

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

WILDLIFE FEATURE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## DUCKS AND GEESE GET A BREAK ON THEIR MORTGAGE PAYMENTS

Ducks and geese of North America have been given a delay of their eviction notice with the recent extension of the Wetlands Loan Act. It increases the amount that could be loaned to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to buy wetland homes for waterfowl and puts off the installment repayments until 1983.

Until 1961, waterfowl habitat was purchased primarily with money from the sale of "duck stamps" to waterfowl hunters. Although the price of the stamp has been increased twice, this source of money was completely inadequate to purchase wetlands before they were drained for agriculture or filled to build homes, industry, or highways.

In order to accelerate acquisition of wetlands, Congress passed the Wetlands Loan Act in 1961 which permitted loans of up to \$105 million. This 15-year authorization was to expire on September 30, 1976. Then, it would have been necessary to start paying back the loan with 75 percent of the annual duck stamp receipts. This would have practically stopped the current acquisition program.

Facing this expiration, the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed the situation of waterfowl habitat and found the need to protect habitat even more urgent now than in 1961. With the original Act, a goal of 2.5 million acres was set. The recent study showed that wetlands destruction was going on at a rate greater than anticipated, so the goal

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for waterfowl habitat to be acquired by the Federal Government was increased to nearly 4 million acres.

The new Act also changed the name of the "duck stamp" to the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp. This was done to encourage the purchase of the stamp by citizens who would like to assist in preserving wetlands. In signing the Act, President Ford further requested the Congress to consider increasing the price of the stamp from the current \$5 to provide additional money to further expedite this program. Present sales of the stamp yield about \$12 million a year.

The recent Act extending the loan until September 30, 1983, also increased the amount permitted to be loaned from \$105 million to a maximum of \$200 million. Currently, \$93.4 million of the original \$105 million had been appropriated. Almost 2 million acres, 75 percent of which were in the glaciated prairie pothole "duck factory" of the Northern United States, were set aside with this money. This leaves \$106.6 million to be appropriated over the next 7 years for an additional 2 million acres of key habitat. A half million acres is anticipated to be acquired by donation and other Federal programs. On the basis of current estimates, only half of the 2-million-acre goal can be acquired with the funds expected to be available in the 7-year period.

Wetlands are being destroyed or degraded at an alarming rate. The greatest losses are occurring in the glaciated prairie pothole region, the Mississippi River Delta region and certain coastal areas. For example, an estimated 80 percent of the wetlands in western Minnesota have been drained since the mid-1950's. A recent Minnesota survey indicated that 40 percent of the wetlands existing in 1964 were drained in 10 years. About 35,000

acres were drained annually in the Dakotas and Minnesota during the mid-1960's. In addition to loss of wetlands, severe deterioration of up-land nesting cover in the prairie pothole region is causing a profoundly adverse effect on waterfowl dependent on the habitat for reproduction.

About two-thirds of the original 24 million acres of Mississippi Delta bottomland hardwoods, a major Mississippi Flyway wintering site, have been cleared and replaced by soybean fields and other agricultural uses. A loss rate of more than 200,000 acres annually occurred between 1950 and 1969. At the current rate of clearing, if left unchecked, the value of the delta's floodplain hardwoods to waterfowl can be expected to be lost by the turn of the century.

Nearly 75 percent of the Nation's estuaries were moderately to severely degraded by 1970. The situation has not improved. Physical and chemical destruction of coastal habitat is expected to have a serious impact on waterfowl and other estuarine-dependent species in the very near future if this trend is not modified.

The need to identify and preserve wetlands and other waterfowl habitat has never been more critical than it is today, Fish and Wildlife Service officials say. Wetlands are disappearing at an ever increasing rate, and likewise, the cost of the remaining wetlands is increasing. Obviously, the more funds immediately available for acquisition, the more choice, and the lower the price.

As an indication of the impact of having extended the program, the Farm Real Estate Index, used to project program costs, increased 123 percent during the fiscal years 1962-1973. According to that index, rural land prices increased an average 25 percent during the single year which ended in March 1974; increases were greater than 30 percent in both North and South Dakota, in which the Nation's primary waterfowl production habitat occurs.

In addition to their importance to waterfowl, wetland ecosystems have gained recognition as one of the most important, yet fragile and often irreplaceable, natural resources in man's environment. Wetlands perform a vital function in providing habitat for numerous game, nongame, commercial and endangered fish and wildlife species; reducing runoff, soil and wind erosion and increasing flood control; improving water quality and significantly reducing stream sedimentation; facilitating recharge of groundwater supplies; and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. Wetlands, serving as the lifeblood for the maintenance of most waterfowl species, are the focus of the Service's waterfowl habitat preservation effort. Protecting wetland ecosystems for waterfowl adds materially to the long-term assurance of these other benefits to society.

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