



GREAT PLAINS
REGION

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STATE CONSERVATION REPORT 2020

North Dakota

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- by Jonas Davis, Manager of Conservation Programs

For the Ducks Unlimited conservation team, 2019 was another successful year in protection, restoration and enhancement of waterfowl habitat in North Dakota. Through expanded partnerships and accelerated efforts, DU restored and enhanced more than 20,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitat. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), DU's primary tool for wetland and grassland conservation is the perpetual conservation easement. The FWS easement program allows landowners to ensure habitat remains intact, maintain their agricultural operation and be compensated for their

efforts. In 2019, this partnership perpetually protected 13,891 acres of grasslands and 14,607 of wetlands in North Dakota. Since the start of this partnership, more than 1.6 million acres have been protected in the Dakotas.

The DU biologists and Farm Bill biologists with the soil conservation district partnership promoted and provided more than 500 landowners with direct technical assistance evaluating options, developing conservation plans and working through enrollment paperwork for a suite of available voluntary conservation programs. Under a 2016 \$4.6 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), DU and partners expanded cover crop and grazing infrastructure practices in the Dakotas, Minnesota and Montana. The 2019 sign-up period accepted more than 8,000 acres of enhanced grassland and wetland habitat through NRCS working lands programs.

In addition to Title II conservation programs in the Farm Bill - such as the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program - DU biologists and agronomists expanded working lands options for landowners through the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, private foundations and major donors. In the last year, DU hired a biologist in the Devils Lake region and a state-wide agronomist to provide technical assistance for landowners interested in soil and water health practices. These programs have resulted in a wider audience of farmers and ranchers looking to improve their operations and wildlife habitat. The results have added 20,000 acres of enhanced prairie habitat to our efforts with perpetual conservation easements.

DU celebrates *Rescue Our Wetlands*

Conservation supporters dedicated North Dakota's Ducks Unlimited (DU) *Rescue Our Wetlands* (ROW) project site this year at the Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge, east of Moffit. A cairn and bronze plaque recognized those who made a formal commitment to Ducks Unlimited during the ROW campaign.

With funding from DU donors, North Dakota's Outdoor Heritage Fund and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, DU completed its portion of repairs to a dike on the refuge, which is owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

The dike is on the south shore of Long Lake and allows FWS staff to better manage the marsh and access other parts of the refuge. In 2011, severe flooding damaged the dike and left several sections breached. DU repaired a section of the two-mile dike and increased its elevation to reduce future flooding



impacts. DU worked with FWS to determine an appropriate native grass mix to reseed the dike and surrounding areas.

The completed project increased wetland vegetation growth and water bird use. The dike is a nesting area for piping plovers. DU used gravel that plovers prefer for nesting during the dike repair. The marsh on the opposite side of the lake has significant waterfowl use, and refuge staff manually operate the water control structure to manage water levels.

The ROW national campaign raised \$2.34 billion and conserved more than 2.2 million acres. [Front page >>](#)

Al Geisen supports DU's habitat efforts

Al Geisen still hunts the same slough where he retrieved his first duck near Bisbee, North Dakota. Al's Uncle Dutch introduced him to duck hunting and those experiences helped spur Al's passion for conservation.

"I'm a conservationist at heart," Al said. "The most critical issue we face today is loss of habitat. I support Ducks Unlimited because they focus on habitat, and they put their resources where it does the most good. No one does it better than DU."

Al has a list of volunteer credits, including serving as the North Dakota State Campaign Chair in 2013, State Chair from 2014 to 2016 and as the Area Chair for the Bismarck chapter for 12 years. In his role as Area Chair, he organizes an annual fun shoot and the Bismarck banquet, with his co-chair, Jonas Davis.



Al first got involved with DU in 1984 when he volunteered for the committee in Cottage Grove, Minnesota, where he and his wife Debbie were living at the time. When he moved to Bismarck in 2004, he soon got a visit from then Regional Director Con Hillman who heard about Al and wanted to recruit him for the Bismarck chapter.

In addition to donating his time to DU, Al and his wife Debbie have also become major sponsors and are working toward the Grand Slam life sponsor level where they contribute to DU, DU Canada and Ducks Unlimited de México. They are also gold level members of DU's Feather Society.

Al and Debbie share their home in Bismarck with two loving Labs named Otter and Liesel. [Front page >>](#)

Agronomist Emily Schwartz joins DU in Bismarck

Emily Schwartz started in August at the Great Plains Regional Office as a field agronomist. Emily hopes to use her passion for agriculture and conservation to promote, deliver and adapt the new soil health programs with the DU Conservation Program team. Schwartz will work with North Dakota agricultural producers on conservation solutions.

“After working in agricultural consulting, I worked in environmental counseling. There I gained an appreciation for North Dakota’s wildlife,” Schwartz said. “I have chosen to work for DU because of their commitment to conservation

and their cooperation with agricultural producers to accomplish conservation goals.”

Emily earned her degree in natural resource management at North Dakota State

University. She also earned a minor in crop and weed science after seeing the importance of having natural resource managers and agricultural producers work together.

