



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

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JB Pritzker, Governor
Colleen Callahan, Director

Illinois Thirty-by-Thirty Conservation Task Force Listening Session #1: Agricultural Areas

Date: March 3rd, 2022
Time: 11:45 A.M. – 1:15 P.M. CST
Location: Remote meeting via WebEx
Subject: Listening Session on Agricultural Areas
Website: www2.illinois.gov/dnr/programs/30by30

Members Present: Sen. Dave Koehler, John Rogner, Brian Rennecker, Todd Rettig, Mike Vanderhoof, Dr. Austin Omer, KJ Johnson, George Czapar, Lindsay Keeney, Dr. Matt Montgomery, Jason Bleich, Jim Herkert, Olivia Schickel, Ava Nollen, Emma O’Lone, Paul Ritter, Todd Katz, Kyle Rorah

Members Absent: Sen. Jason Barickman, Rep. Robyn Gabel, Rep. Thomas Bennett, Emilie Collins, Ellicia Sanchez

Call to Order

- The meeting was called to order by Chair Rogner at 11:50 am
- Roll call was taken by Michael Lynch, DNR staff

Presentation on Agriculture-Related Conservation Efforts

Background

- Chair Rogner provided background information on the 30 by 30 movement globally and in Illinois
 - The movement began in 2019 with a scientific paper calling for a “Global Deal for Nature.” In response to two global emergencies, biodiversity loss and climate change, the paper called for setting aside 50% of land and water by the year 2050, to provide habitat for species and mitigate climate change through carbon sequestration and natural infrastructure.
 - As an intermediate goal, 30% by 2030
 - A group of 30 countries committed to this 30 by 30 goal, including the United States through an Executive Order by President Biden
 - Resulted in a report on progress last year, Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful, including 8 principles
 - Want to highlight a few of these:
 - Pursue a Collaborative and Inclusive Approach to Conservation
 - Support Locally Led and Locally Designed Conservation Efforts

- Honor Private Property Rights; Support Voluntary Stewardship Efforts of Private Landowners and Fishers
 - The report uses “conservation” and “restoration” instead of strictly preservation, to allow for a more diverse of practices to be included
- This 30% need not be evenly distributed across the planet. Some areas are more valuable as species habitat, others for agriculture for human use.
- Want to highlight the focus areas of the task force set by the founding legislation:
 - Identify resources that the State has and how they are being utilized to protect land and water resources;
 - Identify tools, resources, and incentives for landowners and the private sector to restore degraded natural areas and to manage their resources sustainably;
 - Identify financial resources from the private sector, philanthropy, and public sources to expand protections and to help manage lands and waters for conservation;
 - The ability of the State to manage more public lands for the benefit of future generations; and
 - Strategies to conserve and protect 30% of Illinois' land and water by 2030.

Illinois Department of Agriculture

- Brian Rennecker, Bureau Chief of Land and Water, presented on the Department of Agriculture’s programs for promoting conservation practices on agricultural land.
 - Vision: To promote and regulate agriculture in a manner which encourages farming and agribusiness while protecting Illinois' consumers and our natural resources.
 - Belief: Agricultural sustainability rests on the principle that we must meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs
 - Partners for Conservation
 - In partnership with Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Department of Agriculture runs a cost-share program for the implementation of conservation tillage and cover crops to improve soil health, slow erosion, enhance water infiltration, smother weeds, control pests and disease, and increase biodiversity
 - Had \$2.9 mil and \$2.4 mil in allocations statewide in 2019 and 2020, respectively
 - Covered 56% of adoption costs, with remaining balance paid by landowners
 - Practices included terraces, grass, waterways, water and sediment control basins, grade stabilization structures, crop residue management, cover crops, nutrient management plans
 - Of 1,925 projects 2019-2020, most common practice was cover crops
 - Soil erosion was maintained or reduced at or below tolerable levels at 60,283 acres
 - Indicated that 20,006 tons of sediment that did not reach Illinois waterways
 - And reduced nutrient loading
 - 21,535 pounds of nitrate-nitrogen, and 10,170 pounds of phosphorus diverted from loss
 - Fall Covers for Spring Savings

- A new program for us, just in the 3rd application cycle
- Provides a \$5 per acre discount on crop insurance for lands not enrolled in another federal or state program, on a first-come, first-serve basis during enrollment period
- Each year have an abundance of applications
 - **2019:** 50K acre program filled in 10 days
 - 113,000 total acres requested
 - **2020:** 50K acre program filled in 10 hours
 - 185,050 total acres requested
 - **2021:** 100K acre program filled in 9 hours
 - 172,652 total acres requested
- This Highlights that sustained effort from the agricultural sector has scored several made a key impact on nutrient loss reduction
 - But it is still critical keep an eye on nutrient levels leaving the state, to determine if current strategies are enough to reach reduction goals.

