

## TAKING CARE OF UNFINISHED BUSINESS

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The wildlife management profession has a successful tradition of restoring wildlife populations from historic lows back to stable and recreationally viable levels. The list of familiar restored species—white-tailed deer, wild turkey, giant Canada goose, bald eagle, American alligator, beaver, river otters, etc.—illustrates good achievements over difficult challenges in their times. It is now the responsibility of wildlife conservationists to move forward and address remaining and new problems, while protecting past achievements.

Over at least the last 40 years, even as deer and turkey restoration efforts were peaking, populations of the northern bobwhite quail have been steadily and significantly decreasing across most of their range. Bobwhite populations across the Southeast have declined by two-thirds since 1980 and by three-fourths or more since 1966. By no coincidence, several nongame birds that share habitats with bobwhites are also experiencing long-term and large-scale declines. Although numerous factors play some role in the declines, slow but widespread habitat declines are the overriding factor. More specifically, quail biologists have reached a general consensus that nesting and brood-rearing covers are the majority limiting factors across most of the species' range.

In 1998, the Directors of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) took a large step to address the unfinished business by directing its technical committee, the Southeast Quail Study Group (SEQSG) to develop a regional, as opposed to a state-by-state, recovery plan for bobwhites. Never before to this extent have states subjugated their independent authority for resident species on behalf of a collaborative interstate planning and recovery effort. The visionary leadership by the Directors and the aggressive actions of the SEQSG indicates the seriousness of the quail situation.

The SEQSG published the *Northern Bobwhite Quail Initiative* (NBCI) in 2002. This ambitious plan aims to restore bobwhite populations across their range to their 1980 levels, requiring some 81 million acres of voluntary habitat restoration, primarily on private lands. The NBCI separates the quail-manageable landscape into three components—croplands, pasture/hay/range, and forest lands. Quail conservationists must successfully integrate meaningful but practical restoration and management accommodations into the working lands of each of these three land-use types if the NBCI is to reach its goal.

In its first three years, the NBCI has been successful beyond all expectations. For example, the new 250,000 acre "CP33 Habitat Buffers for

Upland Birds” practice in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Continuous Conservation Reserve Program is a direct result of the NBCI.