PRAIRIES CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

Prairie potholes / USFWS

Background

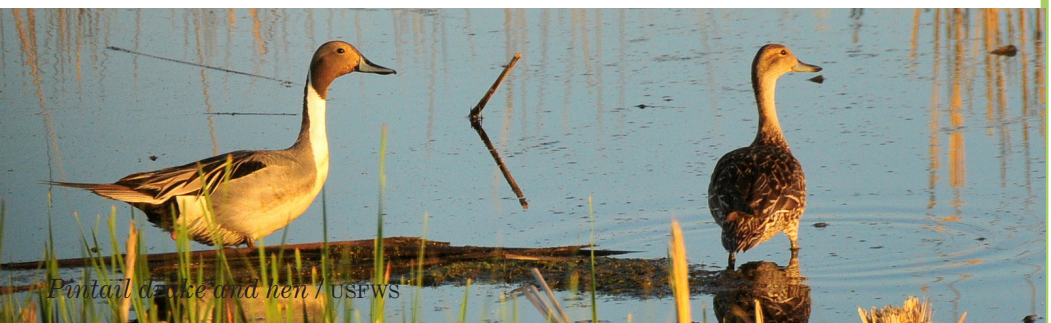
The vast grasslands and wetlands of the Northern Great Plains are often regarded as one of our most diverse ecosystems and one of America's national treasures. Despite substantial change since the Homesteading era, more than 1,600 species of plants, 300 birds, 200 butterflies and nearly 100 species of mammals still call this region home.

Within the Northern Great Plains lies the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), arguably a landscape with one of the most unique wetland resources found anywhere in the world. The U.S. portion of the PPR covers approximately 185,000 square miles or 118 million acres (1 square mile is 640 acres) and includes parts of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. Despite historical losses, the PPR contains 26 million acres of grass cover, (excluding Conservation Reserve Program grass cover), 3.44 million wetland basins and more than 300 species of birds. This area is commonly referred to as America's "duck factory" because it is the most productive area for nesting waterfowl on the continent. More than 50% of North America's ducks depend on the vital mix of wetland and grassland habitats found across the PPR.

In recent years, grassland and wetland losses have continued to expand westward across the PPR. Emerging research indicates that in many portions of the PPR, grassland loss is approaching rates not seen for nearly a century. Compounding this problem is the fact that the rates of grassland and wetland loss are greatest in the areas where the most productive wildlife habitat still remains. These areas host incredible wildlife diversity with shorebirds, waterbirds and many grassland-dependent birds relying on these grassland and wetland complexes to meet their seasonal needs. History has proven that once native prairie is plowed up and temporary and seasonal wetlands are drained, it is impossible to return these areas to their original state. Since very few of these large, intact landscapes still remain in North America, it is critical that solutions are discovered and implemented as soon as possible.

A Larger Connection to the Prairie Pothole Region

Functional grassland and wetland ecosystems not only protect the watersheds in which they occur, but also protect downstream waterways and communities. Together, prairie grasslands interspersed with wetlands provide numerous societal benefits, including filtering water, reducing erosion and sedimentation, and absorbing flood waters. When these grasslands and wetlands are lost, serious impacts are felt further downstream in the Mississippi River Basin. Such habitat losses in the PPR have been linked to creation of the hypoxic area, or "dead zone", which currently exists in the northern Gulf of Mexico adjacent to the Mississippi River. Nitrogen used as a fertilizer in commodity production in the PPR drains into the Mississippi River basin and ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico, where it fuels huge algal blooms. These blooms in turn diminish the dissolved oxygen in the water, which has created this hypoxic zone. Commercial and sport fish species such as grouper, red drum, and red snapper – and the industries and livelihoods that depend upon them – have been heavily impacted as a result.



Pintail drake and hen / USFWS

Cattle grazing at Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota / USFWS

Solutions

It is critical that we raise public awareness about these issues that are occurring across the PPR. We are working with our partners to find conservation solutions, additional resources, and win-win solutions for landowners. In order to do this, one of our primary goals is to increase opportunities for voluntary incentive-based tools to keep cattle producers profitable. This will ensure that the region has healthy fish and wildlife populations, healthy soil and water resources, and an assurance that ranch families will always be an integral and profitable component of the region's economy. Visit **www.fws.gov/prairiesconservation** to learn how you can be part of the solution and follow and participate in the conversation online using the #ConserveThePrairies hashtag.