

BUFFERNOTES



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BUFFER NOTES

is written by the **National Association of Conservation Districts** in cooperation with the **Farm Service Agency**

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WALKING ON THE WILDLIFE SIDE

Fall is a good time to focus on wildlife, whether you're a birdwatcher, conservationist, hunter, nature lover, landowner or all of the above.

Several stories in this month's BufferNotes address the benefits of the Conservation Reserve Program and various conservation practices for wildlife. We'd like to claim credit for grouping the stories together into a theme, but it just happened that way.

That doesn't make the stories any less important. They include an announcement about a duck habitat program focused on raising bird counts and increasing wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region. There's also a story about a study that shows CRP boosts pheasant numbers. Wildlife comes in myriad shapes and sizes, and to honor that diversity, we also include stories about Indiana's CREP and how its benefits include improved mussel habitat, thanks to help from The Nature Conservancy. Not to slight insects, we include a piece on a

new outreach tool to underscore the value of native pollinator species and how conservation practices can provide habitat for pollinators, resulting in multiple benefits.

Enjoy, and happy autumn.

Bill Berry, editor



Pheasants and other wildlife species need both food and cover in winter. It is provided by landowners with both annual and perennial plantings. (NRCS photo)

DUCK INITIATIVE AIMS AT MORE BIRDS, WETLANDS

BISMARCK, North Dakota - The Farm Service Agency has unveiled a new CRP Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative to increase duck populations by an estimated 60,000 birds annually and to restore 100,000 wetland acres.

Restoring 100,000 acres of wetland ecosystems in the Prairie Pothole Region will provide nesting ducks with critical habitat, nesting cover, as well as security from predat-

ors and food. The initiative will also benefit other wildlife species, filter runoff, recharge groundwater supplies, protect drinking water and reduce downstream flooding.

Enrollment is limited to land in the Prairie Pothole Region encompassing parts of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota. The acreage is allocated in the amounts of 40,000 acres to North Dakota, 40,000 acres to South Dakota, 8,000 acres to Minnesota, 8,000 acres to Montana and 4,000 acres to Iowa. Land must be located outside the 100-year floodplain. Land eligible for the

program must be capable of being restored to CRP wetland standards. Wetlands must include a buffer that will protect water quality and provide quality nesting habitat.

"This initiative will further CRP's large-scale achievements in protecting our nation's wetlands and wildlife," said John Johnson, FSA deputy administrator for farm programs. "CRP has restored two million wetland and wetland buffer acres nationwide and adds 2.2 million new ducks to our country's flyways each year."

Johnson made the announcement at the Fourth Annual

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North American Duck Symposium in Bismarck, N.D., last month.

For land with fewer than 25 duck pairs per square mile, participants can enroll acreage at a 4-to-1 upland-to-wetland ratio. This means for every one acre of wetlands, there must be four acres of surrounding upland habitat. For land with 25 or more duck pairs per square mile, participants may enroll acreage up to a 10-to-1 upland-to-wetland ratio.

USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation will offer participants an incentive payment equal to 25 percent of the cost to restore the site's hydrology, an annual rental payment and cost-share assistance of up to 50 percent of eligible practice installation costs.

Sign-up for the initiative was set to begin Oct. 1, 2006, at local FSA offices and will run on a continuous basis until enrollment goals are met, or Dec. 31, 2007, whichever comes first.

CRP offers additional wetlands restoration initiatives targeting 500,000 acres inside the 100-year floodplain, 250,000 acres outside the 100-year floodplain and one million acres of previously converted wetlands of less than 40 acres per tract.

More information on the Duck Nesting Habitat Initiative is available at local FSA offices and in the initiative fact sheet located online at: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/publications/facts/html/crpduck06.htm>.

CORRIDORS ENCOURAGE BIODIVERSITY

Researchers report in the journal *Science* that establishing landscape corridors to connect otherwise isolated plant and animal habitats will encourage biological diversity. The researchers, working in South Carolina, say their finding demonstrate this, at least with plants.

