



Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative Background

In late spring 2010, the Gulf Coast faced an environmental disaster of epic proportions—the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Projections of wide-spread habitat destruction prompted the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) to reduce the potential impact on migratory birds traveling towards oil-impacted areas.

NRCS committed \$40 million to assist agricultural producers improve habitat resources in the Gulf Region. Because of that commitment and the fast action of NRCS staff and partners, farmers and producers in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Texas were able to improve habitat and supplement food and nesting resources on over 471,000 acres of private lands by the fall migration.

Although the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative was created in response to an oil spill, it demonstrated the potential for agricultural lands to remain productive and provide much needed habitat for wildlife. Because of its success along the Gulf Coast, the program was expanded in 2011 to focus on the Northern Plains portion of the Central Flyway.

The Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative

Based on the successes in the Gulf Coast, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota is using a landscape-based, collaborative effort with conservation partners to provide quality wildlife habitat for priority migratory bird species in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR).

The PPR encompasses roughly 100,000 square miles of critical nesting and migration habitat for over 5 million pairs of ducks who breed there annually. The Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (NP-MBHI) includes conservation plans for land birds, shorebirds, and other varieties that also exist in this area. These plans identify the target species and prescribe the implementation of specific conservation practices to provide the appropriate habitat. NRCS conservation planning professionals are working with landowners and managers within the PPR to identify areas of habitat need and using NP-MBHI to provide financial assistance to implement the necessary conservation practices.

Goals/Objectives

The objective of the MBHI is to enhance habitat for migratory birds, improve water management and quality, and increase ecosystem health. The project is designed to assist agricultural producers protect and restore wetland habitat, and promote conditions that support migration, mating, or nesting.

Conservation Funding/ Practices Applied

In 2011, the NP-MBHI utilized NRCS easement and financial assistance programs including the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), and the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). These funds helped to accelerate implementation of conservation practices for improving migratory bird habitats within priority areas in the PPR.

The NP-MBHI emphasizes wetland restoration and enhancement to secure sufficient grassland habitat, pollinator habitat, wetland filtering measures, and water retention. Using working lands conservation programs, NRCS helps farmers and ranchers implement wildlife conservation practices to increase migratory bird habitat.

Partnerships

Numerous conservation partners are involved in MBHI, including conservation districts and state and federal level partners such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies, Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV), and nongovernmental organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever.

Portions of the initiative area have been identified as “biologically unique landscapes” through state agency wildlife action plans. As a result, several partners are actively providing technical and financial assistance in areas complimenting the MBHI efforts. NRCS is working

with these partners and establishing contribution agreements to leverage program technical assistance provided to landowners and managers through the initiative.

