop the NWR&CA in the focal areas identified in 1999 in Illinois, which total about 21,500 acres.

The final acreage of land in federal ownership within this area is unknown because the Service works only with people interested and willing to sell property or wildlife-related easements to us (willing sellers). In addition, the Conservation Area concept includes lands not in federal ownership where the Service will work cooperatively with landowners on voluntary protection, restoration, and improvement of habitat on their land, while maintaining a viable local economy.

Why is the Kankakee NWR&CA only being established in Illinois?

The Service is moving forward in Illinois because the state of Illinois and other conservation partners agree to the Service's cooperative approach to conservation in this area.

Who are the Friends of the Kankakee?

The Friends of the Kankakee (FOK) is an organization that was formed in 2000 to actively support the Service's original refuge proposal. When that project was put on hold, the FOK continued to be a voice for conservation in the Kankakee River Basin. They have been buying and managing land in the Service's 1999 focal areas in Illinois for many years in support of the conservation goals of the original refuge proposal. They are interested having some of their land be part of the NWR&CA. On May 25, 2016, they donated 66 acres of their land to officially establish the NWR&CA.

Does the Service intend to expand the Kankakee NWR&CA into Indiana?

The Service will remain a conservation partner in Indiana, following the State’s lead. The Service is already working in close partnership with the state in Illinois and will also do so in Indiana. The partnership effort in Indiana would focus on a “conservation area” concept that blends agriculture with fish and wildlife conservation.

What can a landowner do with their land if it is within a focal area?

Focal areas carry no land use restrictions so landowners can care for, use, and manage their land as they see fit. The Service will work with landowners in the area if they are interested in conservation efforts on their land, and will only purchase land or easements from willing sellers. The Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program exists to help individuals and organizations improve/protect wildlife habitat on non-federal land.

How can a landowner remove their land from a focal area?

Since focal areas carry no legal weight, there is no need to remove one’s land from a focal area. Landowners in focal areas retain all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership, including the right of access, control of trespass, right to sell, and payment of taxes.

Does the Service intend to acquire all the property within the focal areas?

Since the Service relies on willing sellers, it is unknown how much land or how many easements the Service will eventually buy within the focal areas that make up the Kankakee NWR&CA. It is our desire to work with landowners within the total acreage of these focal areas to promote a positive, sustainable relationship of people with the land that helps us achieve our mission of “working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people”. In addition to any land purchased from willing sellers, the vision is there will also be voluntary protection, restoration, and improvement of habitat on private land.

Will activities conducted on NWR&CA land affect adjacent properties?

Land access, land use, water management, hunting, fishing, and general use is limited only to the land the Service purchases. The Service does not conduct any habitat restoration or make any changes to Service-owned land that would negatively affect privately owned adjacent properties.

How will land be purchased for the Kankakee NWR&CA?

The Service will purchase land or certain rights to land from people interested in selling to us (willing sellers) as funds are available.

Are there ways the Service can manage land for wildlife conservation without owning it?

There are several ways the Service can manage land without owning it, these include:

Conservation Easement - A conservation easement involves the purchase of certain rights that achieve fish and wildlife habitat objectives (for example, the Service may pay a willing landowner to keep their land fallow or in grassland or wetland habitat). Easements become part of the title to the property and are usually permanent. If a landowner sells the property, the easement continues as part of the title.

Lease agreements - Leases are short-term agreements with willing landowners for use of a piece of land or a specific use of the land in return for an annual rental payment to the interested landowner.

Cooperative Agreements - Cooperative Agreements are negotiated between the Service and interested organizations or individuals. A Cooperative Agreement states what management actions or activities the landowner agrees to do, or not do, with his or her property. For example, a landowner may agree to delay mowing hay until after a certain date to allow birds that nest on the ground to hatch their young before equipment is run across an area.

More comprehensive agreements are possible. Agreements are strictly voluntary, can be changed, and are not legally binding. If a landowner is interested in following the terms of an agreement with the Service, this can be an effective way to accomplish NWR&CA objectives on land in private ownership.

Can the Service help private landowners protect and conserve wildlife on their own land?

The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides assistance for work on private land.

More information on this program can be found at the following website:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/partners/index.html>.

Will the Kankakee NWR&CA be open to the public for recreation?

One of the goals of the NWR&CA is to provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation. Hunting, fishing, nature observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation are allowed on most lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service expects to open parts of the NWR&CA to these public uses if a large enough block of land is in federal ownership, easement or agreement so that these activities can be carried out safely and without negative impacts to neighboring properties. Based on prior use, the initial 66-acre donation will be open for deer and turkey hunting according to state regulation, and for collection of wild plants for consumption or medicinal uses by permit only. Additional planning will be completed prior to opening any new lands for public use.

