Oak Ridge Prairie Wetland Mitigation Bank

Prospectus for a Wetland Mitigation Bank in the Grand Calumet and Little Calumet Rivers and Lake Michigan Watersheds in Lake County, Indiana

USACOE Project No: LRC-2017-595

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The following prospectus is for a proposed wetland mitigation bank (Bank) in the City of Merrillville, Ross Township-Section 7, in Lake County, Indiana. The Bank sponsor/owner is the Lake County Parks & Recreation (Sponsor).

I. WMB SITE LOCATION/ SIZE / SITE INFORMATION

A. Site Location and Size

The parcel encompasses 129.33 acres adjacent to Oak Ridge Prairie County Park (844 acres), owned by the Sponsor.

The Bank is located in Ross Township within the Town of Merrillville in Lake County, Indiana. The Bank site area of 106.43 acres includes 92.06 acres of wetland soils, 11.80 acres of upland soils, and 2.57 acres of buildings/farm road. (Exhibit 1- Regional Location Map; Exhibit 2- Project Location Map)

B. Bank Site Information

The Bank site is adjacent to Oak Ridge Prairie County Park on the north and west, privately owned agricultural farm land on the south, and Hendricks Road on the east.

At the entrance to the Bank site there is a small farm house with four storage buildings, grain bin, and silo. A gravel farm road continues from the gravel entrance drive bisecting the north/south field to the upland area which has a quonset hut farm storage building. The drive, buildings, farm road and quonset hut encompass 2.57 acres of the site and have been excluded from the Bank acreage. The farm road shall be maintained on the Bank site after permitting to gain access to the wetlands west of the upland area and serve as a fire break for site management. The buildings will eventually be removed from the site, but those areas may remain as a parking lot (house area), trail (farm lane), and observation area/platform (quonset hut).

The Bank wetland areas compose 92.06 acres and are a combination of wetland re-establishment, rehabilitation, and buffer. Approximately 62 acres of row crop agriculture shall be re-established to a seasonally-flooded basin which shall be of some emergent/sedge meadow and wet prairie/sedge species.
There is an 11.80-acre upland area in the middle of the Bank site with vegetation dominated by non-native grasses (Hungarian or Smooth Brome, Wild Carrot, Kentucky Bluegrass, Timothy, and Orchard Grass) with few native species present. The upland also has approximately 12 large bur, black, and white oaks present on what was originally an oak savanna, a rare plant community (statewide, regionally, globally). The upland area slopes to the hydric soils on each side. The savanna area is included in the Bank as an upland restoration and shall provide important habitat to the surrounding wetlands when restored. An upland oak savanna forb/grass seed mix with oak tree species shall be planted/managed and shall be an important part of the site management as a rare upland plant community type. Exhibit 3- Aerial Photo shows all areas described.

C. Soils

The Bank site is composed of the following soil types as described in the Soil Survey of Lake County, 1972. Hydric soils dominate the site composing 92.06 acres of the site. These soils are: Milford silty clay loam (Mr), Palms (Linwood) muck (Lm), Gilford fine sandy loam (Gd), Wauseon fine sandy loam (Wo), Rensselaer loam (Re), Watseka loam (moderately deep variant) (WI), and Lydick loam, 0-2 percent slopes.

Tyner loamy fine sand (TyB) composes the 11.80 acres of upland on the site in the middle of the Bank area that is included for upland/buffer credit.

Each of the hydric soils listed above are characterized as being deep, very poorly drained soils in the Soil Survey of Lake County. Each of the hydric soils is listed as a wetland soil in the 1987 USACOE Wetland Delineation Manual and as a hydric soil by the USACE Chicago District. (Exhibit 4- NRCS Soil Survey Map).

D. Bank Site Wetlands and Respective Acreages

The National Wetlands Inventory Map-(Exhibit 5) shows the existing wetlands on the WMB site.

The wetland delineation report field investigation data conducted on 5/15/18 found the Bank area to have a total of five (5) wetlands totaling 30.16 acres.

The wetlands are described(mapped in detail in the wetland delineation report (Appendix 1-Wetland Delineation Report).