Benefits

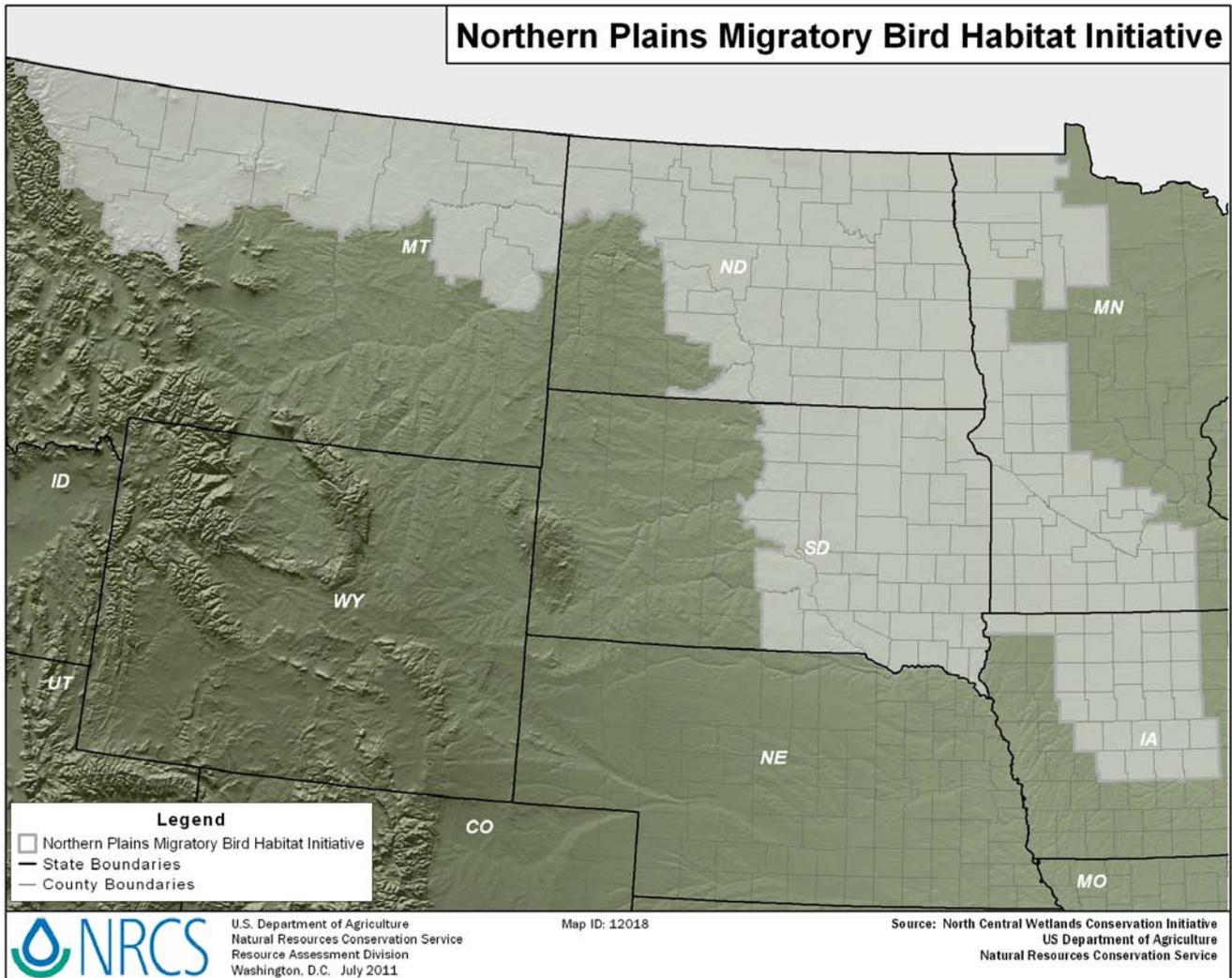
Applications to participate in the initiative and receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices are ranked based on the highest potential enhancements to wetland/upland migratory bird habitats and to the secondary resource concerns of plant diversity and water quality. This ensures the highest benefit from MBHI contracts and activities.

The vast geographic area encompassed in the Initiative lends itself well towards the identification of geographical sub-regions having heightened resource concerns and to using the Initiative to prioritize assistance to resolve those concerns. The prioritized sub-regions are based on maps from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service which provide NRCS with a screening tool to insure that funding goes to projects with the highest priority. Ranking applications will help provide:

- Protection for a variety of wetland types;
- Benefits to priority migratory bird species of concern;
- Large blocks of nesting habitat adjacent to wetlands for waterfowl and other grassland nesting birds;
- Connectivity between wetlands in a wetland complex;
- Opportunities for established habitat to be preserved; and
- Habitat for other targeted or species of concern.



A heron enjoys flight over improved wetland habitat.



NRCS Contracts and Funding Within the Northern Plains - Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative