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

- Todd Rettig, Deputy Director, presented on IEPA programs impacting conservation in agricultural areas.
 - How our practices differ from other programs
 - Focus is not on owning real property, and in fact own none, but instead focuses on ecosystem services through regulation and funding
 - 319 Program (Nonpoint Source Management Program)
 - Funding from USEPA, through IEPA
 - Similar to issues discussed previously, this deals with contaminants washed into rivers, lakes, and streams by runoff and rainfall
 - Provides technical or financial assistance for a variety of projects
 - Has reduced flow of chemicals into waterways by:
 - 1,113,495 lbs. Total Nitrogen
 - 499,620 lbs. Total Phosphorus
 - 5,592,051 lbs. Total Suspended Solids
 - 634,069 tons Sediments
 - Other benefits include:
 - Local Watershed-Based Planning
 - In-field and edge-of-field agriculture conservation practices
 - Streambank and shoreline protection
 - Wetland creation and restoration
 - Livestock and pasture management
 - Tree planting and woodland improvement
 - Ponds and detention basins
 - Urban green infrastructure practices
 - There are other similar programs
 - Other programs provide funding and expertise for similar kinds of ecosystem service conservation projects, not just at IEPA but at other state and federal agencies as well
 - 319 Examples:
 - Copperas Creek Watershed Project
 - Developed locally lead watershed-based plan for Copperas Creek

- Installed streambank stabilization and agricultural best management practices (BMPS) in the Copperas Creek watershed, a tributary of the Mississippi River. BMPs implemented included approximately 2,450 feet of streambank stabilization; 2 acres of filter strips; 3 grade stabilization structures; 3.4 acres of grassed waterways; and 1,365 feet of water and sediment control basins.
 - Otter Lake Watershed Plan and TMDL Implementation
 - Updated the existing watershed-based plan for the Otter Lake and implemented BMPs to reduce nonpoint source pollution in the Otter Lake watershed. BMPs included 2,413 linear feet of shoreline stabilization, 100 acres of cover crops (50 acres/year for 2 years), 1 water and sediment control basin, 3 ponds, one sediment basin, and wetland restoration.
 - Raingarden/Bioswales at Tower Lakes
 - Installed 4,971 square foot bioswale (rain garden) restored 0.4 acres of wetland to further absorb and treat the water coming out of the bioswale, and a 7,798 square foot bioswale (rain garden). Construction of the bioswales included excavation, engineered topsoil, and native vegetation.
- Overall, it would be difficult to conserve the required number of acres for 30 by 30 through public ownership, but with these programs can protect and preserve ecosystem services to the same ends of healthier ecosystems, better habitat, and improved biodiversity
 - One of the 8 principles was building on existing strategies with an emphasis on flexibility. These kinds of programs can fit into that principle

Illinois Department of Natural Resources – CREP

- Michelle Bloomquist, CREP manager, presented on the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.
 - Goals
 - To improve water quality and fish and wildlife habitat
 - Takes frequently flooded, environmentally sensitive crop land and puts it into conservation
 - It is a partnership program with the Farm Service Agency and other government and nongovernment organizations
 - Eligibility
 - Areas in the Illinois River watershed and Kaskaskia River watershed are eligible
 - There is more enrollment in the Illinois River area, since enrollment there was open from 1998-2015, while the Kaskaskia River was only open from 2010-2015
 - On the state side, there are 33,500 easements protecting 90,000 acres
 - 232,000 acres is the federal cap, so plenty of space for more
 - Federal side
 - A sub-program of CRP managed by the Farm Service Agency, this offers a 15-year contract to landowners with a higher cost-share rate (50%) for putting their land into conservation.
 - State side
 - We at DNR extend and enhance that CREP contract when it has expired, offering an easement for 15 years, 30 years, or perpetually

