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WETLANDS FOR WISCONSIN: A WETLAND RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FOR LANDOWNERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT STAFF

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Abstract: The *Wetlands for Wisconsin* Project is a comprehensive, hands-on, educational program on wetlands restoration and management for private landowners and local government staff. This program recruits highly motivated participants to take part in a 2-day workshop and become "Wetland Cooperators." At the workshop presenters instruct sessions both indoors and at field sites to demonstrate the value of wetlands and to show how wetland restoration and management techniques work. We provide each participant with a binder of pertinent wetland publications, and we pay for their meals and lodging during the workshop. In return, the wetland cooperators agree to implement a sound wetland restoration or management plan and reach out to other landowners with the message of wise wetland stewardship. The government staff cooperators are not expected to implement a wetland stewardship plan, but are responsible for reaching other potential wetland owners. In essence, we recruit people to be our ambassadors of sound wetland management and restoration.

Landowners and local government staff members were selected from applications received from citizens in targeted counties. By empowering those community members who value wetlands, we can begin a grassroots campaign to restore and manage the state's wetlands responsibly. We provide wetland cooperators with the knowledge, resources, and support to implement restoration and management on their property, and they in turn demonstrate to others the personal and societal benefits of wetlands. This project made it possible to impact nearly 1,000 acres directly, and more than 5,000 acres through the efforts of our volunteer wetland cooperators. We hope to expand this effort to more counties in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin has lost more than half of its wetlands in the last century. These lost wetlands formerly served to shelter wildlife, recharge groundwater, filter sediments and pollution, and reduce floodwaters. The Federal Coastal Zone Management Act targets the Great Lakes for the protection and wise use of coastal resources. Wetlands in the areas adjacent to the Great Lakes have the potential to play a major role in maintaining or improving water quality. Private landowners are the managers for many thousands of acres of land in the Wisconsin coastal counties. If wetlands are to be restored and properly managed, then the private landowner must play a role.

There are three strategies for working with private wetlands: education, regulation, or acquisition. The latter two strategies, though useful in many circumstances, take the decision-making ability out of the landowner's hands. Contrary to regulation and acquisition, an effective education program, as described here, empowers the private landowner to be a responsible, knowledgeable steward of the land. Many local government staff implement wetland programs, frequently for private landowners. They too should be aware of proper wetland restoration and management techniques to effectively assist their clientele.

Wetland restoration and management are complex issues, and much literature exists on these subjects. We can direct existing literature into the hands of interested

landowners and local government staff through a workshop that draws upon the content of these wetland materials. If we provide the wetland owner or restorer with the knowledge and materials in an applied fashion, then we empower them to be wise stewards of their wetland resource. It also provides them with the power to encourage others to be wise stewards as well. Likewise, if local government staff are exposed to the wetland resource in a hands-on fashion, then they are likely to become more proactive in their wetland work with private landowners.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The *Wetlands for Wisconsin* Project brings a creative approach to wetland restoration and management. This program targets private wetlands through a comprehensive, hands-on, education and outreach program. The premise for this project is based on a successful Ruffed Grouse Society-Cooperative Extension Service co-sponsored program for woodland owners, The Coverts Project, begun in New England in 1984 and in Wisconsin in 1994.

Landowners and local government staff were invited to apply to become "wetland cooperators" through an intensive, 2-day wetlands workshop. At the workshop presenters instructed sessions both indoors and at field sites to show how wetland restoration and management techniques work. We provided each participant with a binder of contacts and existing wetland materials. We also

paid for their meals and lodging to attend the workshop. In return, the wetland cooperators agreed to implement a sound wetland restoration or management plan and reach out to other landowners with the message of wise wetland stewardship.

Our goal was to increase wetland restoration and management activities on 10,000 acres of private lands in the coastal counties of Green Bay and Lake Michigan. To meet our goal we were looking for 15 landowners and 10 local government staff to participate in the program.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

We produced and distributed 1,000 brochures through direct mailings to landowners (members of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association and former Coverts Program applicants) and local government staff (Land Conservation Department, Cooperative Extension Agents, Department of Natural Resources, and other Wisconsin Coastal Management Program contacts). We also wrote an article for the Wisconsin Wetlands Association newsletter. Interested citizens called or sent in an application request included with the brochure. Landowners were sent a four-page application form, and local government staff received a two-page application form.

We used an existing survey of Wisconsin's wetlands literature from which to draw our resources. We also asked presenters to recommend publications. Copies of selected materials were assembled into a reference binder for each participant at the workshop. We also provided a bibliography of other wetlands materials and how they could acquire copies. We facilitated future communication by including directories (address, phone, and general geographic location) of Wetland Cooperators and presenters.

Our presenters for the workshop came from the following organizations: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, and the U.S. Geological Survey. We sought out presenters who were not only knowledgeable, but also active in wetland restoration and management, since this was a hands-on workshop.

The 2-day workshop focused on applied wetland ecology. Presenters discussed wetland values and restoration and management options that could be implemented to meet landowner goals. The critical element for landowners was that we helped them evaluate wetland restoration and management within the context of their own beliefs. If participants took ownership in restoring and managing their wetlands and were shown how it could be done, then they would become more likely to take action. Likewise, if government staff members

understood the value and application of these techniques better, then it would become easier in their job to relate to wetland owners.