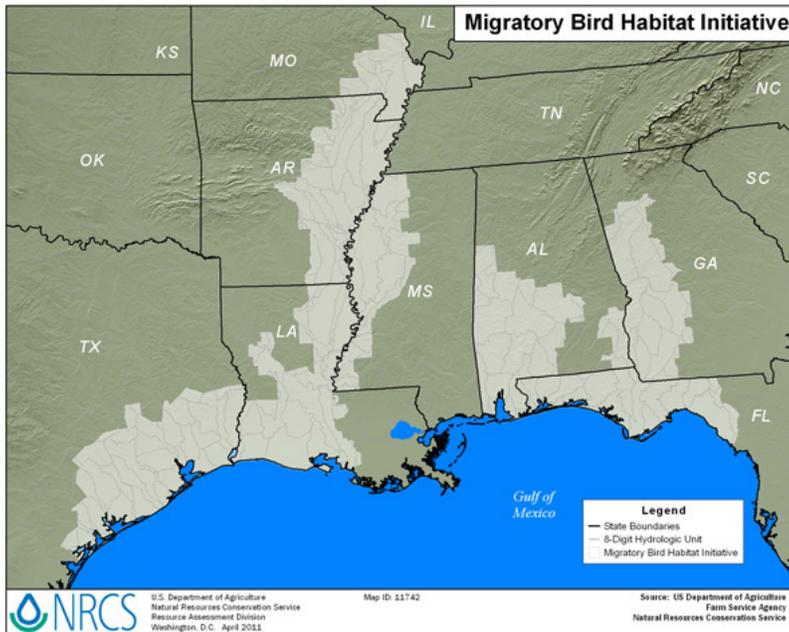
The graphs below identify financial assistance and contracts for Fiscal Year 2011 only. The initial Migratory Bird Habitat Incentive Program continued to work on contracts that were awarded in 2010 but received no new funding for FY11.

Fiscal Year 2011 - NRCS Northern Plains - Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative						
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) Plus						
Active and Completed Contracts/Agreements						
STATE	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)		Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)		Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	
	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligation	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligation	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligation
Iowa	10	\$198,659	0	0	0	0
Minnesota	0	0	0	0	0	0
Montana	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Dakota	79	\$1,542,366	24	\$596,724	0	0
South Dakota	5	\$282,495	1	\$7,824	5	\$255,552
TOTALS	94	\$2,023,520	25	\$604,548	5	\$255,552

Fiscal Year 2011 - NRCS Northern Plains - Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative				
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) Plus				
Active and Completed Contracts/Agreements				
STATE	Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)		Totals for all Programs Within the Initiative Area	
	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligation	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligation
Iowa	16	\$3,822,950	26	\$4,021,609
Minnesota	0	0	0	0
Montana	0	0	0	0
North Dakota	1	\$635,940	104	\$2,775,030
South Dakota	5	\$1,117,101	16	\$1,662,972
TOTALS	22	\$5,575,991	146	\$8,459,611

Success stories from states highlight the efforts of NRCS conservation professionals communicating with clients and developing options for producers to determine best management practices to improve wildlife habitat on their working lands under both the original Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative and the Northern Plains –Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative.

State Stories of Success from the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative Area



The initial Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative area was developed to provide safe habitat for migratory birds whose traditional habitat was threatened by the Gulf Oil Spill.

ALABAMA - MBHI

Alabama hosts more than 30 species of migrating shorebirds each year. With the hot, dry conditions usually found near the Gulf of Mexico in the summer, it is critical to provide safe habitat. As the oil spill in the Gulf decimated necessary habitat for shorebirds and ducks on their migration to the region, old catfish ponds found a new use as mud flats complete with food sources. Through the MBHI, farmers took some ponds out of production or put un-used ponds to alternative use by managing them to provide nesting materials, food sources, and other necessary habitat for nesting or resting.

NRCS targeted \$1.7 million for the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative in Alabama in FY2010. Thirteen landowners and 288 acres were engaged in the effort. Some ponds had water removed; others had water added to create the mud flats the shorebirds needed. One landowner, Roy Barnett, had gotten out of the catfish business, but used the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative to convert out-of-production acres into duck habitat. "They need some management for a couple of months, but it's not that much, and it was just a good thing to do," said Barnett.



Catfish ponds in AL (above) are partially drained (below) to provide mudflats as habitat to keep migrating birds from going further south to habitat compromised by the Deep Water oil spill.

ARKANSAS - MBHI

Dr. DeWayne Goldman operates the 750-acre Dell-Cam Farm, Inc., in Jefferson County, Arkansas. He felt that flooding his fields as part of the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative was just the right thing to do. It helped fulfill a critical need, providing habitat for birds that were in danger if they continued their migration. "It was a win-win situation," said Goldman.