II. Bank Establishment and Operation

The Bank is designed to be self-sustaining following hydrologic and vegetative restoration.
A. Hydrologic Rehabilitation and Hydrology Plan:

The hydrologic restoration plan is to utilize existing wetland soil conditions by absence of farming activities and use of the hydrology/tile plan to dismantle/valve the existing tile lines to restore the site to more natural groundwater conditions.

The Sponsor contracted for a tile investigation plan which was completed by Huddleston-McBride Land Drainage Services on August 15, 2018 for all areas of the Bank site. The Vereb brothers, previous owners who had farmed the site for nearly 50 years, also had a tile sketch plan that was field checked by the tile drainage consultant and included in the plan. In addition, some areas of the farmed row crop acreage had no tile lines and were tilled when the season allowed, i.e., sheet drained to existing wetlands. (Exhibit 6a-Drain Tile Investigation Map; Exhibit 6b-Drain Tile Investigation Map-Details; and Exhibit 6c-Hydrology Plan).

The hydric soils, which compose approximately 90% of the Bank site, have surface water in excess of the soil type on the northeast boundary in spring and is considered a seasonally flooded basin. The rest of the re-establishment area has surface moisture/groundwater conditions typical of the listed hydric soils for most of the growing season which shall ensure hydrological restoration of the site once gate valves are installed to the tiles or tiles are dismantled. The absence of farming activities will allow hydric conditions to improve with the planting of hydric vegetation holding surface moisture for longer periods during the growing season. The high seasonal groundwater conditions shall provide moisture since nearly all of the wetland soils on site are deep and very poorly drained.

To measure the depth and duration of seasonal high groundwater, and other site-specific hydrologic characteristics, monitor wells shall be located in the interior area and edges of the wetland.

The hydrologic restoration shall not adversely affect any adjacent landowner property since the Bank site is lower in elevation than the surrounding land area on the south boundary and is already in public ownership, or adjacent to an existing road ditch or established trail area on the rest of the boundary areas.

B. Re-establishment and Rehabilitation of the Native Plant Communities (Wetland and Savanna)

The native plant communities shall re-establish 61.90 acres of wetlands on the Bank site. Of that total 7.21 acres shall be re-established to a seasonally flooded basin with emergent/sedge meadow species. The remainder of the total, 54.69 acres shall be re-established to a wet prairie-sedge meadow.
native plant community. (Appendix 2-Native Plant Communities Restoration Plan).

A total of 30.16 acres of existing wetlands shall be rehabilitated with the seeding rates listed below. Of that total 18.78 acres shall be rehabilitated to an emergent/sedge meadow native plant community. An additional 11.38 acres shall be rehabilitated to wet prairie/sedge meadow native vegetation. Rehabilitation shall include seeding with the appropriate wetland species from the approved seeding list and herbicide application where necessary.

The rehabilitation of the upland area, 11.80 acres, shall be accomplished by appropriate oak savanna management prior to seeding. The area shall be mowed with any downed trees removed. A selective broad-spectrum herbicide for grasses, such as Post, shall be applied to the non-native grasses (Hungarian/Smooth brome, Orchard Grass, and Timothy) which dominate the upland area. This fall/next spring the area shall have a management burn done. The upland shall then be dormant seeded to a native seed mixture of oak savanna and mesic/dry prairie grasses/forbs at the rate as listed below. The large oaks shall be protected from direct application of herbicide and wind blow-over next to the tree trunks. Additional oak savanna trees shall also be planted once permitted if an appropriate amount of credit is allowed.

The emergent and wet prairie/sedge meadow native plant communities’ rehabilitation shall have a Seeding Rate of: Total 20 lbs./acre: a mixture of 70% grasses, sedges, and/or rushes and 30% forbs selected to approximate natural community area percentages of cover in wet prairie/sedge meadows.

A total of 11.8 acres of upland site area shall be rehabilitated with a seeding rate of 20 lbs./acre and a mix of 80% grasses to 20% forbs.

The seeding of the cover crop and the native wetland species mixes shall be accomplished in the fall dormant season after approval.

Hydrology monitoring and site management for weedy species in the buffer and existing wetlands shall be initiated in the pre-planting period.

