

First VPA-HIP Habitat Project Nears Completion

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OUR FIRST on-the-ground habitat project for VPA-HIP is a big one, and it's not even done yet. The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP), funded in the 2008 Farm Bill and administered by the Farm Service Agency, has the goals of increasing the quality of hunting habitat on the private lands in the existing 2.7 million acre Hunter Access Program, and providing habitat incentives to recruit new cooperators in the program.

Laurel Sand and Stone Company property is a new cooperator in our Hunter Access program. The land was formerly enrolled with us as the North Cambria Fuel Company. They have enrolled 2,020 acres of mixed wetland, forestland and grassland in Cambria County.

Some of their forestland did not have potential for commercial timber, but the current pulpwood market is quite strong. So what might have cost thousands to cut for young forest habitat a few years ago, can now be done at cost or below. Commission staff was able to match a timber company, Cameron Lumber LLC, with the project to actually generate some revenue for the landowner. Critical to the project is that this poorly regenerating forest has great potential for young forest habitat targeting the American woodcock and the golden-winged warbler, helping two birds, with, well, one harvest. What makes this even more incredible is that the harvest was 220 acres of continuous habitat with wet soils, just what woodcock need, and because a small volume of residual trees were left, it will develop into golden-winged warbler habitat in a very short time.

The remaining part of the project is a 100-acre native grass establishment, recovering a non-productive abandoned strip mine, dominated by Kentucky-31 tall fescue, to a native grassland with wildflowers. Once established, the grassland will support a wide array of grassland nesting birds during the spring, and summer and fall pheasant stockings by the Commission to provide a great new recreational opportunity for local hunters. The grass plantings take some planning, beginning with a fall herbicide application to kill the detrimental tall fescue, and finishing with the spring planting of a mix of native grasses and wildflowers by Hilltop Seed Company of Clarion, PA.

So how did this all happen? The regional Land Management Supervisor, Barry Zaffuto, recognized the potential of this site and approached the landowner with the plan. Our regional diversity biologist, Tammy Colt, assistant regional forester, Neil Itle, land management group supervisor, Dan Yahner, and game lands maintenance supervisor, Josh Fuqua coordinated with the landowner to develop a plan that met the needs of the landowner and would result in beneficial wildlife habitat.

The Game Commission solicited bids for the project components, selecting the most cost effective offers, and issued contracts. The contractors began work this fall, and the final contract element, planting the native grasses, will be done this spring, bringing the total project footprint to 320 acres, significantly improving the surrounding landscape both on and off the property for a wide array of wildlife from ruffed grouse and white-tailed deer to golden-winged warblers and Henslows' sparrows.

Most importantly, this adds 2,020 private land acres to the Hunter Access program, with 320 improved acres of pheasant and woodcock hunting habitat to help accommodate our increased pheasant stocking distribution this fall.

Habitat projects, such as native grass plantings and young forest creation, can be as small as 10 acres, and are fully funded by the VPA-HIP grant, no cost-share required. Our next generation of hunters needs a great place to hunt, just like we had, and your property can make the difference to a new young hunter.

If you think you would be interested in a similar habitat project, and are willing to allow hunters to hunt on your property, please contact your local regional office and inquire about our new Hunter Access habitat opportunities.