U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge

Cooperative Agriculture Program

Attention Farmers and Growers

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Seeks Agricultural Producers for Cooperative Agriculture Program

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is seeking proposals from agricultural producers to enter into a Cooperative Agriculture Agreement (Agreement) at the Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) in Cloverdale, Oregon. The producer may have use of up to 74.77 acres of lowland pastures on the Upton Slough Unit of the Refuge for up to five years as a cooperator with the Service. Prospective applicants must fill out applicable portions of FWS Form 3-1383-C and a Bid Sheet. The applicants must address in their application how they will meet the criteria outlined in this announcement.

Background

The Service established the Refuge in 1991, in part, to protect and enhance habitat on agricultural lands for wintering Canada geese and other migratory birds. The Refuge currently consists of 1,203 acres, of which 346 acres are actively managed as green forage habitat for geese and other birds. Carefully managed pastures provide a significant source of protein for wintering Canada geese and other waterfowl on the Refuge. Up to 11,000 Canada geese winter on the Refuge and adjacent lands, including the delisted Aleutian Canada goose and up to 18% of the world's population of the dusky Canada goose (a federal species of special concern) (Blake and Stephensen 2023, Stephensen and Nelson 2017). In all, six sub-species of Canada geese use the Refuge each winter.

The pastures on the Refuge are cooperatively managed with agricultural producers under Agreements with the Service. Under the agreements, techniques such as mowing, grazing, haying, or greenchopping (ensilage or cutting silage for dairy cattle), combined with seeding and vegetation management, may be used to achieve the desired objectives for wintering Canada geese and other migratory birds. The objectives for the Refuge's pastures, and the effects of the various management activities, are explored in depth in the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) (USFWS 2013).

The first goal stated in the CCP (Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1, Page 2-12) calls for the protection and maintenance of agricultural lands that support wintering migratory birds. The singular objective more specifically identifies the need to protect and maintain 346 acres of lowland pastures on the Refuge.

Management strategies to be implemented under the Agreement to achieve the lowland pasture goal and objective specified in the CCP include,

- Maintain drainage ditches, dikes, and water control structures using heavy equipment to provide adequate drainage and flood protection,
- Mow, green chop (silage), and graze livestock to provide desirable vegetation height,
- Use commercial fertilizers and manure to enhance vegetation productivity and apply with buffers to protect water quality,
- Rehabilitate pastures as needed using standard agricultural practices (e.g., seeding with appropriate pasture mix, fertilizing, liming) to maintain optimum productivity and plant species mix,
- Utilize appropriate Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques, including mechanical/physical, chemical, biological, and cultural means,
- Control nuisance mammals (*e.g.,* nutria, beaver), where necessary, to protect dikes and ditches using appropriate lethal and non-lethal methods, and
- Maintain fencing to support cattle grazing and containment.

Monitoring strategies to be implemented under the Agreement to achieve the lowland pasture goal and objective specified in the CCP include,

