PROJECT PROPOSAL: PRIORITY HABITAT RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP UNDER THE SPRINGFIELD PLATEAU REGIONAL RESTORATION PLAN

PURPOSE

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MoDNR) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), acting as Natural Resources Damage Trustees (Trustees), are seeking public input on a collaboration with Pheasants Forever, Inc. and Quail Forever (PFQF). Restoring and maintaining natural communities requires considerable commitment and expense and is achieved more effectively and sustainably through partnerships. The Trustees present such a collaboration, wherein PFQF proposes to treat invasive species, expand prescribed fire activity and diversify and restore native habitats within and around the Springfield Plateau ecoregion, which has been impacted by historic mining activities. Bipartisan Infrastructure funds and Natural Resource Damages, Assessment and Restoration (NRDAR) settlement funds will support a Crew Leader and four full-time Habitat Specialists (Crew) that will restore areas on public and private lands by using habitat Best Management Practices (BMPs). These BMPs have been described in the Springfield Plateau Regional Restoration Plan and are intended to restore natural resources injured by the release of hazardous substances from historic mining. These projects will benefit migratory birds by creating quality habitat in which they may feed and nest, and benefit aquatic species such as mussels by improving the quality of water running off these areas. Projects to be completed throughout the year will be communicated to PFQF and agreed upon in advance. Projects will be mutually beneficial and meet the missions of both organizations.

Crew members will be employees of and supervised by PFQF. The crew's purpose is to conduct natural community management, including prescribed fire operations and the management of invasive plant populations on public, partner and private lands. The crew’s time will be focused on priority private lands with an emphasis on the Spring River watershed. Work on public lands and private lands, regardless of whether they are within a Geographical Opportunity Area (GOA) or similar landscape, will primarily occur in Jasper, Newton, Lawrence and Barry counties.

DELIVERABLES

PFQF

* Employ crews, each consisting of one crew leader and four crew members to conduct restoration and maintenance of natural environments as detailed in the project budget.
* PFQF will provide or purchase necessary equipment and vehicles for the Crew to conduct restoration and maintenance of natural environments and prescribed fire operations as detailed in the project budget and equipment list.
* Provide insurance for crews to effectively conduct restoration and maintenance of natural environments, including conducting prescribed fire and invasive species management operations.
* Facilitate and administer ranking matrix for prioritizing projects and refer selected projects to USFWS’ Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program for landowner agreements.
* PFQF’s project leader will provide progress reports, including photographic documentation that can be shared regionally and statewide.
* PFQF will provide on-the-job training to the Crew, so they are prepared for various types of natural environment restoration and understand the importance of this management.

CREWS

* **Provide restoration and maintenance of natural environments:** Crews will be deployed on public, partner, and private lands following a prioritized approach. Crews will use a priority ranking matrix to conduct restoration and maintenance of natural environments, which will include, but is not limited to invasive species and aggressive native species management, prescribed fire operations, forest/woodland stand improvements, native seed collection and more.
* **Invasive Species Management:** The Crew will spend significant time managing various invasive species for the Trustees. They will function as a strike team available for the Trustees and Trustee-designated Partners to utilize during peak control times. Invasive species treatment, including location, species type, time and acreage, will be documented in online GIS software as a deliverable of this agreement. An estimated 500-1,000 acres of invasive species treatment may be completed annually, a range that reflects considerable variation in target species control methods, density of infestation and accessibility of the areas in which the crews will work over the course of a year.
* **Prescribed Fire:** Crew will be trained and equipped to install fire lines and conduct prescribed fire operations on public, partner and private lands. Burn units on private lands range in size from 1-100 acres, which is where most of the crews’ time will be spent in relation to fire; although, units on public land, held by state or federal agencies, are often considerably larger in size. Given variation in burn unit size and a reasonable range of 10-25 burn days in each season, it is estimated that the crew will impact 1,000-5,000 acres or more through fire line preparation and direct fire application. Prescribed fire burn line preparation and prescribed burn units burned, including location, time, burn line length and burn unit acreage will be documented in online GIS software and be reported on the Missouri Prescribed Fire Council’s Log Your Burn Tool webpage: <https://moprescribedfire.org/log-your-burn>.
* **Monitoring:** For a subset of sites that are treated either with fire or invasive species management, especially those occurring within priority geographies or natural areas, permanent photo monitoring points will be created, and before/after photos will be provided to better educate Missourians about the work being completed through this project. Crews will be working on private lands that potentially have not been visited by individuals familiar with identifying tracked communities and species.
* **Collection of native seed:** Dispersal-limited conservative species are often observed to be locally extirpated even after invasive species removal and prescribed fire treatment. Crews may spend up to 10% of their time collecting and processing seed from conservative native plant species. Local native seed collected (i.e., prairie species) will be used to boost biodiversity in areas receiving active management; the crews’ experience and connection to this aspect of restoration will allow them to advise private landowners on this important step of natural environment restoration.
* **Livestock exclusion fencing:**  The Crew may install livestock exclusion fencing and conduct riparian management.

USFWS

* NEPA: USFWS staff from the Partners For Fish and Wildlife program will coordinate with Historic Preservation staff and conduct ESA Section 7 reviews on a site-by-site basis prior to any work being conducted.

# AGREEMENT PERIOD

This Agreement shall be in effect from Jan. 1, 2025 to Dec. 31, 2027. This agreement may be renewed for up to two (2) one-year renewals contingent upon mutual agreement and available funding.

# FUNDING

It is agreed that the Trustees for TSMD, through BIL and NRDAR funding, will provide approximately $1.8 million for the first three years. If the agreement is extended, an additional $1.3 million will be provided.

Upon completion, expiration, or termination of this Agreement, all unspent funds shall be returned to the Trustees. The Trustees shall be compensated for all vehicles and equipment with a current value exceeding $5000, unless other arrangements are made before the termination of the agreement.