DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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FROM CORNER TO CORNER AND COAST TO COAST
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE BOOSTS
NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Hundreds of volunteer treasure hunters soon will fan out along Chesapeake Bay, but they will not be hunting for Spanish doubloons or pieces of eight. Rather, they'll be searching for underwater plants, monitoring and measuring this natural resource that is vital as habitat for fish and shellfish and as food for waterfowl.

The volunteers will be helping the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service while keeping a sharp lookout especially for wild celery, the favored food of canvasback ducks, a symbol of the historic abundance and health of Chesapeake Bay. The presence of wild celery, particularly in the freshwater portions of the intensely urbanized Upper Bay, serves as an indicator of water quality and the general health of the Bay -- and hope for the canvasback, "king" of North American waterfowl, but whose numbers are seriously depleted.

Although they may not realize it, these volunteers are also contributing to another locally lesser-known, but major Service program, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The Plan is an international agreement among Canada, the U.S., and Mexico whose

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goal is to rebuild the populations of canvasbacks and other waterfowl and migratory birds by protecting and restoring their habitat.

"The Chesapeake Bay Coastal Ecosystem Program is a classic example of how one Service program benefits another," according to Mollie Beattie, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Looking at just one line in the budget doesn't tell the full story of the resources the Service commits to the North American Plan or to any single program. Everything we do is connected. What we do for water quality or endangered species also benefits ducks, and vice versa."

On the West Coast, another coastal initiative has breathed life into the North American Plan's Pacific Coast Joint Venture. Seven joint venture projects recently received $2.7 million in grants from the Service's National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Program to acquire and restore 3,000 acres of wetland habitat in California, Oregon, and Washington. One area to be acquired, 274 acres on the north coast of Grays Harbor, Washington, also provides habitat for one of the largest wintering populations of canvasbacks on the northwest coast. It has been nominated as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site.

And last March, the Pacific Coast Joint Venture received its first grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund to launch a major "First Step" project in North Puget Sound. The $1.1 million grant to Washington State, matched by $1.8 million from joint venture partners, will protect and restore a rich diversity of habitat.

"One of the great features of the North American Plan is the partnership dollars it attracts," Director Beattie said. "It is a magnet for non-government money and has a multiplier effect of two to three times the federal investment."

The Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex is one of the more successful practitioners of leveraging its funds with challenge grants, or matching funds. "In any given year," Refuge Manager Gary Kramer said, "our refuge budget of $1.5 million will be increased by $50,000 to $500,000 in challenge grants and "private lands" money. This enables us to do more waterfowl habitat management on the refuge. In addition, we have two full-time employees who work directly with landowners. They provide technical advice and assistance to hunt clubs, rice growers, and others to help them improve and maintain wildlife habitat throughout the year."

The Sacramento Refuge Complex, at the northern end of the Central Valley, winters up to two million waterfowl, thousands of

shorebirds, and a diverse array of other wildlife. As such, it is a key component in the North American Plan's Central Valley Joint Venture. "Virtually everything we do here supports the Plan in some way," said Kramer.

The same can be said for most of the National Wildlife Refuge System. With an operating budget of $166 million in fiscal year 1993 for nearly 500 units and 92 million acres, the Refuge System provides habitat for a wide array of species, ranging from buffalo to buffleheads to butterflies. Another 156,000 acres were added to the Refuge System in fiscal year 1993, 52 percent purchased with Duck Stamp dollars and 48 percent from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Grants from the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund provided $6 million toward acquisition of 95,208 of the acres acquired, either by purchase, lease, or easement for the Refuge System.

Every state now has at least one National Wildlife Refuge, but North Dakota, often called the "duck factory," leads the way with 63 Refuges covering 290,000 acres. In addition, 250,000 acres are protected in Waterfowl Production Areas, small wetlands distributed throughout 39 North Dakota counties, and another 790,000 acres are protected through easements.

Because North Dakota, along with the other four "prairie" states of South Dakota, Montana, Iowa, and Minnesota are so important to waterfowl production, the prairie pothole wetlands in these states have top priority for Service acquisition. In fiscal year 1994, of the 156,000 acres acquired for the Refuge System, 32 percent or 49,900 acres were in those five states that make up the North American Plan's Prairie Pothole Joint Venture. Similarly, more than 25 percent of the North American Plan operating funds and nearly half of all funds for work on private lands have been sent to the prairies. Joint ventures in the U.S. and Canadian prairies have also received about 40 percent, or nearly $40 million, of the grant money from the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund.

Service biologists in North Dakota also are pacesetters on the information superhighway, producing "road maps" to help guide future decisions about protecting wetland sites critical to waterfowl as brood areas. The biologists have used computer technology to integrate Service-produced National Wetland Inventory maps and duck behavioral models to differentiate between those wetlands that contribute most to duck populations and those less likely to make such contributions.

"Until now, we've been limited to highly subjective field observations of sites suggested for acquisition, with little capability to compare dozens of potential sites simultaneously,"

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according to Bill Wilen, National Wetlands Inventory Coordinator. "This is truly pioneering work that wasn't possible until the last few years because the technology wasn't available. It has enormous potential for the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and could totally change the way we make decisions on which lands to protect."

The technology is also being used to analyze habitat needs of piping plovers and other endangered species, and Wilen points out other social and economic benefits of the technique. For example, the interagency team researching the 1993 floods is considering using digital wetland data, along with other data, to identify where wetland restoration would have the greatest flood control benefits. The Service received $30 million for restoring damages caused by the floods.

"The North American Waterfowl Management Plan is absolutely critical to us," said Mollie Beattie. "It has been the single most effective tool for preserving wetlands in North America. It's difficult to put a dollar figure on our investment in the Plan, as it is integrated into nearly every program and both provides and derives benefits from them. If I had to put a dollar figure on it, however, it would be in the neighborhood of $50 million to $150 million.

"The Plan is also integral to our ecosystem approach," she said. "The joint ventures are footholds on ecosystem management, demonstrating that waterfowl cannot be conserved without habitat and all of the species that go along with it. The Plan and its joint ventures provide a model for us to follow in implementing ecosystem management in all our efforts."

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