

Contributions of the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to conserving grasslands on private lands in the United States

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Keywords: grassland, private lands, biodiversity

Introduction The future of biodiversity in the USA is tied inseparably to activities taking place on private lands. Agriculture is by far the most important user of these lands, with about 50% or 900M acres managed as private cropland, grassland or rangeland. Decisions made by America's farmers and ranchers directly affect grasslands and their impact on food supply, biodiversity, soil protection and water quality. Agricultural programs and policies in the USA have had a large influence on the choices available to farmers and ranchers in land management. Since the 1930s, USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has been working with farmers, ranchers, and other land managers to promote conservation of natural resource through the nation's 3000 soil and water conservation districts. The Conservation Title of the 1985 Farm Bill, amended in 1996, raised the importance of biodiversity /wildlife in the delivery of conservation programs to the nation's privately owned lands. NRCS is charged with developing and delivering the proper grassland establishment techniques to landowners and evaluating the results. Recognising the opportunities and challenges related to conserving and enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, NRCS created the Wildlife Habitat Management Institute (WHMI) in 1997 as part of the NRCS National Science and Technology Consortium. WHMI was to interact with academic institutions, partner agencies, non-government organisations and others to develop and disseminate scientifically based technical materials to NRCS field staffs and others to enhance delivery of sound habitat management principles and practices, including grasslands to America's land users.

Materials and methods NRCS/WHMI works with scientists from various institutions to develop tools useable in the field and to evaluate the response of the utilised tools to develop native grasslands. Work on tool development was started first, recognising results could be 5-6 years away. As tool development began, an evaluation of wildlife response to previous Farm Bill programs was undertaken. The effort was intended to get a starting point to guide future planning for WHMI. Planning by WHMI staff is critical, as only 7 staff guide the effort to develop technical tools, such as jobsheets and technical notes used in management recommendations on grassland and other private land habitats across the USA.

Results A Comprehensive Review of Farm Bill Contributions to Wildlife Conservation (Heard *et al.*, 2000) included reviews of impacts on grasslands. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) added 18M acres of grassland, mostly native, in the Midwest. These grasslands were beneficial to grassland birds and contributed to a 30% (10.5M) increase in ducks from the northern Great Plains. The new grasslands did not produce an immediate increase in population of many grassland birds but decreased the precipitous decline that was being experienced. Conversion to native grassland in the southeast has been limited by the use of exotic forage grasses, rapid succession, and mowing. Most of the southeast habitat improvement from native grasses has come from the development of agricultural field edges. Although the above report reviewed wildlife responses, the response of native grass establishment on soil protection, water quality and biodiversity has been positive also.

In addition to the early report above, NRCS/WHMI continues to work with partners to develop techniques and to evaluate the impacts of native grassland establishment on wildlife. The following are current projects designed to move NRCS forward in its ability assist agricultural producers to conserve and increase native grasslands within their operations: (1) Bird response to grassland management in the northeast, (2) Lesser prairie chicken habitat in the southwest plains, (3) Evaluating wetland restorations in the Gueydan Prairie in coastal Louisiana. WHMI will continue to work to enhance the habitat of species of concern such as northern bobwhite and sage grouse.

References

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