

RESTORE & ENHANCE

*25th anniversary of
the Service's Partners
for Fish and Wildlife
Program*

by MATTHEW FILSINGER and JOE MILMOE

Mission: To efficiently achieve voluntary habitat restoration on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, for the benefit of federal trust species.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program was officially established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987. A group of Service biologists and numerous conservation partners had the vision to look beyond the boundaries of government fee-title holdings and see the need to work cooperatively with private landowners. They recognized that nearly 73 percent of U.S. lands are in private ownership and a vast majority of federal trust species used these areas during their life cycle. Intense stakeholder outreach concluded that the most effective way to achieve conservation success was to provide direct financial and technical assistance.

The Partners program was designed to complement many of the traditional Service easement programs by offering restoration and enhancement agreements

for shorter time periods. This gives private individuals options to improve their property for targeted wildlife species and avoid having to make the sometimes difficult decision on a long-term easement contract.

On-the-ground activities for the Partners program started in the upper Midwest portions of the Prairie Pothole Region and were focused on wetland and grassland restoration for the benefit of migratory birds.

Growth has been tremendous during the past 25 years, and the program now provides assistance to all 50 states and U.S. territories. Today, more than 300 staff members serve the nation's private landowners including farmers, ranchers and corporations. Projects are implemented for a wide range of habitats with an emphasis on federal trust species, including those that are listed as threatened and endangered. The key to success has been the one-on-one relationships that are built with cooperators. These relationships, grounded in trust, are part of larger community-based conservation efforts. The Partners program, in many instances, is the first introduction many people have to the Service.

While the program started out as an opportunistic program, over the decades, it has become extremely strategic in its approach. Five major goals guide the group: 1) Conserve Habitat, 2) Broaden and Strengthen Partnerships, 3) Improve Information Sharing and Communication, 4) Enhance our Workforce and 5) Increase Accountability. These are captured in a strategic plan driven by defined geographic focus areas and select focal species within those boundaries. Development is from the bottom-up and a majority of the decision-making occurs at the field level. The business model is to maintain flexibility and a streamlined approach to delivery, while capitalizing on the strengths of partners and their resources. The program has done a tremendous job of leveraging at a rate of 4:1, essentially taking every dollar and maximizing its impact by utilizing four dollars of non-Partners funds.

The program has gained national recognition as a vanguard in the new era of cooperative conservation based on the premise that fish and wildlife conservation is a responsibility shared by citizens and the government. It is using cutting-edge restoration and enhancement techniques along with deploying proven methods of communicating and partnership building. The conservation landscape is ever-changing and influenced by natural, economic, social and political factors. Future progress will be defined by how the program adapts and reacts to those changes. The core foundation of the program lies in the time-tested relationships with people and those partnerships will carry the program into the future as it deals with new challenges. □

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A private landowner meets with Partners program state and regional coordinators to discuss plans for habitat restoration on his ranch.




Partners Biologist Gib King with private landowner, certifying completion of a habitat restoration project.

worked
with

44,000 
private LANDOWNERS

more than 
3,000 PARTNERING
organizations

restored &
enhanced

9,200 
MILES
of stream
habitat

1,260,000 
ACRES OF WETLANDS

Below: The Partners Program is delivered by more than 300 full-time staff located throughout all 50 states and territories. Staff gathered for the first time in decades at the 20th Anniversary workshop in 2006.

3,235,000 
ACRES
of uplands



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