



PREPARING FOR LONG-TERM STEWARDSHIP: A DUAL APPROACH FOR ILLINOIS

November 2016

Summary Report

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Acknowledgements

The report was made possible through generous funding from the Grand Victoria Foundation. We would like to thank them for their continued leadership in the conservation space in Illinois and for supporting practitioners working to maintain the high value ecosystems in our state. In addition, we would like to thank those who contributed to the content of this report by providing their insight, feedback, and enthusiasm. We would specifically like to thank the Vital Lands Illinois network and the funding working group and members of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition.

Preparing for Long-Term Stewardship: A Dual Approach for Illinois

Beginning in October of 2015, Delta Institute, Illinois Environmental Council (IEC), and the Natural Land Institute (NLI) engaged in a robust conversation with Illinois conservation practitioners to better understand the conditions that are hindering broader funding for long-term stewardship of conserved land and to identify mechanisms that could provide that funding in the future. This research, funded by the Grand Victoria Foundation and rooted in the work of the Vital Lands Illinois collaborative, sets the stage for more long-term work, implementing sustainable stewardship funding mechanisms in a collaborative, concerted effort.

This summary report summarizes the stages of that research and presents the Dual Approach we are presenting for stewardship funding in Illinois. The three sections of the full report can be found at the following links:

Part 1: Understanding Stewardship Funding in Illinois: The Policy Landscape and Practitioner Perspective: http://bit.ly/DA_Part1

Part 2: Engagement and Outreach Strategy: http://bit.ly/DA_Part2

Part 3: A Dual Approach to Stewardship Financing: Resource optimization and Agricultural Working Land Investments: http://bit.ly/DA_Part3

Overview

By addressing insufficient and inconsistent funding for stewardship through the implementation of a long-term, scalable financing strategy, the Illinois conservation community can overcome the constraints of the current funding cycle and chart a new path forward. Our team spent the last year researching, investigating, and analyzing potential models that could provide that new direction for conservation land trusts. In the end, we believe the solution proposed here, The Dual Approach Framework, addresses practitioner needs while being flexible and adaptable with changing policy. This strategy is built around the adoption of two key approaches:

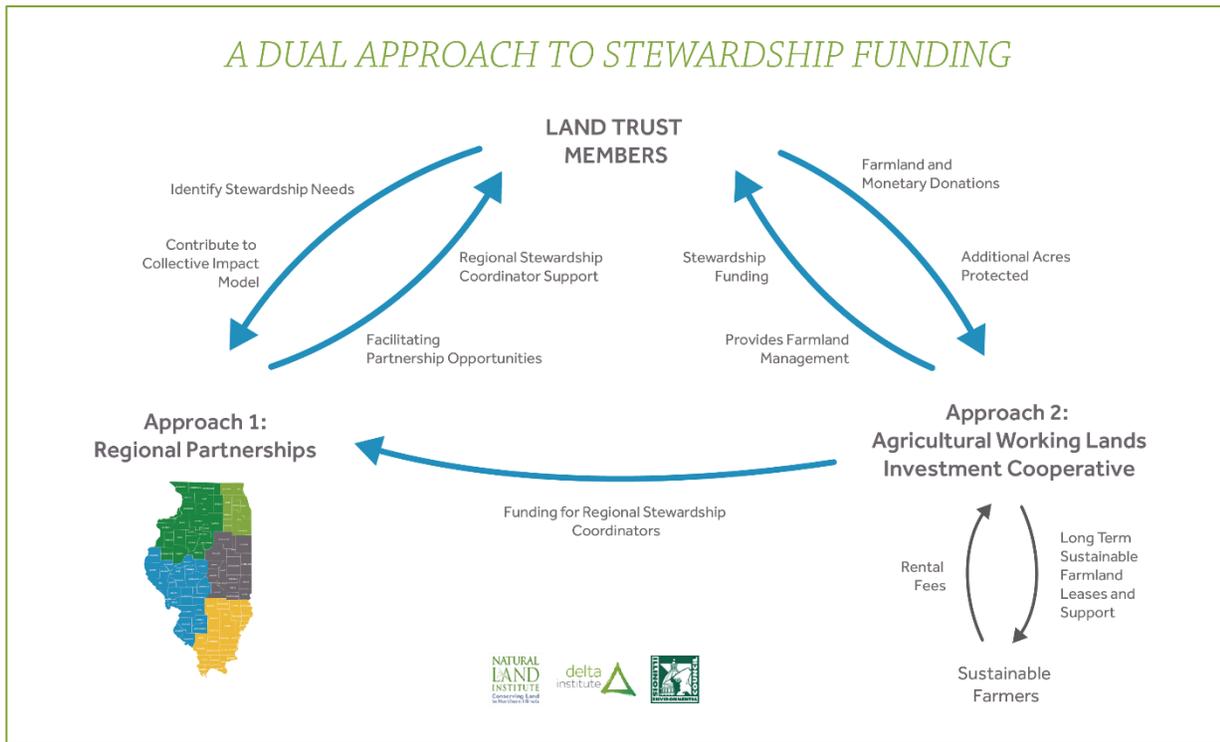
1. Creating **formalized regional partnerships** that can optimize resources and capacity
2. Building an **agricultural working lands investment cooperative** that will promote sustainable practices while creating a steady flow of annual returns

