

Land Protection Plan

Dakota Grassland Conservation Area

North Dakota, South Dakota

September 2011

Prepared by

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

North Dakota Wetland Management Districts
South Dakota Wetland Management Districts

Region 6, Mountain-Prairie Region
Division of Refuge Planning
134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300
Lakewood, Colorado 80228
303/236 8145

CITATION: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Land Protection Plan—Dakota Grassland Conservation Area. Lakewood, Colorado: U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Mountain–Prairie Region. 169 p.

Contents

<i>Summary</i>	V
<i>Abbreviations</i>	VII
Chapter 1—Introduction and Project Description	1
Introduction	1
Project Description	3
Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis	5
Public Review of and Comments on the Draft EA and LPP	6
National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities	7
Related Actions and Activities	7
Habitat Protection and the Easement Acquisition Process	9
Conservation Easements	9
Chapter 2—Area Description and Resources	11
Physical Environment	11
Biological Environment	14
Cultural Resources	22
Socioeconomic Environment	24
Chapter 3—Threats to and Status of Resources	27
Threats to the Resources	27
Effects on the Physical Environment	28
Effects on the Biological Environment	28
Effects on Cultural Resources	30
Effects on the Socioeconomic Environment	30
Unavoidable Adverse Impacts	31
Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitments of Resources	31
Short-Term Use versus Long-Term Productivity	32
Cumulative Impacts	32
Chapter 4—Project Implementation	35
Land Protection Options	35
Project Objectives and Actions	36
Protection Priorities	38
Ecosystem Management and Landscape Conservation	39
Sociocultural Considerations	43
Public Involvement and Coordination	44
LPP Distribution and Availability	44
Glossary	45

Appendixes

A—List of Preparers and Reviewers 47
 B—Species Lists. 49
 C—Environmental Assessment 65
 D—Public Involvement 109
 E—Finding of No Significant Impact 143
 F—Environmental Action Statement. 147
 G—Environmental Compliance Certificate. 149
 H—U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director’s Approval 153
 I—Section 7 Biological Evaluation 157

Bibliography 165

Figures

1. Map of the Prairie Pothole Region of North America 2
 2. Map of the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area 4
 3. Map of ecoregions in the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area. 12
 4. Map of the North American breeding ranges of 27 grassland birds 22
 5. Chart of evaluation criteria for acquiring grassland conservation easements 40
 6. Chart of evaluation criteria for acquiring wetland conservation easements. 41
 7. Graphic of the elements of strategic habitat conservation 42
 A. Map of the Prairie Pothole Region of North America [*same as figure 1*] 66
 B. Map of the proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area [*same as figure 2*] 67
 C. Map of ecoregions in the proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area [*same as figure 3*]. 79
 D. Map of the North American breeding ranges of 27 grassland birds [*same as figure 4*]. 89
 E. Graphic of the elements of strategic habitat conservation [*same as figure 7*] 104
 F. Chart of evaluation criteria for acquiring wetland conservation easements [*same as figure 6*]. 105
 G. Chart of evaluation criteria for acquiring grassland conservation easements [*same as figure 5*] 106
 H. Graph of percentage of public scoping comments, by category, about the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area 139

Tables

1. Priority bird species of the Prairie Pothole Region. 19
 2. Acquisition authorities of the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area (DGCA) and approval components 38
 A. Acquisition authorities of the proposed Dakota Grassland Conservation Area (DGCA) and approval components
 [*same as table 2*]. 73
 B. Priority bird species of the Prairie Pothole Region [*same as table 1*] 86

Summary

The uniqueness of the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area lies in the millions of depressional wetlands that constitute one of the richest wetland systems on Earth—the Prairie Pothole Region. The prairie potholes and surrounding grasslands in this area of North Dakota and South Dakota are highly productive and support a myriad of wetland and grassland birds along with large numbers of spring and fall migrants.

The “Land Protection Plan—Dakota Grassland Conservation Area” describes the management approach that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will take in carrying out this easement program to protect prairie habitats. The plan is based on an environmental assessment, developed with public involvement, that documents the purpose, issues, alternatives, and analysis for the project. Now finalized, the plan contains goals, objectives, and operational considerations for the following management aspects: wildlife and associated habitats, easement priorities, public uses, interagency coordination, public outreach, and other operations.

The Prairie Pothole Region

Once vast grassland, the Prairie Pothole Region is now largely an agricultural system dominated by cropland and is one of the most threatened landscapes in North America. Recent changes in agricul-

tural economics and advances in crop genetics are increasing the rate of habitat transformation—from an expansive mosaic of native prairie and wetland used for livestock ranching—to a landscape dominated by tillage agriculture.

Although one of the most altered, the Prairie Pothole Region is one of the most important, migratory bird habitats in the Western Hemisphere with its ability to produce and sustain tremendous numbers of waterfowl. The large-scale change in land use is rapidly expanding into the remaining quality habitat for breeding birds. At the current rate of grassland conversion, an estimated one-half of the remaining native prairie in the Prairie Pothole Region will be converted to other uses in only 34 years.

