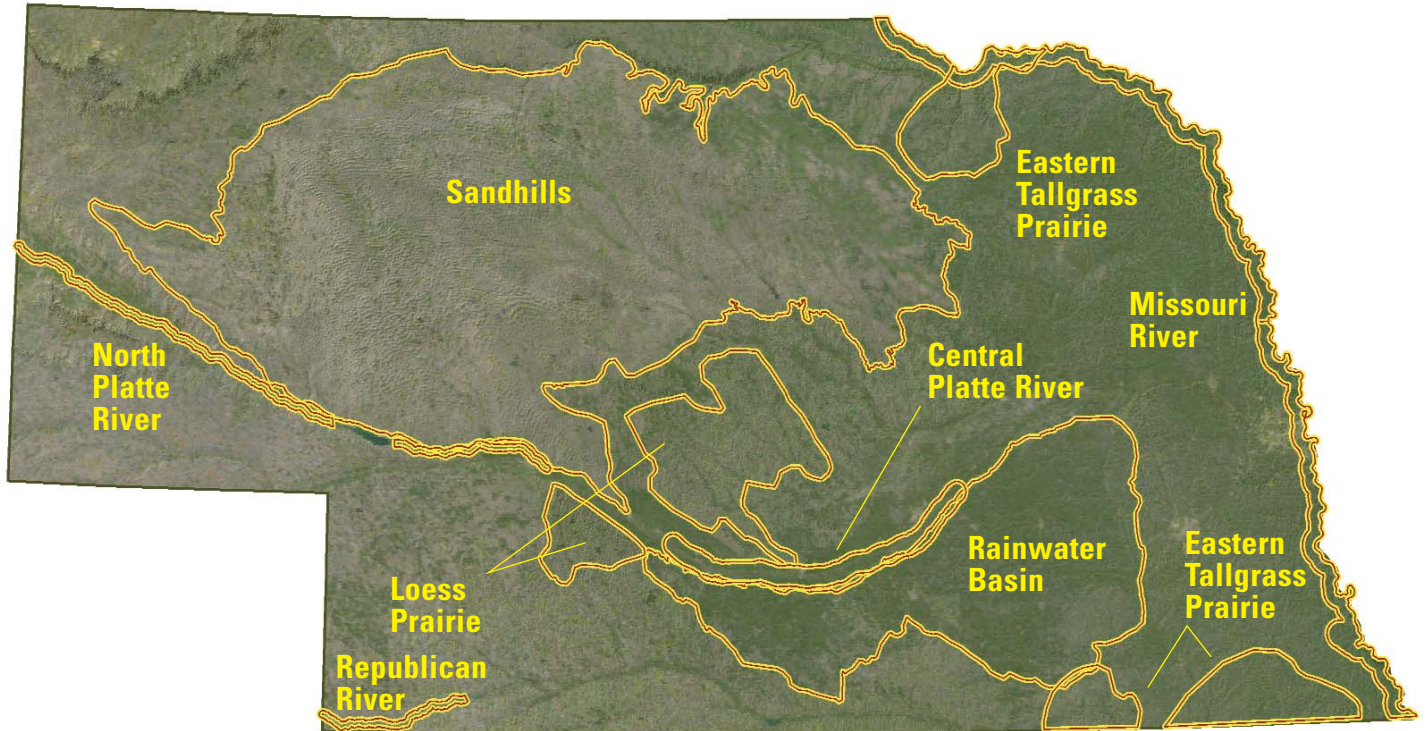
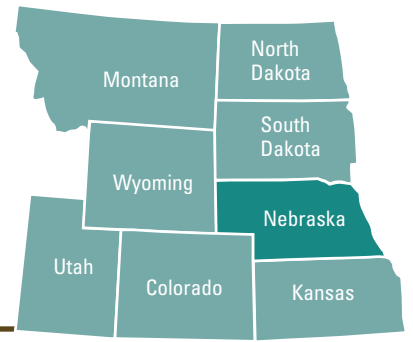


Nebraska



Nebraska Partners Program Conservation Focus Areas

Introduction

Nebraska is strategically located in the central Great Plains and in the heart of the Central Flyway. Its landscapes and, thus, its wildlife resources are highly diverse and very dynamic due to geographic location, hydrology, and other physical properties. Approximately 97% of Nebraska is in private ownership with over 48,000 farms and ranches covering nearly 46 million acres (93% of the total land area). A significant share of Nebraska's overall biological diversity occurs on private lands and the conservation of Nebraska's diverse flora and fauna is largely

dependent upon private landowners. Through the Nebraska Partners Program, the Service provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers and ranchers realize their goal of making their land a better place for fish and wildlife while sustaining profitable farming and ranching operations.

The overall objectives of the Nebraska Partners Program are to work cooperatively with both landowners and other partners throughout Nebraska to restore and maintain habitat for federal trust species; conserve biological diversity through the careful

selection, design, and implementation of restoration projects; and provide technical assistance to landowners and partners involved in the implementation of key conservation programs. The main emphasis of the Partners Program in Nebraska is to continue to develop successful partnerships; to restore wetland, grassland, riverine, and riparian habitat on private lands; and to work with private landowners and other partners to help prevent the need for further listings of species as endangered or threatened.

The Nebraska Partners Program focuses its efforts in ecosystems or

watersheds where these efforts will accomplish the greatest biological benefits per conservation dollar expended. The Nebraska Partners Program identified priority focus areas based on numerous criteria including habitat loss, future threats, habitat functions and values, benefits to federal trust species, proximity to Service lands and other protected areas, and landowners' and partners' goals and objectives. A high priority has been given to projects located in five existing major geographic focus areas located throughout Nebraska that are recognized as being of international importance to wildlife. Potential habitat restoration projects located within the Rainwater Basin area of south-central Nebraska, the Big Bend reach of the central Platte River, the Sandhills in north-central Nebraska, the North Platte River valley and the Missouri River valley are considered to be high priority for the Nebraska Partners Program. In addition to the five existing focus areas, portions of the eastern tallgrass prairie, the loess prairies, and the Republican River valley have been identified as additional focus areas for the Nebraska Partners Program. GIS data layers and habitat modeling efforts were used to refine the focus areas. Primary data sources included the National Wetlands Inventory, soil surveys, various GIS land coverages developed by the Service's Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET) and the Great Plains GIS Partnership Team, Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service information, and The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project — A Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Schneider et al. 2005).

