



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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David Klinger 202-343-5634

PRAIRIE WETLANDS, TRADITIONAL HAVENS FOR WILDLIFE,
PROVING BOON TO DROUGHT-STRICKEN MIDWEST FARMERS

In the Year of the Drought, when many American farmers have been hard-pressed to turn a crop and keep their livestock in forage, some far-sighted landowners have fared better than their neighbors.

Their secret: they kept their wetlands.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in North Dakota, a state ravaged by the twin extremes of high temperatures and low rainfall, where the drought has shot the value of a ton of hay into the triple digits. Farmers there are turning to wetlands as one of the few remaining sources of forage for hungry cattle.

A spot-check of a handful of North Dakota farmers by field employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has turned up a number of enterprising individuals who are weathering the drought of 1988 in better shape than their neighbors by keeping a fraction of their acreage as wetlands.

In their own words:

- o "Having these wetlands during a drought is like having money in the bank. Hay sloughs are going to be my income this year because there isn't much else out there. Slough hay isn't as good as irrigated alfalfa, but it sure beats feeding them snowballs!"--Arnie Swanson, of Stutsman County, North Dakota, who leaves 10 percent of his 600 acres in wetlands.
- o "Probably 80 percent of my hay this year will come from my wetlands. Right now, the potholes are the only thing that is green. I got about 15 tons of hay off of one pothole that's probably 3 acres in size on one cutting. Without wetlands, I would have a choice between selling the herd or buying hay."--Gene Goven, of McLean County, North Dakota, who hayed 50 potholes on his 1,500 acres last year.
- o "Wetlands have been the lifesaver. They are producing two to three times what the standard hayfield is producing. If it weren't for wetlands, the cattle wouldn't have anything to eat. It's kind of an 'ace-in-the-hole' to fall back on."--Kerry Dockter, of Sheridan County, North Dakota, who leaves 200 of his 2,000 acres as wetlands.

"These and other farmers in North America's prairie pothole country have discovered that it makes good economic sense to keep portions of their cropland in wetlands to get them through the lean years," says Frank Dunkle, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "Wildlife managers constantly stress the importance of these waterlogged areas to ducks and other wildlife species, but keeping them around is good for agriculture, too."

Unfortunately, less than half of America's estimated 215 million acres of wetlands remains--less than 99 million acres as of the mid-1970's. Of these, 458,000 acres are drained and lost to farming, urbanization, and other uses each year. In the upper Midwest, where often half of America's waterfowl are produced, wetlands losses proportionately have been even greater: of North Dakota's former 5 million acres of wetlands, barely 2 million remain; in Minnesota, 1.4 million of 8.7 million acres are left; Iowa has only 70,000 of its 1.1 million acres.

The greatest share of this wetland loss--87 percent--has been attributed to agricultural practices. Expansion of agricultural production has promoted the drainage of wetlands and their conversion to cropland. Drought years have allowed farmers to cultivate previously waterlogged potholes, plowing up to the margins and removing cover vital to young ducks.

Lloyd Jones, supervisor of the Fish and Wildlife Service's North Dakota wetland habitat office in Bismarck, sees wetland drainage as a continuing major concern for wildlife managers in the Midwest. "Until recently, North Dakota was losing about 20,000 acres of prairie wetlands a year. There are signs this has slowed, but the drought has provided another opportunity for dry wetland basins to be plowed and drainage ditches to be dug," Jones says. "When the water comes back--and it will come back--will enough habitat remain for wildlife to recover?"

"We have noticed a trend that landowners are seeing a dollar value in wetlands preservation. We have a long way to go, but there is hope for wetlands here on the prairies."

A growing number of farmers have weighed the benefits of increased crop production from drained wetlands against the cost of bringing that land into production. Many have opted to retain wetlands as a hedge against dry years.

"The drought of 1988 has reaffirmed the wisdom of leaving the wetlands for waterfowl and other wildlife during the good years and using them as a handy source of forage and water during the lean years," says Dunkle. "Despite the history of agricultural conversion of wetlands, I think we tend to forget that American farmers--not biologists--still are the number one producers of waterfowl in North America through their stewardship of the land. The current drought is a good reminder that

wetlands conservation can benefit both the wildlife manager and the farmer, and I see a lot more cooperation between the two in the future. Everyone stands to gain by keeping wetlands intact."

The Federal Government already has moved to promote the conservation of the Nation's remaining wetlands while strengthening the American agricultural economy through the Food Security Act of 1985--the "Farm Bill," whose wetlands protection provisions build on what many American farmers already do by offering a series of powerful incentives to protect wetlands. Under "Swampbuster" provisions of the Farm Bill, Federal agricultural subsidies are forbidden to individuals who convert wetlands; the "Conservation Reserve Program" allows farmers to take highly erodible lands out of annual crop production for 10 years and receive rental payments in return for applying conservation measures on those lands.

Faced with the accelerating loss of wetlands and declining populations of waterfowl and other migratory birds, the Federal Government has established wetlands protection as a major conservation priority for the remainder of this century and is using the Farm Bill and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan to achieve that goal. The North American Plan, a U.S.-Canada agreement, sets as its goal the restoration of the continent's duck populations to 100 million birds by the year 2000 and calls for accelerated habitat improvement efforts to achieve this level.

But to North Dakota farmers, suffering through one of the Nation's most severe droughts, their voluntary conservation of wetlands has reaped both immediate and financially rewarding benefits.

Concludes North Dakota farmer Arnie Swanson, "Am I better off this year than farmers who have drained their wetlands? Oh yeah! In 1981, I made my most money ever because it was dry and hay was expensive. I hayed the sloughs and sold the hay. This year will be the same. I'm being careful not to hay too much this year so I can leave some wildlife cover. Part of my benefit is that I can see wildlife, too!"

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NOTE TO BROADCAST EDITORS ONLY: Broadcast-quality video-tape and audio-tape of interviews with the farmers and quotes similar to those used in this release are available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audio-Visual Office, at 202-343-5611. The tape also includes generic footage of haying and grazing on conserved wetlands.