

Request for Grazing Application

Cooperative Agriculture Program

Conservation Grazing on Rainwater Basin WMD

Date: 2/20/2026

Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District
P.O. Box 8 / 73746 V Road
Funk, NE 68940

Point of contact

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PART – 1: GENERAL INFORMATION

A. Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District (Rainwater WMD or District), is seeking applications from qualified individuals to provide resource management services in the form of cattle grazing to promote and enhance native community diversity and control invasive species.

Scattered across a 21-county area in south-central Nebraska, Rainwater WMD includes 63 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) that total approximately 26,000 acres. Located in the heart of the Central Flyway, Rainwater Basin WMD provides critical habitat for migratory birds and other native plants and animals.

The Waterfowl Production Areas typically include all or part of a shallow wetland basin surrounded by upland grasses and shrubs. Cattle grazing in the wetland basins can be beneficial by reducing perennial vegetation, reducing invasive grasses, and compacting the clay soils. In the uplands, grazing can be utilized to reduce invasive plants and promote native warm-season grasses and forbs. Rotational cattle grazing on the District is used in coordination with several other management activities.

B. Scope of work

The selected producer will operate under a Cooperative Agriculture Agreement as a “cooperator” with the Service. Under this agreement, the cooperator will be responsible for providing the requested number of cattle and providing the necessary labor and materials to adequately fulfill the responsibilities of the refuge grazing program. Desired grazing dates vary by location and year but typically occur between April 1st and August 15th. There may be opportunities to graze units earlier or later than the above-listed dates, depending on conditions in the unit. Depending on habitat conditions, haying may also be utilized as a tool to meet habitat objectives on grazing schedules.

Cooperative Agriculture Agreements may be written for multiple years (typically 5 years) and may include coverage for grazing on one or more WPAs.

Cattle grazing opportunities are available on the majority of the WPAs (excluding the following WPAs: McMurtrey WPA, Funk WPA, Troester WPA, Elley WPA, Schwisow WPA, Glenvil WPA, Theesen WPA). Check out the map section of the District’s [website](#) for locations of the WPAs. Acres available to graze annually will vary by WPA, and will be focused on grazing in the wetland basins. Desired stocking rates will vary by habitat conditions.

C. Grazing Fees

Grazing rates are determined using information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service annual publication of agricultural prices. Grazing rates may increase annually, but the rate will not increase by more than \$1.00 per animal unit per year. For 2026, the rate is \$40.60 per animal (dry mature cow 2 years or older) per month.

Deduction rates for services provided are determined based on the most recent Nebraska Farm Custom rate averages. Deductions may be provided for services that include: installing temporary fence, boundary fence repair, hauling water, mowing parking lots, controlling invasive species, removing small trees from the units. Up to 75% of the annual fees may be deducted each year. See Appendix A. for more details on rates and deductions.

D. Eligibility and minimum qualifications

The Service is seeking grazing applicants with the flexibility to adapt their grazing operations to District requirements and conservation objectives. The producer will be selected through an open, transparent, and competitive process.

PART – 2: INSTRUCTIONS TO APPLICANTS

Application process schedule

1. Grazing opportunity announcement will be mid-February.
2. Site visits may take place prior to the application deadline.
3. Application must be received by March 13th by 4pm to be considered eligible.
4. All applications will be opened and reviewed using the criteria of Part 3.
5. Selection will be announced no later than March 27th.
6. Permit finalization will be conducted by April 3rd.
7. Permit to graze will commence in spring 2026.

B. Submission of required documents

Eligible livestock operators meeting the minimum qualification listed above are encouraged to submit applications. A mailed, emailed, or delivered in person application will be accepted. Mailed and delivered in person applications must be in a sealed envelope and marked as indicated below. If you wish to highlight grazing experience, or special interests or qualifications, a cover letter is appreciated.

Mail applications:

Rainwater Basin WMD
PO Box 8
Funk NE 68940

Email applications:

jessica_bolser@fws.gov

PART – 3: BASIS OF SELECTION

A. Selection process

The selection process will proceed as follows:

1. Review of applications, including qualification requirements.
2. Ranking of the most qualified applicants based on submitted applications.
 - a. If multiple applications rank equally, a lottery will be held among those with the highest rank.

B. Selection criteria

The producer(s) will be selected through an open, transparent and competitive process where applications will be scored and ranked by the following objective criteria:

1. Operational capacity and qualifications.
2. Positive experience with grazing systems on public conservation lands.
3. Understanding of grazing management programs focused on conservation.

C. Administrative conditions

1. This request does not commit the Service to pay any cost incurred by respondents in the preparation or submission of applications.
2. The Service reserves the right to reject any and all applications. The determination of qualifications is solely with the Service.
3. The Service reserves the right to conduct discussions with any applicant if it is deemed necessary for understanding, clarity, or negotiations.

