

# “Sodsaver”: Saving America’s Prairie

## *Current farm policy is fueling the destruction of Prairie Pothole grasslands*

The Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) was once part of the largest grassland ecosystems in the world. However, the region has changed dramatically since the days of Lewis and Clark. After settlement, grasslands in the most productive portions of the PPR were converted to cropland to feed a growing world population. Today, grassland-dominated landscapes are largely confined to areas with poor soils, steep topography, and/or climatic conditions unsuitable for crop production.

Unfortunately, a new wave of grassland conversion has occurred in the last decade, causing significant ecological and sociological impacts to the region. Current farm policy is fueling the destruction of this rare and important habitat. Congress must implement a policy in the 2007 Farm Bill to reverse this trend. Ducks Unlimited suggests calling this the “Sodsaver” provision.

### **What’s happening?**

Of the 13.8 million acres of native prairie that remains in the eastern Dakotas, the FSA reports that 298,000 acres (2.2%) were converted to cropland during 2002-05. Unfortunately, this 0.55% annual conversion rate may be much higher in some regions. For example, research by Ducks Unlimited conducted in the Missouri Coteau region of the Dakotas has documented annual loss rates as high as 2% in some key areas. At that rate, half of the remaining native grassland in those areas will be lost in only 34 years!



### **Why is this occurring?**

The accelerated loss of native grassland is a combined result of technological advances and unintended

consequences of federal farm policy. The current Farm Bill provides substantial price support and risk protection to crop producers. The combination of loan-deficiency and disaster payments – coupled with crop insurance – makes crop production economically viable even if high yields are never achieved. The reduction in economic risk, combined with advances in herbicides, genetically engineered crops, and large farm equipment, provides the incentive to break new ground. Additionally, because there is negligible government support for the cattle ranching industry – the current land-use for most native grasslands – subsidized crop producers have a significant economic advantage when competing to rent and buy native grassland.

### **Why is loss of native prairie important?**

Temperate grasslands, like those in the PPR, are at highest risk of conversion to cropland yet have some of the lowest rates of protection of any major ecological biome on earth. The grasslands of the PPR provide critically important habitat for prairie wildlife and are the heart of the breeding range for many North American ducks and shorebirds. The region also hosts numerous grassland-dependent songbirds, species that are experiencing a steeper population decline than any other bird group in North America. Currently, only one endangered species exists in the PPR. However, a “train wreck” of endangered species listings could result if the current pace of grassland loss continues.

Additionally, the native grasslands of the PPR are fundamentally important for livestock producers and their ranching lifestyle. Ranching, recreational hunting, and nature-based tourism associated with the native prairie, provide economic diversity and thus greater stability to rural economies. Further loss of native grassland is also an economically costly policy, as it brings additional, disaster-prone farmland into cultivation and thus creates taxpayer liability for the manifold subsidies that are associated with crop production on marginal land.

Lastly, conversion of native grasslands also has important impacts on critical, associated habitats such as wetlands. For example, in the wetland-rich PPR of North and South Dakota, 60% of the remaining 5.9 million acres of unprotected wetlands occur in native pasture and hayland. Cattle producers consider wetlands valuable assets when they occur in pastureland, because

they provide livestock water and quality hay during drought conditions. If producers convert grasslands to cropland, wetlands become liabilities because they are obstacles for farm equipment. This puts them at greater risk of being destroyed or degraded by sedimentation and contamination from pesticides, herbicides and fertilizer. Unless we halt the loss of grassland, we risk losing both the native prairie and the associated wetlands and will invariably fall short of achieving important public policy initiatives such as the Bush Administration's goal of a net gain in wetlands.

### Solution: a "Sodsaver" provision

Well-crafted farm policy could dramatically reduce the loss of native grassland. Ducks Unlimited proposes a "Sodsaver" provision in the next Farm Bill that would eliminate federal subsidy support of any kind – including direct, counter-cyclical, loan deficiency, disaster, and crop insurance payments – on any new cropland acres that are put into production as a result of breaking grassland that had no previous cropping history.

Why coin a new term – "Sodsaver" – when "Sodbuster" already exists in the current farm bill? First, Sodbuster has proven ineffective at stopping grassland loss because it applies only to highly erodible land, and farmers need only to develop a conservation plan to circumvent Sodbuster. Second, nobody wants to get "busted", and thus Sodbuster carries a negative connotation among landowners. Under Sodsaver, we want to make it clear that landowners may *choose* to break native prairie if they so desire. However, they do so with the full understanding that the profitability of crops grown on this acreage will depend on free-market economics, not agricultural subsidy and disaster payments.

Sodsaver would eliminate the federal government's role in subsidizing the conversion of these increasingly rare

native grasslands. It would put the financial risk for conversion squarely on the shoulders of the individual, not society. In the process, significant taxpayer savings would be realized. In 2002, it was estimated that a proposal similar to Sodsaver would result in savings of \$1.4 billion over 10 years. Sodsaver would be good conservation and good fiscal policy.

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THE NEW  
**SODBUSTERS**

- ▶ Rising land prices, subsidies encourage crop expansion, while technology helps make virgin ground productive
- ▶ Farming unturned land jeopardizes prime waterfowl area

Brad Balsoun walks June 20 past a row of corn growing in wheat stubble on his land near Highmore. The area is on the southern edge of some of North America's best duck-breeding habitat. Fears are growing that farm expansion is disrupting the ecosystem.

Satellite photos indicate habitat is dwindling fast

**Economics put pinch on ducks**

The new wave of sodbusting is gaining attention in local communities.

### Summary

- **Destroying prairie, a rare and important habitat vital to people and wildlife, is an unintended consequence of current farm policy that should be rectified in the 2007 Farm Bill.**
- **Continuation of current policy will fuel additional sodbusting and create costly ecological and sociological problems that will require additional funding to address.**
- **Current farm policy puts ranchers at a significant economic disadvantage with crop producers.**
- **A "Sodsaver" provision would level the economic playing field between ranchers and crop producers, largely eliminate the loss of existing prairie, and result in substantial savings to the U.S. taxpayer.**