An evaluation was done to determine the effectiveness of the workshop. This post-workshop questionnaire allowed participants to provide feedback on subject matter, instructors, facilities, and workshop format and methods. We also learned how we can best assist them in their efforts, what actions they planned to take, and how many others they expected to reach. A 4-month survey will allow us to evaluate the short-term success of the program and will act as a reminder of cooperators' commitments to wetland restoration, management, and outreach. Finally, a 1-year cooperator survey will determine the long-term success of the program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty-five cooperators applied to the program, including 7 local government staff and 18 landowners. Of those who applied, 5 local government staff and 14 landowners attended the workshop (one husband-wife team participated; thus future calculations consider only 13 landowners), composed of 3 women and 16 men. Although the local government staff component was low, these 19 cooperators represented an enthusiastic and diverse group of people.

The local government staff participants were represented by a water resource manager from the Department of Natural Resources, a watershed technician from the Land Conservation Department, a biologist/naturalist from the County Parks System, a wetland project coordinator from the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, and a Great Lakes water quality specialist from the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute. The average local government staff participant had spent 5 years in his current capacity, 33% of his time consulting an average of 112 landowners, who restored or managed an estimated 28 wetland acres. An estimated 11% of the local government staff cooperator's time was spent on wetland issues, and 10% of their total time involved consultations with landowners concerning wetland issues.

Employment backgrounds of landowners were varied: lakes consultant, real estate broker, environmental researcher, engineer, salesperson, postmaster, carpenter, physician, farmer (2), self-employed, dentist, and biologist. The average landowner participant lived in Wisconsin for 42 years, in his/her community for 21 years, owned or was responsible for managing 56 wetland acres, wanted to restore 33 wetland acres, and lived 5 miles from his/her wetlands. The primary and secondary interests in wetlands were for wildlife habitat (62%), pollution/sediment reduction (38%), enhancement of the natural community (or maintain biodiversity, 15%), aesthetic value (15%), and preservation for succeeding generations (15%). Some landowners were actively involved in

wetland management, including removal of exotics or planting native species (62%); restoring wetlands or installing control structures (46%); and actively managing for wildlife (46%). Despite these activities, only four landowners (31%) had a written plan for wetland restoration or management. Landowners had a broad range of knowledge levels coming into the workshop (Table 1).

Workshop topics covered wetland values, wetland characteristics (hydrology, soils, vegetation, and wildlife), regulations, technical assistance and cost-sharing, natural wetlands management, wetland restoration and management, how to develop plans, and the roles of "Wetland Cooperators." These topics were covered in two mornings of 15-minute to 1-hour sessions. Afternoons were spent reinforcing morning sessions by visiting restored wetlands of various ages and types. Dinner and an hour of free time was spent at a nature center

Our 19 cooperators will have influenced 88 people in addition to implementing wetland restoration or management plans on their own lands. We estimate that the total restored and managed wetland acreage as a result of the *Wetlands for Wisconsin* Project will be 5,656 acres, nearly 5,000 acres of which will be as a result of cooperator efforts.

Costs

The *Wetlands for Wisconsin* Project was funded by a grant from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program for \$12,500 with \$12,500 in matching funds and in-kind contributions from cooperating agencies, workshop participants, and us. The grant included salary and fringe for 30% of a full-time outreach person. The out-of-pocket costs for Cooperative Extension Service personnel to do

Table 1. Landowner responses to the question, "Which statement most accurately describes the level of knowledge you feel you have about wetland restoration and management?"

Statement	Respondents
A. I have no knowledge of wetland restoration and management.	2 (15%)
B. I am aware of some options for managing and restoring wetlands on my property.	4 (31%)
C. I understand some wetland restoration and management concepts and can explain them to others.	3 (23%)
D. I have enough skills to implement some wetland restoration and management activities.	4 (31%)
E. I know as much about wetland restoration and management as most water resource professionals.	0

overlooking a 5,000-acre wetland. This enabled participants the freedom and flexibility to interact with the wetland, each other, or presenters on an informal basis.

Evaluations were highly favorable. Overall, the workshop more than fulfilled participants' expectations. Some comments included: "All the handouts in the three-ring binder are well-chosen and will be very educational"; "I feel a lot more comfortable about going into my wetland management and construction with the valuable material handed out"; and "The quality of the speakers and the effort in putting the restoration booklet together will push me to meet the challenge of spreading the word to my fellow landowners." Participants indicated a commitment to the goals of the program when asked, "What is the very first thing you intend to do as a Wetland Cooperator?" Responses included: "Draw up a detailed plan and set goals and a timetable—the vision has always been there"; "See if I can get my neighbors to budge"; and "Call some of the people I've met at the workshop to discuss partnership possibilities." Each cooperator estimated that within a year an average of 4.9 people will have adopted the wetland restoration and management concepts proposed by the project as a result of his or her efforts.

this project would be approximately \$5,000. This would not include salary and fringe or contributions from cooperating agencies and workshop participants.

Assessment

A true assessment of the *Wetlands for Wisconsin* Project's effectiveness will be determined 1 year from now via a survey of Wetland Cooperator activities. However, we can say from the post-workshop evaluations that we have a firm commitment from participants to meet the wetland restoration, management, and outreach challenges set forth by the program. We were successful in raising awareness of wetland values and issues through the workshop. Evaluations indicate that the workshop empowered landowners to restore and manage their wetlands, and participants appear ready to serve as our ambassadors of wetland restoration and management in their communities. Future surveys will show whether or not this program effectively improved wetland management and increased wetland acreage on private lands.