Dakota Grassland Conservation Area

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is establishing the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area in the eastern parts of North Dakota and South Dakota, which cover all counties north and east of the Missouri River except those in the existing Dakota Tallgrass Prairie Wildlife Management Area. The Service will conserve wetland and grassland resources in the project area primarily through the purchase of perpetual easements from willing sell-



Fowler Photography / USFWS

The prairie potholes and surrounding grasslands are highly productive and support wetland and grassland birds along with many other animals.

ers. These wetland and grassland easements will connect and expand existing lands under conservation protection.

The area's strong and vibrant rural lifestyle, of which agriculture is the dominant land use, is one of the key components to ensuring habitat integrity and wildlife resource protection. Based on anticipated levels of landowner participation, objectives for the conservation area are to protect 240,000 acres of wetland and 1.7 million acres of critical grassland habitat, within an overall boundary area of 29.6 million acres.

PRIORITIES

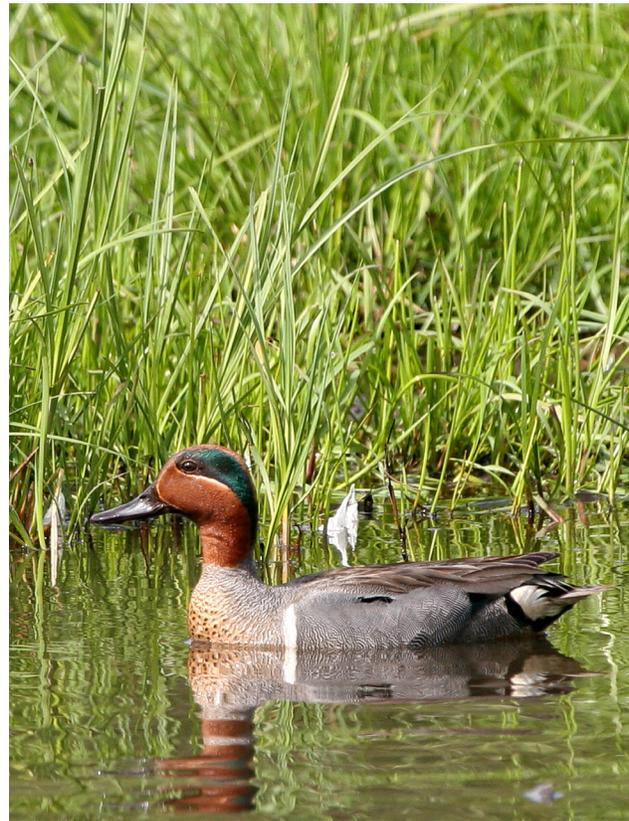
The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, Partners in Flight, and the Service have identified priority species for the Prairie Pothole Region: 8 species of waterfowl, 22 species of shorebirds, 10 species of other waterbirds, and 20 species of grassland birds.

The Service will set priorities for potential easements based on landscape evaluation models that identify the extent and location of grassland and wetland along with nesting areas of concentration for priority species. With this strategic determination of conservation priorities, the Service will be able to protect the most productive, remaining wetland and grassland habitats to help to conserve populations of priority species. Concurrently, the Service will engage the Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative (a recent initiative that reaches across broad landscapes and involves many partners).

ACQUISITION

To better protect wetland and grassland resources, the Service needs authority additional to the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program, which is authorized by the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (Federal Duck Stamps) to acquire perpetual easements in the project area.

With well over 800 landowners interested in selling wetland and grassland easements, the only thing restricting the Service from protecting more than 300,000 acres on the waiting list is limited money. This project allows the purchase of critical wetland and grassland easements using Land and Water Conservation Fund money as an alternate funding source. In addition, the Service will use the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 to purchase easements, as appropriate and available. The estimated cost for acquisition of the easements is about \$588 million.



Donna Dewhurst / USFWS

Green-winged teal is a migratory species that depends on wetlands in the Dakotas.

EASEMENT TERMS

All land under wetland or grassland easement remains in private ownership. Property tax and land management, including control of noxious weeds and other invasive plants and trees, remain the responsibility of the landowner.

The easement contract will specify perpetual protection of habitat by restricting the conversion of wetland and grassland to other uses. Alteration of the natural topography, conversion of grassland to cropland or other uses, and draining, burning, filling, and leveling of protected wetlands will be prohibited. However, perpetual protection will not prohibit all activities. Protected wetland basins may be hayed or grazed without restriction and farmed when dry from natural conditions. Grassland easements will not restrict grazing in any way, and haying will be permitted after July 15 each year.

The Service will administer wetland and grassland easements according to Region 6 policy in the manual of "Administrative and Enforcement Procedures of Easements within the Prairie Pothole States."