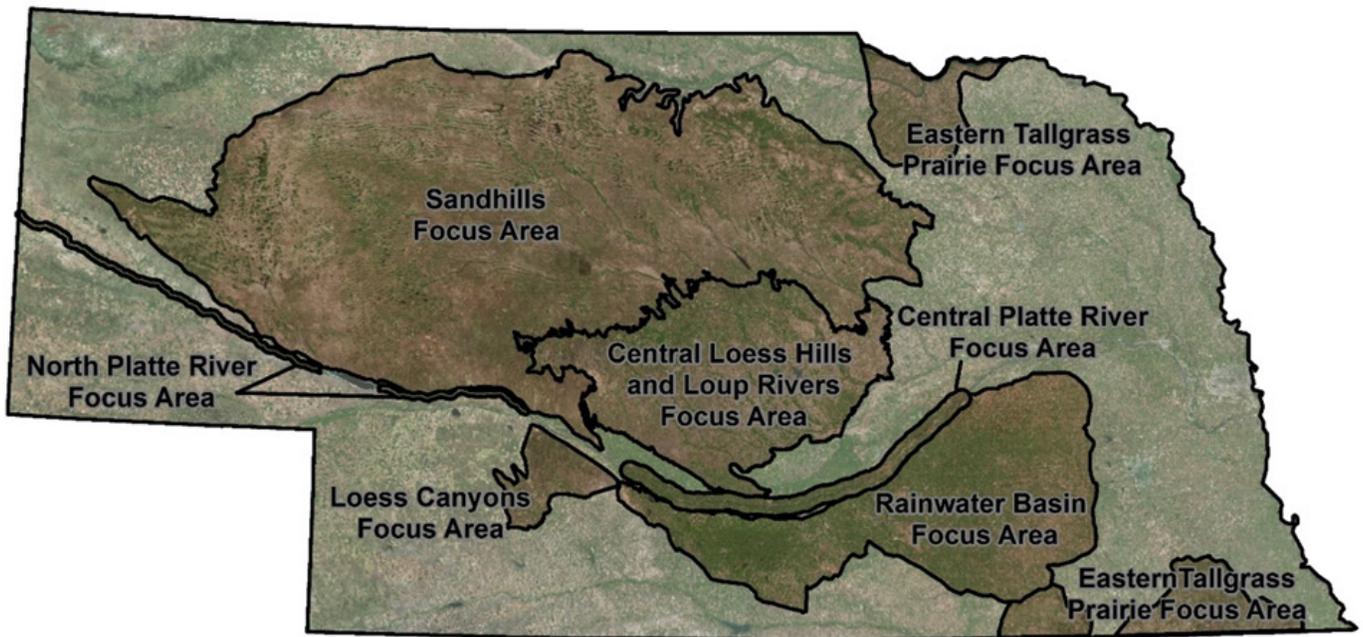


Nebraska



Nebraska PFW program Focus Areas. USFWS map.

Introduction and Overview

The Nebraska Partners for Fish and Wildlife (NE PFW) program had a very productive year this past fiscal year (FY 2017). FY 2017 was a success thanks to: (1) the 63 additional private landowners who voluntarily entered into landowner agreements with the Service, (2) our diverse group of conservation partners, and (3) to the dedicated NE PFW field biologists who have a passion for working with landowners to develop win-win opportunities to restore habitat on private lands. The success of the NE PFW is a result of numerous grass root partnerships that have been developed over the years that have been built on the cornerstones of the PFW program - Trust, Respect, Honesty, Flexibility, Friendship, and Two-way Communication. This past year, the

NE PFW and our partners provided both technical and financial assistance to restore, enhance, manage, and conserve habitat throughout Nebraska for federal trust species including national, regional, and local priority species.

