

# The Conservation Reserve Program

## *Critical Waterfowl Nesting Habitat at Risk in the Prairie Pothole Region*

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was authorized by the Food Security Act of 1985 and nationwide enrollment was capped at 45 million acres. The CRP allows producers to enter into 10 or 15 year contracts with the USDA to convert highly erodible cropland into perennial cover. It was reauthorized in the 1996 and 2002 Farm Bill and the nationwide cap is now 39.2 million acres. Currently, 36 million acres are enrolled and approximately 8 million acres are located in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR).

The goals of the CRP are five-fold:

- reduce soil erosion on highly erodible land
- protect ground and surface water by reducing runoff and sedimentation
- increase benefits for wildlife
- protect the nation's long-term capacity to provide food and fiber and
- provide income support to producers by curbing the production of surplus commodities

To date, CRP has arguably been the most successful conservation program in the U. S. in terms of improving water quality and soil quality and building wildlife populations. One of Ducks Unlimited's highest priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill is to maintain 8 million acres of CRP in the PPR within the current nationwide cap of 39.2 million acres.

### **How has CRP in the PPR benefited waterfowl?**

The CRP has provided well documented, measurable benefits to continental waterfowl populations. CRP



Blue-wing teal ducklings in a CRP field in South Dakota.

in the PPR provides vital nesting cover in the form of large, undisturbed blocks of perennial grassland cover for mallards and many other species of upland nesting waterfowl. Research by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has shown that nest success for upland nesting waterfowl in the PPR of the Dakotas and Montana is 46% higher with CRP than without it. In addition, the USFWS estimates that the current acreage of CRP in the PPR is annually adding 2.1 million ducks to the fall flight.

### **Why the concern over CRP in the PPR?**

Approximately 6.4 million acres or 79% of the CRP acres in the PPR are set to expire from 2007-2010. Nearly 3.36 million or 42% will expire in 2007 alone.

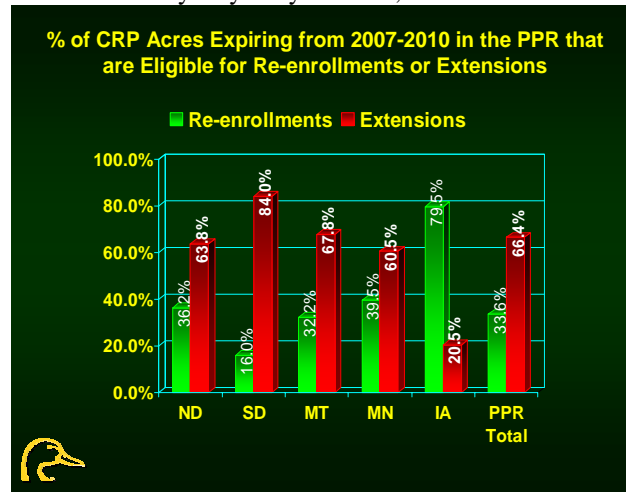
On August 4, 2004, President Bush instructed the Secretary of Agriculture to offer contract reenrollments and extensions for CRP acres expiring from 2007-2010. On September 28, 2005, Agricultural Secretary Mike Johanns unveiled a plan for the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to fulfill the President's request. In order to determine which contracts would be offered reenrollments (new, 10 or 15 year contracts) and which would be offered extensions (2-5 years), FSA decided to use the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) scores when the contracts were first written as a means of ranking. The top 20% of scores nationwide will be offered reenrollments, the next 20% will be offered 5-yr. extensions, the next 20% will be offered 4-yr. extensions, the next 20% will be offered 3-yr. extensions and the bottom 20% will be offered 2-yr. extensions.

Unfortunately, only 2.02 million acres or 34% of the acres expiring in the PPR from 2007-2010 will be offered reenrollments. The PPR of South Dakota, one of the most important areas for nesting waterfowl, will fare much worse with only 16% being offered reenrollments.

### **What does the loss of CRP mean for waterfowl?**

With 79% of the CRP acres in the PPR set to expire from 2007-2010 and a reenrollment rate of 34%, the best case scenario for waterfowl populations is a reduction of 1,143,787 birds/yr. in the fall flight over the next 8 years unless these acres can be replaced. This assumes that all offers for reenrollments and extensions are accepted and that

the entire acreage is reenrolled or extended, which are both unlikely. By the year 2015, all contract



extensions will have expired and the PPR will have lost 4 million acres or 49.7% of its CRP acres. Maintaining 8 million acres of CRP in the PPR is critical for maintaining strong continental waterfowl populations and the next big challenge is to figure out how to replace the acres that are lost.

### What are the next steps?

The first step is getting CRP reauthorized in the 2007 Farm Bill. This is critical if other options for replacing acres in the PPR are to be pursued. Following reauthorization, one option for replacing expiring acres is through future, general signups. However, if this option is to be successful, the EBI must be restructured to make offers in the PPR competitive once again. In the most recent general signups, the acceptance rates for offers in the PPR have been well below the national average. The PPR is considered a National Conservation Priority Area (NCPA) and therefore, awarding additional points to offers in this region is the most logical way to adjust the EBI. The addition of 50 points for offers located within a NCPA would be a good starting point to help make the PPR competitive once again.

Another option may be to regionalize CRP and establish a continuous practice for the PPR that allows for large, block plantings. Continuous CRP practices are beneficial to producers because:

- they can enroll at anytime as long as the acreage cap has not been exceeded;
- they no longer need to compete nationally through the EBI and;
- they only need to meet the eligibility requirements of the CRP

Establishing a cap of 5 million acres in the PPR would pave the way for replacement of the 4.75 million acres of CRP that will eventually be lost. While not as simple and straightforward, this option may be the most effective, although the concept does need substantial leg work.

However, in order for the CRP to have any chance of success in the future, rental rates must be adjusted in order for the program to be competitive with rising cash rental rates on existing cropland. The growing biofuels industry has caused commodity prices to surge and cash rental rates have increased substantially. Rental rates on CRP across the PPR have failed to keep pace and in many cases are only half of the going rate on nearby cropland.

CRP is a vitally important component of the landscape in the PPR and provides vital nesting cover for upland nesting waterfowl, shorebirds, grassland songbirds and prairie grouse and provides habitat for a myriad of other wildlife species as well. Maintaining the current acreage of CRP in the PPR is necessary to sustain the societal benefits to soil, water and wildlife that have been achieved with this program since its inception in 1985.

