

HILDEBRAND'S VISION

The new Hildebrand Wildlife Management Area, located five miles north and three miles east of Drayton, contains not only wildlife habitat, but also nearly two miles of shoreline access to the Red River.

By Craig Bihrlé

Red River WMA Honors Former Game and Fish Director's Career

Editor's note: Shortly before this issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* went to press, former Game and Fish Director Dean Hildebrand passed away after a six-month battle with cancer. He was well enough to attend, along with his entire family, the dedication of a new wildlife management area named in his honor in mid-August. Unfortunately, because of wet conditions, the dedication was not held at the new area. Dean never got to see the WMA that bears his name. Dean's grandchildren, however, will have the opportunity to see and use the area, and that's what Hildebrand's vision for this area – and really all of North Dakota – was all about: making sure that future generations would continue to have places to hunt, fish and enjoy North Dakota's outdoors as much as he did.

At a time when most people stereotyped North Dakota's Red River Valley as a corridor of flat, fertile farmland with little to offer for outdoor recreation, Dean Hildebrand saw something different.

While the Red River Valley is a corridor of flat, fertile farmland, Hildebrand, as North Dakota Game and Fish Department director from April 1996 to December 2005, saw instead a prime destination for hunting, fishing, canoeing, camping and other pursuits. What the eastern border of the state needed, Hildebrand envisioned, was more public access so people in the state's most populated area could better use the river in their own back yard.

Some of that vision started to become reality in the few years before Hildebrand retired. On the heels of a federal program that purchased permanent easements on flood-prone farmland near the river, Game and Fish was able to acquire several tracts to manage for wildlife habitat and recreation.

One of those tracts is now the Dean C. Hildebrand Wildlife Management Area, following a well-attended dedication ceremony held in Drayton on August 15. "It's probably really appropriate that we name a wildlife management area along the Red River for Dean Hildebrand," said Game and Fish Director Terry Steinwand

at the dedication. "... His vision was to get as much access to the Red River, which he felt was a grossly underutilized resource, and this is just the start of it."

The Hildebrand WMA is 282 acres of riverbottom grasslands and trees stretching over nearly two miles of shoreline access. It is one of eight tracts Game and Fish acquired that initially had easements through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Emergency Watershed Protection program. Landowners could voluntarily sign up for the EWP program, which covers agricultural and development rights, while landowners retained use rights like hunting, and also retained responsibility for things like weed control and property taxes.

Some landowners in the EWP program weren't interested in maintaining those lands, and took advantage of an opportunity to transfer their residual rights to the Game and Fish Department. "If there were ever a saga of cooperative conservation, this would be it," said Jennifer Hegland, representing USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service at the dedication.

It was Hildebrand, Hegland said, who started the thought process for making the EWP tracts accessible. "As the people of North Dakota and all across the nation visit the Dean C. Hildebrand Wildlife Management Area, they will feel a kinship to the land, as well as being very proud of the foresight of the people of North Dakota."

Hildebrand brought the concept to the governor's office, and four years ago, Governor John Hoeven announced a plan that would include money in the Game and Fish budget to begin offering landowners an opportunity to include their land in the WMA system.

"It's going to be a place that people are going to enjoy for many, many years," Governor Hoeven remarked at the dedication. "... (Dean) has created a lasting legacy for the state of North Dakota, and really, beyond."

Game and Fish Director Steinwand said that WMAs are named after deserving people, sometimes donating landowners, sometimes prominent conservation leaders. "Areas like this ... they contribute to the quality of life. To us at Game and Fish, and the people who love the outdoors in North Dakota, these areas are (part of) the quality of life," Steinwand stated. "So it's very important that an individual who really felt strongly about contributing to the quality of life, has his name on one of these areas."

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