

Proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area

North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to accelerate the conservation of wetland and grassland habitat, within the Prairie Pothole Region in the eastern portions of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. The proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area (Dakota Grassland) is part of a landscape-scale, strategic habitat conservation effort to conserve populations of migratory birds by protecting the unique, highly diverse, and endangered ecosystem known as the Prairie Pothole Region. Establishment of the Dakota Grassland would allow the Service to further the protection of wetland and grassland habitat by working with private landowners to develop conservation easement agreements.

To maintain current levels of breeding migratory birds in the Prairie Pothole Region, the Service has developed a conservation strategy for wetland and grassland habitat in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. Under this strategy, the proposed Dakota Grassland project identifies 240,000 acres of wetland and 1.7 million acres of grassland for conservation. Additional efforts would be needed to fully meet the conservation strategy, which identifies the need to conserve a total of about 1.8 million acres of wetland and 10 million acres of grassland throughout the Prairie Pothole Region.

The proposed Dakota Grassland project would complement an existing Service program—Small Wetlands Acquisition Program (SWAP). A goal of SWAP and the Dakota Grassland

project is to promote profitable farming and ranching practices on private lands that conserves wetland and grassland resources for the benefit of migratory birds. These efforts are critical for conserving habitat, because at current conversion rates one-half of the remaining native prairie in the region will be converted to other uses in only 34 years. It would take the Service 150 years with current funding levels to protect the remaining wetland and grassland habitat in the project area through the SWAP alone; thus, the need for the Dakota Grasslands project to augment those conservation efforts.

How would conservation easements work?

The Service recognizes that the most effective technique for conserving the remaining wetland and grassland habitat in the proposed project area will be to work with private landowners on conservation matters of mutual interest. The proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area would involve using conservation easements across the project area landscape to protect wetland and grassland habitat from being converted to other uses.



The Prairie Pothole Region is known as the North American “Duck Factory” and helps support mallard populations.

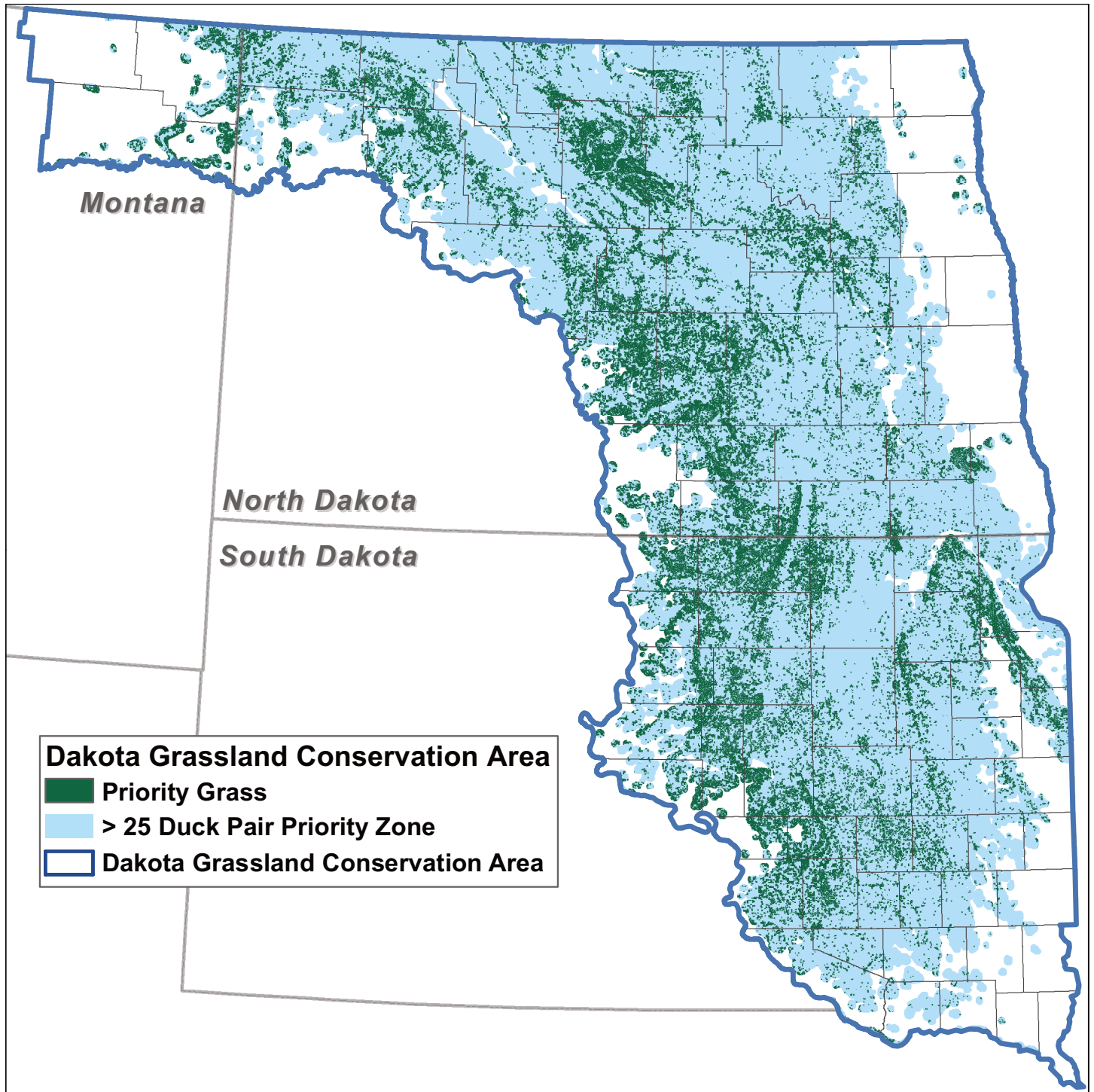
As a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and the Service, an easement is a perpetual conservation agreement that the Service would buy from a willing landowner within the proposed project area. In conjunction with habitat protection measures, the conservation easements would allow for the continuation of traditional activities such as farming wetlands when dry from natural conditions and livestock grazing and haying in grasslands. Unlike fee-title ownership, under a conservation easement the landownership, property rights, and control of public access

would remain with the landowner. In addition, the property would remain on the local tax roll.

