USACE and Pheasants Forever "Handshake" for ecosystem restoration project in Pennsylvania

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The Francis E. Walter Dam, located amidst the Pocono Mountains in White Haven, Pa., was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in 1961 for the purposes of flood control. To date, the project has prevented nearly $180 million in flood damages to the Lehigh River Valley.

At the time of its construction, vast amounts of earth and rock needed to be excavated from approximately 250 acres of Army Corps property. Although this property was opened to the public for hunting and other outdoor recreation opportunities, much of the area is now stripped of all its topsoil and remained fallow with little to no useful herbaceous growth. The borrow area has reduced land which was once farm fields, pastures, and woodland meadows to a moonscape of barren, rocky, and hardpan subsoil. This land was no longer suitable for the support of native plants and wildlife.

While the dam was built for flood control, the site has been used for recreational purposes since 1988 when Congress authorized the additional purpose. Since that time, funding has been used to upgrade roads, electrical infrastructure, repair cracks in the intake tower, repair concrete on the gravity wall and outlet structure, and grout the dam to address seepage issues. Nearly five decades later, little has changed to improve the natural ecosystem. Few native plants capable of providing any habitat or food value for wildlife to exist have re-grown.

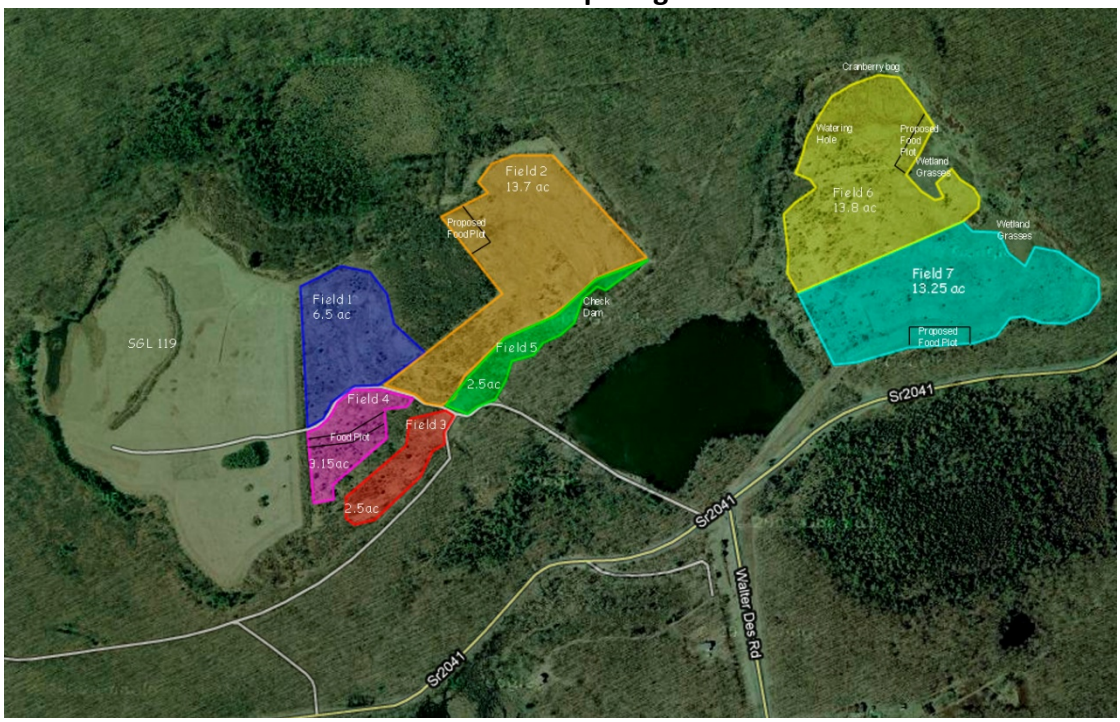
The USACE staff at the F.E. Walter Dam has been working to improve the borrow area as well as the overall ecosystem and habitat around the dam. Pheasants Forever, a national non-profit conservation organization, saw an opportunity to work with the Army Corps and make a difference for the environment.

Three years ago, the Army Corps' Philadelphia District entered into a partnership with Pheasants Forever Chapter 803 via the USACE "Handshake Program". Both parties were determined to reestablish these fallow grounds as viable living areas for plants and wildlife, while also improving recreational opportunities. Pheasants Forever understood the potential of this land area, and saw a unique opportunity to work together with USACE to make a difference for the environment.

With shared goals in mind, the USACE and Pheasants Forever "Handshake" for Ecosystem Restoration was born. The goals, developed and outlined by both groups, were to restore native plant life to barren areas, to create viable habitat and food sources for all animal life, and to provide a quality experience for those who enjoy the forests, fields and wildlife on this Army Corps project site. In addition to ecosystem restoration, improved habitat will increase numbers and varieties of wildlife. Interesting native plant species will be added to the project areas. Nature lovers, hikers, bird watchers, mountain bikers, hunters, fishermen, and family picnickers will all benefit from the enhanced habitat and opportunity it provides.

Through the help of the Army Corps Handshake program, hard work, and a little bit of luck, life is returning to the formerly barren area at the Francis E. Walter Dam. Dozens of volunteers have lent countless hours to this project. And, they are now beginning to see the fruits of their labor. What was a bleak landscape, has once again come to life. The Philadelphia District is thankful to both the Handshake Program and Pheasants Forever for seeing this project though.

Francis Walter Dam Borrow Area Habitat Restoration Project
Hand Shake Partnership Program FY 2011



Highlighted areas show where habitat restoration took place, broken into blocks for maintenance.

Before restoration took place, invasive species such as deer berry, sweet fern and white birch abounded.

Clearing the borrow areas of invasive species.

After the invasive species were removed and herbicide was applied.

Warm season grasses starting to sprout, land already being utilized by sportsmen.

Final product to date, grasses continue to grow and be utilized by the public and wildlife.