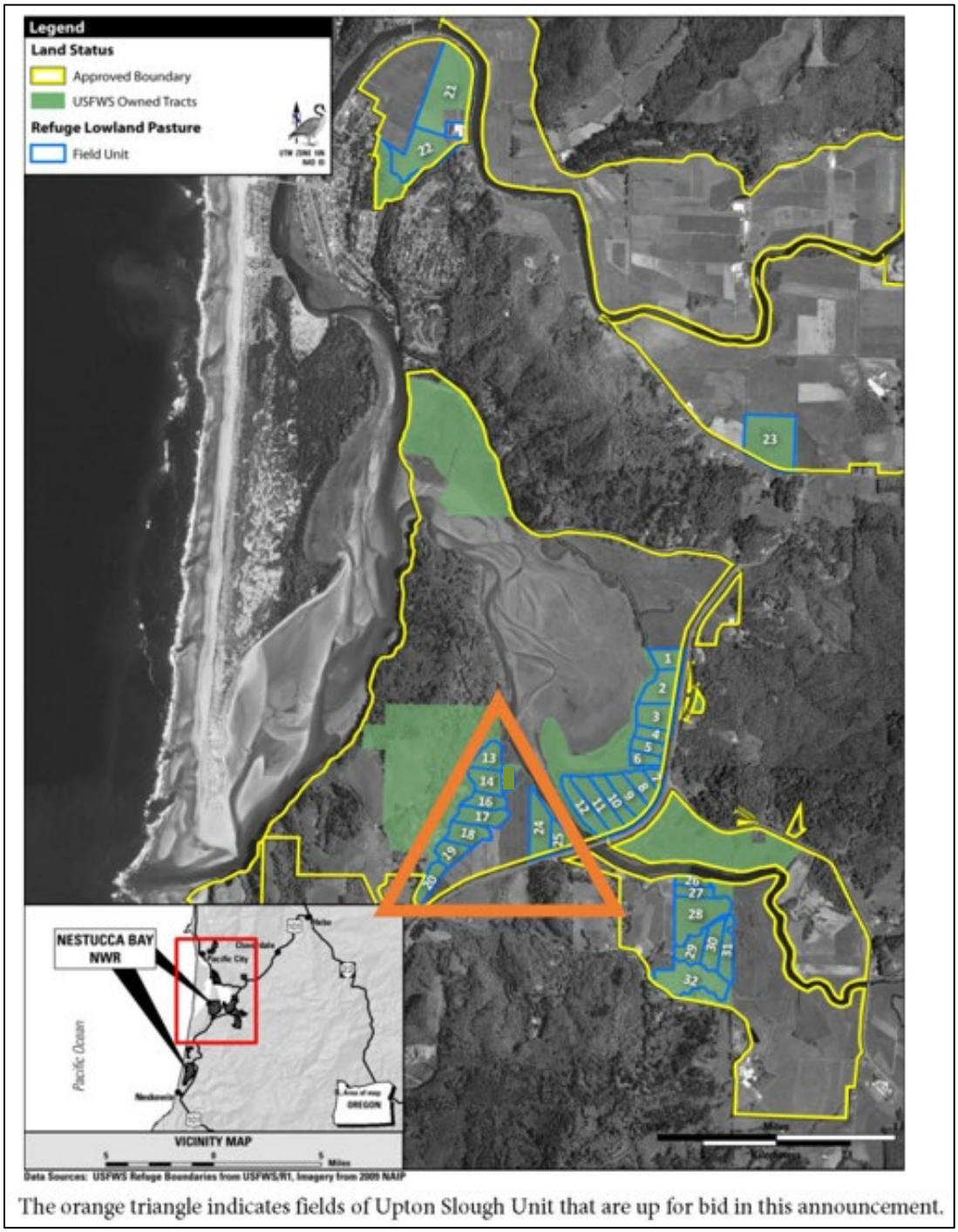
- Monitor water quality on the Refuge to ensure contaminant levels are not exceeded and aquatic resources are protected,
- Conduct periodic soil testing to maintain optimal pH levels and soil condition,
- Monitor lowland pasture vegetation height and species composition to achieve desired parameters,
- Monitor populations six subspecies of Canada geese (western, dusky, lesser, Taverner's, Aleutian, cackling) to determine distribution and abundance,
- Monitor waterfowl populations to determine distribution and abundance,
- Monitor nuisance mammals (e.g., nutria, beaver) populations to determine distribution and abundance, and
- Monitor invasive plant species (e.g., reed canary grass, Himalayan blackberry, *Juncus* spp.) to determine infestation percent and location.

Using a cooperative approach with an agricultural producer, the Service intends to create and maintain lowland pastures characterized by the following:

- Pasture vegetation mix (*e.g.,* orchard grass, annual rye, white clover, *etc.*) that is a maximum of 2" to 4" in height by the end of October each year,
- Naturally saturated to shallowly flooded pastures from approximately October to May,
- Less than 10% plant cover of invasive/undesirable plants (*e.g.,* reed canary grass, Himalayan blackberry, pasture rush, *etc.*),
- Minimal human disturbance while geese are present (approximately October to April).

Proposed Area for Cooperative Agriculture

The Upton Slough Unit (Refuge Pastures 13-14, 16-20, 24-25) is located between the Little Nestucca River, Highway 101, and Christensen Road near Cloverdale, Oregon.



Map 1. Upton Slough Unit pastures, Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Cloverdale, Oregon.

The Upton Slough Unit has a direct connection to Nestucca Bay through two tide gates located at the north end of Upton Slough, which runs parallel to the east edge of fields 13- 20. The pastures on the east side of Upton Slough are privately owned, except for pastures 24-25. The drainage ditch that runs north along the western edge of fields 17-20 backs up in the winter and occasionally floods field 20. This ditch intersects fields 16 and 17 to connect with Upton Slough. There is a fenced-off drainage ditch between each field in this unit. The dike and water control structures are maintained by the diking district, which the Refuge is a member. The district maintains a water pump and when field flooding reaches extreme levels, the water is pumped and removed from the area. **There are no fresh water sources to provide livestock water. The Cooperator will be required to bring in fresh water or plan for an off-site water source.**

Proposed Types of Cooperative Agriculture

The following is a list of agricultural activities that may be conducted on Refuge pastures by the selected Cooperator. All activities must receive prior written approval from the Refuge Manager and must be implemented in coordination with the Service representative assigned to administer the Agreement.

