

## Farm Bill Specialist Program Brings Ag, Conservation Groups

# Together

North Dakota farm and conservation groups are working together on a new program, which is the first of its kind in the nation.

The Farm Bill Specialist Program began last year and employs biologists across the state to assist producers in implementing conservation programs on their land. These biologists, known as “farm bill specialists,” promote conservation programs and provide programmatic, biological, and technical assistance to private landowners interested in enrolling in farm bill and other conservation programs. Farm bill specialists are familiar with the conservation programs that are available, and can meet with producers, find out what their goals are, and help them find a program that fits what they want to do. They can also provide application assistance once landowners decide which program they want to pursue.

For years, farm bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) have provided financial assistance for landowners interested in implementing conservation practices on their land, and have had huge landowner interest. The incentives

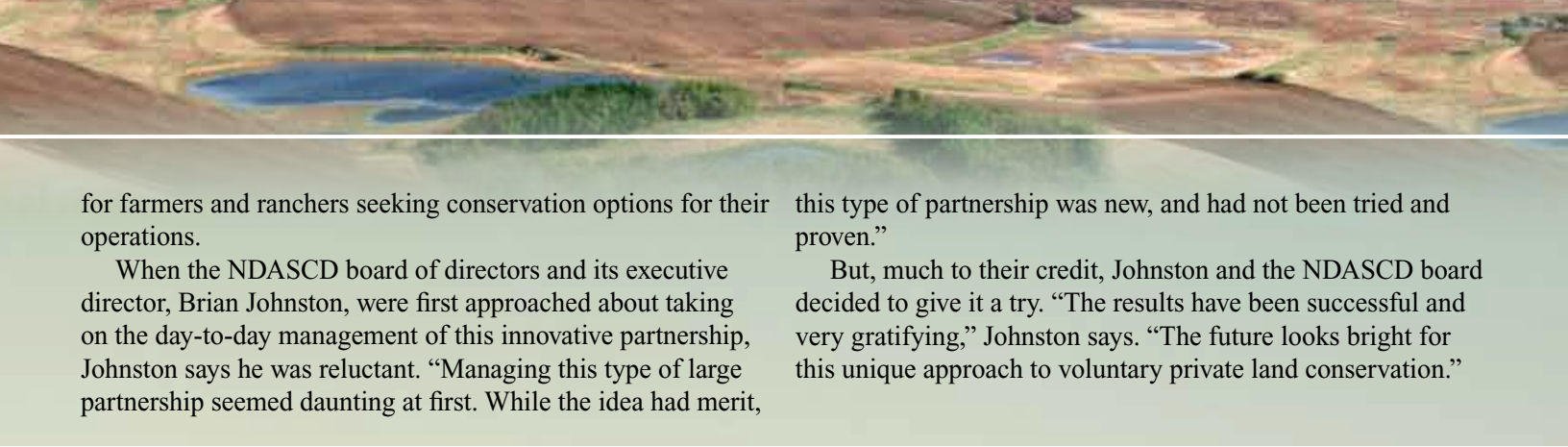
provided as part of these programs were included in various farm bills and much of the technical assistance to producers was funded through a partnership between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and a wide range of private entities. While this arrangement continued for many years, over time, many producers became concerned that it had lost focus on landowner needs.

As a result of these concerns, the concept for the Farm Bill Specialist Program emerged in North Dakota as a broader partnership. Because it would be administered by the North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts (NDASCD), conservation and agricultural groups thought it would balance the broad interests of these groups, as well as allow agricultural groups to participate financially in the support of these important positions. And, if all went well, more staff might be available to provide technical support

### North Dakota Soil Conservation District Specialists



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for farmers and ranchers seeking conservation options for their operations.

When the NDASCD board of directors and its executive director, Brian Johnston, were first approached about taking on the day-to-day management of this innovative partnership, Johnston says he was reluctant. “Managing this type of large partnership seemed daunting at first. While the idea had merit,

this type of partnership was new, and had not been tried and proven.”

But, much to their credit, Johnston and the NDASCD board decided to give it a try. “The results have been successful and very gratifying,” Johnston says. “The future looks bright for this unique approach to voluntary private land conservation.”

## Outdoor Heritage Fund Grant Funds Available for Expiring CRP Grazing Developments

The North Dakota Natural Resources Trust and partners have successfully received Outdoor Heritage Fund grant funding for a proposal called the Working Grassland Partnership (WGP).

