

# ILLINOIS NATURE PRESERVES COMMISSION SPECIAL MEETING

January 27, 2014

Illinois Department of Natural Resources  
One Natural Resources Way  
Springfield, Illinois

On January 27, 2014, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) held a special meeting in Springfield, Illinois.

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Vice Chair Dann.

Members present: George Covington, Pen DauBach, William McClain, Dr. Jo-Elle Morgerman.

Members absent: Dennis Clark, Dr. Abigail Derby Lewis, Dr. Charles Ruffner, and Dr. David Thomas.

Others present: Steven Byers, Meaghan Collins, Bob Edgin, Tom Engbrecht, Randy Heidorn, Tom Lerczak, Angella Moorehouse, Kelly Neal, Debbie Newman, Kim Roman, Jared Ruholl, and Mary Kay Solecki, INPC; Bridget Henning, Dr. Jim Herkert, Don McFall, Connie Waggoner, and John Wilker, Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR); Anne Mankowski, Endangered Species Protection Board (ESPB); and Dr. Brian Anderson, Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) and INPC Advisor; and Jeannie Barnes, INHS.

Randy Heidorn stated that this meeting serves as an orientation because there have been some changes in the Commission. He welcomed Dr. Jo-Elle Morgerman. Dr. Morgerman was appointed to the Commission in November, 2013 and works at the Brookfield Zoo. Dr. Morgerman replaces Jill Riddell. Mr. Heidorn stated that as of January 24, 2014, two new Commissioners were appointed by the Governor. Dr. Abigail Derby Lewis was appointed to replace Lauren Rosenthal. Dr. Lewis works at the Field Museum in Chicago. Dr. Charles Ruffner, Professor of Forestry at Southern Illinois University, was appointed to replace Mare Payne. Due to previous schedule commitments, Dr. Lewis and Dr. Ruffner were unable to attend.

The information presented today will focus on the Commission's relationship and working efforts with the IDNR.

Randy Heidorn gave a presentation regarding the fifty-year history of the INPC. He also discussed the current operations of the Commission.

Kim Roman gave a presentation regarding the field staff efforts in the northern part of the State. She gave an overview of the challenges and successes in her area.

Bob Edgin gave a presentation regarding the field staff efforts in the southern part of the State. He gave an overview of the challenges and successes in his area.

Commissioner Covington stated that the southeastern part of the State is in need of a local land trust which may be a challenge to develop.

Mr. Edgin stated that there have been efforts to develop a land trust or other organizations to help; however, in his part of the State the population has declined 32% in the last 100 years. There are no financial resources in this area. The average household income is \$43,000, which is 25% below the state-wide average.

Kelly Neal gave a presentation providing an overview of the Natural Areas Stewardship Program.

Randy Heidorn stated that because of the decrease in staffing, the stewardship effort has shifted to more of a regulatory function.

A short break was taken.

Dr. Jim Herkert gave an overview of the partnership with the IDNR and Office of Resource Conservation as it relates to the INPC.

Don McFall gave a presentation on the partnership between the Division of Natural Heritage and the INPC.

John Wilker gave a presentation on the Natural Areas Program and how it relates to the INPC's programs.

Commissioner McClain discussed his concerns about the loss of species and communities at the smaller nature preserves.

Randy Heidorn stated that Item 9 on the agenda is deferred.

Mr. Heidorn discussed issues that are impacting the INPC's operations. There is a need for more land management at the sites within the Nature Preserves System, but this is difficult because staffing levels are down. Possible solutions were discussed. Briefing documents were prepared and given to the Commissions for their use when talking with their local groups and contacts regarding the current operational needs of the INPC (Exhibit 1 and 2).

