



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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### HABITAT CONDITIONS FOR NESTING DUCKS REMAIN POOR

Millions of ducks are once again trying to nest across northern prairies where nesting failed almost completely in last year's drought, but U.S. and Canadian wildlife biologists say the ducks are facing long odds in their effort to replenish their numbers.

Despite an increase in winter snow and spring rains in some areas, early results of waterfowl surveys indicate that habitat conditions for ducks remain poor across large portions of the continent's most important duck breeding region--the prairie potholes of the north-central United States and southern Canada.

Overall, the areas where habitat conditions remain poor are so large that they offset the areas where conditions have improved, and the outlook for duck production this year is not optimistic.

"There is still reason to be concerned about our waterfowl populations," said Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan. "The ducks need help to come back. That is why I will press for creation of a special trust fund to acquire and restore wetlands under the public/private partnerships of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan."

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Duck numbers in surveyed areas hit a record low in 1985, improved slightly, then plunged again last year. The decline in their numbers has been tied to drought, which afflicted much of the continent's prime duck nesting region during most of the 1980's. The drought's effects have been compounded by the continuing conversion of many prairie wetlands to agriculture.

This year, according to survey reports from U.S. and Canadian wildlife biologists, habitat conditions are spotty, with some areas improved, particularly South Dakota, Montana, and parts of southern Alberta, while others continue to show the effects of drought. Conditions across large portions of Saskatchewan and Manitoba are poor, and north-central North Dakota is extremely dry. Ducks are more widely distributed than last year, when many congregated around the few remaining larger bodies of water or simply overflew the parched prairies for more northerly areas.

Because the soil continues to be dry and water tables are low, this year's rain and snow simply sank into the ground in many regions, leaving ponds empty or only partially filled. Without additional rains, many small ponds appear likely to dry up before the nesting season is over and many big wetlands needed for ducks to raise their broods are not full.

There is a shortage of cover for duck broods and other wildlife around many wetlands because little vegetation grew last year, and places that were grazed have no stubble left to harbor birds.

Increasingly, biologists report seeing ponds that have been plowed right to the very edge, leaving no natural vegetation for wildlife. "It makes you wonder how a duck is going to find a place to nest or hide her brood from predators," one biologist observed.

Estimates of duck breeding populations are being compiled now and will be available within a few weeks. Results of production surveys and the annual outlook for the fall flight of waterfowl will be completed at the end of July.