Goldman flooded 14.3 acres that hadn't been flooded during the past three years. "We already had a concentrated effort in place that attracted birds to rest and feed in the area," he said. "But because of our participation in MBHI, I noticed a slight increase in the number of waterfowl in the fields." Goldman's NRCS conservation plan calls for flooding the fields in 2012.



NRCS works closely with Dr. DeWayne Goldman to plan for food and habitat for migrating birds before they reached the coastal oil spill area.

FLORIDA - MBHI

Florida NRCS worked with landowners to enhance wetland habitat for migratory birds in twenty Gulf Coast counties. One site (Photos) was in the Apalachicola River Watershed of Gulf County, in the panhandle of Florida. The land was farmed to rice from the late 1970s through early 1990s, and to small grains thereafter. MBHI funding helped to establish annual plots of Japanese millet that could be flooded to provide shallow water habitat for waterfowl.

The leaseholder, Mallory Williams, said that "The variety of ducks that utilized the site was amazing." In 2010, there were diving ducks and puddle ducks, and in the last week of January 2011, a group of approximately 300 mallards arrived. This was very rare, as they usually only see one or two pairs the whole year.

"The improved habitat provided different types of food and more open water," Williams continued. "The program provided a great enhancement to the lease which we feel will continue each migratory season."



Fields in the Florida Panhandle were planted to millet, then flooded to provide open-water habitat and food for migrating birds like this crane.

GEORGIA - MBHI

NRCS has worked with the W.C. Bradley Farms (Stewart County, Georgia) on several wildlife habitat projects, including a 600-acre wetland restoration. They are a fifth generation, family-owned company started in 1885. Bradley Farms owns 15 miles of shoreline that is a great migratory bird area. “They have owned this land since the early 1900’s. They grew cotton – they were the largest continuous cotton farm in the State of Georgia,” said Dan Fletcher, farm manager.

“MBHI was a great fit into our wildlife management program,” he explained. In one area, what was a 155-acre irrigated cotton field is now a MBHI wetland with pristine mudflats and shallow water habitat right next to the Chattahoochee River and surrounded on three sides with water,” he continued, “The field was difficult to manage due to wet pockets scattered across it.” Though not required by the contract, crops were also planted in the field to enhance wildlife diversity.

Fletcher sees more habitat work down the road. “My vision is that there will be 5,000 ducks out there one day - wood storks coming through, all the little shore birds, herons, and others.” Looking forward, he sees “lots of birds out there, and people taking advantage of it.”

MISSISSIPPI - MBHI

For years, Lan Burns farmed rice, soybeans and milo on his land in west DeSoto County, Mississippi. But this season was different — his main yield was habitat for migratory birds.

Burns enrolled in the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative determined to help the birds who were potentially affected by the impacts of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico’s coastal wetlands.

“It was great to be part of the effort by NRCS to help with the catastrophe on the coast,” Burns said of his almost 90 acres that were part of the program. “It has really turned out well. I’m proud to be involved,” he added.

Burns started pumping water on in late October, and soon began to see the arrival of migratory birds.

“This program with NRCS was unbelievable,” Burns said. “We’re holding a lot of birds here that would have moved on to the Gulf.” “I saw killdeer and shorebirds early, and now it is full with waterfowl,” Burns said. “You could not have put another goose or duck on those fields.”

continued



The wet pockets in this cornfield were allowed to become mud flats and the corn provided feed for migrating birds.



Late fall flooding of his Mississippi fields allowed Lan Burns to avoid 2 pesticide applications while providing habitat.

MISSISSIPPI - MBHI *continued*

Burns said he plans to keep his wetland for a little longer after the ducks and geese continue because the water on the fields prevents weeds from growing where crops will be planted later this year.

"We're holding the water late," Burns said, saying he will drain the fields two weeks before planting. "It will save us two applications of chemicals. This will benefit everyone, not just the farmer."

MISSOURI - MBHI

During the two migratory seasons since NRCS established the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI), Southeastern Missouri farmer Davis Minton has seen benefits from both ends of the hydrological spectrum—a drought in 2010 and a flood in 2011.

In 2010, MBHI provided some financial incentives for Minton to re-flood his rice fields and implement additional habitat management strategies on his wetland conservation. The emphasis was to create or enhance habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl.