In November 2005, the Service approved the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project which is Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. This plan was used in this planning effort and to assist in the identification of Nebraska Partners Program focus areas. The plan was developed through the

collaboration of over 500 biologists/conservation practitioners, citizens, and private landowners. A twenty-member partnership team that included representatives from major conservation, agricultural, and tribal organizations guided the planning efforts. The Service's Nebraska Partners Program state coordinator was an active member of the partnership team and Partners Program staff and refuge staff participated in the development of the plan. The Natural Legacy Project represents Nebraska's first comprehensive strategy to conserve at-risk and other wildlife species throughout the state. The Natural Legacy Project identifies over 500 species of animals and plants that are considered at-risk, key threats to those species, conservation actions needed to overcome the threats, and priority research and survey needs. Forty biologically unique landscapes were identified that provide the best opportunities to conserve the majority of Nebraska's biological diversity. Nebraska's Partners Program focus areas are consistent with and included as biologically unique landscapes in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan.

Partner Coordination

The priorities for the Nebraska Partners Program were developed in coordination with major funding partners including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; Rainwater Basin Joint Venture; Sandhills Task Force; The Nature Conservancy; Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust; Ducks Unlimited; Platte River Basin Environments; private landowners; and numerous other groups and organizations located throughout the state. The Nebraska Partners Program staff continues to bring together funding partners to accomplish habitat restoration projects in each of its identified focus areas. An overall priority of the Nebraska Partners Program is to continue to develop successful partnerships with private landowners and other agencies and organizations to improve habitat on private land throughout Nebraska. The Nebraska Partners Program also works in coordination with the National Wildlife Refuge System to implement conservation actions that complement Service lands. In addition, Nebraska Partners



Waterfowl enjoy this restored wetland, located in the Rainwater Basin of Nebraska. USFWS Photo.

Program staff coordinate with other Service program staff including the Nebraska Ecological Services Field Office and the HAPET Office to ensure that restoration projects provide the greatest biological benefit for federal trust species.

Additional input on general Partners Program direction and future activities was solicited from key partners in a comprehensive 2004 stakeholder survey (see Appendix A).



Rainwater Basin Focus Area

The Rainwater Basin encompasses 4,200 square miles and occupies parts of 17 counties in south-central Nebraska. The area is characterized by flat to gently rolling loess plains with poor surface water drainage resulting in closed watersheds that drain into low-lying wetlands. Soil surveys from the early 1900s indicate that approximately 4,000 major wetlands totaling 100,000 acres were present at the time of settlement. It has been determined that less than 10% (374) of the original major wetlands and 22% (20,942) of the original wetland acres remained in 1982 (Nebraska Game and Parks Commission 1984).

The Rainwater Basin Conservation Focus Area is identified as a biologically unique landscape in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. The Rainwater Basin is also identified by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan as a waterfowl habitat area of major concern in North America and is recognized as the focal point of the Central Flyway spring migration



Restored wetland in the Rainwater Basin. USFWS Photo.

corridor. In 1991, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee officially recognized the Rainwater Basin as the eighth area in the United States to receive official Joint Venture status. The overall goal of the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture is to restore and maintain sufficient wetland habitat in the Rainwater Basin area of Nebraska to assist in meeting population objectives identified in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (Gersib et al. 1992).

The Rainwater Basin area of south-central Nebraska is recognized as an internationally important spring staging area for waterfowl. Millions of ducks and geese stop annually in the basin to feed and roost during their spring migration. Approximately 90% of the mid-continent population of white-fronted geese, 50% of the mid-continent population of mallards, and 30% of the continent's northern pintail population stop in the Rainwater Basin each spring. Approximately 300,000 shorebirds comprising more than thirty species use the Rainwater Basin, including the Baird's sandpiper, stilt sandpiper, lesser and greater yellowlegs, and some of the largest concentrations

of buff-breasted sandpipers observed anywhere. The Rainwater Basin also serves as important migration habitat for state-listed and federally listed species, wading birds, and neotropical migrants. Rainwater Basin wetlands and adjacent upland areas also provide habitat to hundreds of species of plants, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals.

Primary partners in the Nebraska Partners Program Rainwater Basin Focus Area include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, state natural resource districts, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Environmental Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Pheasants Forever, and numerous farm families and other private landowners located throughout the basin.

Priority Species

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater white-fronted goose • Mallard • Northern pintail • Blue-winged teal • American bittern • Bald eagle • Northern harrier | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swainson’s hawk • Virginia rail • King rail • Sandhill crane • Whooping crane (Endangered) • Willet • Buff-breasted sandpiper | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wilson’s phalarope • Black tern • Short-eared owl • Sedge wren • Grasshopper sparrow • Dickcissel • Bobolink • Eastern meadowlark |
|--|---|--|

Rainwater Basin Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Wetland Restoration/Enhancement: 1,500 acres
- Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 750 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to work cooperatively with private landowners and a diverse group of partners to restore, enhance, and manage wetland and upland habitats throughout the Rainwater Basin for the benefit of migratory waterbirds (waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds) endangered species (e.g., whooping cranes), and grassland nesting species. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include restoring wetland hydrology (removing silt, filling pits, plugging drains, installing low-level berms and water control structures); removing and controlling invasive species (e.g., reed canary grass, undesirable woody species, hybrid cattails); and restoring native grasslands (cropland conversion, reseeding, prescribed fire).

