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WETLANDS: Prairie potholes could shrink as CRP prepares to shed 11M acres

By: Scott Streater, E&E reporter
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Conservation groups remain worried that millions of wetland acres across the Upper Midwest and Great Plains that are critical nesting and breeding grounds for waterfowl will soon be plowed under despite ongoing federal efforts to preserve the land.

The focus of the concern is North America’s Prairie Pothole region, where millions of ducks, geese and migratory birds find sanctuary in the shallow wetlands that stretches from Montana to portions of Minnesota and Iowa, and encompasses parts of Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The Agriculture Department’s chief strategy to protect the potholes is its long-established Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) -- a voluntary effort in which USDA agrees to pay private landowners to temporarily retire crops, establish wildlife habitat and protect water quality (Greenwire, Sept. 14).

USDA has contracts with landowners to preserve about 31 million acres, and this month the agency announced it had secured commitments from landowners to re-enroll or add some 4.3 million acres in the program.

The Prairie Pothole region derives its name from the thousands of small wetlands that dot the landscape. Conservation groups worry, however, that the critical waterfowl habitat could be lost to expanding agriculture.

At the federal government’s current rate of payment to CRP participants -- about $46 per acre this year, down from $53 per acre last year -- there may not be enough incentive for farm owners to preserve the land, said Scott McLeod, government affairs representative for Ducks Unlimited in Bismarck, N.D.

“They can make more money” by planting crops, McLeod said. “It all comes down to economics.”

The issue has placed the Agriculture Department in a tough spot.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has said he is committed to keeping the CRP program at or near the 32-million-acre cap established by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill. Meeting that pledge could require additional efforts to re-enroll landowners in the program as well as recruiting new farmers, said Kent Politisch, a USDA spokesman in Washington, D.C.

“While we are interested in a number of key landscapes across the country,” Hall wrote, “the [Prairie Pothole region] is at the greatest risk of loss, and there is a need for immediate action.”

The region’s unique topography -- prairie grassland packed with shallow depressions that collect and store water -- was formed 10,000 years ago when glaciers from the last ice age receded, scouring the landscape and leaving behind large indentations, or “potholes.”

An estimated 75 percent of all North American waterfowl use the region for breeding and nesting, earning it the nickname of “America’s duck factory,” according to the Minnesota Conservation Federation.

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In addition, nearly half of all migratory bird species on the continent use the region’s fertile grasslands for breeding, nesting and resting during spring and fall migrations. The Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated that efforts to set aside millions of acres in the region have resulted in adding millions of mallards, blue-winged teals and northern shovelers to the region, McLeod said.

“As we continue to lose acres, that will impact a number of birds,” McLeod said.

Energy vs. conservation

One of the top concerns for conservationists and others trying to preserve the prairie is the push to develop corn-based ethanol.

More than 3.2 million acres of prairie potholes were plowed under across portions of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota in just three years, from 2005 to 2007, to make room for expanding corn crops, according to a report earlier this year by University of Michigan researchers working on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation (Land Letter, Jan. 21).

Much of the additional corn has gone to meet federal mandates for ethanol, which, when blended with gasoline, can reduce certain tailpipe emissions.

The Michigan study followed a Jan. 6 policy paper by Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy that concluded, “Increases in corn-based ethanol production in the Midwest could cause an increase in detrimental regional environmental impacts.”

And in October, a study led by researchers from the Nature Conservancy, Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan Technical University and University of Minnesota found that while the burning of ethanol-blended fuels can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the land-use requirements for growing corn feedstocks are taking a toll on wildlife habitat (Land Letter, Oct. 8, 2009).

That study, published in the journal BioScience, found that the amount of land used to grow corn for ethanol increased by 12 million acres between 2005 and 2008. That includes millions of acres of land formerly set aside under the CRP.

Industry is sensitive to such concerns, said Chris Thorne, a spokesman for Growth Energy, a trade organization that represents ethanol producers.

But Thorne said that corn production has grown more efficient thanks to better farming practices and new seed technology that allows for higher yields. In fact, 2010 will produce one of the three largest corn crops in U.S. history on roughly the same amount of land as the year before, he said.

