

# Proposed Expansion of the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District

## *Conserving the Rainwater Basin*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to expand protection of the Rainwater Basin in southeastern Nebraska. This unique and highly diverse area is internationally known for its spectacular bird migrations.

The Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District (district) was established in 1963 with a goal of acquiring 24,000 acres to support large bird concentrations along the central flyway, especially during spring migration. At that time, the landscape was quite different than it is today, and the conversion of the area's wetlands occurred more rapidly than anticipated. During the nearly 50 years since the district was established, irrigation technology has changed the landscape from diverse croplands, small fields, pastures, and wetlands to intensively farmed corn and soybean fields. Many of the wetlands and nearly all of the pastureland are gone.

To date, the Service has acquired 22,023 acres of the 24,000 acres approved in 1963. The district also manages an additional 4,505 acres donated by or obtained from other agencies, primarily the Farmers Home Administration, bringing the total currently managed by the district to 26,528 acres.

The Service is proposing to increase the acquisition goal from 24,000 acres to 38,177 acres. This would be accomplished by acquiring interest in approximately 9,000 acres by fee-title and 5,000 acres by establishing perpetual conservation easements. These lands would be acquired from willing sellers only.

### How will the proposed expansion work?

The number of acres proposed for acquisition from willing sellers is based on a collaborative assessment performed by the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture and its partners, including the Service.



*A waterfowl production area in the late spring*

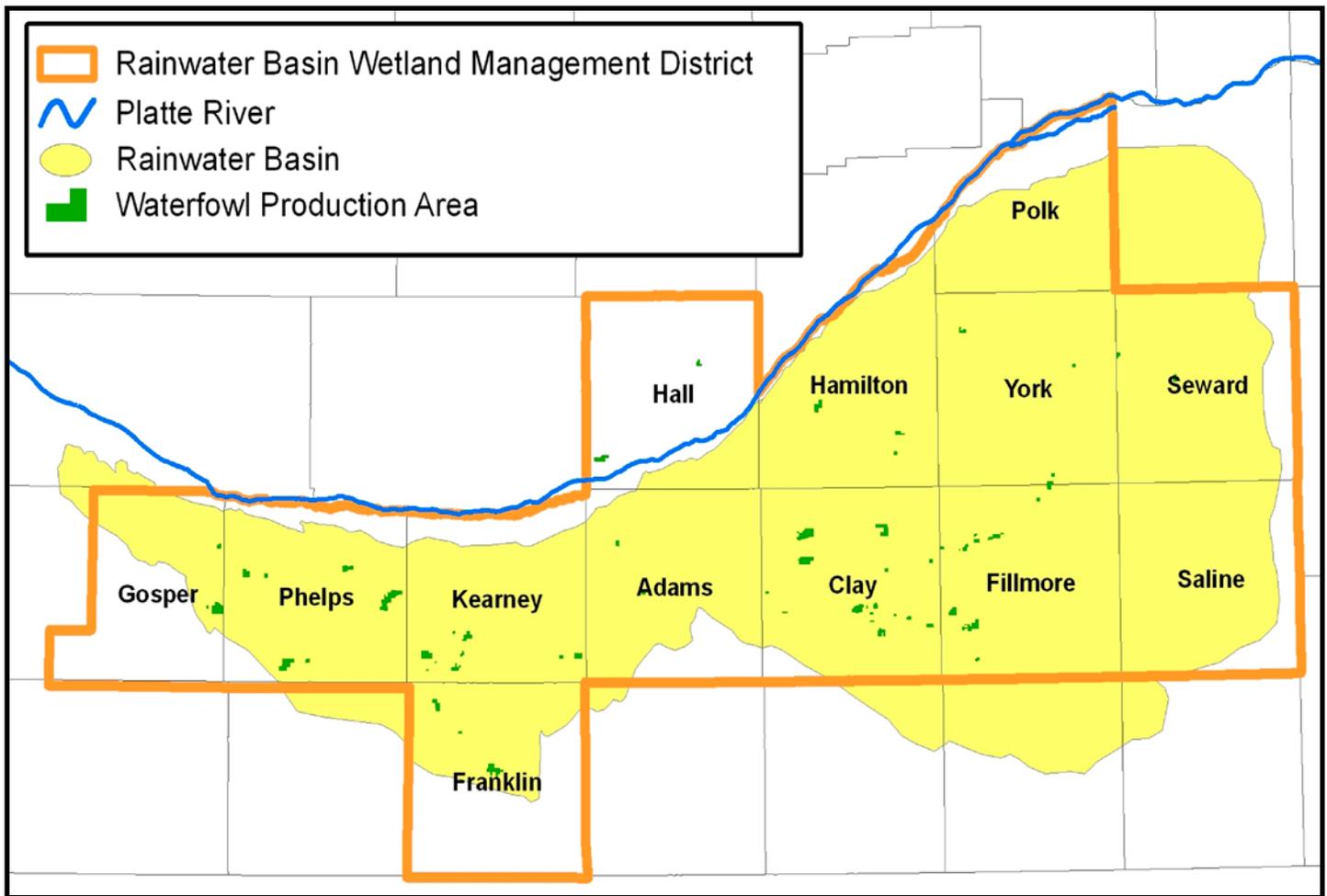
The joint venture identified three factors that would influence the selection of lands to be acquired:

- the number of privately owned wetland acres that affect management of adjoining acres owned by the Service or the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
- the energy needs of waterfowl and the ability of the regional wetlands to provide the needed calories, amino acids and minerals
- the need to provide more separation between wetlands to reduce the likelihood of large outbreaks of avian cholera

Two types of fee-title acquisition from willing sellers would be needed: purchasing the remaining portion of wetlands connected to waterfowl production areas and purchasing isolated wetlands needed to create wetland complexes. Waterfowl production areas are federally owned in fee-title. The 59 waterfowl

production areas in the Rainwater Basin are managed mainly for migratory birds and were purchased primarily with Duck Stamps.

Conservation easements would focus on smaller, temporary wetlands located in cropland and grassland. Conservation easements would be voluntary legal agreements between landowners and the Service that limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. The easements would prohibit subdivision, commercial development, and certain farming activities, but would allow for continued agricultural uses such as livestock grazing and haying. Land ownership and other property rights, including public access, would remain with the landowner. Easement properties would remain on the local tax rolls. Easement prices offered to willing sellers would be determined by a certified appraisal.



## What resources would benefit from the proposed expansion?

Surveys and other research over the past 50 years have documented the international importance of Nebraska's Rainwater Basin region for all types of birds during the migration season. Over 329 species of birds have been observed within the Rainwater Basin. They include 35 species of waterfowl and 40 species of shorebirds. Between 200,000 and 300,000 shorebirds migrate through in the spring.

Fifty percent of the continental mallard population, 30 percent of the continental pintail population, and 90 percent of the mid-continent white-fronted goose population use the region during spring migration. In 2007, it was discovered that the Rainwater Basin is the only known major stopover area during spring migration for buff-breasted sandpiper. Common grassland species in the basin include grasshopper sparrow, dickcissel, western meadowlark, bobolink, northern bobwhite, greater prairie-chicken, ring-necked pheasant, field sparrow, and northern harrier.

## 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 about the proposed expansion

from the public, State and local governments, organizations, and other partners. You are receiving this update because you were identified as someone who may want to be kept informed or share ideas about the future management of the Rainwater Basin.



*Rainwater Basin wetland providing a resting area for some of the millions of birds that migrate through the area each spring*

## What is the next step in the process?

We want to hear from you. We will hold two meetings about the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District proposal on January 11 and 12, 2011 (see meeting schedule on the back page for times and places). At the meetings, you will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and provide input. These meetings will be forums for sharing ideas and issues about the proposed land conservation efforts. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and phone calls to the local or regional contacts listed on the back page.

The Service will use your input when developing a draft environmental assessment and land protection plan for the proposed expansion of the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District. These documents will highlight the resource values of the Rainwater Basin wetlands; present alternatives that address issues identified by the Service, our conservation partners, and the public; and evaluate the effects that may occur if the proposal is determined to be a feasible tool for conserving habitat. Later this winter, the draft environmental assessment and land protection plan will be distributed to those who would like to review and comment on these documents. The Service will consider all comments and then prepare the final land protection plan.

## How can 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 Rainwater Basin. We are accepting initial public scoping comments about the proposed expansion until January 31, 2011.
- Email ([rwb\\_comments@fws.gov](mailto:rwb_comments@fws.gov)), call, or write us with questions and comments (see contact information on back page).
- Add your name to 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



*Mallards using a partially thawed wetland during their annual spring migration*

information, please contact one of the planning leaders (see contact information on the back page) and request that your name be placed on the mailing list. If you do not 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 on back page).
- Visit the project Web site: [www.fws.gov/rainwater](http://www.fws.gov/rainwater)

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



*Seasonally dry wetlands produce an abundance of flowers and seeds for all types of wildlife.*



*Upland grassland restoration brings back the diversity found in native grasslands*



*Native prairie managed with prescribed burning and rest*

## Meeting Schedule

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

### ■ Holdrege, Nebraska

January 11, 2011  
6:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m.  
Super 8 Motel  
420 Broadway  
Holdrege, NE 68949

### ■ Clay Center, Nebraska

January 12, 2011  
6:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m.  
4-H Activity Center  
Clay County Fairgrounds  
701 North Martin Avenue  
Clay Center, NE 68933

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*

## Contact Information

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#### Planning Team Leader

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#### Project email:

[rwb\\_comments@fws.gov](mailto:rwb_comments@fws.gov)

#### Project Web site:

[www.fws.gov/rainwater](http://www.fws.gov/rainwater)



*December 2010*

**Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District  
P.O. Box 8  
Funk, NE 68940**

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**