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 60
- Amount of technical assistance: 250 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to focus its efforts on maintaining existing successful partnerships and develop new partnerships to restore wetland and upland habitat throughout the Rainwater Basin. New partners will be primarily Rainwater Basin landowners who have an interest in restoring and maintaining wetland and upland habitat. The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to provide a significant level of technical assistance to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in the delivery of the Wetlands Reserve Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program in the Rainwater Basin. Nebraska Partners Program staff will also work closely with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and other groups and organizations to assist in the delivery of habitat conservation programs. The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to secure a high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources for Rainwater Basin wetland and upland habitat restoration projects.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Rainwater Basin Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Rainwater Basin Joint Venture Implementation Plan
- North American Waterfowl Management Plan
- The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan
- USFWS Regional Wetland Concept Plan
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan
- Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan
- Platte/Kansas Rivers Ecosystem Plan
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan



Whooping cranes on Central Platte riverine restoration project. Photo by Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust.



Central Platte River Focus Area

The Central Platte River Conservation Focus Area extends approximately 90 miles from Lexington to Chapman, Nebraska. The combination of broad open river channels, the river's shallow braided character, adjacent wet meadows, and abundant food supplies attract millions of birds each year. The Big Bend reach of the central Platte River provides important habitat for fish and wildlife resources of national and international significance. The Central Platte River Focus Area is identified as a biologically unique landscape in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. This stretch of the river is also the focus of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (Platte River Endangered Species Partnership 2005) which is a cooperative effort between the states of Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and the Department of the Interior to address water and habitat needs of four threatened and endangered species.

The central Platte River provides critical migration habitat for the

endangered whooping crane, spring staging habitat for 80% of the world's sandhill crane population, breeding habitat for the threatened piping plover and endangered least tern, and migration and wintering habitat for millions of waterfowl. Over 300 bird species have been observed along the Platte River, and over 140 species are known to nest along the river. The central Platte River also provides a variety of habitat types (e.g., backwaters, sloughs, side channels) for a diverse fish community (e.g., western silvery minnow, plains minnow, flathead chub, speckled chub). The Platte River provides year-round habitat for numerous species of plants (e.g., western prairie fringed orchid), invertebrates (e.g., American burying beetle, regal fritillary butterfly), shellfish, amphibians,

mammals (e.g., river otter) and reptiles (USFWS 2006a).

The central Platte River is also considered to be one of the most endangered waterways in the United States. Open riverine channel and wet meadow grassland habitats for federally listed species (i.e., whooping crane, interior least tern and piping plover), migratory waterbirds (e.g., shorebirds, waterfowl, wading birds), native grassland nesting birds, and other native fish and wildlife species have declined substantially throughout the Platte River watershed during the last 100 years. The Platte River once consisted of riverine and palustrine wetlands located within the active floodplain and channels of the river. An increase in scrub-shrub and forested areas has occurred at the expense of active open riverine channel habitat, riverine wetland habitat (e.g., backwaters, sloughs, and side channels), and adjacent wet meadow/grassland habitat. A large percentage of the open riverine/sandbar (60 to 80%) and wet meadow (55%) habitat has been lost in the Big Bend reach of the central Platte River due to agricultural conversion and human development or has been severely degraded by poor land management and hydrologic changes (Sidle, Miller, and Currier 1989). Other threats include invasion of exotic species, gravel mining, and residential and commercial development.



River restoration projects on the Central Platte River benefit at-risk species, such as the federally endangered piping plover. USFWS Photo.

The Nebraska Partners Program and its Platte River partners have actively worked with over one hundred landowners throughout this focus area to restore and maintain riverine habitat for target species. Primary partners in the Nebraska Partners Program Central Platte River Focus Area include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, National Audubon Society's Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary, Nebraska Environmental Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Prairie Plains Resource Institute, and numerous private landowners located along the central Platte River.

Priority Species

- Greater white-fronted goose
- Northern pintail
- Lesser prairie-chicken
- Bald eagle
- Northern harrier
- Peregrine falcon
- Sandhill crane
- Whooping crane (Endangered)
- Piping plover (Threatened)
- Least tern (Threatened)
- Upland sandpiper
- Short-eared owl
- Sedge wren
- Grasshopper sparrow
- Henslow's sparrow
- Dickcissel
- Bobolink
- Eastern meadowlark
- Western prairie fringed orchid (Threatened)
- Winged maple-leaf mussel (Endangered)



Aerial view of Partners Program habitat restoration project (tree clearing and slough restoration) along the central Platte River. Photo by Lane Kugler, landowner and Partners Program cooperater.

Central Platte River Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Riverine Roosting Habitat Restoration/Enhancement: 15 miles
- Riverine Sloughs and Backwater Habitat Restoration: 20 miles
- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 3,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 2,000 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with numerous landowners along the central Platte River and a diverse group of Platte River partners to restore, enhance, and manage the ecological functions and values of riverine/grassland habitats throughout this focus area.

Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) restoring riverine backwater, wetland slough, and sandbar habitats; (b) clearing and controlling undesirable woody and other invasive vegetation from riverine and grassland habitats; (c) restoring and managing native wet meadow and grassland habitat by establishing diverse stands of native prairie plants; and, (d) maintaining active riverine habitats by disking and mowing riverine channels, sandbars, islands, and accretion lands.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 60
- Amount of technical assistance: 300 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will focus its efforts on developing new partnerships to restore riverine habitat throughout the central Platte River. New partners will primarily be Platte River landowners who are interested in restoring and maintaining riverine habitats for federal trust resources. The Nebraska Partners Program will provide technical assistance to USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in the delivery of USDA conservation programs (e.g., Wetlands Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program) throughout the Platte River corridor. Nebraska Partners Program staff also will work closely with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, and other groups and organizations to assist in the restoration of riverine habitats in a strategic manner. The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its Platte River partners to secure a high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources for central Platte River habitat restoration projects.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Central Platte River Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan
- USFWS Regional Wetland Concept Plan
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan
- Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan
- Platte/Kansas Rivers Ecosystem Plan
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Habitat Management, Restoration, and Acquisition Plan for the Big Bend Reach of the Platte River in Central Nebraska
- The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program Biological Opinion
- The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program Final EIS
- The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program
- Whooping Crane Recovery Plan
- Great Lakes and Northern Great Plains Piping Plover Recovery Plan
- Recovery Plan for the Interior Population of the Least Tern
- Western Prairie Fringed Orchid Recovery Plan
- Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan



Nebraska Sandhills Focus Area

The sandhills of Nebraska are a 19,600-square-mile sand dune formation covered by native grasses in north-central Nebraska. The sandhills represent the largest contiguous tract of grassland remaining in the United States and the largest stabilized sand dune area in the Western Hemisphere. The hydrology associated with these sand dunes has created a vast groundwater reservoir and 1.3 million acres of wetlands. This high wetland to grassland ratio (1:10) provides excellent habitat for resident and migratory wildlife and the abundance of wetlands and grasslands makes the area important to both wildlife and ranching. Ranching is the primary economic use, with approximately 94% of the land in private ownership.