"We noticed the early use of those areas by migrating birds," Minton says. "Not just ducks and geese, which most people think of when they think of migratory birds, but we had many species of birds, including shorebirds."

The Mississippi River flood in Spring 2011 caused another issue for Minton and other managers of wetlands in southeastern Missouri. Minton says that MBHI helped him work around a massive spring flood that covered his fields with 10 feet of water in May. The flood resulted in bare fields that would have produced little or no food for migratory birds without some unconventional management techniques—that included disking fields in June. "The flood caused a 100 percent destruction of the plant community, and if we had not done something, we would have had nothing but cockleburs and morning glories," Minton says.

After the June disking, Minton began pumping water into the dry wetland units. "We were hoping that by disking the units and then flooding them, that we would mimic a crop," he says. "We typically start pumping in August. But, if we would not have pumped water into the units in June this year, we would have had nothing but bare ground," Minton added. "It was a pretty big gamble, but it was a gamble that we could more easily afford to take because of MBHI."

And it was a gamble that paid off. "This turned out to be one of the better years for our wetland units," Minton says. "They have massive amounts of food, and have attracted early migratory birds. We have huge numbers of birds right now," he added.



Disking, then re-flooding fields that had flooded out before planting provided nesting habitat for migratory birds.

TEXAS - MBHI

In southeast Texas alone, more than 29,000 acres were enrolled in the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative. Will Beatty of Chambers County, Texas, was one of the first to enroll. Rice farmers received cost share assistance to flood their fallow fields, creating alternative overwintering habitat for migrating birds. The initiative gave landowners the resources to create habitat and enhanced the effectiveness to hold waterfowl in the area. Beatty enrolled 2,045 acres.

“We were able to flood hundreds and hundreds of acres that we hadn’t been able to flood,” Beatty said. “We enjoyed having a lot more waterfowl that stayed and wintered with us. They usually pass through,” he added. All of the participating landowners expressed excitement in the number of species of migratory waterfowl that have been sighted.

The flooded acres provided the necessary habitat needed by waterfowl to feed, rest, roost, and build energy before moving on their migration path. It also increased the number of wood ducks and diver ducks, such as redheads and bluebills.

“I think that if we had not put the water there they would have gone into the areas that were affected. And who knows what the outcome would have been. But, with NRCS assistance and the Migratory Bird Initiative, we acted very quickly and were able to put water on the ground. It was just magnificent to see the [bird] numbers that were on our farm throughout the migration,” Beatty said.

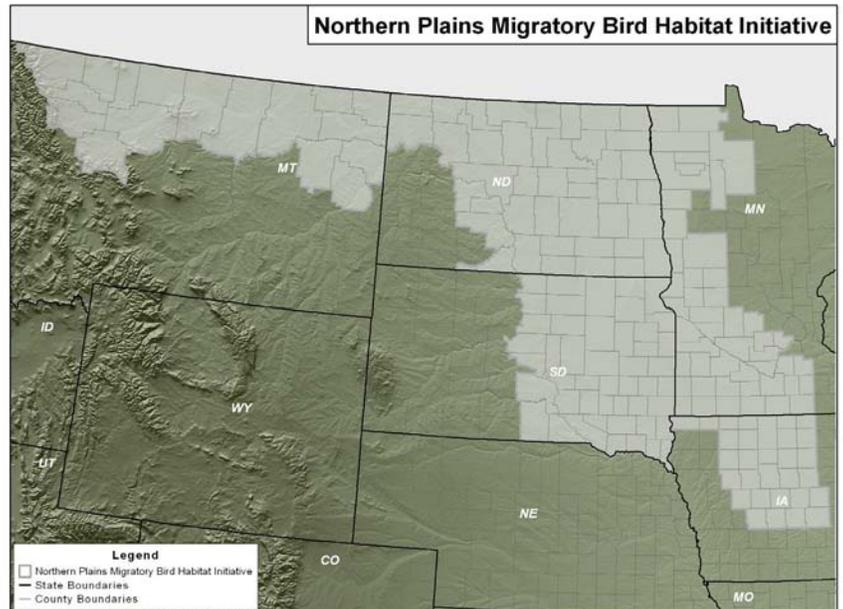


Texas rice farmers flooded their fields to provide habitat and prevent the birds from moving further south to oil-impacted habitat.



Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative - Northern Plains States

The states of Minnesota and Montana are also located in the Northern Plains-Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative but received no funding for Fiscal Year 2011.



IOWA - NPMBHI

Conservation is a family tradition that pays both environmental and economical benefits for the Ausberger farming operation. David Ausberger, of Greene County, Iowa, farms 1,600 acres of no-till corn and soybeans. His family began no-till farming more than 30 years ago. Ausberger recently added cover crops to his operation with financial and technical assistance through the Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative.

This past August, he aerially seeded 250 acres of ryegrass and 150 acres of hairy vetch. In addition to providing soil quality, soil erosion and nutrient management benefits, the cover crops are strategically placed in the migratory bird fly zone, providing a food source for dozens of bird species. "In addition to conservation, we are a very wildlife-oriented operation," said Ausberger. "We care about habitat," he added, "We even include some quail habitat buffers on our farm."

Ausberger views conservation as a key to his bottom-line. "What's good for the environment and wildlife is also good for me economically," he said.



Iowa farmers are planting second crops as cover on the land as well as to provide food for migrating birds.

NORTH DAKOTA- NPMBHI

Dave Migler is a producer from Pierce County, North Dakota, located within the PPR. Migler's operation supports both cattle and crops. For the past few years, Migler has experienced high water levels on his cropland and hayland, making it impossible for him to utilize some of his lands for production purposes. Working with his local NRCS office, the Northern Plains Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative provided a solution that would balance his economic interests and his desire to protect migratory bird habitat. The NP-MBHI was created to help producers, such as Migler, manage these situations in an economical and environmentally-friendly manner.

Migler installed two core conservation practices—wetland wildlife habitat management and upland wildlife habitat management—to keep his wetlands in place, reduce any adverse effects from crop production, and restore wetland acres and function. Migler also plans to plant wildlife-friendly vegetation when the croplands begin to dry out. This will provide food for wildlife, particularly for migrating and nesting birds.

Because of the financial incentives offered through the NP-MBHI, Migler will be able to keep these wetlands intact and meet one of the primary resource objectives of the initiative.

SOUTH DAKOTA- NPMBHI

Six contracts valued at \$292,000 were signed to implement various conservation practices on over 2 million acres in South Dakota. Those contracts will help preserve and improve local natural resources and wildlife habitat to support bird habitat through the NP-MBHI. With the "rollout" period coming late in the fiscal year, most projects will be implemented in FY2012.

One project will consist of seeding a food plot to grass. The producer wished to reduce the labor required to annually seed the food plot but still maintain migration habitat for aquatic birds. Neighboring crops will provide food sources instead, as well as additional habitat. Grass will be seeded next spring and haying will be delayed until after the nesting season (or not at all) to provide additional wildlife cover.

Other projects include cross-fencing and the installation of additional water sources, which will allow the producers to switch from a hay field to pasture by providing a quality water source for livestock. The installation of cross-fencing will allow additional resting periods to other pastureland and gives native vegetation the ability to recover over time and provide additional wildlife nesting cover.



Restoring and developing wetlands provides migration habitat for waterfowl in the Prairie Pothole Region.



Drilling new water wells provides additional water availability for livestock and allows rotational grazing to rest the grasslands and protect nesting habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Continued

SOUTH DAKOTA- NPMBHI *Continued*

With the obligation of another contract, 160 acres of warm/cool season native rangeland and 309 acres of warm/cool season introduced grassland is being managed for wildlife. In October 2011, drilling began on an artesian well that will provide watering facilities to three strategic locations throughout the 469-acre, four-paddock grazing system. In 2012, the herd will be rotated through the four paddocks in an effort to preserve wildlife nesting cover.

All of the projects work to provide good grazing management that also supports wildlife habitat management and protects nesting habitat.



A well-managed grazing system will provide livestock with an abundant and healthy supply of range grasses and provides nesting and safe passage for wildlife.

NP-Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative
Providing Food and Wetland Habitat
for Migratory Birds and Other Wildlife