Researchers surveyed dozens of test plots in forested areas of the 310-square-

mile Savannah River Site in southeastern South Carolina. Originally set aside to produce nuclear weapons for the military, the plots are now managed by the federal Forest Service for pine production.

The researchers surveyed their sites regularly starting in 2000 and found that there was more plant diversity in areas connected by corridors than in other areas. This was true even if they had the same total area or the same amount of "edge" space between cleared and wooded areas.

The connected patches had 20 percent more species of plants than unconnected patches, reported Ellen Damschen, the lead author of the report and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

More and more, landscape managers are incorporating corridors into their plans, but there is relatively little data on effectiveness.

The site was set up in 1999, when forest service loggers carved out the plots, and there was little difference among plot covers just one year later in 2000. But a different pattern became clear in ensuing years. Not only were there more plant species in connected plots than unconnected ones, there were more native species.

It is surprising to see such a dramatic change over a short time scale, Damschen told interviewers. But the research, also carried out by scientists from several other universities, shows that plants can change relatively quickly through their interactions with the landscape and the animals that interact with them, like birds and rodents that disperse seeds or insects that act as pollinators.

It does not appear that the corridors also help spread invasive species, the researchers wrote. They said that areas connected by corridors "retain more native species than do isolated patches, that this difference increases over time, and that corridors do not promote invasion by exotic species."

The results suggest that corridors are an important tool

not only for preserving wildlife but also for supporting and encouraging plant biodiversity.

In recent decades, many states and communities have set aside land for wildlife corridors. They are even planned on a regional scale, with one proposed corridor stretching 1,800 miles from Yellowstone National Park to the Yukon Territory.

STUDY CONFIRMS CRP A BOON TO PHEASANT NUMBERS

LINCOLN, Neb. - Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced in August the results of a study that demonstrates land CRP land is associated with increased numbers of ring-necked pheasants. The report estimates a 22-percent increase in counts of ring-necked pheasants for every 4 percent increase in CRP enrolled acres within large units of pheasant habitat.

"It's gratifying to see research validating what we've long known - that there are tremendous environmental benefits from CRP along with the benefits to producers," said Johanns. "This is great news for CRP participants, hunters, bird watchers, researchers and conservationists nationwide."

Johanns announced the release of the report at the 2006 Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) Forum in Lincoln.

Researchers from Western EcoSystems Technology (West) in Cheyenne, Wyoming, conducted the pheasant study and prepared the report. The researchers evaluated CRP's impact on ring-necked pheasants by observing Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) counts along 388 nationwide BBS routes. BBS counts are conducted in June during the peak of nesting season, except for desert regions and some southern states, where counts are conducted in May. Consistent methodology, observer expertise, yearly visits to the same

spots and suitable weather conditions produce comparable data over time.

Johanns previously announced plans for the pheasant study in March 2005, along with two other wildlife population research studies. In the second study, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service examines the effect of CRP on Prairie Pothole Region upland duck populations. In another study, Mississippi State University examines the effect of CRP on northern bobwhite quail.

The pheasant study is the first to be completed. The other studies will be finalized by the end of this year. All of the studies quantify CRP accomplishments and improve program accountability.

The report, "Estimating the Response of Ring-Necked Pheasant to the Conservation Reserve Program," is available on FSA's Web site at: www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/publications/crp_pheasants_final_report.pdf and on West's Web site at: www.west-inc.com.

TNC 'MUSSELS IN' TO HELP BOOST INDIANA CREP

The Nature Conservancy is among a growing group of partners interested in working lands conservation. In Indiana, TNC is helping to assure the success of that state's CREP.

CREPs often have multiple goals. Indiana's includes enhancing water quality and improving habitat for threatened and endangered species. In the case of Indiana's Tippecanoe River, freshwater mollusks are among the targeted species. A key species is the club shell mussel, which is on the federal endangered species list.

