

## Coolbaugh Natural Areas, Brooks Township, Newaygo County, Michigan

The 400-acre Coolbaugh Natural Areas contains white pine-white oak forests, remnants of dry sand prairie, the Coolbaugh and Bigelow Creek trout streams, a 3.5 acre pond and approximately 7 acres of wetlands. The property is managed to promote white pine-white oak reforestation and enlarge and restore prairie areas while enhancing wildlife habitat. Having received 75% funding from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Recreational Trust Fund (royalties from oil and gas extraction from state owned lands), the property must be open for public use but is restricted to non-motorized low-impact recreational activities.

Brooks Township owns Coolbaugh Natural Areas. However, through contract with the Michigan Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), management decisions are the responsibility of a 7-member Management Commission. Brooks Township and TNC each have 2 representatives to the Commission. Additional membership is a single representative from the US Forest Service, Land Conservancy of West Michigan (LCWM) and the Newaygo County Conservation District.

For several years, TNC had owned the 80-acre Ore-Ida Prairie located in Brooks Township. For sale was the adjacent 320-acre privately owned Ivan Koetje Trust tract with an appraised value of \$700,000. In addition to its value as an extension to the Ore-Ida Prairie, the tract was key to establishing and maintaining an 1,100 acre corridor with federal and state forests.

Brooks Township and TNC had established a close working relationship while developing the *Land Use Vision*, a community-based plan to identify and protect unique and valuable natural features. Brooks Township was an eligible grantee for a MDNR Trust Fund grant with a minimum local match of 25%. TNC offered to donate the Ore-Ida Prairie and supplement with cash to equal the 25% local match plus incidental acquisition costs. With TNC's commitment, Brooks Township applied for and received a \$670,000 MDNR Trust Fund grant allowing acquisition of the Koetje tract. TNC prefers property ownership or at least a permanent conservation easement. Neither was permitted by provisions of the MDNR Trust Fund, hence the development of a binding management contract. This assured TNC reasonable management control to justify their near and long term investment in the property.

Initial capital improvements were modest; signage, hiking paths, barriers to motorized vehicles and a parking lot. Both Brooks Township and TNC committed \$5000 start-up monies. Also, we solicited private donations from *Friends of Coolbaugh Areas* and matching funds from the Fremont Area Community Foundation (FACF). Since inception, Brooks Township has budgeted \$5,000 per year toward capital improvements. TNC has donated management labor. However, FACF has provided substantial financial support to both TNC and LCWM for work on the Coolbaugh and the broader Newaygo Prairies project.

Public use has steadily increased as awareness of the property has grown. Particularly satisfying is use by the public schools to educate students about local biota and wildlife habitat. Future capital improvements will be limited to projects that enhance access or increase educational value. There will be no commercialization or resource extraction.

Brooks Township is approximately 36 square miles in area. Within Brooks Township are 9 lakes, the largest being 770 surface acres. In addition, there are trout streams and the most significant segment of the Muskegon River, an important fishery tributary to Lake Michigan. In essence, the township is blessed with significant natural features: lakes, streams, forests, prairies and the Muskegon River. In the decade ending year 2000, our population had increased 35%. Similar future growth rates are predicted. We are still rural. Our natural features are not irreparably damaged. We have the opportunity and challenge to manage growth while protecting natural features and preserving our way of life.