Part – 4: Conditions of the Cooperative Agreement (CAA)

The terms and conditions for the CAA and Special Use Permit (SUP) are established in accordance with Region 6 Cooperative Agricultural Guidance and Rainwater Basin WMD Compatibility Determination.

1. No transferring or subcontracting of the CAA is permitted. The cooperator will be solely responsible for all of the livestock grazed, the amount paid, and the requirements of the permit. Cooperators will be required to comply with all applicable state and local livestock regulations.
2. A multi-year CAA does not guarantee that a grazing opportunity will be available every year on each WPA. There are a variety of management reasons why all or portions of any unit might not be grazed any given year. The cooperator will only be charged for use (and not when the opportunity is not available).
3. Prior to the grazing season (typically in late winter), the Station Manager will meet with the cooperator and will provide a grazing plan for that year (including a map with dates and stocking rates). The cooperator must submit a complete Cooperator Grazing Record to the

Station Manager once livestock are removed from the property. Failure to provide a grazing record and/or move cattle off by the prescribed dates may result in revocation of the CAA.

4. Cattle are permitted only: 1) within the prescribed units, 2) during the specified period of use, 3) in the authorized numbers. Cooperators will be provided annual grazing plans with maps, dates, and updated rates.

5. Monitoring Conditions – While staff will periodically assess conditions, it is the responsibility of the permittee to monitor grass conditions, communicate with Rainwater WMD staff, and move livestock according to staff direction. Monitoring is beneficial to maintain desired wildlife habitat and healthy environmental conditions, and necessary to ensure adequate recovery time for the grass.

6. Drought Conditions - If severe drought conditions occur, livestock may need to be removed early from the WPA, stocking rates or times adjusted, or the grazing season may be completely cancelled. It is the responsibility of the cooperator to have or find alternative pastures or locations for cattle under these conditions.

7. Flood Conditions - If flooding occurs, livestock may have to be removed from the WPA and returned when flooding has subsided. It is the responsibility of the cooperator to have or find alternative locations for his/her cattle.

8. Water for Livestock – Water is not supplied on all WPAs. Available water may include water from solar or electric stock wells, water in the wetland basins, or (in rare cases) water from an irrigation well. If none of these options are available on the WPA, it is the responsibility of the cooperator to haul water for their cattle. If repairs are required on the tanks, solar panels, wells, or other facilities, the cooperator must contact District staff to schedule repairs or obtain permission for them to make the necessary repairs. The District does not monitor water quality in the wells or small wetlands. If there are concerns, please reach out to staff.

9. Temporary Electric Fence – The cooperator is responsible for putting up and taking down temporary electric fence. A deduction of the grazing fees will be provided (per foot) of electric fence. It is the responsibility of the cooperator to regularly check and maintain the electric fence. Cooperators may not use USFWS-owned power sources without prior permission from staff.

10. Boundary Fence Maintenance – Boundary fence is not found on every WPA. The maintenance of permanent fences (where they occur) is the responsibility of the permittee. The cooperator may obtain supplies for maintenance and repairs from the District or furnish supplies of comparable type and quality, receiving a deduction on their grazing fees. All work and materials must be communicated to the Station Manager and documented to receive deductions.

11. Infrastructure Protection - Cooperators are required to fence around all permanent

structures such as wells, solar panels, fuel tanks, and any other identified areas to prevent damage. At the end of the specified period or upon earlier termination, the cooperator shall give up the premises in as good order and condition as when received, except for reasonable wear, tear, or damage occurring without fault or negligence. The cooperator will fully repay the Service for any and all damage directly or indirectly resulting from negligence or failure on his/her part, or the part of their associates, to use reasonable care.

12. Equipment –The use of trucks, ATVs/UTVs, and horses is permitted for driving or herding cattle, installing fence, maintaining facilities, and treating sick livestock, however, cooperators must obtain permission from refuge staff before utilizing heavy equipment (tractors, skid steers, mowers, etc.) on the property. Exceptions will be made in the case of emergencies. Use of vehicles and equipment must be in a manner that minimizes disturbance to wildlife and wildlife habitat.

13. Weed Free Equipment/Animals -All equipment (including horses) that are used when checking and moving livestock will be weed free prior to use on Rainwater Basin WMD to prevent the spread of noxious weeds and invasive plant species.

14. Mineral – Salt and mineral supplement may be used but must be placed in a tub or mineral feeder and placed in such a manner as to encouragement movement of livestock throughout the entire unit. All containers must be removed at the end of the grazing season.

15. Pesticide Usage – Dust bags, oilers, or other insecticide treatment or sprays may not be used on the District. Treated ear tags may be used. Any other types of chemicals brought onto the District must be approved by staff.

16. Gates & locks – Gate locks and keys will be provided upon request. The cooperator is not permitted to use their own locks. District staff must have access to the WPAs at all times. In addition, the cooperator is not allowed to prevent public access to parking lots.

17. Cameras – Any use of cameras for monitoring during livestock grazing operations must be approved by the Station Manager prior to use.