"Indiana is blessed with a good freshwater mussel population, and TNC's charge is to protect it," says Chad Watts, TNC's Tippecanoe River project manager. Sedimentation and nutrient loadings from agricultural lands are harmful to mussels, and TNC sees the

POLLINATOR POWER: NEW BROCHURE IS AVAILABLE

Conservation plantings are important habitat

To help farmers recognize habitat features and opportunities for conservation that will help pollinators, the Xerces Society has produced an educational brochure in cooperation with NRCS's West Technology Support Center. Copies of a "Farming for Pollinators" brochure will be available in NRCS offices across the country in October.

Pollinators are an important part of on-farm biodiversity, with the potential to provide significant economic as well as environmental benefits. They help maintain diverse plant communities that provide food for wildlife and are needed to produce seed and fruit for approximately 70 percent of crop species worldwide. Conservation buffers, CRP plantings of native grasses and trees and other conservation practices are valuable habitat niches for pollinators. In turn, pollinators such as bees and other insects, bats and birds enhance the potential of conservation plantings to achieve environmental goals, including wildlife habitat in robust plant communities and enhanced water quality and erosion control.

Farmers in the U.S. rely upon insect pollinators to produce a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. This produce and its indirect products (such as milk from cows fed on alfalfa), represent 15 to 30 percent of the foods and beverages Americans consume.

Research shows value of native pollinators

Non-native honey bees are the most important pollinators for working farms, but native bees may be able to ease the burden at a time when honey bees are seeing significant declines across the

country. Wild-living native bees already occur on most farms, contribute to current crop yields and can provide an insurance policy for farmers' pollination needs.

Their value was illustrated by professor Claire Kremen at the University of California-Berkeley and her research team. They found more than 50 species of native, unmanaged bees providing pollination services to 14 different crops. In fact, when enough habitat is available on or near a farm, native bees provide all of the pollination needed by certain crops - even those with heavy pollination demands.

The abundance of native pollinators depends on both the presence of suitable habitat near a field and careful farm management. Farms close to natural habitat may already be visited by significant populations of native bees. On private working lands, three resources must be in place if growers want to increase pollinator populations:

- A variety of flowering plants that provide pollen and nectar from early spring to late fall
- Nesting sites
- A refuge from insecticides

All of these resources can occur in small patches or in marginal areas across a farm, such as around farm ponds, fence-rows, field margins, or riparian buffers.

The new "Farming for Pollinators" brochure is also available as a pdf at http://www.xerces.org/Pollinator_Insect_Conservation/Bee_Farming_Brochure.pdf

Other resources include:

- An-NRCS produced Native Pollinators Habitat Management Leaflet, available at

<ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/WHMI/WEB/pdf/TechnicalLeaflets/NativePollinators.pdf>.

- The first two of a four-issue series on pollinator conservation in the USDA Agroforestry Center's "Agroforestry Notes." For more information on the National Agroforestry Center and its publications, please visit its Web site: <http://www.unl.edu/nac/index.htm>.

- Detailed information on how to provide habitat for native bees and other important pollinators available from the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation at www.xerces.org.

Wendell Gilgert, NRCS wildlife biologist in the West National Technical Support Center, Portland, Oregon, and Mace Vaughan, conservation director at the Xerces Society, provided information for this story.

Contact Gilgert at 503-273-2426 or Wendell.Gilgert@por.usda.gov. Contact Vaughan at 503-232-6639 or mace@xerces.org.



The yellow-faced bumble bee (*Bombus vosnesenkii*) forages on red raspberry. (Photo by Mace Vaughan)

CREP as a way to address that concern, Watts says.

"We saw CREP as great opportunity to reduce sediment to these communities. That's been our big push - to work with the ag community to reduce the threat."

In addition to assisting efforts to restore riparian corridors and reforestation with CREP, TNC is also promoting conservation tillage.

TNC offers incentives for lands reforested in priority areas that are within two miles of the Tiptecanoe. TNC pro-

vides landowners an option to extend contracts from 15 to 25 years, providing a one-time payment of \$250 an acre. Contract extensions are also available for wetland restoration in the upper portion of the watershed.

TNC also offers \$500 an acre for landowners choosing a permanent easement within two miles of the river in the CREP area. "We have had some interest in permanent easements. A lot of those fields are bottomlands that flood out," Watts says.

