

The Largest WILDLIFE HABITAT PROGRAM IN THE COUNTRY CELEBRATES 30 YEARS

BY MARK NORTON, PRIVATE LANDS WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

When people think about wildlife habitat in South Dakota many things might come to mind, one of which is likely to be the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This year marks 30 years since this program was created as part of the 1985 Farm Bill. It is the largest wildlife habitat conservation program in the U.S.; paying farmers and ranchers to remove agricultural lands from production and establish grassland, trees and restore wetlands for 10 to 15 years at a time.

The original intent of the program was to reduce excessive crop production in the U.S. and help stabilize the agriculture economy. The early 1980s was a farm crisis, which resulted in part from the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz's, policies in the 1970s that encouraged fence-row to fence-row farming. Besides reducing the overproduction of crops, CRP also benefitted the environment by reducing soil erosion, removing carbon from the atmosphere and reducing flooding.

It didn't take long for people to also realize CRP brought value to wildlife habitat. By 1991, South Dakota farmers and ranchers had enrolled more than 1.7 million acres of cropland into CRP and the pheasant population soared from a little more than 1.8 million in 1986 to 4.5 million in 1991. The pheasant population continued to grow to almost 12 million over the next 15 years as South Dakota farmers and ranchers kept over 1.5 million acres of cropland in the program.



Pheasants are not the only wildlife that benefit from habitat created by CRP. More than 1 million acres of CRP land in South Dakota produces 600,000 ducks annually. It provides habitat for many of the state's grassland song birds like the bobolink, dickcissel, and western meadowlark. White-tailed deer prefer CRP fields for fawning and raising their fawns in the spring and summer.

Since 2007, South Dakota CRP enrollments have declined to the current level of 926,000 acres. Currently, the CRP program is limited by a national cap on the number of acres that can be enrolled. Right now, that cap is lower than it has ever been. Help increase this cap by letting congressmen and women and senators know how valuable the CRP program is in South Dakota.

2015 CRP ENROLLMENT OPTIONS

This fall there will be more options for enrolling land into CRP than ever before. Landowners can place land into the program in three different ways; continuous CRP, general CRP or grasslands CRP. Cropping history eligibility dates are four out of six years from 2008 to 2013 for the most continuous and general options. In all cases, rental rates have been updated in 2015. Any land being placed in CRP must be owned for at least one year.

Agricultural producers and/or landowners, currently have the opportunity to enroll eligible land into many different continuous CRP practices. There are more than 100,000 acres available in South Dakota for enrollment in the Pheasant SAFE, Western SD Grassland Wildlife SAFE, Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative, Flood Plain and Non-floodplain Wetland Restoration and Farmable Wetland Program. Many of the continuous CRP practices have additional payment incentives to protect sensitive lands like wetlands and highly erodible lands.

Another continuous CRP opportunity that has no limit on enrolled acres is the pollinator habitat initiative. This initiative is a fantastic way to add pheasant nesting and brood rearing habitat to land. It has a minimum size limit of 0.5 acres and no maximum acreage limit. Seed mixes

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Describe your job.

I coordinate hunting access and Farm Bill programs for the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP). This includes working closely with conservation officers and private lands habitat biologists throughout the state to deliver the Walk-In Area program, Controlled Hunting Access program and the James River Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). I also work with federal agency staff to target Farm Bill conservation programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to maximize benefits to wildlife in South Dakota. On a national level, I work with other states' wildlife agency staff to influence federal Farm Bill conservation programs for the benefit of wildlife habitat from a rules and policy standpoint.

What benefits come from this work?

There is always a need for public hunting access. Hunting is a valuable tool used by wildlife managers to maintain healthy wildlife populations. The more land accessible to hunters, the more effective that tool is to the managers. Public hunting access to private lands with quality wildlife habitat falls right in line with the Farm Bill work. The conservation programs in the Farm Bill have the ability to improve wildlife habitat on private land.

Why should people care about hunting access and the Farm Bill?

Most wildlife conservation is funded from two main sources: hunting license sales and taxes on purchases of firearms and ammunition used for hunting. Hunting access is also funded this way, which fits in a grander cycle that is critical to keeping money available for wildlife conservation. If there were not enough places to hunt, fewer people would continue to hunt. Fewer hunters would buy less licenses, firearms and ammunition and there would be less money available for wildlife conservation. In South Dakota more than 80 percent of land is privately owned. While some of the money from hunters is used for private land wildlife habitat and management, most of it is not. That is where the other major funding source comes into to play, the Farm Bill. Since 1985, when the first Farm Bill was passed, no other funding source has provided close to the amount of money for wildlife habitat on private land in South Dakota. It is critical that the conservation title (of the Farm Bill) continues to have funding to establish and maintain wildlife habitat on private lands.

may contain up to 25 percent native grasses, but must contain minimum of nine wild flower species, three of which must bloom during spring, mid-summer and late summer. There is a \$150/acre signing incentive payment offered with this initiative.

Grassland CRP is a new type of CRP. Expiring and expired CRP grassland as well as non-cropped native rangeland and pastureland are eligible. Contract length is 15 years and the rental rate will be up to 75 percent of the average county grazing lease rates. Cost-share will be available at 50 percent rate for fence and water development on enrolled acres. The grassland CRP sign-up is available from September 1, 2015 through November 20, 2015.

CRP plays an important role in South Dakota's wildlife populations. "The undisturbed grassland habitat that CRP provides in South Dakota is vitally important for grassland nesting songbirds, pheasants, waterfowl, as well as big game species like white-tailed deer," said Chad Switzer, GFP wildlife program administrator. "There is a proven record on the benefits of CRP in South Dakota in both influencing wildlife populations and providing producers with another option in their land management decisions." ■

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IMPROVING YOUR CHANCES OF BEING ACCEPTED

For the first time since 2013, a general CRP sign-up will be held from December 1, 2015 through February 26, 2016. It is expected to be highly competitive. Please use the following tips to help increase the greatest chances of being accepted.

- 1** Choose a high diversity mix of native species to get the maximum 50 points. CP42 (pollinator habitat), CP25 (rare and declining habitat), CP4D (five species native mix for wildlife habitat) or CP2 (native five species mix) score 50 points. CP25 may cost more, but also gains an additional 25 points for enduring benefits and five points for carbon sequestration. CP42 also gains five points for carbon sequestration.
- 2** Establish pollinator-friendly habitat (20 points) or upgrade existing cover (20 Points). With CP42 Pollinator Habitat producers can plant nine species of pollinator-friendly shrubs, legumes and wildflowers, with three in bloom for each of spring, summer, and fall on one acre or 10 percent of the offer, whichever is larger and gain 20 points. The other way to gain 20 points is to upgrade the cover on expired or expiring CRP land that has an existing stand of a single species of grass if the producer converts 51 percent or more of it to a mixed stand of native species.
- 3** Consider offering only the portions of your fields with the highest erodibility index value. Soils that easily erode score more points.
- 4** If necessary, consider accepting less than the maximum rental rate. Producers can receive up to 25 points for bidding up to 15 percent below the maximum per acre rental rate.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO SUBMIT AN OFFER, AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS SHOULD SET UP AN APPOINTMENT WITH THEIR LOCAL USDA FARM SERVICE AGENCY OFFICE.

HABITAT ADVISORS LOCATED THROUGHOUT THE STATE ARE ALSO AVAILABLE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT CRP. FOR A LIST OF ADVISORS, PLEASE SEE PAGE 10 OR VISIT HABITAT.SD.GOV.