FY 2017 is the first year of the PFW Mountain-Prairie Region Strategic Plan, 2017–2021 and during this past year, the NE PFW program made excellent progress towards meeting our stepped down targets for the following five Regional PFW goals: (1) Conserve Habitat; (2) Broaden and Strengthen Partnerships; (3) Improve Information Sharing and Communication; (3) Enhance Our Workforce; and (5) Increase Accountability. The NE PFW program is well on its way to meeting or exceeding its five-year targets for the FY 2017–2021 time period.

Goal I. Conserve Habitat

During the past year, the NE PFW program maintained its focus on habitat restoration projects that benefited federal trust species, including federally listed species, migratory waterbirds, grassland nesting birds, monarch butterflies and other pollinator species. The NE PFW program also focused its efforts on restoring wetland, riverine, riparian, and upland habitats throughout the state, with the highest priority given to projects located in the following seven conservation Focus Areas identified in the PFW 2017–2021 Strategic Plan: (1) Rainwater Basin, (2) Central Platte River, (3) Sandhills, (4) North Platte River, (5) Loess Canyons (6) Eastern Tallgrass Prairies, and (7) Central Loess Hills and Loup Rivers.

Fifty-nine (59) habitat projects were completed during FY 2017. Of the 59 projects completed, 56 projects (95%) were in conservation focus areas identified in the PFW 2017–2021 Strategic Plan. Two (2) projects that were funded outside of Nebraska’s focus areas were located adjacent to the Lower Niobrara River and the other one (1) occurred in a Nebraska biologically unique landscape (Wildcat Hills). The NE PFW program continued to focus its

delivery in ecosystems or watersheds where our efforts accomplished the greatest biological benefits per conservation dollar expended and on restoring and maintaining the functionality of natural communities and ecological systems.

Nebraska’s private landowners continue to be our most important partner and none of the 59 habitat projects completed this past year could have been accomplished

without their interest and desire to conserve and restore habitat on their lands for fish and wildlife while sustaining profitable farming and ranching.

The following table shows FY 2017 habitat accomplishments, 5-year targets, and the percentages of the 5-year targets that have been completed through year 1 for all of Nebraska’s conservation focus areas combined.

Nebraska Partners for Fish and Wildlife FY 2017 Habitat Accomplishments

| Habitat Type (restored/enhanced/established) | FY 2017 Total | FY 2017–2021 Cumulative Total | FY 2017–2021 Target | Percent Complete |
|--|---------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Upland acres | 31,469 | 31,469 | 41,750 | 75 % |
| Wetland acres | 1,675 | 1,675 | 7,250 | 23 % |
| Riparian/river miles | 10.5 | 10.5 | 30 | 35 % |
| Riverine sloughs miles | 2.4 | 2.4 | 18 | 13 % |
| Watershed enhancements (# pits filled) | 19 pits | 19 pits | 30 pits | 63 % |
| Fish passage structures | 10 | 10 | n/a | n/a |



Nebraska PFW riverine slough restoration project completed along the North Platte River in Keith County, Nebraska. Photo by Dominic Barrett, USFWS.



PFW private lands biologist and other partners meeting with landowners and potential contractors on Sandhills project site. Note the invasion of Eastern red cedars throughout the grassland. Photo by Kenny Dinan, USFWS.

Goal II. Broaden and Strengthen Partnerships

Developing and maintaining partnerships with Nebraska’s farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners continues to be a main objective of NE PFW staff. This past year, staff sought out opportunities to build new partnerships with private landowners and other groups, agencies, and organizations. NE PFW staff worked collaboratively with its partners and developed 63 new partnership agreements with landowners to accomplish mutually beneficial projects that will contribute towards habitat and technical assistance targets identified in the PFW 2017–2021 Strategic Plan.

Eleven (11) formal partnership agreements are also in place with conservation groups and other private organizations to restore and enhance fish and wildlife habitat in priority landscapes throughout Nebraska. Currently, the NE PFW program has formal partnership agreements with the following conservation partners: Audubon’s Rowe Sanctuary, Ducks Unlimited (DU), Nebraska Community Foundation, Nebraska Land Trust, Northern Prairie Land Trust, Pheasants Forever (PF), Platte River Trust, Platte River Basin

Environments, Prairie Plains Resource Institute, and the Sandhills Task Force (STF).