- Although this may change when the program reopens this year
 - We also enhance the contract by adding additional, contiguous acres, creating corridors of conservation
 - The payment is a one-time, lump-sum payment when the easement is executed
 - And we pay the other 50% of the cost-share, so landowner is made whole for conservation practices
- SWCD
 - Are another great partner. They perform enrollment, conduct monitoring, assist with managing existing easements, and are local contact for CREP landowners.
- Easements
 - A legal agreement restricting the use of land that stays with the property even if it is sold.
 - The landowner still retains all recreation rights but restricts agriculture and construction.
 - No public access is required, but it is allowed.
 - DNR also helps advise landowners to manage property as best they can

Illinois Department of Natural Resources – Agricultural Lease Program

- Bob Caveny, Farm Program Manager, presented on DNR's agricultural lease program.
 - DNR has 475,000 acres owned, another 450,000 managed (mostly leased from the Army Corps of Engineers)
 - 35,000 acres of that is tillable, mostly row crop agriculture
 - A small amount is pasture or soon-expiring CRP habitat
 - Work with 240 tenants across the state
 - The leases developed under this program will promote ecologically sound agricultural practices to improve soil health, minimize soil erosion, improve water quality, and reduce chemical impacts to benefit wildlife populations and their habitats.
 - DNR recognizes its responsibility to be a leader in conservation agriculture and strives to develop an agricultural lease program to be used as models for producers throughout the state.
 - Income generated from agricultural leases supports enhancement or establishment of wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.
 - DNR develops crop plans with site staff and local biologists
 - As part of this, DNR is implementing cover crops on most of our leases
 - Received Partners for Conservation funding for reduced tillage, crop rotation
 - Targeting 8,000 acres for that, getting tenants enrolled at NRCS offices, across state to learn what works best for farmers in different areas
 - Also looking at different cover crop mixes to see their effect on soil health and wildlife health, with University of Illinois researchers
 - Adopt a number of policies to protect natural communities
 - No neonic treated soybeans are allowed on IDNR sites.
 - A pesticide used as a seed coating to prevent pest damage to plants, but which can harm pollinators.
 - No foliar application of neonics or dicamba allowed on IDNR sites.
 - No fall tillage (w/o written permission) or fall Nitrogen applications.
 - Vertical tillage allowed to incorporate some of the residue or cover crop seed.

- IDNR collecting soil samples to monitor soil health.
 - Working with University of Illinois Soil Health Lab on this, and to monitor carbon sequestration.
 - Date restrictions on hay leases for nesting.
- These practices are valuable in their own right and as demonstrations for farmers across the state on best practices

Discussion of Presentation by Task Force

- John Rogner
 - Always get asked why we farm all that land.
 - The answer is complicated, but if DNR is going to be involved in farming, we want to be doing the best we can in terms of promoting conservation while doing it.
 - Our tenants also farm other lands, so the practices they learn on DNR land can spread to other areas.
- Rodd Katz
 - These presentations make me proud of what we have done in Illinois so far.
 - Knowing what is happening is really awesome, and will make it easier for us to do the rest.
- Jim Herkert
 - Is there an annual goal of Nitrogen and Phosphorus reduction for the state? Could that be scaled up as part of our efforts here?
- Brian Rennecker
 - The programs discussed are on a volunteer basis, and funded through General Revenue, so it is hard to be consistent enough to establish a program-by-program goal
 - There is a statewide goal in the NLRS
- Sen. Dave Koehler
 - The legislature is putting together next year's budget now, and think the task force will be an excellent way to bring some of these concerns together.
 - We have passed legislation on reducing emissions, but carbon sequestration is an entirely different aspect of carbon reduction.
 - Hope we can distribute what we find to my colleagues
- Olivia Schickel
 - We wanted to clarify that this is not a governmental land grab, and these presentations have done a great job of that
 - Going forward, we should include other youth voices, through Future Farmers of America
- Dr. Austin Omer
 - In addition to these programs, there is a lot of acreage outside of any program, or in federal programs, that has conservation practices, so want to include those as well.

Listening Time (Public Comment)

- Max Webster, American Farmland Trust
 - Mission: To save the save the land by protecting sound farmland practices and keeping farmers on the land
 - We are supporters of the 30 by 30 effort overall, and believe that farmers, ranchers, and foresters as essential allies in this initiative.