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Illinois Nature Preserves Commission  
One Natural Resources Way  
Springfield, IL 62702  
217/785-8686

## **ILLINOIS SHOULD CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN ITS NATURAL AREAS OR FACE LOSING THE STATE'S INVESTMENT IN THEIR CONSERVATION.**

**Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) recommends that FY 2015 appropriation and head count be increased so that:**

- 1) Vital vacancies within the INPC, Division of Natural Heritage (DNH) and Endangered Species Protection Board (ESPB) are filled no later than FY2015;**
- 2) We can meet the challenge of leadership succession within supported agencies;**
- 3) Remedial land stewardship is accelerated on state-protected lands and;**
- 4) A modest program of targeted land acquisitions can be expedited with an adequate appropriation as revenues become available in FY2014 and FY2015.**

The INPC understands that during tough economic times, sacrifices need to be made. Previous revenue shortfalls and budgetary decision stopped land acquisition and the filling of vacancies caused by retirements or movements within the agency. The cost of these persistent vacancies and the current inability to timely fill positions has caused vital efforts to protect and manage our natural areas to be delayed resulting in deterioration and loss of natural resources. Failure to make natural areas conservation a priority is resulting in further and severe deterioration of Illinois' over 50 years of investments in natural areas and endangered species conservation.

- The conservation of natural areas is consistently a priority for the people of the State of Illinois. The Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF), which is funded by a tax on real estate transactions, was specifically established to exclusively fund efforts to protect, acquire and steward natural areas.
- The INPC has a 50-year history of protecting natural areas within the Nature Preserves System that incorporates 545 sites. Many are acquired without State purchase.
- Recent improvements in the Illinois' housing market and the return of previously borrowed funds have increased the available balance in the NAAF to over 8.9 million dollars.
- In FY2014 even though more revenues are available, budget constraints within IDNR, and lack of head count, coupled with vacancies and retirements are resulting in significant short falls in staff capacity, slowed land acquisition and slowed management of the existing Nature Preserve System.
  - FY 2014 operations appropriations have returned to FY2012 levels; however lack of head count and slow hiring processes have limited the filling of positions vacated in prior fiscal years and total expenditures are 14% lower in the first four months than they were in the same period in FY2012.
  - At least six NAA supported staff including the INPC Director, Chief of the DNH and critical middle managers are currently eligible for retirement with no successors available.
  - The need to defend and steward the Nature Preserves System continues to grow.
  - Staff estimated that there were around 4 million dollars annually in unmet stewardship needs in the Nature Preserves System in 2007. The situation has only worsened since then.
  - While numerous alternatives to hiring permanent staff are being used to deliver natural area stewardship on the ground, effective work with partners and volunteers is limited by lack of professional staff to train, coordinate, support and direct volunteers and partners.
  - Land Acquisition: In spite of great needs, only one 19-acre parcel has been acquired with NAAF in FY10-13 costing a total of \$70,000.
- **Without restoration of staff all of the above efforts will be curtailed further.**

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  - 525 ILCS 35/14 (from Ch. 85, par. 2114)  
 Sec. 14. There is hereby created in the State Treasury the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund. The fund shall be used by the Department for the acquisition, preservation and stewardship of natural areas, including habitats for endangered and threatened species, high quality natural communities, wetlands, and other areas with unique or unusual natural heritage qualities.  
 (Source: P.A. 86-925.)
  - INPC's Role with the NAAF is to provide IDNR advice on the use of this fund. (525 ILCS 30/6.05, 6.07)
- **The INPC has a 50-year history of protecting natural areas within the Nature Preserves System that incorporates 545 sites. Many are acquired without State purchase.**
  - Protection of this land came about because the Commission has eight staff in the field working with private and public landowners.
  - There are now 373 dedicated nature preserves in 84 counties totaling about 56,746 acres.
  - There are now 172 land and water reserves in 66 counties totaling about 48,675 acres.
  - The value of lands protected by staff without state purchase far exceeds the cost of employing the staff year after year.

- **Recent improvements in the Illinois' housing market and the return of previously borrowed funds have increased the available balance in the NAAF to over 8.9 million dollars.**
  - Previous sweeps, fund borrowing and temporary changes in allocation formulas had substantially lowered the fund balance.
    - In September 2012, \$3.46 million that had been borrowed were returned to NAAF.
  - The fund balance has recovered from a low of \$1.7 million in April 2012 to \$8.9 million as of October 31, 2013.
    - In FY2008-FY2011, annual NAAF revenues decreased 49% since FY2008 to \$5.7 million per year as a result of the downturn in residential real estate sales.
    - In FY2012 the trend was reversed with a 11% increase in new revenues to \$6.3 million. In FY2013, 27% more revenues were collected as compared to FY12. The trend continues in FY2014 with 31% more revenues collected during the first four months of the fiscal year as compared to the same period in FY13.
  