Numerous informal partnerships are also in place and were critical to the successful implementation of the NE PFW program this past year. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) and USDA-NRCS are major partners in the conservation of habitat on private lands in Nebraska. A large percentage of all NE PFW projects are jointly funded by the Service and the NGPC. The NGPC is a major partner in the conservation of habitat on private lands throughout Nebraska.

The USDA-NRCS also provided valuable technical assistance to the NE PFW program this past year. For example, USDA-NRCS staff assisted in planning, designing, and construction oversight on multiple large scale projects in the Sandhills. The NE PFW program also provided a significant level of technical assistance towards the implementation of USDA-NRCS programs this past year, as well. NE PFW staff participated on seven bio/engineering teams that have been established to assist in the delivery of Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP). NE PFW staff

actively participated in meetings, workshops, site visits, and participated on the State Technical Committee and WREP, ACEP, EQIP, and WHIP workgroups.

In addition, the Intra-Service partnerships between the NE PFW program and the NE ES Field Office, RWB Joint Venture (RWBJV), RWB-WMD, and the Sandhills Refuge offices contributed significantly toward our ability to successfully delivery habitat conservation on private lands throughout Nebraska this past year. The success of the NE PFW program is a result of our ability to partner with private landowners and our conservation partners to accomplish projects that would not be possible through the PFW program alone. Nebraska’s private landowners and our partners are critical to the successful implementation of NE PFW.

One example of a larger, landscape level, multiple partner, initiative/partnership that the NE PFW staff took an active role in this past year included the Sandhills Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative (WLFW). During FY 2017, NE PFW staff, along with staff from NGPC, PF, RWBJV, and the STF worked

with NRCS to submit a proposal for the WLFW Initiative, through NRCS's EQIP to promote habitat restoration for greater-prairie chicken, federally listed American burying beetle and numerous other grassland birds and pollinator species (e.g., monarch and regal fritillary butterflies) in the eastern Sandhills.

Eastern red cedars are invading Nebraska's native prairies and negatively impacting both wildlife and the local ranching community. The proposal was selected for funding, at which point PFW staff, along with other partner biologists, were heavily involved in developing the ranking criteria for evaluating each application for funding, project delivery, and implementation. Numerous habitat restoration projects were completed throughout FY 2017 and many more projects will be completed in FY 2018. Nebraska's Sandhills are a conservation focus area for the NE PFW program and this strategic planning effort contributed significantly towards meeting both established habitat restoration and partnership targets as identified in the PFW 2017-2021 Strategic Plan.

This past year, NE PFW staff also coordinated with our diverse group of partners to successfully leverage additional funding from numerous sources to implement habitat restoration projects for federal trust species throughout NE PFW conservation focus areas. Cost of the 59 projects funded in part through the NE PFW program totaled approximately \$2.0 million. Approximately 17.0% (\$328,464) of the total restoration cost was provided from NE PFW 1121 habitat restoration funds. The other 83.0% (~\$1.66 million) was leveraged from other non-program funding sources, (Partner Cash Contributions = ~\$1.40 million; Partner In-kind Contributions = ~\$242,000.00). Partnerships such as those listed above are vital to the

successful implementation of the PFW program throughout Nebraska.

Goal III. Improve Information Sharing and Communication

An overarching objective of the NE PFW program is to maintain and improve information sharing and honest two-way communication with our internal and external partners. Information sharing and communication is an essential part of habitat conservation and NE PFW staff made increasing awareness of the PFW program and improving communication with both internal and external partners a priority during this past year. NE PFW staff actively participated in numerous workshops, seminars, conferences, meetings, field tours, landowner/watershed meetings, and field tours during FY 2017. NE PFW staff also gave numerous presentations to youth groups, landowner groups, and local, state, and Federal agencies and organizations to inform the public of the importance of conserving species and habitat on private lands.

