

Final Committee Report, Vol. 9, No. 1
Nebraska Habitat Fund

January 2002

Prepared by
Andrew Slain
Cameron Otopalik

Editing
Cynthia Johnson

Production
Nancy Cherrington

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The program evaluation described in this report was requested by the Program Evaluation Committee and undertaken by the Legislative Program Evaluation Unit. The unit evaluated the Nebraska Habitat Fund, which is administered by the Game and Parks Commission (commission). The evaluation report describes the two commission programs that rely on the fund for financial support and addresses the extent to which the commission has assessed whether the fund is achieving its goals.

The fund was created in 1976 to support the purchase and management of habitat areas in Nebraska for the benefit of hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts. Its largest source of revenue is a user fee levied via sales of a habitat stamp that must be affixed to most hunting licenses. The fund also makes use of federal reimbursements, interest income, and donations. Over the past ten years, the fund's total annual revenue has fluctuated between \$2.5 and \$4 million.

The lion's share of the fund's money is expended by the commission's Land Acquisition and Improvement Program and the Habitat Development Program, each of which is discussed below.

Land Acquisition

The Land Acquisition and Improvement Program is managed by the commission's Realty and Environmental Services Division. On average, the division spends approximately \$1 million per year to acquire parcels of land to be set aside and used as wildlife management areas.

The commission focuses its land-acquisition efforts on parcels that are valuable for wildlife

habitat—wetland areas, riparian areas (land along rivers and streams), and upland areas (grassland areas with significant brush cover). Such areas are not economically viable for farming in their natural state. The commission may only purchase land on a willing-seller, willing-buyer basis, and it must make in-lieu-of-tax payments on land it purchases to avoid detrimentally affecting the local tax base.

The commission has purchased nearly 48,500 acres with the fund's money and now owns more than 87,000 acres statewide. The unit found that the Land Acquisition and Improvement Program functions effectively. It complies with all relevant statutes, staff members are knowledgeable and experienced, and landowners appear to be treated fairly.

Habitat Development

Money from the fund is also expended by the Habitat Development Program, which is administered by the commission's Wildlife Division. The program has two branches: one, administered by the Management Section, deals with commission-managed land; the other, administered by the Habitat Partners Section, deals with noncommission-managed land.

Commission-managed land consists of land purchased through the land acquisition process as well as land managed by the commission under long-term leases. All of these lands, which total more than 132,000 acres, are designated as wildlife management areas and provide hunting, trapping, and other outdoor recreation opportunities for the public. The Management Section maintains these areas and improves them when necessary to en-

sure access and safety. The section spends an average of \$712,000 annually.

Noncommission-managed land consists of land owned by private citizens or public entities other than the commission, such as natural resources districts or the federal government. The commission partners with such landowners, as well as habitat-conservation groups, to help and encourage landowners to develop and manage their land in ways that benefit habitat. According to the commission, it must rely on partnerships in order to have a significant impact on habitat quality because the commission directly manages less than 0.3 percent of Nebraska's land. In recent years, the section has spent an average of \$1.5 million per year on its partnering efforts, up from an average of approximately \$880,000 a few years ago.

The unit found that, overall, the Habitat Development Program functions well. Generally speaking, the personnel administering both branches of the program were knowledgeable and genuinely concerned about habitat in Nebraska. The Habitat Partners Section seems especially forward-thinking, and in fact has been used as a model in other states.

We note, however, that the commission has begun to spend significantly more on its partnering efforts than on land acquisition or managing wildlife habitat areas. Whereas expenditures in the three areas have historically been roughly equal, partnering expenditures have increased while expenditures for land acquisition and habitat management have remained relatively constant. In recent years this has caused more money to be expended from the fund than has been brought into it. In the short term, enough money is held in the fund to cover the additional partnering expenses, but if the trend continues, there will eventually be a shortfall.

Achieving Goals

The unit found that the commission cannot easily demonstrate that the fund is achieving its goals of improving wildlife habitat and, correspondingly, the quality of hunting in Nebraska. The commission needs to make better efforts to demonstrate its effectiveness by showing not only that money is being spent but what is being achieved with it. It needs to show that it has at least slowed the decline of habitat in areas where it has focused its efforts.

Conclusion

The program evaluation described in this report revealed that the commission administers the fund appropriately. Beyond that, the unit made two main recommendations. First, if the commission is to avoid a shortfall in the fund, it must make efforts to find additional sources of funding. For example, the commission could increase the cost of habitat stamps or supplement the fund with additional federal funds. Second, the commission should do a better job of measuring the effectiveness of expenditures made from the fund. For example, it should conduct more surveys of hunters and landowners and make efforts to document its successes.