19. Deceased cattle – It is the responsibility of the cooperator to remove any deceased cattle from the property as soon as possible.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District assumes no responsibility or liability for damages from water and/or flood, fire, hail, wind, wildlife, or any other damage to cattle or Cooperator's equipment. Wildlife damage is also a consideration with cattle on a Waterfowl Production Area. Wildlife may not be harassed or driven from refuge fields. In the event of federal trust species presence, the cooperator will be made aware of the event and all entrance to federal lands with cattle or for haying purpose will need to be discussed with the Station Manager.

Damages: The US Fish and Wildlife Service shall not be responsible for any loss or damage to property including, but not limited to, growing crops, animals, and machinery or injury to the permittee or his/her relatives, or to the officers, agents, employees, or any other who are on the premises from instructions or by the sufferance of wildlife or employees or representatives of the Government carrying out their official responsibilities. The permittee agrees to save the United States or any of its agencies harmless from any and all claims for damages or losses that may arise to be incident to the flooding of the premises resulting from any associated Government river or flood control activity.

Failure of the cooperator to comply with terms of the conditions of the CAA and SUP directly affects the Cooperative Agricultural Use Agreements and will be considered cause for revocation of the permit immediately and may cause the cooperator to become ineligible to graze Service lands in the future.

Grazing Questionnaire for Cooperative Agriculture Agreement Application 2026-2030

1. What numbers and type of stock would you be able to graze on the District? Also, what is typically the earliest date in the year that you would have cattle available for grazing?

2. Have you ever worked with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or any other public lands?
 - a) If so, what was the nature of the work?
 - b) How long were you involved with the project?

3. Describe your experience with grazing to create habitat conditions for wildlife or conservation grazing.

4. Are you willing to follow prescribed grazing management plan based on vegetation utilization which may vary annually at a specific location?

5. Do you own, operate on or rent any property adjacent to the WPA?

6. Are you prepared and willing to haul in water from offsite, if necessary?

7. Are you willing to maintain current fence and build and remove temporary electric fence during the grazing season?

8. Are you prepared to remove your cattle early to avoid undesirable impacts of grazing, especially during drought or flooding conditions?

9. Describe availability and expected response time in the event you are notified of an issue, such as livestock/human conflict, sick or injured livestock, cattle out of assigned paddock, or cattle on roadway. Please consider travel time to the WPA in your response.

10. Are you willing to control noxious weeds according to FWS specifications if requested?

11. Are you willing to mow parking lot areas, driveways, or well lanes according to FWS specifications if requested?

12. Additional comments and information that you would like to add to your application.

SEALED APPLICATION DUE – March 13th

An applicant may apply on more than one permit, but the most an applicant can be awarded is one permit. Awarded applicants cannot have any association with any other grazing permit or operations awarded on Rainwater Basin WMD during the grazing period (e.g., permittees cannot share/coordinate resources or be involved with cattle moves or operations associated with more than one permit). **Please note: Successful applicants will also be asked to complete a Commercial Special Use Permit.**

Name of Applicant: _____

Address: _____

Home Phone: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Email: _____

Please list the Waterfowl Production Area that you would like to be considered for: (You may list more than one.)

I have read, understand, and agree to the terms of this application and District regulations. I am currently a livestock operator and at least 18 years of age. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District) reserves the right to adjust, or halt use, to protect the resource and to reject any and all applications.

Signature _____ **Date** _____

Appendix A. Grazing Fees and Deduction Rates

2026 Grazing Rate/AUM: 40.60

Grazing Fees (per AUM)

Mature Cow: \$40.60

Cow/Calf Pair: \$46.00

Bull: \$60.90

Yearling: \$28.42

Weaner Calf: \$20.30

Grazing rates are determined using information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's, National Agricultural Statistics Service annual publication of agricultural prices. Rates may change each year of a permit, but will not increase by more than \$1.00 per AUM each year. The rates for each year are typically known by February that year.

Discounts:

Installing and removing temporary electric fence: \$0.05 / foot (1 mile = 5,280 feet)

Hauling water: \$0.01 / gallon

Deduction Rates for Services Provided*

Standard deduction for all labor..... \$30.00 / hour

Services include:

Repair boundary fence/gates (FWS supplies materials or cost of materials)

Invasive species control – mechanical (hand chopping, weed whipping, chainsaw, etc.)

Invasive species control – chemical (spot-spraying weeds/trees, herbicide supplied by FWS)

Use of equipment (disking, shredding, cutting/stacking trees)

Small farm tractors (less than 150 HP) \$50 / hour

Large farm tractors (150 HP or larger) \$125 /
hour

Mow Parking Lots \$35 / parking lot or \$50 minimum

***Rates for services provided and discounts were based on the most recent Nebraska Farm Custom rate averages ([source: University of Nebraska Lincoln](#)) and Kansas Custom rate averages ([source: Kansas State University](#)) for general hourly labor and use of farm equipment.**