Traditionally, the burden of stewardship, defined here as *the practice of providing long-term maintenance, including the overhead and administration needed, to ensure high-quality land is conserved in perpetuity*, has fallen on the state, municipalities, or government agencies. Of the over 1 million acres of land conserved in Illinois, only about 70,000 remains in the hands of non-governmental conservation groups. With the present budget impasse and the continued need to increase conservation, the trends suggest that land trusts should prepare to increase their acreage holdings with insufficient and unpredictable funding for stewardship. The annual cost for stewarding this land is estimated to be between \$8 and \$11 million, and with acreage likely to increase and the ecosystem stressors such as the spread of invasive species and climate change, that figure could grow to over \$16 million in the next 20 years.

To identify which mechanisms would be viable in Illinois, we assessed the policy constraints and identified key barriers of each one through formal and informal engagement with conservation practitioners. Through this engagement strategy, which included a survey, interviews, informal discussions, resource sharing, and outside research, we identified a list of practitioner needs that fall into two main categories – increasing the usable funding pot, and building capacity across organizations. We considered these categories of needs as we evaluated various financial and partnership mechanisms. In addition to this process we also assessed which mechanisms have worked in other geographies and how that process may translate to Illinois.

We found that the two mechanisms presented in this framework, when used together, can address practitioner needs without significant state policy changes. Illinois is home to a robust ecosystem of conservation organizations, which makes it a challenge to create one framework that meets the needs, missions, and objectives of all groups. We have constructed this framework to provide opportunities for groups of different size, scope and agency to participate, but understand that these mechanisms may not be applicable or utilized by some organizations. As a new stewardship funding option, this Dual Approach could help increase statewide capacity and build beneficial, lasting funding partnerships through a collective impact model.

Figure 1: A Dual Approach to Stewardship



Approach 1: Creating Regional Partnerships to Address Capacity

Addressing stewardship funding needs has as much to do with efficiently using the funding available as it does with creating new funding sources. By collaborating across geographies, there is an opportunity for land trusts to achieve an efficiency of scale.

Based upon the Illinois Department of Natural Resources areas, we propose the creation of five regional partnerships, as seen in Figure 2, with each eventually having their own regional stewardship coordinator funded through resources from the investment cooperative.

These cooperatives would be built around the *Collective Impact Model*, which work creates long term commitments across the group by basing partnership design on five key ideas.

1. A Common Agenda
2. Shared Measurement

3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities
4. Continuous Communication
5. Backbone Support

This framework, as well as the work of individual members and stewardship coordinators to identify synergies in activities and look for ways to share resources will ensure that these more formalized partnerships are beneficial to conservation land trusts statewide. As opposed to other volunteer partnerships, these regional partnerships also have an outlined funding source, provided through the second approach.