Native seed mixes shall be drilled with a seed drill or broadcast directly over the previous agricultural land. The native seed mixes shall be sown at the above seeding rates with the appropriate cover crop rates. The seed will be drilled using a Truax-type Grain Drill and broadcast with a mechanical fertilizer or similar spreader. If drilled there shall be repeated seeding by broadcast method over the same area in all directions to accomplish increased coverage/distribution creating a more natural mosaic seeding pattern rather than “vegetation lines” typically associated with drilling. The oak savanna shall be seeded by broadcast method only. Following germination, the plants shall be managed and monitored as discussed in the following sections.
The native plant communities to be planted on the Bank shall be: wet prairie/sedge meadow; emergent wetland/sedge meadow; and oak savanna. (Appendix 3: Native Species Planting List).

C. Management Plan

The management of the Bank shall be initiated with herbicide work on the site in the Summer/Fall 2019 season during permit approval process period.

Previous agricultural areas have been left fallow in the 2019 to allow weed species to germinate and then had herbicide applied in August. Another herbicide shall be applied in Fall 2019 prior to a heavy frost to further reduce weed cover.

A seeding with a cover crop of species as listed in the Planting List shall be done in Spring 2020. Mowing vegetation to a height of 6-8 inches with a rotary mower shall be done in late July following grassland bird nesting and monitoring report transects are completed.

A dormant seeding of the wetland/savanna shall be done in the Fall 2020 if permitted. Otherwise permanent seeding shall be done the following fall.

Mowing may need to be done again in the fall if feasible/needed ie., not too wet to mow with tractor or ATV mowing unit. Other management shall include herbicide application on areas as needed using appropriate herbicides after obtaining all necessary permits.

Site inspections will be made on a weekly basis during the first growing season and later on a bi-monthly basis thereafter during the growing season to review weed control, seed germination/native plant development, erosion control, hydrologic conditions, and any necessary site management.

To manage the desired species in the 2nd growing season the vegetation shall be mowed in late July and again in the fall to a height of 6-8 inches as in the initial season where feasible. Mowing shall reduce competition by early growing annual weeds and allow the slower growing native species to further establish. A late July mowing shall allow grassland bird species to complete a nesting season for most species with a first brood (mid-May through June). The mowing in July shall follow the annual vegetation monitoring in June.

Other management shall include further herbicide application as needed in the Fall.

By the 3rd planting season (2nd monitoring season) the vegetation should be approaching the desired plan with all interim releases hopefully approved. By the Fall of the 3rd season or Spring prior to the 4th season the vegetation should be ready for a controlled management burn.
The Sponsor shall be responsible for necessary permits and contracting with trained fire control personnel to implement the burn. Periodic management burns will be necessary about every 2-3 years to maintain the performance objectives and goals of the Bank.

The Mitigation Bank Instrument (MBI) document has more specific management information.

D. Monitor Plan

1. The Monitor Plan shall follow the ICA Monitoring and Performance Standards-September 2017 as approved by the Interagency Review Team (IRT) in the 2017 Interagency Coordination Agreement (ICA).

2. The specific performance standards for the Bank are listed in the MBI and shall be the final measurements for the bank.

3. Hydrological monitoring shall include recordings from the monitor wells during the growing season as set by the NRCS (typically mid/late April – to October 15 or later) until all hydrology credits are finalized. Data collected shall be included in the annual report along with the vegetation monitoring data. Ten hydrology monitor wells shall be installed as shown in Exhibit 7-Monitor Well Locations.

4. Vegetation sampling shall be accomplished on an annual basis (mid-late June and/or in early October if needed) of each growing season for the five year monitoring period and thereafter as necessary. Sampling measurements and qualitative/quantitative data shall include: species composition (diversity) and species dominance determined by frequency, relative frequency, coverage, relative coverage, and importance value of each native species encountered as required in the ICA of Sept. 2017. Plant community quality shall include calculation of C-values for each species/plant community and the community/site FQI/FQA the Swink/Wilhelm Quality Index.

Ten transects, each 100 meters long with 10 quadrats of 1 square meter, at 10 meter intervals per/transect shall be conducted as shown in Exhibit 8-Transect Locations Map.

