

# Introduction

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The future of wildlife in this country is inseparably tied to activities taking place on private lands. Agriculture is by far the dominant user of these lands with about 50% of the United States or 900 million acres managed as private cropland, pastureland, or rangeland. Decisions made by America's farmers and ranchers directly affect the land's plant life, soil, water, and wildlife. Decisions affecting stewardship of these resources cannot be understood apart from landowners' most basic need, the ability to support themselves and their families. Making a living from the land has never been easy—not at the time of settlement and not today, in spite of the many technological advances that were made during the previous century. U.S. agricultural programs and policies have had a large influence on the choices available to farmers and ranchers in the management of their land.

Changes in the occurrences of native plants and animals are a reflection of our stewardship of the land. Loss of biodiversity and declines in wildlife populations during the past century suggest that we have fallen short on our stewardship responsibilities. Landcover changes associated with shifts in federal agricultural policy and programs, and farmers' land-use practices have important consequences for wildlife in landscapes dominated by agriculture. In the Great Plains, for example, dramatic declines in grassland-dependent wildlife since the 1950s have been attributed to federal agricultural policy and programs that favored conversion of native habitats to agricultural purposes. Indeed, according to Dahlberg (1992), the legacy for agricultural goals, institutions, and policies in the twentieth century was a dramatic reduction in the abundance and diversity of native plants and animals.

I have a more optimistic view about the future of wildlife in agricultural landscapes. Today, we recognize that stewardship of private lands is a shared responsibility between public and private interests and that expenditure of public funds for private land conservation is one of our government's wisest investments, yielding multiple benefits. New partnerships being forged between agricultural and conservation interests are based on mutual respect, improved understanding of the many challenges faced by those land users seeking to make their livelihoods from the land, greater awareness about how

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Iowa landscape (D. Eilers)

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Iowa CRP (L. Betts)

agricultural activities relate to conservation goals, and acceptance of shared stewardship responsibilities. I believe that inclusion of the conservation title in the 1985 Food Security Act (hereafter, Farm Bill) was a turning point in our approach to conservation of private lands.

A myriad of agricultural, environmental, social, political, and economic considerations led to the passage of the 1985 Farm Bill. Included in the 16-page Conservation Title of the 1985 Farm Bill were the Highly Erodible Land and Wetlands Conservation Compliance Programs, as well as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The highly erodible lands and wetlands conservation provisions collectively work to reduce the rate of soil erosion from highly erodible croplands and to reduce the rate of conversion of other highly erodible lands and wetlands to crop production. These provisions generally do not create wildlife habitat directly, but collectively support the conservation gains made by the CRP and other Farm Bill programs. Some habitat enhancement may occur on highly erodible croplands if land users choose to implement conservation systems with holistic goals. While the greatest effect of these provisions is the reduction of soil erosion and the associated delivery of sediments and other pollutants to aquatic systems, there are substantial habitat gains made by other programs that would not occur without the interaction of these compliance provisions with the other USDA programs.

The Conservation Reserve Program provides compensation to farmers who cease production of agricultural commodities on erodible and other environmentally sensitive lands and establish perennial grass or trees on enrolled lands. Whereas CRP was originally conceived as a dual-purpose commodity supply control and soil erosion reduction program, it has evolved into a multipurpose conservation program with wildlife conservation now recognized as one of its core purposes (McKenzie 1997). CRP enrollment currently stands at 31.4 million acres, five million acres below the 36.4 million-acre cap established in 1996. Approximately 80% of CRP acres are planted with grass cover, 6% trees, 14% wildlife habitat, and 3% buffers. CRP participation is highest in Plains and midwestern states: Texas (3.9 million acres), Montana (3.2 million acres), North Dakota (3.2 million acres), Kansas (2.5 million acres), Iowa (1.6 million acres), Minnesota (1.5 million acres), Missouri (1.4 million acres), and South Dakota (1.3 million acres).

CRP was not the first land retirement program implemented by USDA to protect soils, reduce crop surpluses, control overproduction, and support commodity prices. Predecessors of CRP included the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, Agriculture Conservation Program (1936), Soil Bank Act (1956), Wheat Production Program (1962), and Feed Grain Program (1972). Important shortcomings of these programs for wildlife were the short duration of contracts, late planting date, undiversified planting mixtures, frequent distur-

bance, and lack of technical assistance. For example, acreage reduction under Soil Bank and Feed Grain Programs was accomplished by using one-year contracts that required participants to plant cover (generally seed grain) after 15 June and mow, disk, or plow cover before grain maturity in mid to late July. Annual land retirement programs implemented between 1961 and 1983 resulted in increased soil erosion and contributed to declines in some grassland-dependent wildlife (Berner 1984). CRP requirements for 10-year contracts, diverse seeding mixtures that included forbs, elimination of disturbances except under emergency conditions, and provision of technical assistance to program participants were major advancements for wildlife in the 1985 Farm Bill.

Amendments to the 1985 Farm Bill in 1990 and 1996 sought to enhance wildlife benefits of CRP. Improvements in legislation that were sought by wildlife conservation interests were creation of state technical committees, establishment of application review procedure that ranked applications based on their environmental benefits (e.g., proximity to wildlife habitat, diversity of seeding, use of native plant species), and recognition of coequal status of wildlife with soil and water conservation. Additionally, new programs, such as the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) were created that offered great potential for improving wildlife habitat on private land. Further improvements in Farm Bill programs require a better understanding of wildlife responses to existing programs.

The purpose of this document is to tell us what these programs are doing for wildlife conservation. As indicated in the Foreword, this review began as an attempt to identify and annotate all published literature on Farm Bill programs. The document has evolved into a comprehensive collection of program summaries contributed by leading experts in the field. As you will learn, our understanding of Farm Bill contributions to wildlife conservation, though still incomplete, is best for the CRP, the oldest and largest (size and cost) of the Farm Bill programs. Because birds are considered important indicators of ecosystem function and because the wildlife community has given highest priority to conservation of grassland birds in the Great Plains region, our understanding is largely based on assessments of bird responses to CRP conducted in the Midwest and Plains states. Additionally, bird population objectives generally are clearly defined and habitat associations are well understood compared to other wildlife groups, so it is possible to measure program contributions to conservation goals.

Information on wildlife responses to other Farm Bill programs is greatly limited. Consequently, to provide a better understanding of WRP's contributions to wildlife conservation we summarized all of the published literature pertaining to biological changes in restored wetlands. Treatments of WHIP

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and EQIP, however, were limited to descriptions of the programs and identification of information needs.

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Black-necked stilts (W. Hohman)

Wildlife are indicators of the health of the environment. As such, they are good measures of the success of our conservation programs. Our hope is that this document will contribute to a better understanding of the environmental benefits that we have gained through Farm Bill programs and opportunities for further improvements in these important and worthwhile programs.

### **Literature Cited**

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