NE PFW staff participated in several outdoor education opportunities in south-central Nebraska including leading educational programs that focused on the migration, biology, behavior, and habitat needs of sandhill cranes and other migratory birds across North America. NE PFW staff also gave presentations to high schoolers and provided an opportunity for area students to interact with professionals about career opportunities in the field of biological resources. NE PFW staff also provided after school programs to middle school students with the focus on Nebraska flora and fauna.

NE PFW staff assisted in the production of 3 documentaries on rivers of Nebraska including the central Platte River and the sandhill crane migration. NE PFW staff were interviewed and assisted in location

selection, script, dialog and coordinating with other conservation groups in the production of these films. These films will provide education and outreach to a broad national and worldwide audience on the significance of the central Platte River and other Nebraska river systems and the spectacle of the spring migration in Nebraska.

NE PFW staff in conjunction with the NGPC organized and hosted a wetland restoration and enhancement field tour for the Playa Lakes Joint Venture Management Board along the North Platte River and Southwest Playa wetland complexes. The day was spent in the field viewing riverine and playa wetland projects, and discussing restoration techniques and practices for different wetland types found across western Nebraska.

Staff from the USFWS, including NE PFW, Refuges, ES, and Migratory Birds hosted and organized a collaborative coordination meeting with staff from Nebraska's Congressional delegation and the NGPC. During the first day of the meeting, USFWS and NGPC staff met with Congressional staff to review USFWS programs, responsibilities and to discuss natural resource issues in Nebraska. The meeting was a great opportunity to meet with Congressional staff and discuss potential items of interest in the upcoming year. The second day of the meeting was a chance for the USFWS and NGPC to meet and discuss wildlife and natural resource issues of mutual concern in Nebraska.

Nebraska Partners for Fish and Wildlife FY 2017 Partnership Accomplishments

| Accomplishment Type | FY 2017 Total | FY 2017–2021 Cumulative Total | FY 2017–2021 Target | Percent Complete |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Private landowner agreements | 63 | 63 | 185 | 34% |
| Partnerships | 195 | 195 | 960 | 20% |
| Technical assistance (staff days) | 625 | 625 | 2,200 | 28% |
| Leveraging ratio (PFW:non-program) | 1:5 (17:83) | 1:5 (17:83) | 1:2.3 (30:70) | n/a |



Field tour of Southwest Playa wetland complex and North Platte River habitat projects hosted by NE PFW and NGPC for the PLJV Management Board and staff. Photo by Kenny Dinan, USFWS.

Nebraska Partners for Fish and Wildlife FY 2017 Communication Accomplishments

| Accomplishment Type | FY 2017 Total | FY 2017–2021 Cumulative Total | FY 2017–2021 Target | Percent Complete |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Landowner group meetings/workshops | 30 | 30 | 50 | 60 % |
| Media Events/presentations | 16 | 16 | 25 | 64 % |
| Ranch/field tours | 25 | 25 | 75 | 33 % |
| Congressional staff meetings | 1 | 1 | 5 | 20 % |
| Youth outdoor education events | 7 | 7 | 10 | 70% |

Goal IV. Enhance our Workforce

The FY 2017 NE PFW staffing plan includes five full-time private lands biologist (including the State Coordinator) with all four private lands field biologists being supervised by the NE PFW coordinator. For most of FY 2017 the NE PFW program was short one staff member due to a vacancy that occurred in Western Nebraska. However, NE PFW staff continued to perform at an exceptional level during FY 2017 and contributed significantly towards meeting NE PFW habitat and partnership related targets as identified in the PFW 2017-2021 Strategic Plan.