- Cutting - mowing, grazing, haying and greenchopping,
- Planting and seeding - enhance the quality (*e.g.,* crude protein content) and quantity (*e.g.,* tons per acre) of green forage by seeding a desirable grass/forb pasture mix suitable for the local climate, soil, pH, *etc.* Various type and varieties of orchard grass (*Dactylis glomerata*), annual rye (*Lolium multiflorum*), and white clover (*Trifolium repens*) may be appropriate,
- Fertilizer applications - manure application 2-3 times annually during the dry season and application of commercial fertilizer on non-organic fields may enhance the quality and quantity of the green forage. The required setback of natural and commercial fertilizer applications would be 20 feet from all ditches (as recommended by the Oregon State University Agricultural Extension Service),
- Invasive plant control - invasive plants species shall be controlled to less than 10% plant cover using mechanical/physical, chemical, biological, and cultural methods, including pasture rush (*Juncus effusus*), Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*), reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), tansy ragwort (*Tanacetum vulgare*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), and others, as necessary. **Cooperators must be licensed by the State of Oregon to apply herbicides on public land.** See below for information regarding licensing requirements,
- Structure maintenance – The Cooperator would be responsible for maintenance of all tide gates, culverts, ditches, and other infrastructure to ensure proper drainage of all pastures. The Refuge would be responsible for infrastructure replacement. The Cooperator would also be responsible for installing, repairing, and maintaining all livestock infrastructure.

- Additional activities and restrictions would be documented in a Plan of Operations that would be made part of the Agreement.

Restrictions on Cooperative Agriculture

- **Cooperator must be licensed by the State of Oregon to apply herbicides on public land (State of Oregon: Licensing - Explore Licensing Requirements).** Application of pesticides or bio-controls on the Refuge must be approved in writing and in advance through the Service's Pesticide Use Proposal process. All chemical applications must be done in accordance with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Service regulations and policies, and manufacturer's label. Chemical applications must also be coordinated with the Refuge Manager and/or his/her designee, prior to application, and documented in a detailed post-application report. No restricted use chemicals would be permitted for use on the Refuge.
- The required setback of natural and commercial fertilizer applications would be 20 feet from all ditches,
- Livestock shall be removed from all Refuge pastures no later than October 31st of each year,
- Minimal human disturbance would be allowed in or near Refuge pastures from November 1 to April 14 each year.

Proposed cost-sharing information or bids for payment in compliance with the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act.

As part of their bid proposal, prospective Cooperators would be required to submit detailed information about cost-sharing, including but not limited to, material and labor costs for activities such as installing, repairing, and maintaining fences, gates, ditches, culverts, tide gates, seeding, fertilizing, implementing weed treatments, etc. Cost sharing information may also include crop yield information.

Objective criteria under which the Service will evaluate applications.

The producer(s) would be selected through an open and competitive process where applications will be scored and ranked by a panel, including Service, Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, and Oregon State University Agricultural Extension staff using the answers to the questions on the bid sheet and the following criteria:

- Experience in managing lowland pastures, especially personal experience on NWRS lands or comparable conservation lands, including intimate knowledge of soil composition, chemistry, moisture, fertility, water needs, pest problems, *etc*.,

- Demonstrated ability to successfully manage lowland pastures that produce the quality and quantity of green forage necessary to support wintering migratory Canada geese and other migratory birds,
- Ownership or access to the proper equipment, materials, labor, or other resources needed to competently participate in the cost-sharing nature of the Agreement,
- Other objective criteria including, but not limited to, cost sharing details, record keeping and reporting, effective communication, and response time to address issues (*e.g.,* unauthorized grazing, beaver dams, fence repair, *etc.*) necessary to ensure the specified objectives prescribed for the Refuge are met.

Application Process and Deadline

Applications are due by 4 p.m. on March 8, 2024. To apply, please complete FWS Form 3-1383-C (Commercial Activities Special Use Permit Application) and the bid sheet. Hard copies can be requested by calling Shawn Stephensen, Wildlife Biologist at (541) 867-4550 or emailing him at shawn_stephensen@fws.gov.

Completed applications are to be submitted to the Service in a sealed envelope marked Cooperative Agriculture Agreement Application, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2127 SE Marine Science Drive, Newport, OR 97365. The sealed envelopes may be submitted either by mail, hand delivery, or email to kate_iaquinto@fws.gov. The deadline for submittal is March 8, 2024 at 4 PM.

The individual selected as the prospective Cooperator will be notified within approximately three weeks of the completion of the ranking and scoring process. All individual(s) not selected will also be notified about why they were unsuccessful and of their right to appeal any adverse decision in accordance with 50 CFR 25.45. Once awarded, the Service will work with selected cooperator to develop the terms and conditions of the Agreement.

Site Visits

A site visit to the Refuge's lowland pastures will be held on Monday, March 4, 2024. Meet in the lower parking lot of Nestucca Bay Refuge (7000 Christensen Road) at 2:00 pm. Call Shawn Stephensen (541) 867-4550 for more information.

Literature Cited

Blake, K. and S.W. Stephensen. 2023. Canada geese surveys at Nestucca Bay, Oregon Winter 2022-23. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Unpublished Report, Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Newport, Oregon 97365. 25 pp.

Stephensen, S.W. and J.E. Nelson. 2017. Canada geese surveys at Tillamook County, Oregon Winter 2016-17. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Unpublished Report, Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Newport, Oregon 97365. 34 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) 2013. Nestucca Bay National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. USFWS, Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Newport, Oregon, Pacific Northwest Planning Team, Portland, Oregon.