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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-1093](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The 64-million-acre Prairie Pothole Region in the north-central United States provides breeding grounds for over 60 percent of key migratory bird species in the United States. During much of the 20th century, the draining of wetlands and the conversion of prairie to cropland has reduced bird habitat. Under the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program, the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (the Service) aims to sustain remaining migratory bird populations by permanently protecting high-priority habitat. Some habitat is temporarily protected under the Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program.

In this context, GAO examined (1) the status of the Service's acquisition program in the region, (2) the Service's habitat protection goals for the region, and (3) challenges to achieving these goals. To answer these objectives, GAO examined Service land acquisition data and projected rates of habitat loss.

What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress consider several alternatives as it deliberates on resource levels for habitat protection in the region. In addition, GAO is recommending that the Service focus more on acquiring the least expensive high-priority habitat. The Department of the Interior did not provide comments in time for them to be included as part of this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1093.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION

At the Current Pace of Acquisitions, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Is Unlikely to Achieve Its Habitat Protection Goals for Migratory Birds

What GAO Found

Since the inception of the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program in the late 1950s, the Service has acquired and permanently protected about 3 million acres of wetlands and grasslands in the Prairie Pothole Region, primarily using Migratory Bird Conservation Funds. The Service has purchased outright almost 700,000 acres and acquired permanent conservation easements on more than 2.3 million acres that are privately owned.

To sustain bird populations in the region, the Service's goal is to acquire and permanently protect as much as possible of an additional 12 million acres of "high-priority" habitat—at-risk acreage capable of supporting a high number of breeding duck pairs per square mile. The goal acreage consists of 1.4 million acres of wetlands and 10.4 million acres of grasslands. According to the Service, achieving this goal is necessary to sustain the region's current population of 4.2 million breeding duck pairs and to ensure that enough habitat is maintained during wet years, when duck populations boom.

At the current pace of acquisitions, it could take the Service around 150 years and billions of dollars to acquire its 12 million goal acres. Some emerging market forces, however, suggest that the Service may have only several decades before most of its goal acreage is converted to agricultural uses. The pace of acquisitions could be increased marginally by using existing funds more efficiently or substantially by providing additional resources. The Service has purchased some expensive habitat in South Dakota. On the basis of GAO's analysis, the Service could have acquired about an additional 8,500 acres of high-priority habitat in South Dakota in fiscal year 2006, over and above the 16,169 acres that it did acquire, by more effectively targeting low-cost, high-priority habitat. However, with about \$17 million per year for land acquisitions in the Prairie Pothole Region, the Service's limited resources pose a substantial challenge. Another way to address this challenge is to explore additional resource alternatives, such as increasing the price of the federal Duck Stamp (these funds are placed in the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund), reauthorizing a wetlands loan, or providing additional funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Each of these alternatives would require congressional action, such as H.R. 2735 and S. 272, which have been introduced in the 110th Congress.

The Prairie Pothole Region



Source: Prairie Pothole Joint Venture.