NE PFW field biologists are very dedicated to working with Nebraska landowners and our partners to restore federal trust resources on private lands. To maintain a high level of professionalism and to have the proper training, tools, and resources to better accomplish the Service's goal of conserving fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats, the NE PFW staff participated in numerous training opportunities (e.g., formal training, workshops, seminars, conferences), to improve program operations and to improve career opportunities this past year. In addition, NE PFW staff worked with other Service and non-Service programs outside of their primary areas of responsibility to share ideas, methods, and build support and understanding regarding habitat restoration and what is occurring in other parts of the state, Region, and country.

In addition to participating in numerous training events, the RWB NE PFW private lands biologist also assisted with the instruction of the NCTC-sponsored course Wetland Assessment, Restoration, and Management. The course was designed to assess degraded wetlands for restoration potential, to develop and implement restoration plans, and

develop management plans for specific wetland objects. The course included lectures, field work, and group activities that resulted in an emphasis on wetland ecology, wildlife needs, enhancement of wetland functions, conceptual design and implementation processes, structural and vegetative restoration practices, permitting requirements, control of nuisance and invasive species, and other management considerations. The NE PFW private lands biologist taught the course in two locations, Willows, CA and Alexandria Bay, NY. This example demonstrates the dedication of NE PFW staff to enhance the Service's workforce beyond the state boundary of Nebraska.

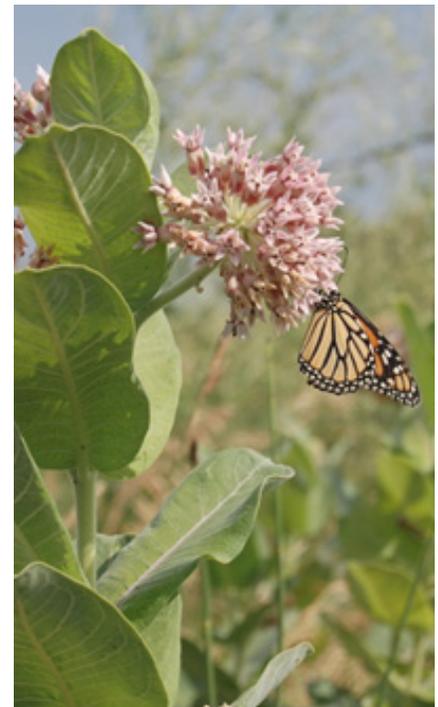
Goal V. Increase Accountability

During FY 2017, the NE PFW program State Coordinator served as Project Officer and fiduciary for all PFW program funds, including PLAs, cooperative agreements, grants and other funding agreements. The State Coordinator worked closely with the NE Field Office's Administrative Officer, Regional Office staff, and NE PFW staff, to ensure that all appropriate procedures and guidelines were followed and necessary paperwork were completed for all projects. NE PFW funds were managed in an effective and timely manner and all NE PFW funds were obligated by established deadlines. All FY 2017 PLAs (63) were reviewed by the NE PFW State Coordinator and Assistant State Coordinator to ensure quality control and to manage for program excellence.

All projects completed during FY 2017, including spatial data, were reviewed, tracked, and entered into the HabITS database. NE PFW staff provided the State Coordinator with accurate information regarding accomplishments throughout their areas of responsibility for inclusion into HabITS. The NE PFW State

Coordinator coordinated with the PFW Deputy Regional Coordinator to ensure HabITS data were entered correctly and accurately.

To ensure NE PFW efforts accomplished the greatest biological benefit per conservation dollar expended, the program used decision support tools, predictive models, and the experience and knowledge of our local landowners and partners to assist in the strategic delivery of the PFW program throughout Nebraska. NE PFW field biologists are also equipped with digital cameras to increase the number of before, during, and after construction photos for projects and to facilitate the development of restoration plans and project monitoring. Trail cameras and/or time lapse cameras have also been set up on a few habitat projects during this past year to document species use and changes in habitat condition over time. The NE PFW program completed Level I monitoring for all projects completed during FY 2017 using established Level I monitoring protocols.



Monarch on Milkweed in Nebraska's Sandhills. Photo by Dominic Barrett, USFWS.