- **In FY2014 even though more revenues are available, budget constraints within IDNR, and lack of head count, coupled with vacancies and retirements are resulting in significant short falls in staff capacity, slowed land acquisition and slowed management of the existing Nature Preserve System.**
  - Excluding \$70,000 in land acquisition, \$6.3 million of NAAF was needed in FY2012 to support maintenance of the current natural areas system and endangered species conservation. FY2013 expenditures were cut to \$6.1 million with no land acquisition taking place
  - **FY 2014 operations appropriations have returned to FY2012 levels; however lack of head count and slow hiring processes have limited the filling of positions vacated in prior fiscal years and total expenditures are 14% lower in the first four months than they were in the same period in FY2012.**
    - Current vacant INPC staff positions are shown below. (One additional vacancy was created in FY2014 and no positions have been filled to date)
      - Natural Areas Defense Specialist (Vacated 9/2013, Position was posted, but not yet filled)
      - Natural Areas Protection Manager (Vacant since 2005, position clarification submitted to IDNR Human Resources)
      - Area 9 (Southern Illinois) Natural Areas Preservation Specialist (Vacant since Jan 2011)
      - Assistant Director, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (formerly Deputy Director for Stewardship not active since 2005 due to change in duties with loss of Director in 2003 and Natural Areas Protection Manager in 2005)
    - Current vacant Endangered Species Protection Board (ESPB) Staff Positions:
      - Listing Coordinator
      - Executive Secretary
    - Current vacancies in DNH: (Two additional professional vacancies were created in FY2014; one professional and two clerical positions were filled).
      - 16 of 26 Natural Heritage Districts Biologist positions are vacant. All 10 of the current Natural Heritage Biologists are covering more than one district. (Four Districts were never previously filled).

- 2 Regional Natural Heritage Administrators
- Data Base Project Manager
- GIS Project Manager
- Exotic Species Coordinator
- Prairie Ridge Land Manager.
- **At least six NAA supported staff including the INPC Director, Chief of the DNH and critical middle managers are currently eligible for retirement with no successors available.**
  - Many NAA staff are nearing retirement eligibility.
  - Without filling critical mid-management vacancies, it will be difficult for these organizations to function when key leadership positions become vacant through retirement or other means.
- **The need to defend and steward the Nature Preserves System continues to grow.**
  - Delays in stewardship particularly on IDNR lands, resulting from previous budgetary and staff shortages are resulting in loss of resources at protected sites.
  - Oil spills, intrusions, developments, groundwater contamination and other threats continue to happen in and near Nature Preserves. These threats are growing in number annually. Without addressing the threats, natural areas will be severely degraded.
- **Staff estimated that there were around 4 million dollars annually in unmet stewardship needs in the Nature Preserves System in 2007. The situation has only worsened since then.**
  - Unfunded remedial stewardship requests totaled \$650 thousand in FY2008 and 2009, \$250 thousand in FY 2010 and 2011 and \$300 thousand in FY 2012. In FY2013, staff requested \$393 thousand for stewardship project which were funded, however requests were limited due to lack of funds to projects matched by federal dollars. In FY2014 \$519 thousand in requests went unfunded.
- **While numerous alternatives to hiring permanent staff are being used to deliver natural area stewardship on the ground, effective work with partners and volunteers is limited by lack of professional staff to train, coordinate, support and direct volunteers and partners.**
  - Lack of field and administrative staff have reduced the capacity to implement contractual stewardship including those funded by grants.
- **Land Acquisition: In spite of great needs, only one 19-acre parcel has been acquired with NAAF in FY10-13 costing a total of \$70,000.**
  - Lands that are identified as gaps in the Nature Preserve System need to be acquired or otherwise brought into the system.
  - The cost of these land acquisitions would total \$12.7 million.
- **Without restoration of staff all of the above efforts will be curtailed further.**