A Quarter-Century of CRP

by Ron Wilson

A celebrated conservation program that improves water quality, safeguards soils on marginal cropland and provides indispensable cover for a host of animals big and small turns 25 this year.

Unfortunately, the silver anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program may be the last noteworthy milestone for the lauded environmental undertaking that changed North Dakota's landscape. What's certain about the future of CRP is that the program is swathed in so much uncertainty.

Signed into law in 1985, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program was designed to reduce grain surpluses to jumpstart commodity prices, and decrease erosion on marginal croplands. It did that and more, scientists say, helping to reduce soil erosion by millions of tons across the country.

Wildlife managers talk about an entire generation of hunters who have never seen North Dakota's landscape without acres and acres of CRP. Not to mention bountiful animal populations that are the product of the dense cover that shelters them from unpredictable Northern Plains weather, while providing nesting and rearing habitat for ground-nesting birds.

"This generation will be severely disappointed in coming years unless we are able to salvage CRP and other landscape-level conservation programs," said Randy Kreil, Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "It's going to be a very big challenge in these financially difficult times, but the long-term benefits to wildlife resources and quality of life to this state and others is something that shouldn't be ignored."

While it makes perfect sense today that big blocks of grass spread across the countryside is a wonderful thing for wildlife, there was some uncertainty as to the kind of influence it would have on many species when the Conservation Reserve Program was initiated.

Mike Johnson, Game and Fish Department game management section leader, said in the early 1980s, waterfowl biologists were investigating many avenues – nesting structures, peninsula cutoffs, electric fence enclosures, island construction, the list goes on – to improve duck nesting success in the state.

"We didn't know how we were going to raise ducks," he said. "Then came CRP and we were totally shocked what the ducks could do with that much grass on the landscape … no one had any idea that it could happen or would happen."

"The Conservation Reserve Program has proven over and over again that if you put quality habitat on North Dakota's landscape, the wildlife responds," Kreil said. "CRP has also dramatically changed our Private Land Open To Sportsmen program as we've been able to enroll thousands of acres of high quality wildlife habitat into this hunter access program, providing countless days of recreation for an increased number of hunters looking for a place to go."

The potential to lose much of the CRP in the state is a path North Dakota traveled before. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the federal government initiated Soil Bank, the predecessor to today's Conservation Reserve Program. Environmentally friendly and a boon to wildlife, Soil Bank was eventually retired.

"That begs the question, 'Will we ever learn?'" Kreil said.

Hunter Behavior Can Influence PLOTS Retention

If you have this guide in your hands, you are probably looking for a place to hunt, such as public land, or private land enrolled in the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program.

It's important to remember that PLOTS is a voluntary program, and at the end of each year many landowners will consider whether to renew expiring short- and long-term contracts.

In the past, the Game and Fish Department has lost contracts, and therefore opportunities for hunters, because of poor treatment of a PLOTS tract.

If you are hunting a PLOTS tract, or any public land for that matter, leave it in better shape than you found it. Pack out any litter you pack in, and if you find litter somebody else left behind, pack that out, too.

It goes without saying that shooting PLOTS signs is vandalism and costs the Game and Fish Department money that is better used to enroll more acres.

Find a place to park that does not block a roadway, and clean birds in an area that is out of sight from passing vehicles.

There's no prize or reward for picking up your own or someone else's garbage, just the satisfaction that you and your hunting partners may be able to hunt the tract the next year because the landowner was satisfied with the way "hunters" treated their land.

Photo by Greg Gullickson