



May 27, 2016

## Priority Issue: Wildlife Refuge Proposal Reintroduced

### **Background**

A wildlife refuge in Kankakee County was proposed in 1997 by the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The Kankakee County Farm Bureau along with Kankakee County Government and the regional Chamber of Commerce each passed resolutions taking positions against the proposal. The main reasons for opposition were that the refuge would have taken valuable farmland out of production, altered and disrupted established watersheds and drainage patterns, altered and disrupted transportation infrastructure, displaced many residents, reduced the tax base for the area, reduced recreational activities, and was inconsistent with the County's land use plans.

The proposed refuge was to be established on 30,000 acres of land with a stated goal of acquiring an additional 100,000 acres. It was acknowledged that the US Fish & Wildlife Service has the authority to impose eminent domain. With virtually no community support for the proposal and from pressure from state and federal legislators, the refuge proposal was defeated and was withdrawn in 2001.

Last year, the US Fish & Wildlife Service reintroduced this refuge proposal. The focus areas for the refuge this time are similar. It appears that nearly 18,000 acres of the refuge would be in Kankakee County while the remaining approximately 3,800 acres would be located in Iroquois County. The focus areas in Kankakee County include areas east of the City of Momence on the north and south sides of the Kankakee River and a very large portion of Pembroke Township which includes the Village of Hopkins Park (see the map included with this article). The original proposal included land in both Illinois and Indiana whereas the reintroduced proposal only includes land in Illinois.

### **Farm Bureau Policy**

Illinois Farm Bureau policy #45 titled "Governmental Property Acquisition and Ownership" addresses creation of such large federally owned areas. In part, that policy states:

*We will oppose:*

- 1. Any effort to establish buffer areas around parks, preserves, or other areas being protected for their environmental or ecological value without just compensation to affected landowners.*
- 2. The formation of any state or federal wildlife refuges, recreational or conservation areas until such time as the boundaries of such projects are clearly defined and the property targeted for acquisition is clearly identified.*
- 3. The creation or expansion of local, state, and federal refuges, recreational or conservation areas when the aggregate acreage of such areas held by all public entities participating in such projects within the county equals more than two percent of the total acreage in the county.*
- 4. The formation of state or national wildlife refuges, recreation, or conservation areas that impede the existing natural and artificial drainage systems of landowners in the watershed.*
- 5. The continued encroachment of federal and state agencies and local governments on agricultural and forest lands.*

Kankakee County has a total of 432,997 acres of land. According to our current Farm Bureau policy (mentioned above in point three), if a refuge in Kankakee County is proposed to be in aggregate of 8,660 acres (two percent of the total acreage of the County) or more, it will be opposed by the Farm Bureau. It appears the current refuge would be nearly 18,000 acres in Kankakee County which is more than double the threshold allowable in Farm Bureau policy.

## **Economic Impact**

Kankakee County consists of 342,637 acres of farm land. The 18,000 acre refuge in Kankakee County would be equal to 5.25% of the County's farm land. The economic output from agriculture in Kankakee County for one year is over \$1.5 billion (USDA Ag Census data). If you remove 5.25% from that figure, that is nearly \$79 million of economic output lost *annually* to our local economy. There are 4,271 jobs in Kankakee County that come from agriculture (USDA Ag Census data). Removing 5.25% from that figure translates into a loss of 224 jobs. The figures from these direct calculations may be too low due to the fact that much of the farm land in the eastern portion of Kankakee County has a high density of specialty crops. These specialty crops can be valued much higher than traditional corn and soybean production and typically require more labor.

Another economic impact to consider is the reduction of property taxes. Land controlled by a federal agency such as the US Fish & Wildlife Service is not subject to property taxes. In one year, Kankakee County farms paid \$4,130,000 in property taxes (USDA Ag Census data). If you remove 5.25% of that figure from the tax rolls, that equals \$216,825 in lost tax revenue annually for the impacted areas of Momence Township, Pembroke Township, the Village of Hopkins Park and to the County government. Under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1935, the US Fish & Wildlife Service is required to reimburse local governments using one of three calculations: 1) \$0.75 per acre 2) 25% of the net receipts collected from refuge lands in the County; or 3)  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one percent of the appraised value. A study completed by the Kankakee County Planning Department during the initial refuge proposal found that by using the option that would produce the largest return, the refuge would reduce property tax revenue by as much as 75%.

## **Recent Activities**

Several entities including Pembroke Township, Village of Hopkins Park, US Fish & Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Kankakee County Government and others have formed an agreement to develop a sustainability plan for the Pembroke Township area. The stated purpose of the agreement is to: "Sustain and enhance: the municipal infrastructure, the tax base, the population, the globally significant landscape of Hopkins Park and Pembroke Township," and last but not least, to "sustain and enhance the agriculture community." This sustainability plan is to give guidance to the US Fish & Wildlife Service in developing their Land Protection Plan for the refuge. The Farm Bureau has participated in these discussions. As a part of this sustainability planning process, the value that agriculture adds to this community should be considered and stakeholders in the agriculture community should be included.

The Chicago Field Museum is assisting in the Pembroke Township-Hopkins Park sustainability plan by conducting "Quality of Life" sessions to determine what is important to the community. After becoming aware that the invitations to these sessions were limited, the Farm Bureau worked to inform farmers who have a vested interest in the community about their opportunity to participate. Their involvement ought to be a key part of these community assessment sessions. The role that agriculture plays in this community is an important one and should be included in the community assessment. Thank you to the Farm Bureau members who made an effort to participate in these sessions.

