CONSERVATION PROPOSAL TO
LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT
OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES

SECURING A LEGACY OF HABITAT
CONSERVATION IN SASKATCHEWAN
WITH ENDURING BENEFITS FOR CURRENT
AND FUTURE GENERATIONS TO ENJOY

2019-2021 Conservation Proposal
Submitted by Ducks Unlimited Canada
and Ducks Unlimited Inc.
May 25, 2018
Ducks Unlimited protects, restores and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America’s waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people.

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OVERVIEW

Ducks Unlimited is the world leader in wetland conservation

Ducks Unlimited (DU) has been conserving habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife in the United States, Canada and Mexico since 1937. In Canada alone, DU has completed over 10,366 habitat projects, securing 6.4 million acres and positively influencing 152 million acres of habitat. This vast network of conservation projects contributes to the long-term sustainability of North America’s waterfowl populations by providing breeding, migratory stopover and wintering habitat, ensuring a waterfowl legacy for future generations to enjoy.

DU and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Sportsmen from Louisiana have supported DU since its inception and DU has worked in partnership with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) since 1965. With this long-term support, Louisiana sportsmen and LDWF have become recognized leaders in continental efforts to conserve waterfowl breeding habitat. DU is proposing to continue this partnership to provide enduring benefits for future generations. DU is seeking $320,000 per year over the next three years to achieve critical conservation results in Saskatchewan—the province with the strongest migratory relationship with Louisiana. With this funding, DU will permanently protect 3,600 acres, restore 2,300 acres and manage 175,000 acres previously conserved with help from LDWF.
Located in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Canada’s Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) encompasses 212,000 square miles, stretching from the Peace Lowlands of northwestern Alberta southeast to southwestern Manitoba.

More than 10,000 years ago, the glaciers from the last ice age receded across this landscape, leaving millions of shallow depressions that are now wetlands known as prairie potholes. These fertile wetlands are rich in plant and aquatic invertebrate life, which supports breeding waterfowl populations unmatched anywhere in the world. It is a critical area for mallard, northern shoveler, gadwall, northern pintail, blue-winged teal, American wigeon, canvasback, and redhead.

Despite the PPR’s importance to waterfowl, the region’s wetlands and surrounding native grassland habitat have been lost and degraded for over a century. Soon after European settlement began in the late 1800s, the pristine landscape was developed for agriculture. As the agricultural industry grew through the 1900s, many prairie potholes were drained to make room for cultivation. In key waterfowl production landscapes up to 90% of prairie wetlands have been drained. Persistent loss of wetlands and natural upland cover continue to threaten the long-term waterfowl productivity of the landscape. It is DU’s challenge to protect existing habitats, restore what has been lost, and develop new habitats that are compatible with the agricultural landscape.

In tackling this challenge, DU and partners, such as LDWF, have had a positive landscape impact. However, as the human population continues to increase, demands for more intensive agricultural production is increasing pressure on habitat. Continued conservation efforts are critical to ensure sustainable waterfowl production.
Investing Louisiana funding in Saskatchewan’s priority areas will provide the highest return to Louisiana sportsmen.
DU has developed a waterfowl distribution model based on long-term waterfowl population data and wetland inventory. The resulting Waterfowl Decision Support System (DSS) maps help identify ‘hot spots’ or priority landscapes within the PPR in which to direct our efforts to maximize benefits to waterfowl.

The priority areas are characterized by gently rolling to rugged hills that create high wetland densities. During wet years, these highly productive wetlands in concert with abundant grassland/parkland collectively contribute to some of the very best waterfowl habitat in the PPR.

The top seven waterfowl priority areas in Saskatchewan are the Missouri Coteau, Touchwood Hills, Allan/Dana Hills, Conjuring Creek, Trampling Lake East, Upper Assiniboine and Lightning Creek. These areas have high wetland density, extreme risk and/or degree of habitat loss, and excellent partnership opportunities. Most years, these landscapes support 30 pairs of breeding ducks (including mallard, northern pintail, northern shoveler, gadwall, blue-winged teal, canvasback and redhead) per square mile. The best habitat under optimal conditions will support upwards of 100 pairs of breeding ducks per square mile.

Within the waterfowl priority areas, programs are tailored to complement existing land cover type, condition, and waterfowl needs. For example, areas with significant perennial cover are targeted for habitat protection to secure existing uplands and wetlands. Areas with high wetland densities and significant agricultural activity are targeted for wetland retention and programs to restore perennial cover or increase fall seeded cereals, such as winter wheat.

**Wetlands are critical to attract ducks to the landscape and provide habitat for successful brood production.**

Intact uplands (grasslands or haylands) ensure suitable nesting habitat. DU’s focus in Saskatchewan is to protect and restore small prairie wetlands and upland nesting cover.

DU combines strategically targeted direct programs, agricultural extension and public policy efforts to advance its conservation goals. Direct habitat programs, such as land acquisition and conservation easements, help to protect the remaining habitat base, and provide restoration opportunities. Agricultural extension programs add nesting cover and improve wetland conditions, while the promoting waterfowl-friendly agricultural practices that provide positive economic benefits to producers.

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**Science based programs tailored to landscape realities**

DU has completed extensive evaluation of our conservation programs. For example, the PHJV assessment study followed 2,500 radio-marked mallards during nesting. With the results, we developed the Waterfowl Productivity Model, which predicts the breeding outputs of a landscape and allows us to prescribe habitat programs for maximum benefits. Different programs yield different returns on a per acre basis, but as we implement programs in working agricultural landscapes, we also have the ability to define program mixes that are agreeable to local producers.
CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR LDWF FUNDING

DU has an aggressive conservation strategy that includes restoring the productive capacity of the PPR for breeding waterfowl.

The strategy focuses on four habitat goals:
1. Protection of Existing Wetlands
2. Restoration of Lost Wetlands
3. Protection of Existing Uplands
4. Restoration of Lost Uplands

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

DU focuses on cost-effective programs that increase waterfowl productivity and long-term sustainability. Partnerships with producer groups and government agencies broaden conservation program impact and awareness. All programs are monitored and evaluated through an adaptive management process to ensure maximum effectiveness. With funding requested from and leveraged by LDWF, DU is proposing the following programs:

Habitat Retention

Wetland loss and degradation, and native upland fragmentation continue to impact waterfowl negatively. DU uses a variety of program tools to protect remaining critical habitats that are vital to the PPR’s long-term productivity. Habitat retention includes four primary efforts:

Conservation Easements (CEs) and Agreements protect habitats on private lands through programs offering financial incentives for varying levels of protection. These programs range in cost from $30/acre for 10-year agreements to $350/acre for perpetual easements. With LDWF’s support, we plan to protect 1600 acres through paid CE’s and 900 acres through conservation agreements.

Land Purchase is the most intensive program that DU delivers to protect high risk and value habitats. Land purchase costs continue to rise and DU will invest strategically to derive the greatest waterfowl benefits. With LDWF’s support, we plan to purchase 900 acres of prime waterfowl habitat.

Revolving Land Purchase is a program tool whereby DU purchases land, restores wetlands and grasslands, then sells the property with a perpetual conservation easement protecting all habitats. With LDWF’s support, we plan to protect an additional 900 acres through conservation easements.

Wetland Rebuilds is a reinvestment into existing wetland projects that have been highly productive and successful for waterfowl. These projects have met or surpassed their original design life span and require new infrastructure; agreement terms have expired and require new agreements to ensure their productive capacity for another 30 years. DU will re-sign all landowners on the project and construct physical improvements to maximize wetland productivity and waterfowl recruitment. With LDWF’s support, we plan to rebuild and re-sign conservation agreements for 600 acres of wetlands.
WORKING LANDSCAPES

Over 90% of the PPR is in private ownership. Most landowners are trying to make a living off the land through agriculture. Wetlands and associated habitats are often seen as negative features from a landowner’s perspective; hence the drive to break grassland and drain wetlands and convert them to ‘productive’ agricultural land. DU is finding ways to adjust this attitude. DU has a great working relationship with cattlemen, a group with interest in grass and water conservation. We have developed and promoted waterfowl-friendly cropping practices, such as winter wheat and no-till, which allow successful nesting. We are researching the economic value of wetlands for flood control, water quality, carbon sequestration and other ecosystem services. The results of this research will help us develop sustainable offset programs to maintain and restore these natural features that are so critical to waterfowl on the prairie landscape.

Wetland Restoration

Although wetlands are expensive to drain and offer benefits to landowners, thousands of acres of wetland habitat has been lost in waterfowl priority areas, significantly reducing the productive capacity of the PPR. Most of DU’s wetland restoration work occurs on private land, which involves working with landowners who are primarily ranchers or farmers. As such, DU often initiates wetland restoration in concert with conservation easements, land purchase and forage conversion. DU’s efforts restore or enhance degraded wetland hydrology and biodiversity so they can once again provide essential habitat for waterfowl. Restoration will be completed on lands we are proposing to protect with support from LDWF; however, this program is funded through other partnerships with no cost to LDWF.

Upland Restoration

Duck nest success drives continental waterfowl populations. Improving nest success requires nesting cover restoration. DU increases the availability of quality cover in the PPR through its winter wheat program. Unlike spring wheat, winter wheat is planted in the fall; come spring, it provides undisturbed nesting cover that is 12 times more productive for upland nesting waterfowl.

DU’s winter wheat program focuses on the agronomic and economic benefits of the crop to the producer. Approaches vary from research and development of new winter wheat varieties that grow better in the Canadian Prairies, to working directly with producers through incentive or extension programs. With LDWF’s support, we plan to work with local producers to support their planting of 40,000 acres of winter wheat.

In addition to winter wheat, forage conversion programs, delivered in partnership with provincial agencies and the agricultural industry, help maximize upland nesting habitat. The cattle industry is growing in Prairie Canada and that will drive a demand for more grass. DU’s forage program provides financial incentives to seed cultivated land to grass and delay the cutting operations until after the majority of waterfowl have completed nesting. This program costs $45/acre to $200/acre (including wetland restoration) and commits the landowner to a 10-year agreement. With LDWF’s support, we plan to work to partner with local farmers on 2,300 acres of cultivated lands converted to grass.

Habitat Asset Management

DU has protected millions of acres of habitat through its conservation programs. These habitat projects require continued investment as they age to retain their long-term production value. This includes wetland control operations, nesting cover management, habitat inspections and agreement compliance monitoring. Management activities ensure that projects provide maximum benefit for waterfowl and the greatest return on investment for our conservation dollar. With LDWF’s support, we plan to manage 175,000 acres of previously protected habitat with LDWF funds.
In Canada, DU is the main delivery agent for the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). DU’s programs are designed to support NAWMP goals under the PHJV. DU’s efforts in the PPR are focused within the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture’s (PHJV’s) waterfowl priority areas. Priority areas direct conservation resources to locations with the highest need and benefit to birds.

The PHJV is a successful collaboration of over 200 Canadian and U.S. partners that support and deliver programs to over 20,000 producers across the PPR of Canada while impacting over 12 million acres. Partnership include collaboration with Saskatchewan Environment and Environment Canada to deliver conservation easements and land purchases, and work with local watershed organizations to protect and enhance wetlands and water quality.

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is the funding mechanism for NAWMP. It is a critical funding source for Canadian waterfowl conservation. In fact, 45% of NAWCA’s annual appropriation is earmarked for Canadian conservation programs, which are approved by Canadian joint ventures.

To receive NAWCA funding, proponents must match funds. For Canadian proponents, up to 50% of match funds may come from Canadian Sources, but a minimum of 50% must come from U.S. non-federal government sources. As such, grants from other American agencies, such as the funds sought with this proposal, are critical to allow NAWCA dollars to flow to Canada.

The match requirement is directly beneficial to LDWF because it results in leveraging: for every dollar invested by LDWF, $4 will be invested in conservation of critical habitats that produce ducks and other migratory birds that migrate to Louisiana.

NAWCA has become a cornerstone of waterfowl conservation across North America. One of the strongest supporting arguments for retaining this program is the matching funds committed by state agencies and non-profit organizations to meet U.S. non-federal match requirements. The future of NAWCA funding weighs heavily on the health of the program’s mandate to support the NAWMP. The 2012 revision of the NAWMP reaffirmed the importance of the breeding grounds of Canada and the commitment of resources to meet the 25-year habitat conservation goals.
PROPOSAL DETAILS

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries funding provide the critical first dollar, which leverages additional funding that drives Canadian waterfowl habitat conservation.

We respectfully invite the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to renew its partnership and investment for FY2019–2021. Your funding protect and restore priority waterfowl and water bird habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region of Saskatchewan. Louisiana's partnership funding of $320,000 annually for FY2019–2021, for a total of $960,000. These funds will be leveraged four-fold by Ducks Unlimited, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and other partners, resulting in $3,840,000 for the conservation of critical waterfowl habitat on North America's breeding grounds.

NOTE: This proposal is scalable to dollars and timeframe available. With this contribution, we anticipate the following conservation work:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Conservation Initiatives</th>
<th>Proposed LDWF Acres</th>
<th>Proposed LDWF Costs</th>
<th>Proposed Program Acres</th>
<th>Proposed Costs</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Habitat Retention</td>
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<td>a. Conservation Easements</td>
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* Habitat Asset Management acres are not incremental and are therefore not included in the total acre goals.