



# Farm the Best, Conserve the Rest.

*As we work on the 2007 Farm Bill it is critical that we promote waterfowl conservation programs that contribute to the economic viability of America's farmers and ranchers, and a healthy environment*

Farm Bill conservation programs provide a voluntary, incentive-based framework for landscape-level conservation that addresses the needs of working farmers, ranchers, private landowners and wildlife. However, multiple factors can alter the accessibility and economic viability of conservation programs to landowners, as well as the ability to create habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. In developing the 2007 Farm Bill, we must ensure conservation programs provide private landowners with viable financial incentives to restore and protect large tracts of grasslands and wetlands that benefit North American waterfowl.

## DU'S NATIONAL PRIORITIES FOR THE 2007 FARM BILL

### Highest Priorities:

- ☞ Within the national cap, maintain at least 7.8 million acres of **CRP** in the Prairie Pothole Region.
- ☞ Maintain an annual allocation of **WRP** of at least 250,000 acres, with a nationwide cap of 3,525,000 acres.
- ☞ Support a "**sodsaver**" provision that removes all incentives for those who convert native prairie to cropland.
- ☞ Ensure that agricultural policy on **biofuels** is consistent with the conservation of waterfowl and other wildlife.
- ☞ Maintain current protection measures for preventing conversion of **wetlands** to other uses.

### Other Priorities:

- ☞ Focus **CSP** enhancements more towards active agricultural practices that benefit wildlife, wetlands, and grassland habitat on farms and ranches.
- ☞ Support a program that would encourage the long-term protection of native grassland through incentives, similar to the original intent of the **GRP** to protect two million acres.
- ☞ Keep **CREP** available and allow local flexibility to be applied to specific sites that are beneficial to waterfowl and wetlands conservation.
- ☞ Maintain the **FRPP** program.
- ☞ Maintain the **WHIP** program.
- ☞ Focus **EQIP** more towards agriculture practices that benefit wildlife, wetlands, and grassland habitat.
- ☞ Work to reform **TSP**, **RFP**, and **cooperative agreement** policies to allow partners to work more effectively with USDA to deliver Farm Bill conservation programs.

## BACKGROUND OF PRIORITY FARM BILL PROGRAMS

### **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) estimates that 7.8 million acres of CRP in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) adds a minimum of 2 million ducks to the fall flight each year. Most of these acres consist of large, contiguous blocks of grassland cover interspersed with an abundance of prairie wetlands. Contracts on nearly 6.4 million of the 7.8 million CRP acres in the PPR are set to expire between 2007 and 2010. **DU strongly supports the continuance of at least 7.8 million acres in the PPR in the 2007 Farm Bill.** Though it is apparent that CRP is a critical component of the landscape in the PPR, it is currently under threat. Other issues currently affecting CRP that must also be addressed include:

1. Rental rates in the PPR are not competitive with current cash rental rates
2. Threats of voiding CRP contracts for corn-based ethanol production
3. No general signups for 2007 & 2008
4. Proposals to convert CRP for bio-fuel and biomass production
5. The Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) no longer targets acres to the PPR

### **Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)**

The continental U.S. has lost over 50% of its wetlands and continues to lose these habitats at the alarming rate of more than 80,000 acres annually. One of the most successful federal wetlands conservation programs is the Wetlands Reserve Program, which provides a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based program for private landowners, farmers and ranchers to protect and restore the functions and values of wetlands on their property. WRP has provided an avenue for farmers and ranchers to remove marginal croplands from their working lands. The WRP provides societal benefits such as improved water quality and quantity, reduced flood damage, groundwater recharge, and enhanced fish and wildlife habitat. Producer demand for this program outstrips available funding by at least a 3:1. The program is authorized to enroll up to 250,000 acres annually, **and DU supports this acre allotment and a national acre cap increase to 3,525,000 to continue in the 2007 Farm Bill;** however, several issues currently in play could negatively impact the future of WRP, including:

1. Recent changes to the easement appraisal methodology
2. Lack of technical and financial assistance funding necessary to implement the program
3. Absence of baseline funding
4. WRP will expire in September 2007 unless it is reauthorized and the acreage cap increased

### **Sodsaver Provision**

There are 22 million acres of native prairie remaining in the PPR. Only about 1 million acres are protected in perpetuity. The highest priority areas that support the highest breeding densities of ducks and a vibrant grassland-based livestock industry, needs to be protected; however, many of these areas are rapidly disappearing. With the current conversion and low protection rates, the PPR could lose over half of the remaining native prairie over the next 34 years. The USFWS estimates a decrease of 25,000 ducks in the fall flight with each 1% loss of native prairie in the PPR. The current commodity title of the 2002 Farm Bill and the emerging bio-fuels market encourages farmers to break native prairie. A provision that removes all incentives, particularly federal crop insurance, for converting native prairie is needed in the 2007 Farm Bill to maintain these vital nesting habitats. In addition to native prairie, such a provision would also protect approximately 60 percent of the remaining unprotected wetlands in the PPR.

### **Biofuels and Alternative Energy**

The 2007 Farm Bill provides a unique opportunity to promote the next generation of renewable energy. In doing so, care must be taken to ensure the conservation of waterfowl, other wildlife, water resources and the substantial environmental gains made under USDA conservation programs. Research and development funding should promote the next generation of biofuels technology based on perennial crops that are managed to provide co-benefits to society, including wildlife conservation, cleaner water, and carbon sequestration. This approach is consistent with the desirable “green” image of this emerging industry, and will also provide a stream of alternative income sources for American farmers. Science, resource and market-based analyses of where and how biofuels production will be most beneficial, cost effective and sensitive to environmental limitations are not complete. However, it is becoming evident that marginal lands, including those currently in native prairie grasslands or those enrolled in conservation programs like CRP and WRP, do not represent a viable land base for biofuels production. Accordingly, Ducks Unlimited advocates a thoughtful, science-based approach to targeting and managing biomass crops in a manner that benefits the wildlife, agricultural producers, citizens, and natural resources of this nation.

### **Maintain current protection measures that prevent conversion of wetlands to other uses**

There are approximately 7.3 million acres of wetlands in the PPR and only about 1.5 million acres are perpetually protected. The 1.4 million acres of wetlands at greatest risk (surrounded by cropland) and in most need of protection are also very valuable breeding waterfowl. Swampbuster has been in law for 20 years and is the only disincentive keeping the “at risk” wetlands from being lost. Many of the other remaining wetlands are located within native prairie or CRP grasslands and are vulnerable to loss or degradation if the surrounding grasslands are converted. The USFWS estimates breeding waterfowl populations in the PPR would be reduced by 38 percent with the loss of these “at-risk” wetlands.

**[www.ducks.org/FarmBill](http://www.ducks.org/FarmBill)**