“The Outdoor Heritage Fund advisory board is excited to offer funding to programs like the Working Grassland Partnership,” says the board’s chairman Jim Melchior. “These types of programs support landowner conservation practices while providing sportsmen with access to private lands, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of such conservation practices.”

WGP’s primary focus is to provide landowners with funding assistance to install the infrastructure needed to transition expired or expiring U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts into healthy grazing grasslands. The program will promote livestock grazing for retaining and improving grassland habitat. A 60 percent cost-share grant will be available to assist landowners with installing livestock and grassland bird-friendly development practices including livestock watering systems and fencing, but it does require an approved grazing plan. The program’s partners include the North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts, Pheasants Forever, and Ducks Unlimited. In addition, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department will offer public access through the Private Land Open to Sportsmen, or PLOTS, program.

The WGP project area includes 31 counties (see figure 1) and focuses on grassland habitat that would benefit rare and declining grassland bird species. Last year, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department updated the State Wildlife Action Plan and the species of conservation priority for North Dakota. The newly updated plan has raised awareness of grassland loss by identifying some widely recognized species, including North Dakota’s state bird, the Western meadowlark, as a species of conservation priority.

Projects that are set to expire from CRP this year and next year and allow public access will be given the highest priority in the WGP.

To receive more information about the WGP, contact Terry Allbee with the Natural Resources Trust at 701-223-8501 or any farm bill specialist at designated USDA offices.



The primary focus of the Working Grassland Partnership is to provide landowners with funding assistance to install infrastructure, such as livestock watering systems (pictured above) or fencing (pictured right), needed to transition expired or expiring CRP contracts into healthy grazing land.

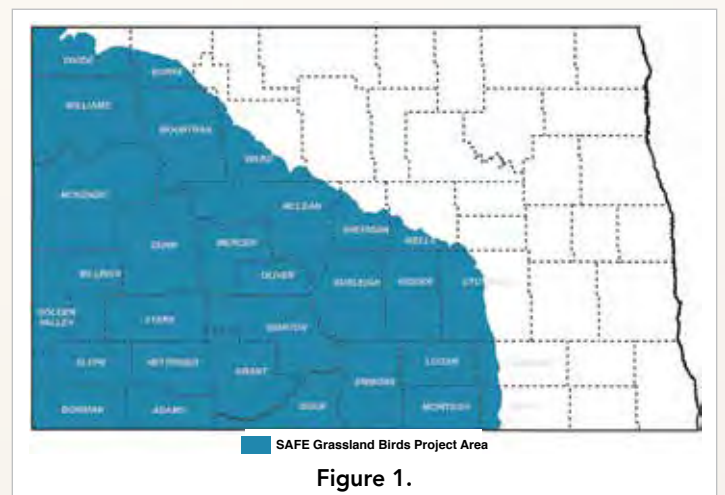


Figure 1.



# FSA Announces Final CRP Acres

By Jesse Beckers, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust

During a time when commodity prices are low and interest in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is high, several groups across North Dakota were dismayed at the program's recent allocation announcements.