“The average corn yield has gone up exponentially and we’re getting more per acre,” Thorne said. “That, in turn, has allowed us to expand the total number of bushels we produced on the same amount of land as before.”

Streater wrote from Colorado Springs, Colo.

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Chris Hesla, P.O. Box 7075, Pierre, SD 57501-7075
**President’s Column**  
*by Bill Antonides*

This is a very difficult column for me to write because it is my very first as President of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, and there is so much to say I don’t know where to begin. I have been a member of the SDWF for over two decades by belonging to one of the affiliated clubs, but rarely gave the Federation itself a second thought, at least not at first. I just figured a few dollars of my dues went to another organization that may be doing some good, but like the vast majority of people, I really didn’t pay attention.

I started to pay attention shortly after becoming a conservation officer in 1983. I learned about the SDWF Youth Conservation Camp, an annual event where Federation members, GF&P personnel, and other individuals and agencies team up to teach kids from across the state about our natural resources and what is required to nurture and maintain what we have. It was gratifying to be part of a group that does what our last President, Rieck Eske, advised at the end of each of his monthly columns: “Carry on the Tradition.”

I also learned that with each passing year more and more legislation was introduced to increase the commercialization and privatization of our natural resources, thereby reducing access for the average person. It seemed few voices were speaking out for the sportsmen and other conservationists of the state. The Game, Fish and Parks was doing what it could, but as a state agency under the control of the Governor and commissioners appointed by the Governor, the ability of the Department to fulfill its mission statement was often hamstringed by political interests. It didn’t take long to realize the one voice that could be counted on to speak up for everyone who thinks like most South Dakotans who enjoy the out-of-doors think was the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.

In 2005, I retired from the SD Game, Fish and Parks, and shortly thereafter attended the SDWF annual convention in Aberdeen, SD. I was asked by the Executive Committee to join the SDWF Board of Directors. Within three years I was a vice president, thanks in no small part to my inability to keep my mouth shut. The same inability to keep my opinions to myself led me to where I am now, the latest in a long line of SDWF Presidents. As I look back on the work accomplished by my predecessors, I know my job is enormous, the challenges immense. The best way to thank them for what they have done is to make sure their work continues.

It is not going to be easy. I started writing this, my first President’s Column, the day my daughter went into labor with my first granddaughter, Ivy. Since then, I have been away from home on multiple occasions doing my job as an airport wildlife hazard management consultant. In fact, due to a fire on Labor Day, I’ve been away from my own home almost the entire time I’ve been president of the Federation. We’ll be back in our house in time for Christmas, although Christmas is looking like it might be around Valentine’s Day for us.

Meanwhile, the work of the Federation goes on, thanks in no small part to the dedicated group of people who lead the Federation, and especially to the members of the Federation, who respond en masse to requests for e-mails, calls and letters to our legislators and commission- ers. Just in the last few weeks, we have greatly influenced the thinking of both candidates for governor. Never ever doubt the power of even a single person to change the minds of those who govern us. As a group of 3500 like-minded individuals, we can accomplish almost anything we truly desire. We fight for what is right, we are strong, we are the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, and we are darn proud of it.

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**Executive Director’s Update**  
*by Chris Hesla*

My blood is still pumping hard and fast. Nothing can replace or imitate the sound and feel of a rooster exploding under your feet. We had a great opening weekend of pheasant hunting in Potter County. There were plenty of birds to shoot at, enough where bagged, and it is always great to see old friends.

The elections are right around the corner. Because the SDWF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, neither the organization nor the Executive Director can endorse any political candidate—but we can educate and inform. I urge each and every one of you to research the candidates and choose those that best support your views and beliefs. Then continue to work with them to keep them informed on the importance of your issues.

SDWF is aware of the gubernatorial candidates’ ideas for the future of hunting and fishing in SD. If you have not seen the candidates’ stances, please take time to review their websites and cast your vote for who best represents your interests. http://www.scotheidepriem.com and http://www.dennisdaugaard.com for more info.

As far as the 52 legislative seats that will be decided on November 2nd, ask the candidates their positions about hunting and fishing whenever they ask for your vote.