The Nebraska Sandhills Focus Area encompasses numerous biologically unique landscapes (e.g., Cherry County Wetlands, Sandhills Alkaline Lakes, Dismal Headwaters, Elkhorn Headwaters) identified in Nebraska’s comprehensive wildlife action plan. The sandhills are identified in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan as a waterfowl habitat area of major concern in North America and are considered to be the best duck production area south of the Prairie Pothole Region. In 1991, a sixteen member task force made up of local sandhills ranchers and representatives from the Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, The Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Cattlemen, and the North Central Resource Conservation and Development program was formed. The goal of the Sandhills Task Force is to work cooperatively with



Members of the Sandhills Task Force, and their partners, discuss potential Partners Program projects. USFWS Photo.

state and federal conservation agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and sandhills landowners to enhance the natural resources in the sandhills by supporting wildlife and profitable ranching.

The sandhills remain as one of the best examples of a functioning prairie landscape in the country. Approximately 700 native plant species have been documented, including several at-risk species (e.g., blowout penstemon, marsh marigold, bog bean). The sandhills provide habitat for 55 species of mammals, 75 species of fish, and 27 species of amphibians and reptiles. Over 300 species of resident and migratory birds have been documented, including large numbers of waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and other wetland and grassland dependent species. The sandhills are considered to be an important breeding site for many native nesting birds including sharp-tailed grouse, greater prairie-chicken, long-billed curlew, upland sandpiper, vesper sparrow, lark bunting, grasshopper sparrow, western meadowlark, American avocet, Trumpeter swan, black tern, ferruginous hawk, and numerous species of ducks.

The Nebraska Partners Program cooperatively works with the Sandhills Task Force and a diverse group of partners to restore and enhance wetland, riparian, stream, and grassland habitat in the sandhills. Primary partners in the Nebraska Sandhills Focus Area include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Sandhills Task Force, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Nebraska Environmental Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Nebraska Cattlemen, North Central Resource Conservation and Development, and numerous ranchers located throughout the sandhills.

Priority Species

- Trumpeter swan
- Mallard
- Northern pintail
- Blue-winged teal
- Gadwall
- Greater prairie-chicken
- American bittern
- Black-crowned night heron
- White-faced ibis
- Northern harrier
- Ferruginous hawk
- Swainson's hawk
- Peregrine falcon
- Whooping crane (Endangered)
- American avocet
- Upland sandpiper
- Long-billed curlew
- Black tern
- Short-eared owl
- Burrowing owl
- Bell's vireo
- Vesper sparrow
- Savannah sparrow
- Grasshopper sparrow
- Chesnut-collared longspur
- American burying beetle (Endangered)
- Western prairie fringed orchid (Threatened)
- Blowout penstemon (Endangered)



Wetland and grassland restoration project in the sandhills. USFWS Photo.

Nebraska Sandhills Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Stream/Riparian Habitat Restoration/Enhancement: 25 miles
- Grassland Habitat Restoration/Enhancement: 65,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 5,000 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will partner with the Sandhills Task Force and others to work with ranchers throughout the sandhills to restore and enhance wetland, riparian, stream, and native grassland habitats. Specific habitat actions include developing and implementing grazing management plans and wetland, riparian, and stream restorations projects. These projects will be conducted to enhance the sandhills' wetland-grassland ecosystem in a way that sustains profitable private ranching and wildlife and vegetative diversity.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 40
- Amount of technical assistance: 150 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will focus its efforts on maintaining existing partnerships and developing new partnerships to enhance and restore wetland and grassland habitat throughout this focus area. New partners will primarily be sandhills ranchers and other private landowners who are interested in protecting this unique ecosystem for both federal trust resources and the sandhills ranching community. Nebraska Partners Program staff will work closely with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Sandhills Task Force, and other groups and organizations to assist in the restoration of wetland, upland, and stream habitats. In addition, the Nebraska Partners Program will continue to provide technical assistance to the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the delivery of USDA conservation programs (e.g., Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program) throughout this focus area. The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its sandhills partners to secure a high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources for habitat restoration and enhancement projects.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Nebraska Sandhills Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Sandhills Management Plan
- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- North American Waterfowl Management Plan
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan
- Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie
- U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan
- Regional Wetland Concept Plan
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan
- Platte/Kansas Rivers Ecosystem Plan
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan



North Platte River Focus Area

The North Platte River and its associated wetlands contain important habitats for a diverse group of wildlife species. Wet meadows, freshwater and alkaline wetlands, river channels, backwater sloughs, oxbows, sandbars, and riverine islands provide important habitats for migrating, wintering, and breeding waterbirds (e.g., waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds); grassland nesting birds; federally threatened and endangered species; and numerous other wetland- and riverine-dependent species. Over 225 migratory bird species have been documented using habitats found along the North Platte River, including the federally listed whooping crane, least tern, and piping plover. All three species have been well documented within this focus area. The focus area also provides habitat for 2 million ducks and 500,000 geese which use the North Platte River valley to rest and feed during their annual migration. North Platte River wetlands provide important migration habitat for shorebirds and the adjacent alkaline meadows support unique assemblages of insects including tiger beetles, dragonflies, and butterflies. Riverine wetlands located throughout the valley also provide important habitat for numerous species of plants, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, including the state-listed river otter.