Time meander searches shall be accomplished to measure species composition and species diversity (qualitative data) on an annual basis.

5. Monitoring shall culminate as part of the Monitor Report submitted to the IRT by February 1st of each year until the Bank has met all performance standards. The report shall include an overview of the progress in meeting mitigation goals and performance standards as previously described.
III. Goals, Objectives, and Feasibility

1. To re-establish/rehabilitate a historic wetland area in the Turkey Creek micro-watershed and the Grand Calumet/Little Calumet Rivers and Lake Michigan watersheds.

2. To restore to natural conditions wet prairie/sedge meadow, emergent wetlands/sedge meadow, and upland savanna native plant communities.

3. To rehabilitate the 18.78 acres of existing emergent wetland and 11.38 acres of wet prairie/sedge meadow on the site./sedge meadow

A complete description of the existing 30.16 acres of wetland (18.78 acres of emergent wetland and 11.38 acres of wet prairie/sedge meadow) are detailed in the wetland delineation (Appendix 1).

4. To make a positive contribution to the long-term ecological functioning of the Grand Calumet & Little Calumet Rivers and Lake Michigan watersheds, Turkey Creek micro-watersheds and Oak Ridge Prairie County Park. Oak Ridge Prairie is listed as a high-quality state/Chicago region natural area adjacent to the proposed Bank site.

5. To replace essential aquatic functions that are anticipated to be lost through authorized activities at other locations within the Bank service area.

6. To provide economically feasible and efficient mitigation opportunities.

7. The restoration of the Bank shall enhance wildlife habitat within the Grand/Little Calumet Rivers and Lake Michigan watersheds and the Turkey Creek micro-watershed, especially migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and rare, threatened, or endangered species on the Federal or Indiana List as indicated below.

The Bank shall potentially provide high quality wildlife habitat when restored for a number of Indiana State listed Endangered Species: Mammals - Evening Bat (Nycticeius humeralis), Franklin’s Ground Squirrel (Spermophilus franklinii); Birds - Least Bittern (Ixbobrychus exilis), American Bittern (Botaurus lentiginosus), Osprey (Pandion Haliaetus), Northern Harrier (Circus cyaneus), Black Rail (Laterallus jamaicensis), Virginia Rail (Rallus limicola), Sedge Wren (Cistothorus platensis), Marsh Wren (Cistothorus palustris), Cerulean Warbler (Setophaga cerulean), Henslow’s Sparrow (Ammodramus henslowii); and Reptiles - Spotted Turtle (Clemmys guttata), Blanding’s Turtle (Emydoidea blandingi), Smooth Greensnake (Opheodrys vernalis), and Eastern Massasauga (Sistrurus catenatus).
All Bird Species seen/documentated at the Oak Ridge Prairie Park, including any Indiana State Endangered Bird Species are listed in Appendix 4-ORP Bird List.

All other sited State Endangered Listed Species have been seen on the Oak Ridge Prairie site or nearby open space areas such as Hoosier Prairie.

**Indiana Species of Special Concern** that have been documented on the adjacent Oak Ridge Prairie are: **Mammals** - Eastern Red Bat (Lasiurus borealis), Plains Pocket Gopher (Geomys bursarius); **Birds** – Great Egret (Ardea alba), Bald Eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus), Sharp-shinned Hawk (Accipiter striatus), Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus), Broad-winged Hawk (Buteo platypterus), Sandhill Crane (Grus canadensis), Solitary Sandpiper (Tringa solitaria), Greater Yellowlegs (Tringa melanolocea), Common Nighthawk (Choreilis minor), Eastern Whip-poor-will (Antrostomus vociferous), Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus), Black- and-White Warbler (Mniotilta varia), Hooded Warbler (Setophaga citrina), Western Meadowlark (Sturnella neglecta); **Amphibians** – Blanchard’s Cricket Frog (Acris blanchardi), Northern Leopard Frog (Lithobates pipiens); **Reptiles** - Eastern Box Turtle (Terrapene carolina), Rough Greensnake (Opheodrys aestivus).