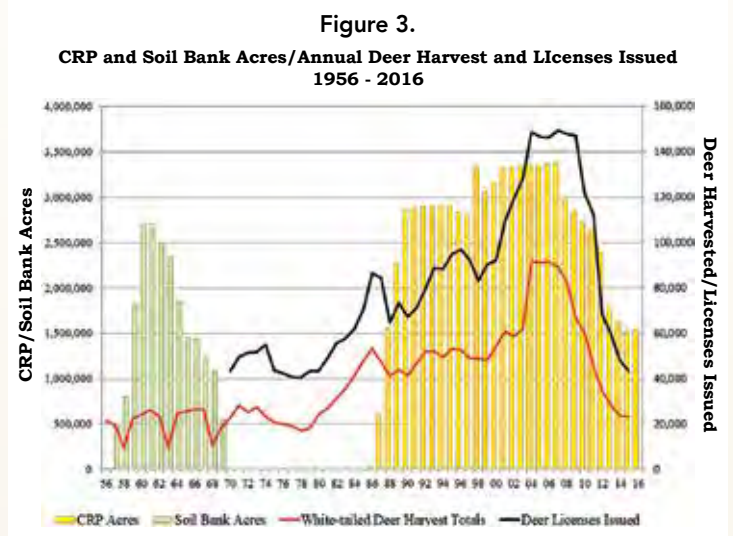
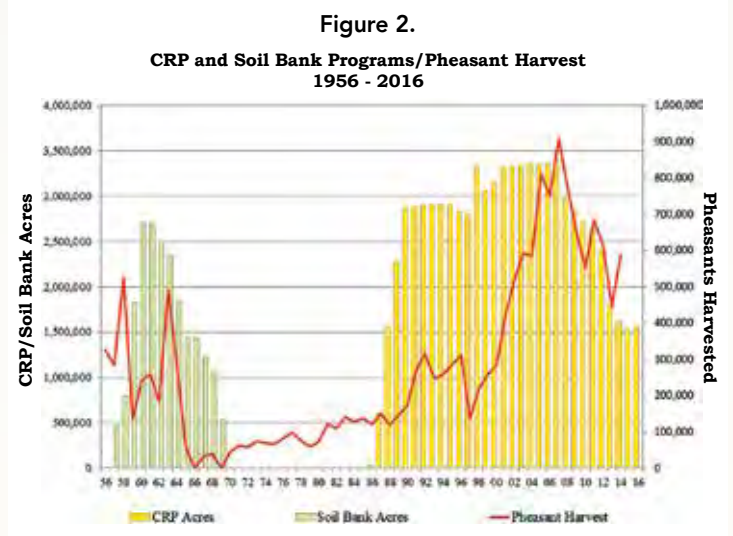
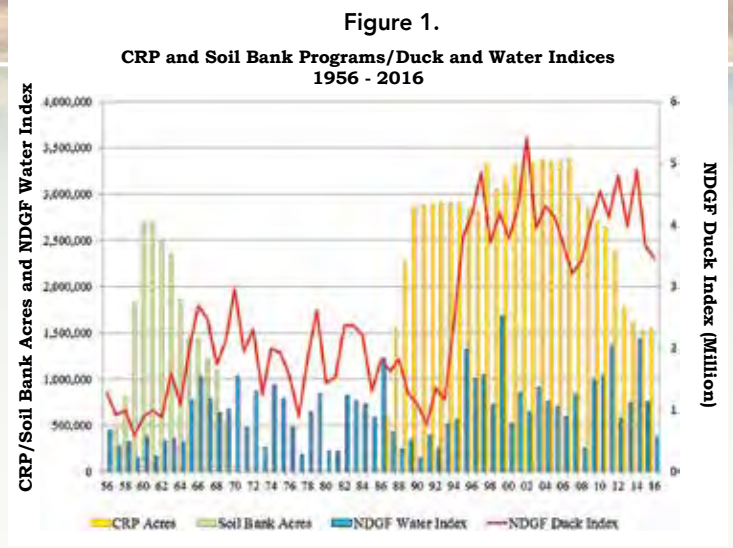
While wildlife groups were expecting a low percentage of successful applicants since the current farm bill only allows up to 24 million acres to be enrolled nationwide, it still stings when the final numbers are announced, especially since the data on CRP shows that water and soil quality increase and wildlife populations flourish when more habitat is available.

According to the Farm Service Agency (FSA), North Dakota had 1,094 applications for CRP totaling 74,059 acres of habitat across the landscape. Only 5,944 of those acres were accepted into the program, or 8 percent of North Dakota's total request. But, when considering other state statistics, it could have been worse. South Dakota's allocation was less than 1 percent of total acres offered. According to a recent FSA press release, this was the most competitive general signup in the 30-plus years CRP has been in existence – 1.8 million acres were offered for the general signup, and the FSA could only accept 411,000 nationwide, or 23 percent of total requests.

The question of how this will affect wildlife populations is rightly on the mind of a multitude of outdoor enthusiasts. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tracks such indices, and for the purposes of this article we will consider the trinity of game species pursued by most hunters in North Dakota: ducks, deer, and pheasants.

At the height of CRP acres on the landscape in the 2000s, duck indices spiked around 5.5 million. This year, those numbers decreased by more than 1 million, settling below the 3.5 million mark (see figure 1). During this same period, pheasant harvests increased dramatically each year and finally peaked at more than 900,000 birds harvested, and the data indicates that number dropped to 400,000 in 2014, which is the most recent data available (see figure 2). Also during the height of CRP acres, the number of deer harvested spiked at around 90,000. Last year, that number had decreased to around 23,000 (see figure 3).

Even with the decrease in available acres for conservation, groups are working together like never before to provide as many options to landowners as possible. Last year, conservation and agricultural representatives came together to provide funding and oversee the Farm Bill Specialist Program in North Dakota. These employees are



available to meet with landowners across North Dakota to provide guidance and service about the options available for each landowner. (See article on page 10 for more information about this program.)

Landowners interested in implementing CRP or other conservation programs on their land can contact their local Soil Conservation District office.