

Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council

December 15, 2023

The Honorable Robert Bonnie
Under Secretary - Farm Production and Conservation
US. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Bonnie:

On behalf of the membership of the Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council, we want to thank the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for establishing the Migratory Bird Resurgence Initiative (MBRI) last fiscal year. The Initiative was a success and illustrated strong demand to conserve small shallow wetlands and enhance migratory bird habitat in key wintering areas. Due to the high demand, the Council recommends increasing the annual investment from \$15 million to \$75 million, and that the increased funding of \$50 million be allocated to the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) and \$25 million allocated to post-harvest flooding in rice producing states.

As you are aware, the MBRI was developed along two tracks: in 2010 in response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and in 2015 with the Working Wetlands Pilot Project. The oil spill led to the creation of the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, which was focused in eight states to provide valuable wetland habitat for migratory birds, including post-harvest flooding practices, in the Lower Mississippi River Delta and along the Gulf Coast. The Initiative was so popular with agricultural producers that it enrolled more than 470,000 acres in one- to three-year contracts, far exceeding the initial goal of 150,000 acres. The Working Wetlands Pilot Project in North Dakota conserved shallow wetlands and was widely supported by commodity and conservation groups. It was well received, with more than 124 signed producer agreements across key habitat areas in the state, including 9,568 individual wetlands on 4,822 acres. Conservation practices funded through these efforts, conserving small wetlands in crop fields and enhancing post-harvest flooding on rice fields, were included in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in the 2018 Farm Bill. The MBRI was subsequently created and implemented.

The goal of MBRI is to engage farmers in a voluntary effort that is both good for the environment and farm economics by: conserving small wetlands (less than 2 acres in size) on 366,277 acres in the Prairie Pothole Region¹; and creating post-harvest flooding on 500,000 acres of cropland in California's Central Valley and in the Mississippi and

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Central Flyways to establish temporary habitat and rest areas for migrating birds. The enrollment target in the Prairie Pothole Region represents 56.7 percent of all the remaining small temporary and seasonal wetlands in that area. Overall, the Initiative voluntarily enrolls more than 866,000 acres of working lands, supports 507,524 breeding pairs of ducks², store 9.5 million tons of carbon³, annually “digest” 16.4 million pounds of excess nitrogen⁴ and 1.63 million pounds of phosphorus⁵, and stores 276,709-acre feet of water annual to mitigate the impacts of drought and deluge.


The Council is a strong supporter of efforts to conserve and enhance wetland habitats. We believe the Migratory Bird Resurgence Initiative would complement the addition of specific wetland provisions within the new and revised USDA Framework for Conservation Action under Working Lands for Wildlife. Therefore, we recommend that USDA increase investments to the Initiative and continue conserving and enhancing critical migratory bird habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region and key wintering areas.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations. Should you have questions or need more information regarding this matter, please contact Doug Hobbs, the Council’s Designated Federal Officer, at doug_hobbs@fws.gov or (703) 358-2336.

Sincerely,



Collin O’Mara
Chair



John Devney
Vice Chair

1. Total Acres in Small Wetlands is based on data compiled by the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/hapet.php>).

2. Data source for small wetland basins, acres, and duck pairs is the Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET), which is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is responsible for modeling breeding habitat and duck use in the U.S. portion of the Prairie Pothole Region.

3. Gleason, R.A., Laubhan, M.K., and Euliss, N.H., Jr. 2008. Ecosystem services derived from wetland conservation practices in the United States Prairie Pothole Region with an emphasis on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve and Wetlands Reserve Programs: U.S. Geological Professional Paper 1745: 58.

4. Yang, W., Wang, X., Gabor, S., Boychuk, L., & Badiou, P. 2008. Water Quantity and Quality Benefits from Wetland Conservation and Restoration in the Broughton’s Creek Watershed. https://www.pcap-sk.org/rsu_docs/documents/Water_Quantity_etc.pdf

5. Bansal, S., Tangen, B.A., Gleason, R.A., Badiou, P. and Creed, I.F. 2021. Land Management Strategies Influence Soil Organic Carbon Stocks of Prairie Potholes of North America. In Wetland Carbon and Environmental Management (eds K.W. Krauss, Z. Zhu and C.L. Stagg)

Cc: HWCC members
Terry Cosby, Chief – Natural Resources Conservation Service, Department of
Agriculture
Matt Strickler, Deputy Assistant Secretary – Department of the Interior
Martha Williams, Director – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service