News Release - for Immediate Release

Removing Invasive Trees is a Key Component to Restoring Minnesota's Grasslands

For many people who live on the spacious prairies of western Minnesota, planting a tree can be a personal statement about their conservation ethic. On this sweeping landscape dominated by vast tilled fields of active farms, and the stubby grass and woody overgrowth of farms long-dormant, trees can provide an aesthetically pleasing contrast, as well as a nesting perch and habitat for all manner of migratory birds.

So trees are a good thing, right?

Not all of them, say Federal and state land managers and wildlife biologists who are working to restore Minnesota's grasslands and the valuable nesting habitat it provides for ducks, pheasants, prairie chickens, and a number of non-game migratory birds. It's a job that requires some trees to be removed, particularly the scattered trees that have become established in important grassland stands. "We're not anti-trees," said Jim Leach, Area Supervisor for National Wildlife Refuges in Minnesota. "Trees in the right places are desirable, but when trees negatively impact wildlife by encroaching upon, or taking over grasslands, we need to remove them."

Native tallgrass prairie is one type of grassland of special interest. For several years, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has been working in concert with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, Brandenburg Foundation, and other government and non-government partners to restore and protect the vanishing northern tallgrass prairie in western Minnesota and northern Iowa. Estimates place the original tallgrass prairie in Minnesota and Iowa at 25 million acres. Today, only about 300,000 acres remain in the two states, representing a greater than 99 percent decline. Currently, only a small percentage of northern tallgrass prairie habitats are protected, making it one of the rarest and most fragmented ecosystems in America.

In addition to protecting remaining native tallgrass prairie, many agencies and organizations are working to restore grassland acres by retiring marginal croplands and planting a mix of grasses and wildflowers. One example is the Fergus Falls Wetland Management District (WMD) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which operates in Wilkin, Otter Tail, Grant, Douglas, and Wadena Counties. Since 1962, the Fergus Falls WMD has purchased over 43,000 acres to manage as Waterfowl Production Areas. Slightly over half of this acreage is grassland which was restored from cropland.

The wildlife value of these grasslands can be reduced by the invasion of trees and shrubs. Research into the effects of woody vegetation on grassland nesting birds such as ducks, prairie chicken, pheasants, and others non game species supports the strategy for removing many, but not all, trees and shrubs from the prairie's grassy landscape. For example, researchers in Missouri have found that prairie chicken nesting success is directly related to the distance the nests are from woody cover. A study in western South Dakota found that trees along pond edges decreased use of the pond by mallard broods. During a typical South Dakota winter, cattail wetlands, tall grass, and food plots ranked highest in pheasant hen use. Nesting success was also found to be lower in shelterbelts in South Dakota and Colorado.

Wildlife biologists and land managers with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources are aggressively removing scattered trees and woody vegetation that are threatening

to overtake tracts of grassland habitat in western Minnesota. The scattered non-native trees (mostly Russian olive, Siberian elm, and buckthorn), as well as trees native to North America like green ash and cottonwood provide cover for predators that threaten nesting waterfowl, prairie chicken, pheasants, and other non-game bird species that depend on large open grasslands to thrive.

Despite the scientific evidence supporting removal of trees on prairie grasslands, some people oppose removing trees. Federal and state wildlife biologists agree that educating the public on where trees are beneficial and where they are not is an important component of their wildlife and prairie restorations efforts. "Our focus is on the historic grasslands and our goal is to help protect and restore our remnant prairie habitats that are being invaded by trees," said Doug Wells with the Fergus Falls WMD. "Nesting success and survival of some key species of grassland birds can be affected by the presence of trees. Selective tree removal is another tool, just as prescribed burning is a tool, for maintaining productive grasslands. Trees have expanded into many of our grassland areas due to the general lack of fire over the past 3-to-4 decades, and now the trees have grown to the point where prescribed burns alone will not control their spread and coverage."

Kevin Brennan, Manager of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Fergus Falls Wetland Management District, is also concerned about the impacts of trees on grassland birds. "Over the years we have learned more about waterfowl, more about creating and restoring habitat that is ideal for ducks, and other wetland dependent wildlife. Making an area ideal for ducks means removing things that tend to accumulate on old farmsteads: junk piles, rock piles and trees that provide perches and cover for predators like hawks, raccoons, and skunks. Management practices that are good for ducks also benefit other grass nesting birds, both game and non-game."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats, for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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