The North Platte River Conservation Focus Area includes portions of two biologically unique landscapes (North Platte River Wetlands BUL and Platte Confluence BUL) identified in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. This focus area



Partners Program riverine habitat restoration project along the North Platte River. USFWS Photo.

includes the North Platte River channel and the associated freshwater and alkaline wetland complexes within the river valley extending 180 miles from the Nebraska-Wyoming state line to North Platte, Nebraska. Habitat conditions along the North Platte River have degraded as a result of water management, altered hydrology, consumptive use, and the establishment of invasive species throughout the river corridor. River channels and adjacent riverine wetlands have narrowed and become heavily vegetated with undesirable woody and herbaceous vegetation (e.g., Russian olive, phragmites, reed canary grass, Eastern red cedar).

The overall goal for this focus area is to work with private landowners to restore and enhance riverine habitat (uplands and wetlands) for federal trust fish and wildlife resources found along the North Platte River. The Nebraska Partners Program and its North Platte River partners have actively worked with approximately one hundred landowners throughout this focus area to restore and enhance riverine habitat for target species. Primary partners in the Nebraska Partners Program North Platte River Focus Area

include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; Ducks Unlimited; Nebraska Environmental Trust; Platte River Basin Environments, Inc.; The Nature Conservancy; Pheasants Forever; and numerous private landowners located along the North Platte River.

Priority Species

- Trumpeter swan
- Mallard
- Blue-winged teal
- Northern pintail
- Greater prairie-chicken
- American bittern
- Black-crowned night heron
- White-faced ibis
- Bald eagle
- Swainson's hawk
- Ferruginous hawk
- Sandhill crane
- Whooping crane (Endangered)
- Mountain plover
- Upland sandpiper
- Long-billed curlew
- Burrowing owl
- Savannah sparrow
- Grasshopper sparrow
- Baird's sparrow
- Lark bunting
- Bobolink

North Platte River Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Riverine Habitat Restoration (sloughs and backwaters): 15 miles
- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 2,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 3,000 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with landowners and a diverse group of North Platte River partners to restore and enhance riverine/grassland habitats throughout this focus area. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) clearing Russian olive, Eastern red cedar, phragmites, and other undesirable invasive woody and herbaceous vegetation from river channels, islands, and accretion lands; (b) restoring backwater sloughs and other wetlands through excavation and installation of water control structures; and, (c) restoring floodplain wet meadow/grasslands by clearing invasive vegetation, renovating wetlands, and developing grazing management systems (fencing, alternate sources of water, etc.) to re-establish and maintain diverse stands of native prairie plants.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 40
- Amount of technical assistance: 125 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: A primary emphasis of the Nebraska Partners Program will be to ensure that existing successful partnerships are maintained and that new partnerships to restore riverine wetland and upland habitat throughout this focus area are formed. New partners will primarily be North Platte River landowners who are interested in restoring and maintaining riverine habitats for federal trust fish and wildlife species. Partners Program staff will continue to work closely with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Platte River Basin Environments, Inc., and other groups and organizations to assist in the delivery of habitat projects on private lands throughout the North Platte River valley. The Nebraska Partners Program will also continue to provide a significant level of technical assistance to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in the delivery of the Wetlands Reserve and Wildlife Habitat Incentives programs in this focus area. The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to secure a high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources for North Platte riverine wetland and upland habitat restoration projects.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the North Platte River Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan
- Ecoregion-Based Conservation in the Central Shortgrass Prairie
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Platte/Kansas Rivers Ecosystem Plan
- U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan
- Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan
- Regional Wetland Concept Plan



Nebraska

Missouri River Focus Area

The Missouri River Conservation Focus Area includes the Missouri River and its floodplain from the Nebraska/South Dakota border in eastern Boyd County downstream to the Nebraska/Kansas border in Richardson County, Nebraska. A 98-mile stretch of the river from Gavins Point Dam to Ponca State Park is designated as a Wild and Scenic River due to its cultural, economic, and ecological importance. The Missouri River and its associated wetlands from Sioux City to the Nebraska/Kansas border are included as part of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan's Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Region Joint Venture. The Missouri River Focus Area is also identified as a biologically unique landscape in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan.

The Missouri River is a complex of riverine floodplain and palustrine wetlands. Drastic alterations to the channel and the floodplain have occurred throughout much of the river. It has been estimated that approximately 100,000 acres of aquatic habitat and over 65,000 acres of islands and sandbars have been converted to dry-land or navigation channel between Sioux City, Iowa, and the river's confluence with the Mississippi River (LaGrange 2005). It has also been estimated that only approximately 25,000 acres of wetlands remain along the Missouri River in Nebraska.

Despite all the changes that have occurred along the Missouri River, it still provides habitat (although of diminished quality and quantity) for waterfowl, shorebirds, and other fish and wildlife species, especially in the unchanneled reach above Ponca State Park.

Over 250 species of birds and numerous mammal species use the Missouri River and its associated habitats. The Missouri River supports an abundance of fish and wildlife including eleven state-listed species, six of which are also federally listed. The Missouri River is a major stopover for migratory birds traveling the Central Flyway and the combination of river channels, adjacent wetlands, grasslands, and abundant food supplies attract millions of migratory birds each year. The Missouri River and its associated floodplain habitats also provide spawning and nursery areas for many different species of fish and provide year-round habitat for numerous species of plants, invertebrates, mollusks, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals.

The Nebraska Partners Program will continue to actively coordinate and cooperate with its Missouri River partners to work with landowners throughout this focus area to restore and maintain riverine habitat for federal trust fish and wildlife resources. Primary partners involved with the restoration of riverine habitat along the Missouri River in Nebraska include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service, Omaha Tribe, Winnebago Tribe, Santee Sioux Tribe, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Missouri River Futures Group, Missouri River Life, Ducks Unlimited, state natural resource districts, The Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Environmental Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and numerous private landowners located along the Missouri River.

