



# Georgia's Bobwhite Quail Initiative 2013 – 2023

*“Gaining Ground for Bobwhites  
&  
The National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative”*

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Bobwhite Quail  
INITIATIVE

Wildlife Resources Division  
Game Management Section



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The northern bobwhite quail (hereafter bobwhite) occupies a prominent place in Georgia's wildlife heritage. In fact, in 1970 the Georgia General Assembly formally designated the bobwhite as the State Gamebird. During the 1800's through the mid 1900's from Georgia's mountain valleys to the coast, quality early succession habitat (ESH; native grasses, forbs, legumes and shrubs) occurred as a by-product of the extensive, low-intensity agriculture and forestry practices. This resulted in widespread bobwhite abundance and earned Georgia the reputation as a premier quail hunting state. However, since that time bobwhite populations have experienced severe long-term declines, more than 90% since 1966.

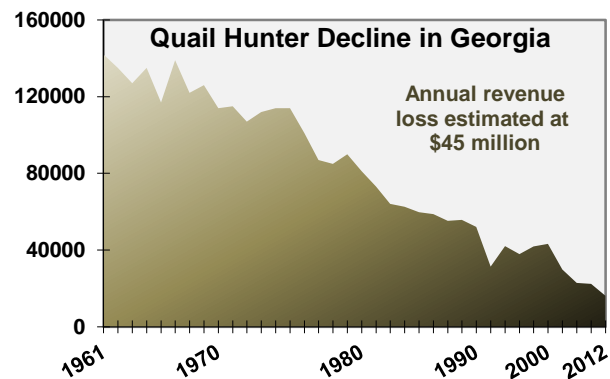
This decline is the result of widespread changes in land use, which have greatly reduced the abundance and distribution of native ESH. Collectively, these landscape changes have fragmented what was once a "sea" of ESH into "habitat islands" that are becoming increasingly smaller in size and farther apart. The overall result of this habitat loss and fragmentation is severely reduced bobwhite survival and productivity.

Bobwhites are not the only species suffering from this landscape scale habitat change. Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) identifies 45 animal and 132 plant species that, like bobwhites, are associated with ESH ranging from croplands to woodland savannas and are of priority conservation concern. The bobwhite serves as an indicator for an entire association of species at risk due to widespread habitat degradation. Additionally, quality ESH benefits many other wildlife species that are more abundant and adaptable than bobwhites (e.g., Eastern wild turkey, white-tailed deer and cottontail rabbit) and are important to Georgia's hunters and other citizens.

The bobwhite decline is an indicator of a dramatic ecological change with widespread economic and recreational impacts. Since 1964, Georgia's bobwhite hunter numbers have declined by over 80% with a similar decline in hunter harvest. Across much of Georgia, bobwhite densities have fallen below levels needed to attract and sustain hunter interest, and in some landscapes viable bobwhite populations are no longer apparent.

Due to the severity of the bobwhite decline, in 1998, a grassroots effort through the Georgia General Assembly and Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Board led to the development of the Wildlife Resources Division Game Management Section (WRD) Bobwhite Quail Initiative (BQI). BQI is a proactive effort to restore and maintain bobwhite habitat on private lands across Georgia's Upper Coastal Plain.

Since its inception, BQI has advanced bobwhite restoration in Georgia and across the Southeast and revealed: 1) within appropriate landscapes, bobwhite numbers can be increased through judicious habitat restoration across working farms and forestlands; 2) landowner demand for bobwhites is high but adequate levels of financial incentives and qualified technical