I hunt with SDWF’s lobbyist Dave Nauman on his farm in Potter County. He and I work some long yet fulfilling days during the legislative session. Thanks you and Dave, we have been very successful in protecting the rights of South Dakota sportsmen/women and visitors. This year we will have a new Governor and 52 new or re-elected legislators (of 105) in the 2010-2011 Legislative Session.

On a national level it’s the mid-term election which will determine the mood in DC for the next 2 years. Conservationists here in SD are already been working on the authorization and implementation of a new Farm Bill in the 2012 Congress. For those of you who do not have a lot of knowledge about the Farm Bill, almost all wildlife and the quality of that wildlife here in SD depend on the conservation plans implemented by the Federal government through tax payer funding. This is where programs such as CRP, CREP, WHIP, EQUIP and many other programs with 3 or 4 letter acronyms are found. The Farm Bill allows producers to idle some land and cost-share the planting of habitat on farms and ranches across the USA, which benefits the environment and wildlife.

SDWF will do its best to keep you informed. THANK YOU for all that each of you do.
South Dakota’s outdoor heritage and natural resources are extremely important to her people. Credit for helping to preserve that heritage goes to one organization and its many involved and passionate members. The South Dakota Wildlife Federation (SDWF) was founded in 1945 and is the leading sportsman/conservation organization in the state.

“The SDWF works hard to protect rights and opportunities of our hunters, anglers and other conservationists,” said Bill Antonides, Aberdeen, newly elected president heading the 3,500-member organization.

SDWF and its 15 affiliate clubs throughout the state, including Sportsman’s Club of Brown County, are in turn affiliates of the National Wildlife Federation, the largest conservation organization in the world.

“Our lobbying efforts are one of the most important things we do,” said Antonides. “Every year, sportsmen and other conservationists lose more of our South Dakota heritage as our legislators and other elected officials sell access to our natural resources to the highest bidder, or otherwise deny the average sportsmen the rights they should have.”

SDWF also promotes youth education, habitat improvement, landowner/sportsmen relations and more. “We actively support laws beneficial to our natural resources and oppose laws which unfairly promote commercialization and privatization of wildlife,” said Antonides.

Antonides is a long-term member of the SDWF, was appointed to the board after retirement from GFP in 2005 and served as vice president before his election as president. His wife, Lila, is also an enthusiastic SDWF member.

Re-printed with permission from the writer on the Berdette Zastrow’s article. Photo By Bill Antonides.
2011 SOUTH DAKOTA MOUNTAIN LION SEASON SET

SAVOY, S.D. - The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission has approved rules that will allow hunters to harvest up to 50 mountain lions in the 2011 hunting season. The season will let hunters harvest five mountain lions of either sex in Custer State Park.

Both the statewide season and Custer State Park season will run from Jan. 1 - March 31, 2011. The statewide season will have a harvest limit of 45 mountain lions. The season will end early if the 45-lion limit is met or if a limit of 30 female mountain lions is met. An unlimited number of mountain lion licenses will be available at a fee of $25. Ten licenses will be available for the Custer State Park season and will be issued through a lottery license drawing. The season will end when the harvest limit of five mountain lions is met. The lion license fee for the Custer State Park season is $155.

Although resident hunters will be able to hold both the statewide mountain lion license and the Custer State Park license, a hunter may only harvest one mountain lion in a season. A mountain lion harvested within any of the mountain lion seasons must be presented to a Game and Fish Park official within 24 hours.

FISHING REGULATIONS PROPOSED

SAVOY, S.D. - South Dakota Game Fish and Parks Commission members have proposed standardizing several fishing regulations. The proposals would:

* Change legal spearing dates on inland waters for rough fish to allow spearing year-round.
* Change legal spearing dates for rough fish in South Dakota-Minnesota border waters to allow spearing from May 1 through the last Sunday in February.
* Repeal a rule limiting the dates for spearing rough fish in certain northeastern counties.
* Change the statewide deadline for removal of ice fishing shelters to the last day of February.
* Add a game-fish spearing and archery certification permit for $5 as a requirement for taking of game fish with legal spears, spears guns or bows and arrows.
* Add a nonresident youth (under age 16) fishing license for $25.
* Reduce the statewide panfish limit from 25 daily to 15, and from 50 in possession to 30.
* Change daily and possession limits for yellow perch on South Dakota-Minnesota boundary waters from 25 to 15.