Priority Species

- Wood duck
- Mallard
- Blue-winged teal
- Gadwall
- American white pelican
- Bald eagle
- Peregrine falcon
- Piping plover (Endangered)
- Greater yellowlegs
- Least tern (Threatened)
- Bell's vireo
- Cerulean warbler
- Henslow's sparrow
- Bobolink
- Eastern meadowlark
- Pallid sturgeon
- Sturgeon chub
- Sicklefin chub

Missouri River Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Riverine Habitat Restoration (sloughs and backwaters): 15 miles
- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 3,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 3,000 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with landowners and a diverse group of Missouri River partners to restore and enhance the ecological functions and values of riverine/grassland habitats throughout this focus area. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) restoring riverine backwater, wetland slough, and other riverine (e.g., river channel, sandbar, island, riparian) and palustrine wetland habitats; (b) clearing and controlling undesirable woody and other invasive vegetation from riverine and grassland habitats; and (c) restoring and managing native wet meadow and grassland habitats by establishing diverse stands of native prairie plants.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 30
- Amount of technical assistance: 300 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: Nebraska Partners Program staff will continue to work closely with Missouri River Futures, Missouri River Life, and other groups and organizations to assist in the restoration of riverine habitats throughout this focus area. Missouri River Futures is a collaborative effort between agencies to improve communication, understanding, and trust among Missouri River stakeholders. Missouri River Life is a locally led effort that involves landowners, local communities, businesses and natural resource professionals. The goal of this group is to “provide an environmentally sensitive method of protecting and enhancing the river valley to invigorate economic viability of the surrounding area and improve the ecological integrity of the river valley for future generations.”

The Nebraska Partners Program will also focus its efforts on developing new partnerships to restore riverine habitat throughout the Missouri River valley. New partners will primarily be Missouri River landowners who are interested in restoring and maintaining riverine habitat for federal trust fish and wildlife resources. The Nebraska Partners Program will also continue to provide a significant level of technical assistance to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in the delivery of the Wetlands Reserve Program, Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program in this focus area. The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its Missouri River partners to secure a high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources for Missouri River habitat restoration projects.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Missouri River Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- Nebraska Wetlands Priority Plan
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan
- Terrestrial Natural Communities of Nebraska
- Regional Wetland Concept Plan
- Great Lakes and Northern Great Plains Piping Plover Recovery Plan
- Recovery Plan for the Interior Population of the Least Tern
- Missouri River National Recreational River Management Plan
- Missouri River Biological Opinion
- U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Conservation in a Highly Fragmented Landscape: the Central Tallgrass Prairie Ecoregional Conservation Plan



Republican River Focus Area

The Republican River is a relatively new focus area for the Nebraska Partners Program. The Republican River Conservation Focus Area is located in the southwest corner of Nebraska and includes the stretch of the Republican River from the Colorado-Nebraska state line downstream to the upper end of Swanson Reservoir in Nebraska. The Republican River Focus Area is located within the Sandsage South biologically unique landscape identified in Nebraska's

comprehensive wildlife action plan. Historically, the Republican River valley was relatively treeless, with only scattered trees (primarily cottonwoods and willows) found in the floodplain. The grasslands and wetlands that occurred throughout the river valley provided high quality habitat for a diverse mix of wildlife. Thirty-four of the bird species listed in the state's comprehensive wildlife action plan as at-risk species use or have used this area in the past for a portion of their life cycle.

In a relatively short period of time, the Republican River valley has been invaded by populations of Eastern red cedar, Russian olive, and other undesirable herbaceous vegetation. Invasive species have increased dramatically over the last 10 to 30 years and have led to a loss or degradation of

grassland, wetland, cottonwood savannah, and riverine habitats (e.g., sandbars, river channels, sloughs, backwaters) throughout this focus area. These alterations have resulted in a narrower, deeper river channel and a reduction in sandbar, shallow water, and backwater habitats that are critical to species such as least tern, piping plover, and a variety of other native fish and wildlife species. Due to the encroachment and growth of invasive woody species and the loss of sandbar, wetland, and adjacent grassland/wet meadow habitats, migration habitat has also become limited for species such as whooping crane and sandhill crane, as well as shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl, and other federal trust fish and wildlife species that use prairie riverine habitats.



Partners Program habitat restoration project along the Republican River. USFWS Photo.

The objective of this focus area is to work with private landowners to restore and enhance riverine and adjacent grassland habitats for federal trust fish and wildlife resources along this stretch of the Republican River. Primary partners in the Nebraska Partners Program Republican River Focus Area are the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, National Wild Turkey Federation, Nebraska Environmental Trust, and numerous private landowners located along this portion of the Republican River valley.

Priority Species	
• Wood duck	• Prairie falcon
• American wigeon	• Sandhill crane
• Greater prairie-chicken	• Piping plover (Threatened)
• American bittern	• Least tern (Threatened)
• Black-crowned night heron	• Black tern
• White-faced ibis	• Yellow-billed cuckoo
• Bald eagle	• Short-eared owl
• Northern harrier	• Bell's vireo
• Swainson's hawk	• Yellow-breasted chat
• Merlin	• Savannah sparrow
• Peregrine falcon	

Republican River Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Riverine Habitat Restoration (sloughs and backwaters): 10 miles
- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 2,500 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 2,500 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its Republican River partners to increase grassland nesting bird densities at project sites by 25% by restoring and enhancing important habitats throughout this focus area. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) clearing Russian olive, Eastern red cedar, phragmites, and other undesirable invasive vegetation from river channels, cottonwood savannahs, wetlands, and grassland habitats; (b) restoring hydrology to palustrine and riverine wetlands; and, (c) implement planned grazing systems (fencing, alternate sources of water, etc.) to re-establish and maintain diverse stands of native prairie plants.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 20
- Amount of technical assistance: 60 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: Nebraska Partners Program staff will work with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and National Wild Turkey Federation to develop and implement habitat restoration projects throughout this focus area. New partners will primarily be landowners who value grassland, wetland, and riparian habitats along this stretch of the Republican River. Along with financial assistance, the Nebraska Partners Program will provide a limited amount of technical assistance for habitat projects. A primary emphasis will be placed on assisting private landowners with removing invasive species, developing grazing plans, and restoring wetland, grassland, and riverine habitats. A high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources will be secured for habitat restoration projects throughout this focus area.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Republican River Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- Ecoregional-Based Conservation in the Central Shortgrass Prairie
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Terrestrial Natural Communities of Nebraska
- North American Waterbird Conservation Plan



The Loess Prairie is being invaded by Eastern red cedar trees. The Nebraska Partners Program works with private landowners to control the cedar trees, as well as other invasive species. USFWS Photo.