The Bank also shall provide habitat for a number of **Federal USFWS Priority** birds such as Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, and Short-billed Dowitcher. The following **Region 3-USFWS Resource Priority** birds shall likely occur at the site: Least Bittern, Black Tern, Sedge Wren, and Eastern Meadowlark. The site shall provide potential habitat for Federal migratory waterfowl species such as Northern Pintail, Mallard, American Black Duck, Northern Shoveler Duck, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon and Wood Duck.

The Bank shall potentially provide feeding and nesting habitat for a number of these **Federal Watch List Species**, as well as a number of other wetland or prairie dependent fauna. These include other wetland bird species (Great Egret), and grassland bird species (Eastern/Western Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Grasshopper Sparrow, Savanna Sparrow, and Bobolink), amphibians (Blanchard’s Cricket Frog), & reptiles (Western Smooth Green Snake).

8. The restoration of the Bank shall not impact any cultural or historical resources. (Appendix 5-Archeology Report Abstract).

9. To restore a buffer adjacent to Oak Ridge Prairie County Park and provide permanent preservation of open space along the Turkey Creek/Little Calumet River corridor.
IV. Site Suitability/Actions to achieve Goals/Objectives

The Bank shall achieve its goals and objectives, support wetland functions, and provide long-term sustainability by the following:

1. The site is owned by the Sponsor, the largest open space agency in Lake County, Indiana.

2. The Bank site is dominated by hydric soils modified farm tiling and ditching practices. Restoration i.e., Re-establishment and Rehabilitation of the Bank site shall meet the conditions required by the ICA. Sustainable native wetland communities of emergent/sedge meadow (Seasonally inundated basin) and wet prairie/sedge meadow shall be the goal of the Bank. (Appendix 2).

3. There are no high-quality wetlands on site that would be adversely affected by the construction or restoration/enhancement work.

4. The Bank site is surrounded by existing open space, parcels currently under agriculture and Hendricks Road with some residential development to the east. The Bank shall improve the nearby creek/river corridors and increase the ecological benefits by providing a buffer area to the high natural quality Oak Ridge Prairie County Park. Utilizing the existing hydric soils and tiles by either installing valves or disabling the agricultural drainage system shall restore the hydrology of the site. It is expected that implementing these methods shall enhance the hydrological conditions already present with high seasonal high water in some areas and groundwater table associated with the site soil types should be more than enough to make the hydrological standards.

5. The site was purchased by the Sponsor in the last 5 years as part of their Proposed Acquisition Plan and was under a farm lease through 2018. The farm lease was not renewed for 2019.

6. The parcel has no known hazardous waste on-site and has only been used for agricultural row crops dating back 50 years as shown by historic aerial photographs.

7. The Bank site is 106.43 acres and exceeds the minimum size requirement of 25 acres for an approved Bank.

8. The restoration of the Bank shall not adversely affect any federal or state listed species, their habitat or any high-quality habitats or natural areas. The Bank shall in fact provide additional habitat for a number of rare mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, insect, and plant species that occur in the adjacent Oak Ridge Prairie County Park and other nearby high-quality natural areas such as Hoosier Prairie.
9. In addition, a number of Indiana State Listed Endangered or Special Concern Species are documented from the adjacent Oak Ridge Prairie site owned by the Sponsor. Additional Bank credits for these species that are wetland dependent may be requested.

10. As the Sponsor owns the Bank site, it shall provide the long-term management and permanent protection to the site for native species habitat.

11. The Sponsor shall be responsible for management, maintenance, and monitoring of the Bank for a period of 5 years or as required by the IRT and serve as the long-term manager in perpetuity.

12. The Sponsor shall be responsible for financial assurances to cover the bank through the restoration phase, management phase, and monitoring phase.

13. Upon approval of the Bank the Sponsor shall provide funding as specified in the MBI.

14. The Sponsor shall comply with the ICA on Wetland Mitigation Banking within the Regulatory Boundaries of Chicago District, US Army Corps of Engineers, dated September 2017 as it pertains to the Bank. Sponsor or its agent shall sell conditionally uncertified credits and final certified credits in accordance with the ICA. The Sponsor acknowledges that the IRT has the authority to determine the number of credits available for withdrawal from the mitigation bank in accordance with the ICA. The Sponsor shall not sell more than the number of credits approved by the IRT for sale. The Sponsor shall maintain a ledger of available credits, whether purchased or not, and of all credits sold. The ledger will be made available to the IRT upon request.