Conservation easements limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. However, activities that would affect a conservation easement such as roads, pipelines, or wind projects and certain development activities could be allowed under limited circumstances. The Service proposes to identify a review process for evaluating activities on all current and future conservation easements in the Prairie Pothole States

of Region 6. This review process would apply to not only conservation easements purchased under the proposed Dakota Grassland project, but also to those acquired under other Service programs such as SWAP.

The Service would purchase conservation easements with funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965; these funds are primarily derived from oil and gas leases on the outer continental shelf, excess motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus Federal property. Easement payment is determined by a calculation that





The Dakota Grassland Conservation Area would promote working landscapes through partnerships with landowners to conserve grassland and wetland habitat.

includes comparable land sales and the assessed value of the property. Depending on land productivity, the payment for an easement typically ranges from about one-third to one-half of a property's full-market value.

What resources would benefit from the proposed conservation area?

During the last quarter century, grassland birds have experienced faster and more widespread declines as compared to other groups of birds. The loss of grassland habitat has played a significant role in this decline. The proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area would focus on conserving populations of migratory birds by protecting the most productive tracts of remaining wetland and grassland habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region.

The Prairie Pothole Region is unique in that it contains millions of small, water-filled depressions—called wetlands or prairie “potholes”—that were formed by glaciers, and it constitutes one of the richest wetland systems in the world. These wetlands are surrounded by grasslands that provide highly productive habitat for migratory birds. Supporting an incredible diversity of bird life, the Prairie Pothole Region is breeding habitat for a myriad of wetland and grassland birds and also supports significant numbers of spring and fall migrants.

The Prairie Pothole Region is one of the most altered landscapes due to the loss of wetland and grassland to other uses. However, it is also one of the most important migratory bird habitats in the

Western Hemisphere. Despite significant changes to the landscape, millions of wetlands and large tracts of grassland still remain. This region continues to be the backbone of North America's “duck factory” and critical habitat for many wetland- and grassland-dependent migratory birds.



Grassland habitat is necessary for the productivity of marbled godwits.

Why did I receive this fact sheet?

The Service is widely distributing this fact sheet to generate interest in the planning process and to collect ideas and thoughts from the public, State and local governments, organizations, and other partners. You are receiving this fact sheet because you were identified as someone who may want to be kept informed or share ideas about the future conservation of the Prairie Pothole Region.

What are the next steps in the process?

We want to hear from you, and to do that we will hold public meetings about the proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area. The Service will host three public meetings on December 14–16, 2010 (see “Meeting Schedule”). At the meetings, you will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and provide input. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and phone calls to the local or regional contact listed below.

The Service will use your input to determine the appropriate level of environmental review required by the National Environmental Policy Act for developing a land protection plan for the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area. The land protection plan and an environmental document will highlight the resource values of the project area; present alternatives that address issues the Service, our conservation partners, and the public identify; and evaluate the effects that may occur if the proposal is determined to be a viable tool for conserving habitat.

Later this winter, we will distribute the draft land protection plan and environmental document to those who would like to review and comment on the documents. The Service will consider all comments in the preparation of the final land protection plan.

How do I continue to be involved?

The Service welcomes your questions and comments! We hope you contact us to get more information, discuss this proposal, and give your perspective on the future of the Dakota Grassland.

■ Email, call, or write us

(see “Contacts”)

- **Join the project mailing list:** Since the mailing list is subject to the Freedom of Information Act, your permission is needed to place your name on the permanent mailing list. To continue receiving planning information, please contact one of the planning leaders (see “Contacts”) and request that your name be placed on the mailing list. Unless you make this request, we will assume that you do not wish to receive further information on the planning process.

- **Attend a public meeting**
(see “Meeting Schedule”)
- **Visit the project Web site**
(see “Contacts”)

We are accepting initial public comments about the proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area until December 31, 2010.

In addition, there will be other opportunities to comment on the proposed project during the public comment period for the draft land protection plan. *(You need to request that your name be on the project mailing list if you would like to receive this document.)*



Contacts

Lloyd Jones, Refuge Manager

Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531

701/442 5474 extension 111 (phone)
701/442 5546 (fax)

Nick Kaczor, Planning Team Leader

Division of Refuge Planning
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 25486, DFC
Denver, CO 80225

303/236 4387 (phone)
303/236 4792 (fax)

Project email: dgca_comments@fws.gov

Project Web site: www.fws.gov/audubon/dakotagrassland.html

Meeting Schedule

*Forums for sharing
ideas and issues
about the proposed
conservation area project*

■ Minot, North Dakota

December 14, 2010
7 p.m.–9 p.m.
Sleep Inn–Inn and Suites
2400 10th Street SW

■ Jamestown, North Dakota

December 15, 2010
7 p.m.–9 p.m.
Gladstone Inn and Suites
111 2nd Street NE

■ Huron, South Dakota

December 16, 2010
7 p.m.–9 p.m.
Crossroads Hotel
100 4th Street SW



December 2010

Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
3275 11th Street NW
Coleharbor, ND 58531

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED