

Prairie PONDERings

North Dakota
Natural Resources Trust

Natural Resources Trust Encourages Land Ethic-Based Farm Bills

By Dick Kroger, Board chairman

The legislated mission statement for the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust (Trust) within the 2000 Dakota Water Resources Act is, “To preserve, enhance, restore, and manage wetlands and associated wildlife habitat, grasslands, and riparian areas in the state of North Dakota.” There are many ways the Trust’s board of directors tries to accomplish its mission. In the past, the Trust has pursued numerous different projects, practices, and programs on scattered private lands throughout North Dakota wherever an opportunity arose with willing landowners.

Previously, when it was designated responsibilities for only wetland conservation under the Garrison Diversion Unit Reformulation Act of 1986, it was brought to the

Trust’s attention that drainage was no longer the number one threat causing wetland loss. It was sedimentation from soil eroding off of adjacent farm fields. This new information prompted the Trust to look for ways to reduce the impacts to wetlands from overland erosion of soil from agricultural fields. Biologists in North Dakota did an analysis and determined that the Trust could best accomplish its mission throughout North Dakota if farm bill payments were used to reward farmers and ranchers who implemented soil, water, wetland, and other wildlife habitat conservation practices on their working lands. They hypothesized that emphasizing farm bill payments, based on conservation benefits, could even increase overall farm profits while meeting societal natural resource goals.

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Photo by Terry Allbee



**Board chairman
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As a result of these new data and ideas, the Trust's board of directors unanimously committed \$500,000 in 1999 to a five-year demonstration study to determine how conservation agricultural practices could be implemented on working farms in North Dakota to benefit wetlands, soil, water, and other wildlife habitat while

maintaining or increasing farm profits. A sixth year and another \$100,000 were subsequently added to accomplish the study's objectives. In essence, results of the study showed that substantial conservation benefits could be accrued while maintaining or increasing farm profits. Incentive payments were made to the four farm families for each acre on which they implemented conservation practices to improve protection for soil, water, wetlands, and other wildlife habitat.

During the Trust's study, the Conservation Security Program (CSP) became law within the 2002 Farm Bill. The legislation provided agricultural producers throughout the nation with opportunities to voluntarily receive incentive payments for continuing existing conservation practices on their working lands, receive additional incentive payments for implementing more conservation measures on those acres, and for adopting conservation practices on additional farm fields.

The CSP represented the near exact blueprint which we were hoping the Trust study would show was needed. The CSP theme was, "reward the best and motivate the rest," whereas the theme of the Trust study was, "farm the best and alternatives on the rest." Unfortunately, the proposed funding for CSP was cut each year and tight restrictions were placed on sign ups so that only a small percentage of agricultural producers could enter and qualify for the program in North Dakota and the nation.

In the 2008 Farm Bill, the CSP has been renamed the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with substantial additional funding and sign-up opportunities to ensure more rapid and complete implementation nationwide. If implemented properly

in accordance with the enabling legislation, the Trust can foresee the time when all agricultural producers in North Dakota would have the opportunity to voluntarily enroll part or all of their operations into the CSP to receive incentive payments in accordance with the number of acres they enroll and the type of conservation practices they implement. To ensure that every agricultural producer is given the chance to sign up for CSP, the Trust plans to work on efforts to inform agricultural producers about the program and to coordinate with agricultural and conservation groups to ensure widespread implementation of CSP in North Dakota.

The new CSP in the 2008 Farm Bill again sounds encouraging, but there is still a need to go further in pursuing a permanent future land ethic and profitable farming-based farm bill. Agriculture producers in the United States provide citizens with the most inexpensive relative food costs in the world. Unfortunately, this cheap food has come with a high societal cost. The full cost of sustainable food production must include measures which permanently protect the nation's soil, water, air, and biological diversity if our society is to survive and maintain its current standard of living and improve the environmental quality of life.

This country's agricultural system began with unlimited productive soils, clean water, and diverse ecosystems

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Photo courtesy USDA NRCS

overflowing with abundant native fish and wildlife. Although it will never go back to anywhere near the pristine natural conditions, many opportunities exist within each agricultural region of the country to make new and highly modified agricultural ecosystems sustainable and environmentally friendly to the fish, wildlife, and human populations. An effectively implemented comprehensive “land ethic” based farm bill would be tailored to meet the special ecological and wildlife needs within different areas of the country. For instance, in the Prairie Pothole Region of North Dakota, lucrative incentive payments would be offered to ensure that all participating farmers willingly look for opportunities to permanently restore some of their drained wetlands to round out their conservation programs in order to maximize overall net farm incomes.

The great ecological philosopher Aldo Leopold discussed the fact that natural resource problems associated with agricultural practices would never be resolved until farmers and landowners developed a “land ethic.” Leopold implied that if the soils are protected from the ravages of erosion, the uplands, rivers, lakes, and wetlands will be healthy and support abundant fish and wildlife populations. He further stated that “land ethics” only develop when people view the land as a natural community to which they belong and not just a commodity to be used, abused, and sold to maximize economic gains. This community connectedness phenomenon can be encouraged and perpetuated among conventional and economically driven agriculturalists by providing financial incentives to them for voluntarily implementing conservation practices, which help protect and restore the quality of the soil, water, and air and improve and create wildlife habitat on their lands.

Agricultural philosopher Wendell Berry said, “The land cannot prosper unless the people using the land are prosperous.” The Trust believes it needs to combine these universally accepted truths stated by Leopold and Berry and have their philosophies form the basis for a comprehensive and permanent farm bill conservation program. A land ethic and farmer prosperity-based policy will ensure perpetual support from most agriculturalists and other citizens committed to sustainable food production and to the sound conservation of natural resources in the agricultural ecosystems of the country.

Agricultural producers cannot be expected to assume all the financial costs of sustainable food production (including the protection of the

soil, water, air, and wildlife habitat from degradation) from the returns they regularly receive for their products in the world market. Sustainable food production is a societal cost and must be borne by all citizens. Implementation of a comprehensive and permanent “land ethic” and prosperous farming-based farm bill would not only increase the net income of agricultural producers but would improve the economic vitality of rural agricultural communities and the environmental quality of life parameters for all citizens.

In summary, the Trust believes that one universally supportable “land ethic” and prosperous farming message should come from the conservation and agricultural communities if we are to succeed in getting Congress to pass and fully fund the best permanent and comprehensive farm bills in the future. The Trust will continue working on this effort because widespread implementation of conservation practices on private agricultural working lands throughout North Dakota is the only way we can hope to accomplish our mission.

The Trust sponsored a study, which ultimately found that substantial conservation benefits could be accrued while maintaining or even increasing farm profits.



Photo by Merle Bennett