

New, Improved Forestry for Wildlife Partnership? You Bet

DNR has upgraded a program that has marked excellence in combining forest management and wildlife conservation since 1996. The revamped partnership is project-focused and open to more landowners.

The Forestry for Wildlife Partnership is a voluntary, flexible, non-competitive and participant-driven effort that:

- Enhances wildlife conservation on the holdings of large landowners.
- Facilitates wildlife technical assistance, training and outreach.
- Recognizes partners for wildlife conservation achievements.
- Promotes wildlife-related recreational opportunities on partner properties.

Forestry for Wildlife, FWP for short, began in 1996 as a partnership between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources Division and corporate forest landowners. The program celebrated partners' conservation achievements, while also enhancing landowner opportunities for wildlife technical assistance, training and outreach.

Forestry for Wildlife was a way to recognize corporate landowners that went above and beyond the requirements of what was then the newly formed Sustainable Forestry Initiative, or SFI.

Since 1996, however, corporate land-ownership patterns in Georgia have changed. Fewer companies manage large forest landholdings. And the expansion of SFI standards regarding conservation has made many Forestry for Wildlife reporting requirements duplicative.

As a result, the Wildlife Resources Division surveyed the changing landscape, discussed the outlook with FWP partners and developed a new evaluative process for the program.

In with the New

The revised FWP centers on implementing projects that potential partners choose in consultation with DNR. Emphasis is placed on work that improves on-the-ground conditions based on goals spelled out in wildlife management plans DNR created with stakeholders.

Another key change is that owners of 10,000 or more acres are eligible. FWP's previous minimum was 20,000 acres. By lowering that threshold, more landowners – not just corporate interests – can receive FWP status for enhanced wildlife management practices on their lands. In sum, corporate landowners, timberland investment management organizations, and family and individual landowners are all eligible if they own at least 10,000 acres of timberland.

The Wildlife Resources Division will work with potential partners to identify projects that meet agency and landowner objectives (examples listed below).

Project proposals will include a timeline and benchmarks to assess progress. Projects can last a year or more, but will be evaluated annually, allowing for recognition each year.

As work progresses, significant partner accomplishments will be recognized via social media and other digital platforms, such as Wildlife Resources' Georgia Wild e-newsletter, and in advertisements in the state hunting and fishing regulations.

When a project is completed, representatives of that FWP partner will be recognized by Georgia's governor.

Interested? Contact DNR senior wildlife biologist Erin Cork at erin.cork@dnr.ga.gov or (404) 242-4295.

Want to know what a project might look like? Here are some examples from the Bobwhite Quail Initiative 2013-2023 and high-priority goals in Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan.

Wildlife Action Plan-based Projects

- Survey your property or fund surveys for high-priority species (as recommended by DNR's Wildlife Conservation Section) and develop and implement plans to protect sensitive species and improve habitat conditions.
- With guidance from the Wildlife Conservation Section, part of DNR's Wildlife Resources Division, create and improve isolated wetlands on sites likely to support populations of rare amphibians.
- Implement intensive trapping or other control techniques to reduce or prevent feral hog damage to wetlands and native habitats.
- If you manage land in the Coastal Plain, survey and assess rare seepage bog habitats and implement conservation practices on the highest quality sites. This can include managing bogs with prescribed fire and creating conservation agreements to protect high-priority sites. Coordinate with Wildlife Conservation Section biologists for technical assistance and possible granting of rare plant material for the site.
- Survey for invasive species (such as sand pine), identify highest priority species or sites for control measures, and develop a management plan for these species or sites. Make sure equipment is not harboring invasive species, seed or soil. Where new land disturbance activities take place (e.g., soil grading, erosion control measures, utility line installation, etc.), use regionally appropriate native plant species instead of exotics to revegetate the site and control erosion.
- Develop wide riparian buffers in high-priority watersheds to protect water quality and aquatic species diversity, and enhance the native plant diversity of these buffers through control of exotic species. Remove pine plantations from riparian buffers and convert these areas to native hardwood species.
- Develop educational signage and access to promote public education events about aquatic species led by DNR's Wildlife Resources Division and partners (e.g., a snorkeling site).
- Place recruitment cavities (i.e., nest boxes inserted in suitable trees) in potential red-cockaded woodpecker habitat near established populations and create suitable pine foraging habitat on tracts adjacent to known red-cockaded woodpecker groups by using prescribed fire or other forest midstory control methods, such as herbicides.
- In the Coastal Plain, conduct growing-season prescribed burns on moist and grassy or weedy powerline corridors and other similar habitat to benefit wintering Henslow's sparrows.
- Survey suitable habitat (floodplain forests in the lower Coastal Plain) for swallow-tailed kites during breeding season (April 1-June 30). If birds or nests are located, work with the Wildlife Conservation Section to develop conservation plans for nest locations, monitoring nesting success and, if appropriate, installing predator guards and trail cameras.
- Conduct photo monitoring of prescribed fire effects on rare species and habitats. Coordinate with Wildlife Conservation biologists for protocols and data sharing.

- Close unnecessary roads, repair eroding roads and parking and camping areas, re-engineer non-working turnouts, and move problem roads farther from aquatic habitats.
- Survey transmission line corridors for rare plants to evaluate habitat, and develop and implement a plan to protect and improve habitat for pollinators, birds and other wildlife.
- Identify dams, culverts and other instream structures that may be limiting the movement of fish and other aquatic wildlife. Develop and implement a plan to remove or replace such structures in order to improve stream flow and improve habitat use and movement by aquatic wildlife.
- Work with Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance partners to collect seeds from priority rare plants on private lands. Assess holdings for appropriate habitats for outplanting.

Projects Tied to BQI

Bobwhite Quail Initiative-based projects could include developing programs for pine savanna restoration that:

- Adjust herbicide use in ways (e.g., timing, rates, etc.) that meet objectives while more effectively conserving native plant species diversity, abundance and distribution.
- Establish a “model” forest habitat adjacent to similarly managed public lands that supports wildlife species in decline. This could include frequently burned pine savannas or habitat reclaimed by controlling invasive exotic species in a BQI focus area.
- Incorporate prescribed fire as a wide-spread, consistent forest management practice.
- Maintain forest stands with 40-70 feet² basal area to allow adequate sunlight for ground-level herbaceous vegetation.
- Replant clearcut stands with longleaf pine where appropriate and burn frequently (e.g., every two to three years) to maintain groundcover vegetation.

Projects also could help create early successional. Examples include:

- Delaying mowing/brush hogging in open areas until early spring to maintain vegetation cover throughout winter.
- “Daylighting” forest roads and manage the roadsides with burning or disking to encourage early successional habitat.
- Creating wildlife openings of at least 2 acres to increase early successional habitat cover in forested stands.
- Managing herbaceous vegetation buffers of at least 30 feet around forest openings, crop, pasture and hay fields.
- Creating and maintaining fallow patches or old-field habitat in mowed fields or forest openings.
- Establishing hedgerows or woody vegetation clumps in large openings to provide escape and thermal cover for wildlife.
- Harvesting seed from areas containing high-quality native groundcover for native groundcover restoration projects.

For more details on the revised Forestry for Wildlife Partnership, visit www.georgiawildlife.com/FWP.

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