Nebraska

Nebraska Loess Prairie Focus Area

The Loess Prairie area of central Nebraska is a new focus area for the Nebraska Partners Program. The Loess Prairie Conservation Focus Area includes two high priority biologically unique landscapes identified in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. This focus area includes the Central Loess Hills and Loess Canyons located in the mixed-grass prairie ecoregion of Nebraska. The

Loess Prairie Focus Area consists of rolling to steep loess hills and canyons and consists of a mosaic of mixed-grass prairie and cropland. The Loess Prairie grasslands have been heavily invaded by Eastern red cedar and exotic cool-season grasses in recent decades, and most have been overgrazed in the past. It is estimated that 36% of the Loess Canyons landscape has been invaded by Eastern red cedar, and continues to increase at a rate of 2% per year. At this rate, a large percentage of the region's mixed-grass prairie will be lost in the very near future.

The Loess Prairie landscapes provide important habitat for hundreds of species of plants, state-listed and federally listed species, grassland nesting birds, migratory

waterbirds, insects, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. Playa wetlands are scattered throughout the flatter tablelands of the Central Loess Hills and are used by whooping cranes and numerous species of waterbirds during migration. The Loess Canyons contain one of the largest known populations of the endangered American burying beetle.

Nebraska Partners Program efforts throughout the Loess Prairie Focus Area have been relatively minor in the past due to lack of staff and funding. However, over the next five years the Nebraska Partners Program plans to become more active in this focus area. The Nebraska Partners Program will cooperate with Loess Prairie partners to work with landowners throughout this focus

area to restore and maintain grassland and wetland habitats for federal trust fish and wildlife resources. Potential partners include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Pheasants Forever, The Nature Conservancy, National Wild Turkey Federation, Sierra Club, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and numerous private landowners located throughout the Loess Canyons and the Central Loess Hills.

Priority Species

- American wigeon
- Northern pintail
- Greater prairie-chicken
- Bald eagle
- Northern harrier
- Ferruginous hawk
- Swainson’s hawk
- Peregrine falcon
- Prairie falcon
- Merlin
- Sandhill crane
- Whooping crane (Endangered)
- Upland sandpiper
- Long-billed curlew
- Yellow-billed cuckoo
- Short-eared owl
- Burrowing owl
- Bell’s vireo
- Yellow-breasted chat
- Grasshopper sparrow
- American burying beetle (Endangered)

Nebraska Loess Prairie Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 8,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 300 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its Loess Prairie partners to control invasive species, improve grassland conditions, and promote biodiversity by restoring and enhancing important habitats throughout this focus area. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) clearing Eastern red cedar and other undesirable invasive vegetation from grassland habitat; (b) implementing planned grazing systems to reduce exotic cool-season grasses and improve native plant diversity and vigor; and (c) restoring the hydrology to playa and riverine wetlands.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 30
- Amount of technical assistance: 75 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: Nebraska Partners Program staff will work with partners to develop and implement habitat restoration projects on private lands throughout this area. New partners will primarily be landowners who value grassland, wetland, and riparian habitats. Along with financial assistance, the Nebraska Partners Program will provide a limited amount of technical assistance for habitat projects. A primary emphasis will be placed on assisting private landowners with removing invasive species and restoring grassland, wetland, and riverine habitats. A high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources will be secured for habitat restoration projects throughout this focus area.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Loess Prairie Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Terrestrial Natural Communities of Nebraska
- Ducks Unlimited Nebraska Conservation Plan



Nebraska Eastern Tallgrass Prairie Focus Area

The Eastern Tallgrass Prairie Conservation Focus Area includes three high priority biologically unique landscapes identified in Nebraska's comprehensive wildlife action plan. This focus area includes the Sandstone Prairies, Southeast Prairies, and the Verdigre-Bazile Creek Watershed, all located in the tallgrass prairie ecoregion of Nebraska. The Sandstone Prairies and Southeast Prairies include the bluffs and breaks along the Little Blue River and Rose Creek in Jefferson and Thayer counties, and the rolling hills of portions of Richardson, Pawnee, Johnson, and Gage counties. The Verdigre-Bazile Creek Watershed includes the watershed of the Verdigris and Bazile creeks in Cedar, Knox, Holt, and Antelope counties.

Grasslands throughout the Great Plains are considered to be some of the most threatened ecosystems on the continent. Over 98% of eastern Nebraska's tallgrass prairie has been lost to conversion to cropland and other development (Sampson and Knopf 1996). The Sandstone Prairies, Southeast Prairies, and the Verdigre-Bazile Creek Watershed contain some of Nebraska's (and the nation's) largest remaining tallgrass prairie

remnants. However, most of the remaining prairies have been impacted by intensive grazing and exotic plant invasion (e.g., Eastern red cedar, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass) which have degraded many of the sites by reducing biodiversity. The large size of prairie remnants in this focus area makes these landscapes unique and provides an opportunity for landscape scale tallgrass prairie restoration and conservation.

Prairie restoration and enhancement will be completed throughout this focus area to benefit at-risk grassland wildlife species, including grassland nesting birds (e.g., greater prairie-chicken, Henslow's sparrow, dickcissel, bobolink), reptiles (e.g., milk snake, eastern and western hognose snake), insects (e.e., regal fritillary), mammals (e.g., plains pocket mouse), and numerous other species of wildlife found throughout the area. Primary partners include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Santee Sioux Tribe, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Tallgrass Prairie Partnership, Northeast Resource Conservation and Development, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Northeast Resource Conservation and Development, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Northern Prairie Land Trust, Pheasants Forever, Audubon Nebraska, Wachiska Audubon, Prairie Plains Resource Institute, The Nature Conservancy, state natural resource districts, Nebraska Wildlife Federation, and numerous private landowners located throughout the Eastern Tallgrass Prairie Focus Area.