Conservation tillage can open doors, too

TNC has found that conservation tillage is "a great gateway program to promote CREP," Watts says. The organization is in the third year of an effort to encourage conservation tillage in Indiana. It offers an insurance program for cooperators. "They farm a portion of their land as they have in the past and a portion with conservation tillage," he says. "We track all inputs on the farms, then plug them into

a database that gives the overall net gain or loss per year. If the way they've been doing things is superior, we make up the difference up to \$100 per acre." TNC also provides a crop consultant and helps landowners purchase conservation tillage equipment, covering 30 percent of the cost.

"We're using it as a soil quality education tool as well," Watts says. "We focus on soil structure, organic matter, all those things that help to reduce nutrients and help to grow crops. It has bought us a

lot of good will.”

TNC relies on help from friends. “We work a lot with soil and water conservation districts, NRCS, state agriculture folks and others to help open doors for us,” Watts says.

Indiana’s \$20.2 million CREP was signed in July 2005. It targets the enrollment of 7,000 acres in the Highland/Pigeon, Tippecanoe and Upper White River watersheds. The total cost over a 15-year period is estimated at \$20.2 million, with the federal government contributing \$14.6 million and the state funding \$5.6 million.

More information on the Indiana CREP is available on FSA’s Web site at: www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/default.htm.

Contact Chad Watts for more information on TNC’s program at cwatts@tnc.org or 574-946-7491.

OHIO LAKE ERIE CREP ENHANCED

LONDON, Ohio - Ohio’s Lake Erie CREP has been enhanced to attract more participants. It adds new conservation practices, targets additional areas and improves water quality, and increases payments to some landowners.

Several states have worked

with FSA to make changes to their CREPs in recent years, underscoring the program’s flexibility and ability to meet local needs.

Larry Adams, USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) assistant deputy administrator for farm programs, joined Ohio officials Sept. 19 to announce additions to the CREP that will improve the water quality of Lake Erie and contributing watersheds. The Lake Erie CREP is one of three in Ohio. The only other state with three CREPs is New York.

Adams made the announcement at the Farm Science Review held in London, Ohio, during a ceremony recognizing the 20th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Also participating in the CRP event were John Stevenson, Ohio FSA state executive director; Sam Speck, director for Ohio Department of Natural Resources; David Hanselmann, chief of the Division of Soil and Water Conservation for Ohio Department of Natural Resources; Dave Graham, assistant chief for the Division of Wildlife for Ohio Department of Natural Resources; Terry Cosby, state conservationist for Ohio USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Kurt Waterstradt, state coordinator for U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service; Gary Moore, agricultural policy specialist for The Nature Conservancy; and representatives from Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever.

Although the Ohio Lake Erie CREP has been successful so far, enrolling more than 25,000 acres, Ohio partners believe the improvements are necessary to achieve the program’s goals. The amended agreement gives participants the option of entering into a state agreement to extend environmental benefits by an additional 15 years and focuses more state funds on water quality practices.

FSA and Ohio officials upgraded the CREP project by adding new conservation practices such as:

- Planting introduced and native grasses/legumes in filter, recharge and other areas;
- Restoring wetland in non-floodplain areas;
- Planting rare and declining habitat covers
- Establishing conservation buffers on marginal pastureland

The Ohio Lake Erie CREP project area includes all or portions of 27 northwestern Ohio counties in the Lake Erie watershed.

Sign-up for the enhanced

Ohio Lake Erie CREP is scheduled to begin Oct. 20, 2006.

FSA estimates the Ohio Lake Erie CREP total cost when fully enrolled over a 15-year period at \$220 million with USDA contributing \$184 million, and Ohio funding \$36 million.

Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever contribute to the Ohio Lake Erie CREP by providing technical assistance to FSA offices and by promoting the program. In 2005, FSA and Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever formally agreed to cooperate to enhance pheasant and other wildlife populations through habitat improvement, public awareness and education, and land management that also benefits landowners.

More information on the Ohio Lake Erie and other CREPs: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=cep>.

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