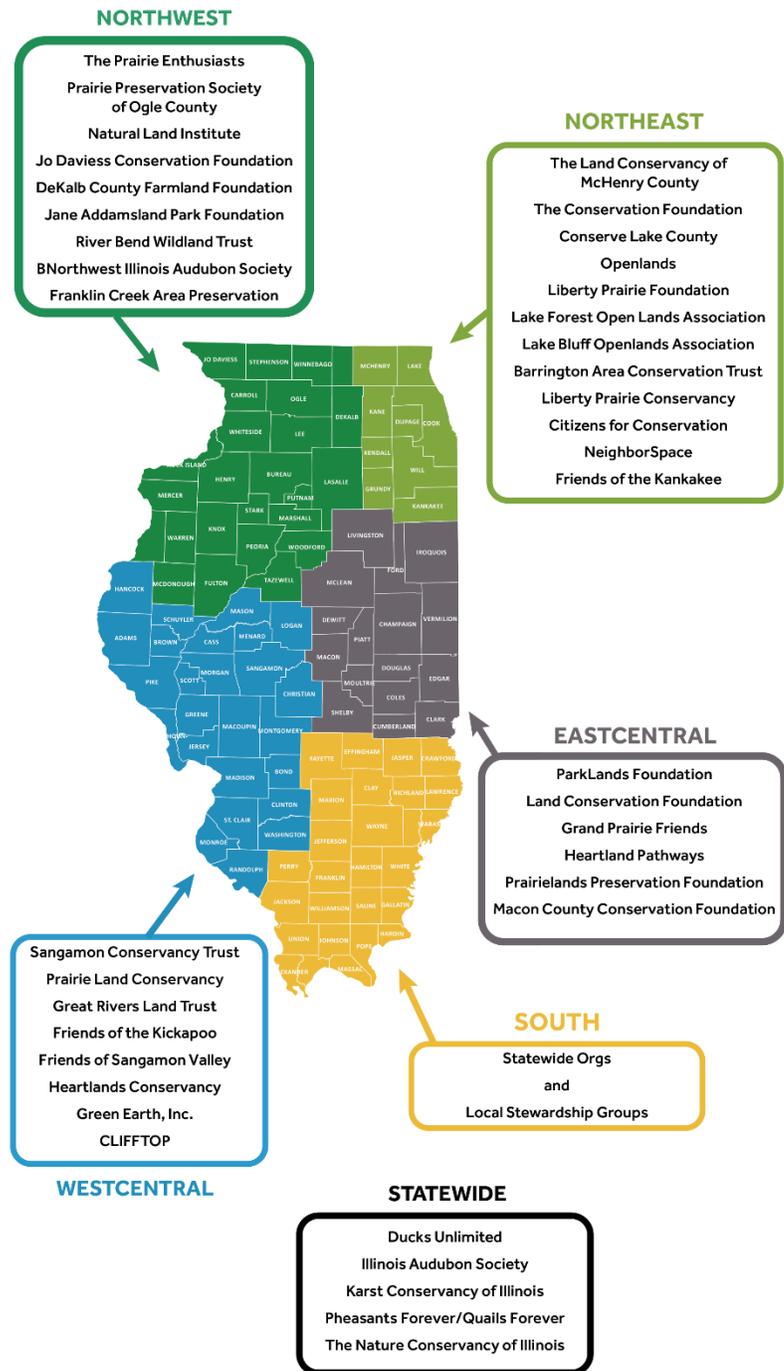
Approach 2: Creating an Agricultural Working Lands Investment Cooperative

Agricultural working lands have been used as a financial investment with much success in the conservation space in recent years. Through an investment cooperative where land trusts in Illinois pool donated land and money, this investment vehicle could provide the revenue source land trusts need, while increasing sustainable farming practices in the state. This approach would be a win-win for land trusts and farmers who would be able to ensure that land is both conserved at a high quality and kept in agriculture production.

In order to raise the \$8 to \$11 million needed annually for stewardship today, between 27,000 and 71,000 acres are necessary, depending on the quality of the land. These numbers are highly dependent on the location, plot size, farm layout, and soil productivity, among other factors. The cooperative would:

- determine lease rates

Figure 2: Potential Regional Partnerships



- manage farmer relationships
- assist farmers in adopting sustainable farming practices and set farming requirements in leases
- Determine payout structure between cooperative members and regional partnerships to ensure that those who contributed the most would be proportionately compensated.

Through this agricultural investment cooperative, land trusts of all sizes will be able to tap into the 27 million acres of farmland in Illinois, contribute to its conversion to more sustainable practices, and alleviate the uncertainty surrounding their stewardship funding now and into the future.

Realizing the Dual Approach

To implement this Dual Approach, these five regional partnerships and investment cooperative will need to be established, tested, and scaled. This will be a multi-year effort that will require the long-term buy-in of land trusts and the investment in a shared approach to stewardship funding. The implementation roadmap is summarized in the graphic on the following page and details one path for realizing this new model.

The full report provides practitioners and stakeholders with a detailed analysis of the existing conditions, our engagement strategy, and the dual approach framework. The overall implementation will be driven by the practitioners, as this report is intended to be the beginning a conversation that, we hope, in the end will build a sustainable funding model and more effective stewardship partnerships throughout the state. Links to the three sections of the full report can be found below:

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