Priority Species

- Greater prairie-chicken
- Northern harrier
- Upland sandpiper
- Sedge wren
- Savannah sparrow
- Grasshopper sparrow
- Henslow's sparrow
- Dickcissel
- Bobolink
- Eastern meadowlark
- Western prairie fringed orchid (Threatened)

Nebraska Eastern Tallgrass Prairie Focus Area Five-year Targets

Habitat

- Upland Grassland Restoration/Enhancement: 25,000 acres
- Wetland/Wet Meadow Restoration/Enhancement: 2,500 acres

Implementation strategy for habitat objectives: The Nebraska Partners Program will work with its Eastern Tallgrass Prairie partners to control invasive species, restore and improve native grassland conditions, and promote biodiversity by restoring and enhancing important habitats throughout this focus area. Specific Partners Program habitat actions include (a) removing invasive species (e.g., Eastern red cedar, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass); (b) facilitating landscape scale increases in heterogeneity by implementing innovative management strategies made possible by the removal of trees; (c) improving habitat conditions on large tracts of intact grassland by reducing fragmentation; (d) demonstrating sustainable management of grasslands and associated native woodlands; (e) restoring native plant communities by improving native plant diversity and vigor; and, (f) restoring the hydrology to wetlands.

Partnerships

- Number of new landowner partners: 50
- Amount of technical assistance: 200 staff days
- Percentage of leveraging: 70% or more of non-Partners Program sources

Implementation strategy for partnership objectives: Nebraska Partners Program staff will work with its partners to develop and implement habitat restoration projects on private lands throughout this area. New partners will primarily be landowners located throughout this focus area who are interested in restoring and maintaining native grassland habitats for federal trust fish and wildlife species.

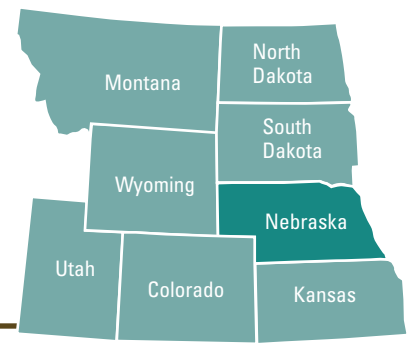
Along with financial assistance, the Nebraska Partners Program will provide technical assistance for habitat projects. Emphasis will be placed on assisting private landowners with removing invasive species and restoring grassland and wetland habitats. A high proportion of non-Partners Program funding sources will be secured for habitat restoration projects throughout this focus area.

Related Plans

The Partners Program habitat actions proposed for the Eastern Tallgrass Prairie Focus Area are closely aligned with the goals of the following conservation plans:

- Nebraska Natural Legacy Project
- Conservation in a Highly Fragmented Landscape: the Central Tallgrass Prairie
- Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie
- Partners in Flight – North American Landbird Conservation Plan
- Terrestrial Natural Communities of Nebraska

Nebraska Statewide Goals



Improve Information Sharing and Communication

A big part of the success of the Partners Program in Nebraska has been the diversity of partners and partnerships (internal and external) that have been developed. Partnerships cannot be successful without effective communication and collaboration. No single entity has the staff or funds available to accomplish conservation goals and objectives at the landscape or ecosystem level on its own.

Nebraska Partners Program staff will participate and support (technically and financially) locally-based conservation partnerships and assist in the development of new partnerships in priority landscapes.

Five-year Targets

- Actively participate in landowner meetings, site visits, conferences, and workshops.
- Make presentations at local, state, and national meetings; conferences; and workshops.
- Conduct field tours and site visits to habitat restoration projects throughout the state to exchange information regarding restoration techniques and funding opportunities.
- Actively participate in the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service state technical committee as well as Wetlands Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Conservation Reserve Program sub-committee meetings.
- Continue to coordinate with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to deliver habitat restoration projects on private lands.
- Collaborate and coordinate with the Nebraska Ecological Services Field Office, refuge offices located throughout Nebraska, DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery, and the Mountain-Prairie Region HAPET Office.
- Continue to improve communications with partners by maintaining a strong presence in a wide variety of work groups and committees and participate with numerous Nebraska stakeholders in the development of strategic landscape planning efforts throughout Nebraska.

Enhance Our Workforce

The Nebraska Partners Program currently fully funds five full time private lands biologists (including the state coordinator). These private lands biologists are extremely dedicated to working with private landowners and partners to restore federal trust resources on private lands. In order to maintain this high level of professionalism, each Partners Program biologist will have an opportunity to participate in 40 hours of training to improve program operations (e.g., habitat restoration techniques, GIS technology, partnership development) and to improve career opportunities (e.g., research, evaluation, communication, policy). In addition, Partners Program staff will have an opportunity to spend time working with other Partners Program biologists outside of their primary areas of responsibility to share ideas and methods, and to build support and understanding regarding what is occurring in other parts of the state.

Five-year Targets

- Ensure that Nebraska Partners Program staff have the opportunity to acquire a minimum of 40 hours of training each year.
- Maintain a highly-skilled and highly-motivated Partners Program staff.
- Fill vacant positions as identified on the currently approved Nebraska Partners Program organizational chart.

Increase Accountability

Five-year Targets

- The Nebraska Partners Program will work with the Mountain-Prairie Region HAPET office and the Great Plains GIS Partnership to:
 - Develop GIS coverage and an associated database of all historic Partners Program projects in Nebraska.
 - Develop and field test habitat models that will assist in more strategically targeting Partners Program conservation efforts within the Nebraska Partners Program focus areas.
- All new Partners Program projects will annually be entered into HabITS as soon as the Wildlife Extension Agreements have been fully executed. The state coordinator will continue to ensure that HabITS data is entered correctly and is accurate.
- Nebraska Partners Program staff will continue to provide the state coordinator with accurate information regarding technical assistance efforts throughout their areas of responsibility for inclusion into HabITS.
- Partners Program field staff will be equipped with digital cameras to increase the number of before, during, and after construction photos for projects. This should result in an increase in the number of projects that are entered into HabITS with associated photos.

External Factors

The primary external factors that may influence the Nebraska Partners Program's ability to meet five-year targets is the amount of Partners Program funding available for habitat restoration projects, the amount of Partners Program personnel available to deliver habitat restoration projects throughout the focus areas, and the availability of funding and personnel from the program's diverse group of partners.