15. The Schedule of Completion is specified in the MBI.

16. The Performance Standards are specified in the MBI.

V. Wetland Delineation

The wetland delineation was conducted on 5/18/2108 and is included as (Appendix 1- Wetland Delineation).

VI. Proposed Service Area

The proposed service area of the Bank shall be the Grand Calumet River, Little Calumet River and the Lake Michigan watersheds (Exhibit 9- Proposed Service Area).
VII. Real Estate Owner

The 106.43-acre Bank site is owned by the Sponsor, an open space agency. The Title Deed/Affidavit is included as (Appendix 6-Title Deed/Affidavit).

VIII. Legal Description

The Bank site is located in the north half of the northwest quarter of Section 7 of Ross Township in Lake County, Indiana. The GIS location is N 41 41.50549 and W 87.38646. (Appendix 7- Survey and Legal Description).

IX. Bank Type and Marketing Concept

The Bank shall be publicly owned that is market oriented for clients requiring wetland credits for mitigation purposes. These clients will include private individuals, corporations, or public agencies.

X. Bank Credit Production

The Bank has 92.06 acres of hydric soil areas. Of this amount 61.90 acres is intended for full re-establishment credit and requested at a ratio of 1:1 per acre/credit. An area of 30.16 acres is requested for rehabilitation credit at a ratio of 0.50:1 per acre/credit. An area of 11.80 acres of upland is requested for rehabilitation credit at a ratio of 0.25:1 per acre/credit. The buffer areas on all boundaries are requested at a ratio of 0.25 per acre/credit. The total amount of credits being requested is 79.93 acres and the credit breakdown is listed in the Table below.

Re-establishment of wetlands as defined in the ICA of 2017 is manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of the site with the goal of returning natural/historic functions to a former aquatic resource. Re-establishment results in the rebuilding of a former aquatic resource producing a gain in the aquatic resource area. Therefore, re-establishment of wetland conditions is in areas that were historically wetlands, but which have been modified such that they are now considered non-wetland. The 61.90 acres of wetland credit that were previous farmed and tiled wetlands would qualify as re-establishment credit areas of the site and are requested at a 1:1 ratio.

Rehabilitation of wetlands is defined in the ICA as the manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of the site the goal of repairing natural/historic functions to a degraded aquatic resource. Rehabilitation results in a gain in aquatic resource function, but does not result in a gain in the aquatic resource area. The five (5) existing wetlands totaling 30.16 acres of the Bank = 15.08 acres of wetland credit are requested for rehabilitation at a ratio of 0.50:1.
The oak savanna/upland area credits shall increase the functional wetland enhancement and the ecological integrity of the Bank. The 11.8-acre area located in the center of the site shall compliment ecologically the wetlands with the potential rare oak savanna restoration for a request of 2.95 acres of credit at a 0.25:1 ratio.

The Sponsor is proposing to restore 103.86 acres at the Bank to generate 79.93 wetland credits according to the following table:

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XI. Site Existing Conditions

The Site Plan of Existing Conditions shows existing roads, trails, structures, utilities, and adjacent property uses. (Exhibit 10-Existing Site Conditions).

XII. Hydrology Plan

The Hydrology Plan depicts the existing tiles to be abandoned and/or modified by installation of gate valves to open/close for hydrology site management. (Exhibit 6c-Hydrology Plan).

XIII. Sponsor Qualifications/Experience

The following is a list of projects that the Sponsor has completed or are under restoration, and are under their management. Also included is a timeline and budget for each project.

1. **Gibson Woods Nature Preserve**: Located in Hammond/Gary, the Sponsor has been granted approximately $2 million dollars over the past 8 years from the USEPA, IDEM, and GLRI funds for site restoration and management. These funds have/will be used for enhancement and management of the 179 acre Indiana State Nature Preserve of globally endangered dune and swale plant communities composed of many state endangered species.