Who will maintain and manage the Kankakee NWR&CA?

Once the NWR&CA is started, it will become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System), which is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The majority of the lands within the System are maintained and managed by the Service.

Will there be public involvement during the development phase of the Kankakee NWR&CA?

Public involvement was part of the planning process in 1999 which approved the NWR&CA (then called the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge). Now that the NWR&CA is established, a Land Protection Plan (LPP) will be written and available for public review. We have committed to working with Kankakee County, Pembroke Township, the Village of Hopkins Park, and other partners in the development of a Sustainability Plan for Hopkins Park and part of Pembroke Township. This planning process will reflect the desires of the local community and will be an important source of input to our LPP. Any future planning efforts in Indiana would also include public involvement.

What is a Land Protection Plan (LPP) and how can I get involved in the process?

An LPP is a report that is prepared by the Service to describe natural resource protection needs of an area to help prioritize conservation action within the area. A LPP will describe the extent of the area where the Service has been approved for NWR&CA activities and priority areas for Service involvement. It includes some of the Service's land purchase processes and policies, how the Service will coordinate land management and a discussion about sociocultural impacts. The Service will write an LPP for the Kankakee NWR&CA (i.e., the focal areas in Illinois) that will be available for public review.

Will the NWR&CA help advance the State of Illinois' conservation objectives for the Kankakee area?

The Kankakee NWR&CA focal areas in Illinois are located within an area named by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as the Kankakee Sands - Pembroke Savannas - Kankakee River - Momence Wetlands Conservation Opportunity Area (COA). COAs are areas that the state has identified as important for conserving wildlife species they have found are in the greatest need of conservation. Because the goals of the state COA and the Service's NWR&CA are alike, we can work together in this area to achieve them.

What are some of the benefits of living close to land in the National Wildlife Refuge System?

Several benefits of living close to a refuge have been shown:

- National wildlife refuges pumped \$2.4 billion into the economy, supported more than 35,000 jobs and produced \$792.7 million in job income for local communities in 2011, according to an economic analysis (USFWS Division of Economics, Banking on Nature, 2013).
- Refuges preserve scenic views and other "natural amenity benefits associated with open spaces." (Taylor, Liu, & Timothy, Amenity Values of Proximity to National Wildlife Refuges, 2012)
- Recreational opportunities nearby lead to more physical activity and improved health and quality of life.

Where does funding come from to purchase land or easements within a Conservation Area?

Typically, money to buy land or easements within the National Wildlife Refuge System, including NWRs and CAs, comes from the Land and Water Conservation Fund or the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, both established through federal law. The Land and Water Conservation Fund receives its money from the sale of products on federal land, such as offshore oil and gas leases. Funds for the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund are derived from the sale of federal duck stamps. Funds for purchasing easements or land can also come from grants and private donations.

How will the area's tax base be affected?

Land where an easement has been purchased from a landowner remains on the tax rolls. If the Service purchases all rights to a piece of land, the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of June 15, 1935, as amended, provides for annual payments to counties based on acreage and value of Service lands located within the county.

How can the Kankakee NWR&CA contribute to ecotourism?

Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education. The Kankakee NWR&CA will be a new natural area in the region, conserving special natural communities and providing activities like birding, hiking, and nature photography. Visitors will need services and supplies while they are in the area that could be provided by local businesses and private individuals.

In addition to local revenues from ecotourism activities, studies show the economic benefit of living next to a National Wildlife Refuge. These studies include *Banking on Nature* by the USFWS Division of Economics in 2013 and *Amenity Values of Proximity to National Wildlife Refuges* by Taylor, Liu, & Timothy in 2012.

How could schools in the area benefit from the Kankakee NWR&CA?

Many units of the National Wildlife Refuge System have an interpretation and/or environmental education program. As the Kankakee NWR&CA grows in size and staff, the Service may work with local schools and communities to create an environmental education program. In addition, the Service may give presentations at schools or community events.

Will wild harvest, particularly harvest of wild plants, be allowed on the Kankakee NWR&CA?

A formal compatibility determination process was completed for this activity. Wild harvest has been found to be compatible with wildlife conservation under certain strict guidelines. It may be allowed by permit on the Service-owned lands within the NWR&CA. Contact us for more information.

Will sustainable farming or community-supported agriculture be allowed on the Kankakee NWR&CA?

Generally long-term farming or community-supported agriculture is not allowed on land owned by the Service. If already occurring at the time of purchase by the Service, these practices may continue for a period of time to keep the land weed-free until habitat restoration begins.