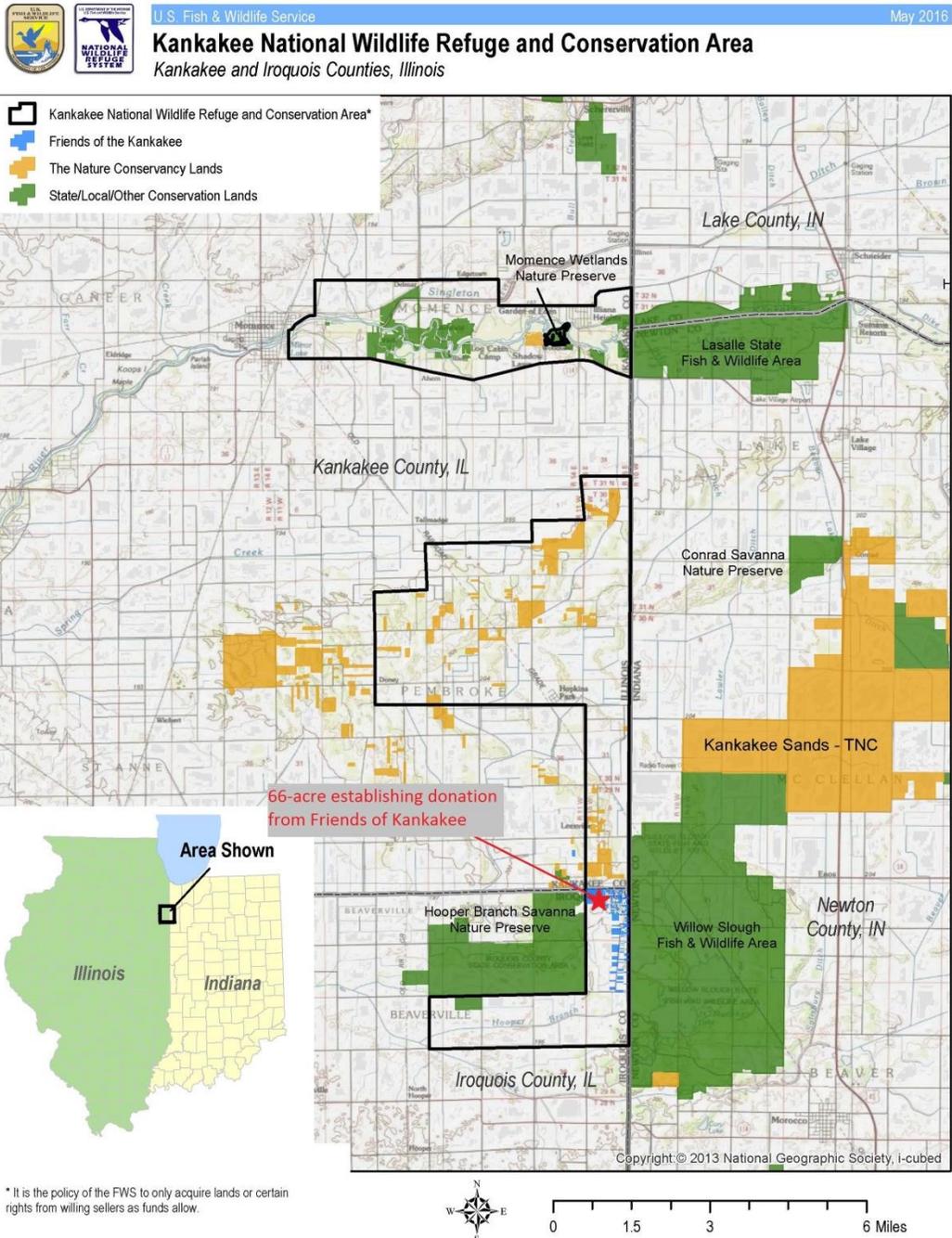
Recent activities have given the refuge a starting point. On May 25, 2016 the refuge was officially established in Iroquois County with the acceptance of a 66 acre donation from an organization called "Friends of the

### **Wildlife Refuge Facts**

- The refuge proposal was initially introduced in 1997. With virtually no community support, it was defeated and withdrawn in 2001. The proposal was reintroduced in 2015.
- The refuge could consume nearly 18,000 acres of land in Kankakee County. That's roughly 28 square miles which is equal to 5.25% of our County's farm land.
- Removing 5.25% of our County's agricultural output could remove nearly \$79 million from our local economy and could result in 224 jobs lost.
- A study conducted by the County Planning Department found the refuge would reduce property tax revenue by as much as 75%
- Farm Bureau policy states opposition to such a project if it equals more than 2% of the total acreage in the county. The refuge would be more than double the threshold allowable in Farm Bureau policy.

Kankakee.” The refuge is officially established; however, the US Fish & Wildlife Service has yet to release their Land Protection Plan for public review.

Your County Farm Bureau will continue to monitor the development of the US Fish & Wildlife Service refuge. Get involved and get educated on this issue by speaking to your County Farm Bureau. If you have any thoughts or concerns with the refuge, please contact the County Farm Bureau at 815-932-7471.



Above is a map showing the local areas that could be consumed by a US Fish & Wildlife refuge. The focus areas outlined in black in Kankakee County include areas east of the City of Momence on the north and south sides of the Kankakee River and a very large portion of Pembroke Township which includes the Village of Hopkins Park. To get involved or to receive further information on this project including a copy of this map, contact the County Farm Bureau office.