“Standardizing spearing dates will provide more opportunities for spearing without impacting the resources,” said GFP Fisheries Program Manager Geno Adams. “The addition of the game-fish certification permit will help Game, Fish and Parks by letting us know how many people participate in the spearing of game fish. Changes to the panfish limits will simplify our regulations state-wide without sacrificing the quality of our fisheries and reduce the likelihood of inadvertent violations of daily limits.”

The GFP Commission will take final action on those proposed changes during its next meeting at the Ramkota River Center in Pierre on Nov. 4-5, 2010. People wishing to comment on the proposals may send letters to the Game Fish and Parks Department at 523 E. Capitol, Pierre, SD 57501, or by e-mail to wildinfo@state.sd.gov. Please include your name and city of residence if you wish to be part of the public record. All letters and e-mails must be received by noon Wednesday, Nov. 3. People also may testify at the GFP Commission meeting on Thursday, Nov. 4 at 2 p.m. Central Time.
Delicate S.D. bird finicky to cook but worth the work

Sioux Falls Argus Leader

The ring-necked pheasant is foremost known as a game bird, offering sport to hunters on the state’s prairie grasslands and fields. Beyond the challenge of the hunt, chefs and home cooks face another challenge in the kitchen. Many avoid cooking pheasant because of its unfamiliar taste and previous unsavory cooking experiences, says Nancy Gellerman, owner and chef of Wild Sage Grille at Cherapa Place.

“(Pheasant hunting) is the No. 1 pastime in the state of South Dakota, and it is the least-liked animal. … You have to take care of it. You have to slow-cook this bird. You have to marinate this bird. You have to brine this bird.”

So, why bother? Chefs praise the rich, distinctive flavors of pheasant, along with its local-food status. Last year, the state’s pheasant population was 8.4 million, according to the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks. Saturday marked the start of the state’s pheasant hunting season.

Chef John Noel Gilbertson hunts pheasant and also enjoys cooking it. “(Pheasant) is about the prairie. It’s about where we live. It’s maybe the one most unique South Dakota-identified foods besides corn and soybeans,” says Gilbertson, executive chef at Sanford Health.

Gilbertson never settles for the standard pheasant dish add-on, cream of mushroom soup. He prefers brussing pheasant with wine, such as pinot noir, and letting the natural flavors come through. “(Pheasant) has a distinct poultry taste without being gamy,” he says.

“It can be very delicate. … You’ll always have a better product to go with the flavor.”

Pheasant has a tendency to dry out and, unlike chicken, doesn’t fit into one-size-fits-all recipes. Chefs recommend techniques that create moisture, such as braising and brining.

The key to preparing pheasant, Gellerman says, is to plan ahead and incorporate pheasant into comfort food, such as pheasant and wild rice soup, pheasant stroganoff and pot pie or shepherd’s pie.

Gellerman’s cuisine has a focus on local foods, such as buffalo, elk and pheasant. She discovered a pheasant start, with butternut squash, shiitake mushrooms, leeks, cream, fresh sage and garden carrots.

She recommends brining the pheasant or covering in bacon and then roasting. Or cook the pheasant in a slow cooker with orange juice or white wine and onions. Then, break apart the meat to make pasta dishes like stroganoff or wild rice soup.

The best part on the bird are the breasts and thighs; if you use other parts, you run the risk of having bone or, if it’s a game bird, pellets.

Place pheasant overnight in a mixture of water, brown sugar, maple syrup, garlic, onion and cloves. Also consider using Asian spices, such as coconut milk, sautés and curries, in an ode to the pheasant’s homeland.

Daniel Coyt prepares pheasant at Cheyenne Ridge Signature Lodge, a pheasant-hunting and fishing lodge north of Pierre. He serves pheasant breast with butternut squash, shiitake mushrooms, leeks, cream, fresh sage and garden carrots.

Coyt’s recipe for roasted pheasant breast with rosemary smashed reds was featured in the February 2008 issue of Southern Living Magazine. He doesn’t serve that dish at the lodge, but he serves other entrees such as braised pheasant breast with a cherry port wine sauce.