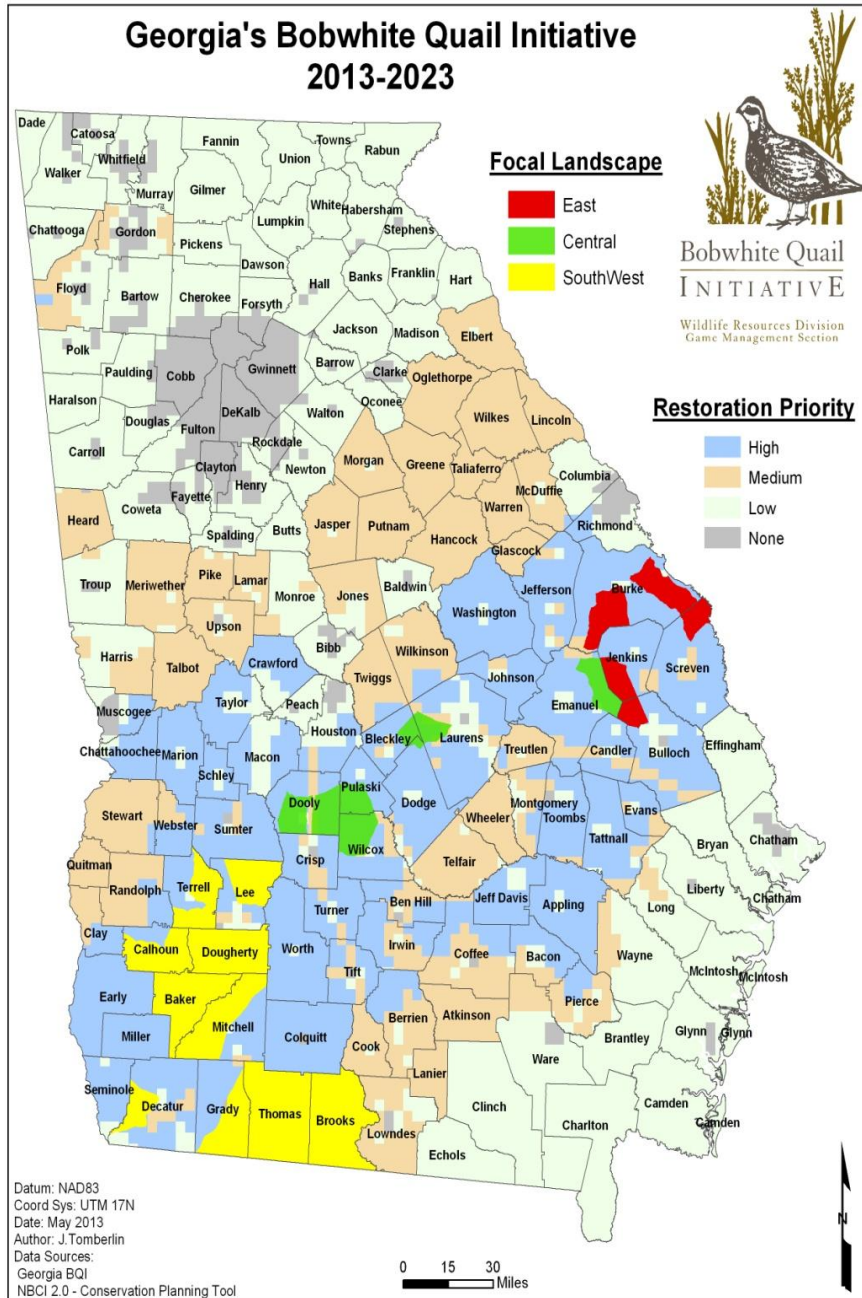


staff are essential for success; and **3) habitat restoration must be focused into spatially explicit landscapes to produce and sustain a bobwhite population response.** Based on these

lessons and the recent revision of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI 2.0), WRD is now broadening the scope of BQI but with a more targeted approach into designated priority areas. The NBCI is a 25-state bobwhite habitat and population recovery plan developed by over 600 wildlife biologists and managers. As part of the NBCI 2.0 process, Tall Timbers Research Station staff, with input from biologists and managers from WRD and 11 other conservation organizations in Georgia, conducted a statewide habitat analysis to identify, rank and prioritize counties and areas for bobwhite restoration potential.

The main goal of the BQI is to restore and maintain quality ESH and woodland savanna habitat in as many Focal Landscapes as feasible, so as to increase and maintain viable and huntable populations of wild bobwhites; while providing habitat for other grassland obligate wildlife species of priority conservation concern. This will necessitate collaborative work on both private and public lands. Since 93% of Georgia is under private ownership, private lands implementation is the key to achieving success. This plan addresses the following strategies for WRD's future bobwhite restoration:

Georgia BQI Implementation	Budget Needs
Focal Landscape Habitat Restoration	\$11.5 million
Bobwhite Quail Initiative Personnel	\$8.6 million



- ❖ **Working** at national, state and local levels to influence agriculture and forest policies that will increase opportunities for bobwhite habitat restoration and management.
- ❖ **Linking BQI with the:** Georgia WRD SWAP, Georgia Forestry Commission State Forest Assessment and Strategies, Georgia Natural Resources Conservation Service State Resources Assessment, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners For Fish and Wildlife Plan, America’s Longleaf Initiative and similar plans of national or regional importance to leverage additional manpower and funding inputs and optimize bobwhite and other natural resource outputs.
- ❖ **Providing** training and outreach to landowners and managers of private and public lands for the restoration and maintenance of native woodland savanna and ESH.
- ❖ **Promoting** and delivering state, federal and NGO private lands program practices, funding and technical assistance into BQI Focal Landscapes so as to establish and sustain viable and huntable bobwhite populations.
- ❖ **Tracking** bobwhite habitat restoration and monitoring population response at the Focal Area scale across a sample of Focal Landscapes.
- ❖ **Refining** BQI efforts based on monitoring feedback from habitat implementation, bobwhite population response, and measures of hunter and/or landowner satisfaction. We recommend the BQI plan be revised every 5 years guided by this adaptive feedback process.

These strategies will be used to impact Focal Landscapes identified within three BQI Regions with emphasis on restoring and managing native ESH and woodland savanna habitats. Analysis of habitat conditions within these Focal Landscapes reveals the potential and need for 58,360 acres of heavy pine thinning, 209,844 acres of additional prescribed burning and 63,205 acres of fallow cropland margins (e.g., field borders, center-pivot corners, etc.) to restore bobwhite habitat. Assuming a financial incentive rate of \$60/ac for heavy thinning, \$20/ac for prescribed burning, and \$60/ac for managing fallow cropland edges, initial restoration of these acres would require an estimated \$11.5 million in incentives. Additionally, WRD staff and operating costs needed for technical delivery would require about \$8.6 million over the next 10 years.

Considering costs and budgetary constraints, full implementation across all Focal Landscapes is not feasible over the short term. However, existing program staff and available federal, state, NGO and grant funding will be used to target bobwhite restoration into the highest priority Focal Landscapes as determined by habitat conditions, landowner participation, funding and staff availability to maximize restoration success. This plan is about far more than bobwhites as it addresses the restoration and sustainability of healthy native ecosystems. Specifically, it is a plan for working farms and forests with the purposes of providing native ESH and woodland savanna habitat for the full complement of wildlife and plants while yielding an array of ecosystem goods and services to present and future generations of Georgian’s. We have the science and technology to achieve this goal but the question remains whether or not we as a society have the collective will.

The BQI Implementation Plan and additional information on bobwhite quail management is available at the [Bobwhite Quail in Georgia](#) website