- The lands they manage are critical for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and rural prosperity.
- We need bold new strategies to effectively stabilize the climate and protect biodiversity, and we are encouraged to hear these existing programs, especially Partners for Conservation and Fall Covers for Spring Savings
- We also believe it is important
 - To protect vulnerable working lands from being converted to development.
 - To support landowners in voluntary conservation practices, particularly in valuable areas for carbon sequestration and biodiversity
 - To get CREP back and support structures at the state level that bring federal dollars into Illinois
- Grant Hammer, AISWCD
 - Quote for Hugh Hammond Bennett, founder of SWCD: “From every conceivable angle - economic, social, cultural, public health, national defense - the conservation of natural resources is an objective on which all should agree.”
 - Soil and Water Conservation Districts work to protect Illinois’ greatest assets – the rich, fertile soils and water resources of the state through strategic conservation efforts.
 - The network of SWCDs represents the local infrastructure for the delivery of state and federal conservation programs in Illinois.
 - SWCDs are considered the multipurpose tool in the toolbox for the delivery of state and federal conservation programs in Illinois.
 - SWCDs are non-taxing, non-regulatory, volunteer led units of local government.
 - SWCDs support voluntary, locally led strategies that further the adoption of conservation practices.
 - Today's SWCDs serve a variety of "non-traditional" audiences, including municipal officials, developers, and a whole new client group - suburban homeowners.
 - SWCDs provide a wide range of services which include flood prevention, erosion control, habitat restoration, sediment control, forestry management, and miscellaneous land use services.
 - SWCDs implement strategies that reduce the potential for costly flooding and protects water quality by controlling erosion and sedimentation.
 - Data trends suggests that Illinois is becoming more precipitous, which creates more erosion, which in turn diminishes water quality.
 - The Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy guides state efforts to improve water quality at home and downstream by reducing nitrogen and phosphorus levels in our lakes, streams, and rivers.
 - The Gulf of Mexico dead zone is primarily caused by nutrient runoff from urban and rural areas throughout the Mississippi River watershed.
 - The Partners for Conservation Program sunsets this year.
 - It is a 30-year-old program funds numerous programs, want to make sure it gets renewed.
- Olivia Dorothy, American Rivers
 - There is a concerning trend in the 30x30 conservation that pays a lot more attention to land than water, while the highest rates of extinction are in aquatic habitats.
 - Even in an inland state like Illinois, a NYTimes map shows the highest rates of imperiled biodiversity are in and along our rivers.
 - Land conservation can help but does not address issues like water pollution or disconnection of rivers from their floodplains

- Climate change is expected to cause an expansion of flood prone areas in Illinois by 50% by 2100 at the low end, 80-100% at the high end.
- Would make the following recommendations
 - Address flood hazards in context of biodiversity
 - Improve the capacity of soil to hold water and reduce runoff from surface water and tile drainage
 - Programs spoken to today need increased funding
 - Develop incentives for farmers who are in flood prone areas to make sure they are able to convey water during flood events
 - Crop insurance is structured to incentivize farmers to pump water out of area, which worsens downstream effects
 - Enhance floodplain restoration
 - Not in NLRS, even though it can remove nitrogen and phosphorus from rivers
 - Move floodplain easement program into the annually funded conservation easement suite so can be more regularly funded and used as a pre-disaster mitigation technique
- Nathan Aaberg, Liberty Prairie Foundation
 - We own and manage a farm as part of a broader conservation community
 - This initiative comes out of urgent emotional sense - we're 28 points down halfway through the 3rd quarter, so we can't just go for field goals anymore.
 - Would make a few suggestions
 - Keeping score: we need to have key natural resource indicators, maybe as a dashboard, to see if and how we are improving.
 - Is our bird population going up or down, for example.
 - Protection outright should stay on table, especially in key areas that are critical for biodiversity.
 - Agricultural as it is practiced now has been highly counterproductive to the preservation of biodiversity and sequestration of carbon.
 - Like what DNR is doing on their lands, think we should expand those practices.
 - Should also pursue more dramatic practices, such as perennial agriculture, regenerative grazing, and dramatic reductions in pesticide use and dangerous chemical use
 - Current policy is contributing to an insect apocalypse

Other Business

- Todd Katz
 - Can we motion to ask 4H club to participate?
- Brian Rennecker
 - I would amend that to Future Farmers of America and 4H.
- Olivia Schickel
 - I second the motion.
- Vote
 - In Favor: Todd Katz, Brian Rennecker, Lindsay Keeney, George Czapar, Jim Herkert, Matt Montgomery, Todd Rettig, Olivia Schickel, Ava Nollen, Emma O'Lone, Paul Ritter
 - Opposed: none