Hunters frequently call and e-mail Coyt asking how to prepare the bird. Pheasant is difficult to prepare, he says, but it’s worth a shot.

“You do the labor of walking those fields, hunting those birds, shooting the birds,” Coyt says. “… If you’re doing all of this to get your pheasant at your home, at least try to cook it and get your worthwhile, your money’s work, and get fulfillment out of it, from start to finish. If you can get out there and hunt them, why not cook them?”
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2. Jim Beam Brands, Co. is not responsible for lost, late or misdirected entries. Limit one entry per person and one prize per qualifying person.

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   One first prize winner will receive a $600 gift certificate redeemable at sporting goods retailer Scheels All Sport, one convertible Windsor® Canadian hunting jacket, one Browning lightweight jacket, one shot shell thermos, one Windsor® Canadian hat, one ammo gear bag, one Windsor® Canadian travel mug, one Windsor® Canadian travel blanket, and one Windsor® Canadian gun carrying case. Approximate retail value: $1100.

   One second prize winner will receive a $500 gift certificate redeemable at sporting goods retailer Scheels All Sport, one convertible Windsor® Canadian hunting jacket, one Browning lightweight jacket, one shot shell thermos, one Windsor® Canadian hat, one ammo gear bag, one Windsor® Canadian travel mug, one Windsor® Canadian travel blanket, and one Windsor® Canadian gun carrying case. Approximate retail value: $1000.

   One third prize winner will receive a $400 gift certificate redeemable at sporting goods retailer Scheels All Sport, one convertible Windsor® Canadian hunting jacket, one Browning lightweight jacket, one shot shell thermos, one Windsor® Canadian hat, one ammo gear bag, one Windsor® Canadian travel mug, one Windsor® Canadian travel blanket, and one Windsor® Canadian gun carrying case. Approximate retail value: $900.

   One fourth prize winner will receive a $275 gift certificate redeemable at sporting goods retailer Scheels All Sport, one convertible Windsor® Canadian hunting jacket, one Browning lightweight jacket, one shot shell thermos, one Windsor® Canadian hat, one ammo gear bag, one Windsor® Canadian travel mug, one Windsor® Canadian travel blanket and one Windsor® Canadian gun carrying case. Approximate retail value: $775.

   One fifth place prize winner will receive a $225 gift certificate redeemable at sporting goods retailer Scheels All Sport, one convertible Windsor® Canadian hunting jacket, one Browning lightweight jacket, one shot shell thermos, one Windsor® Canadian hat, one ammo gear bag, one Windsor® Canadian travel mug, one Windsor® Canadian travel blanket, and one Windsor® Canadian gun carrying case. Approximate retail value: $725.

   295 sixth place prize winners will receive a Windsor® Canadian baseball cap and a Windsor® Canadian travel mug. Approximate retail value $35.
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4. All winners must provide positive identification specified by Jim Beam Brands, Co. to claim a prize and will be required to sign and return an affidavit of eligibility, publicity and liability release within 14 days of notification or the prize will be forfeited. Entrants waive all rights and remedies by law or in equity for any claim they may have relating to this promotion. Except where prohibited, acceptance of a prize constitutes a winner’s agreement to hold harmless Jim Beam Brands, Co., their affiliates and officers, directors, employees and agents of each of them (individually and collectively for the purposes of this paragraph 3, “Jim Beam Brands, Co.”) from and against any injuries, losses or damages related in any way to their participation in this promotion including Jim Beam Brands, Co. reliance upon their compliance with these rules and agreement and Jim Beam Brands, Co. may use his or her name, voice likeness and/or biographical data for advertising or promotional purposes on any and all media without further compensation.

5. This sweepstakes is open only to residents of the United States 21 years of age or older who hold a South Dakota pheasant hunting license valid for the time of the contest. Employees of Jim Beam Brands, Co., their affiliates, advertising and promotion agencies, distributors, wholesalers, holders of resale alcohol beverage license permits or agent and the immediate families and/or those residing in the same household as any of these above are not eligible. This sweepstakes shall only be construed and evaluated according to United States law and submission of a winning tag constitutes acceptance of the laws of the United States. Void in California and where prohibited.

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