

## Illinois' Natural Areas Inventory Update is On the Ground

**A** little over a year ago, the Department of Natural Resources announced Governor Rod R. Blagojevich's commitment to fund an update to the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory. The INAI provides valuable information about high-quality natural communities, habitats and significant natural features that exist across the state. The original INAI was conducted 30 years ago and has served as a national model for identifying and protecting high-quality natural resources.

Beginning in June 2007, a team of contractors began working with DNR staff and key partners and stakeholders to develop tools and procedures needed to successfully complete the INAI update. Members of the INAI update team are experts in GIS technologies, aerial photography interpretation, field survey methodologies, public involvement and other fields. The INAI update team includes:

- Lincoln Land Community College, the lead contractor
- Applied Ecological Services, Inc.



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- Environmental Planning Solutions, Inc.
- Illinois Natural History Survey

A series of workshops was held to elicit input from INAI partners on key issues related to the update. The goal of these workshops was to share information with key partners and solicit their input on methods for evaluating the quality of natural communities, visions

for end products, and local opportunities and challenges. More than 80 professionals participated.

In addition, the INAI update team has:

- Hosted meetings with natural resource partners from northeastern Illinois and other stakeholders.
- Created an INAI Update Web site ([www.inhs.uiuc.edu/INAI](http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/INAI)) as a means of communicating with the public.
- Started development of comprehensive Landowner Contact Protocols to address issues related to gaining access to the sites requiring field surveys.
- Hired a GIS specialist and developed file management protocols for accurate and efficient processing of data.

- Designed and programmed a sophisticated GIS-based database to allow all data to be electronically recorded in the field.

One of the most exciting accomplishments to date has been the hiring of five botanists as regional ecologists to conduct comprehensive field surveys. Regional meetings are being held to introduce these ecologists to INAI update partners and other stakeholders. Field work will begin in late spring, with the INAI update scheduled for completion in October 2010.

DNR is pleased to have landed such an exceptional team to carry out the INAI update. The update will provide DNR, its partners and all natural resource managers statewide the tools needed to protect rare, valuable natural communities. Additionally, the INAI update will play a central role in helping DNR and Illinois meet the goals of the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan.

Illinois served as a national role model 30 years ago with the first INAI—and will continue to do so in the future with the INAI update.

*Sam Flood*