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Couple improves grassland with DU’s soil health programs

Dustin and Barbara Roise are farmers and ranchers in Powers Lake, North Dakota, whose family land and business were passed down from generation to generation. The couple’s goals are to graze their livestock 365 days a year, run

a profitable operation and improve their land for future generations.

Ducks Unlimited’s Cover Crop and Livestock Integration Project is helping the Roises adopt soil health practices that will fight soil erosion. These practices also help protect wetlands and provide better habitat.

When Dustin and Barbara took over his father’s operation, they made the decision to plant marginal cropland back to grass. Working with DU, they planted full season cover crops on land traditionally used for corn silage. Grazing cattle on their cover crops plays a key role in increasing organic matter and improving water infiltration.

The Roises are doing many things to regenerate their land, including winter bale grazing on marginal soils

to improve organic matter, rotational grazing to allow for grass-rest recovery and working with the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service to install grazing infrastructure. DU is providing cost-share for installing fence, water and cover crops.

“Seeing my Dad’s photos from 60 years ago where rain carved deep gullies in the land reminds me of how important it is that we continue to improve our land management,” Dustin said.

Grazing cattle in a specific quadrant of cropland and installing cross fences to move them to other quadrants of grass allows the benefits of natural fertilizer and plant regrowth to occur. This rotating grid process will allow for year-round natural soil regeneration for decades to come. [Front page >>](#)

DU performs a simple soil test for ranchers to reveal soil health

One of the many factors farmers and ranchers contend with is the health of their soil. The quality of the soil contributes to significant aspects of their livelihood, be it crops or grazing. Ducks Unlimited is helping landowners determine the health of their soil using water filtration testing.

Ducks Unlimited Biologist Dane Buysse performs water filtration tests for farmers and ranchers who participate in DU programs. Ducks Unlimited received a grant from the Outdoor Heritage Fund to help landowners improve soil health and reduce input costs. [\(continued on next page\) ►](#)



Metal ring inserted in the ground to test water absorbency of the soil.

Future park in Bismarck

DU's Great Plains Region (GPR) is helping Bismarck turn 120 acres of open land in the city into a park with restored wetlands and grasslands. The proposed new park is adjacent to the GPR office. With dollars raised in the community, DU hopes to purchase the land, restore and build wetlands, plant native grasses and trees and improve the land's activity trails.

“We want people to understand how wetlands benefit them, and this is a chance to provide more wetland education in the city,” said Steve Adair, DU national director for conservation strategy. “The city wetlands will also be convenient for schools to visit.”

After park improvements are made, DU will transfer the land to the Bismarck Parks and Recreation Department and agree to maintain the park wetlands indefinitely.

Contact Chris Hildebrandt to contribute to this effort. [Front page >>](#)

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A water filtration test measures the absorbency of the soil. Once the tester determines soil types, he or she embeds a six-inch metal ring into the ground. An inch of water is poured into the ring to see how long it takes to be absorbed. After ten minutes, another inch is poured in. The second inch of water determines the soils capacity to continue to take in water during high rainfall. This process is repeated three times.

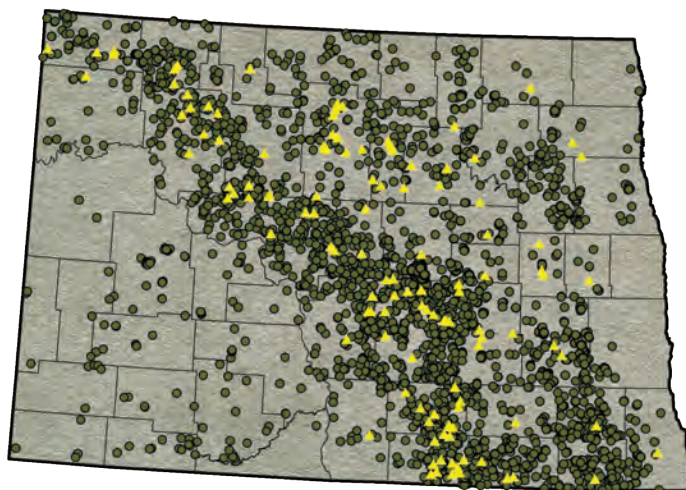
“Healthy soils provide cattle with better grasslands for grazing. The cattle then help complete the carbon cycle by supplying the grasses with manure, which is absorbed into the soil, and the circle of benefits continues,” Buysse said. “Healthy soil allows water to infiltrate through soil pores, which also holds water longer during droughts and helps prevent runoff and flooding during heavy rains.”

Buysse says incorporating the five soil health principles benefits the landowner's operation, local habitat, wildlife and the public. The five principles include soil armor, minimizing soil disturbance, increasing plant diversity, continual live plant root and livestock integration. Soil management practices include planned grazing on grasslands, implementing no-till practices on cropland and planting cover crops to stimulate soil biology. [Front page >>](#)

North Dakota Projects

1984 through the end of Fiscal Year 2019

● Completed projects ▲ Fiscal Year 2019 projects



Fiscal Year 2019

- Impacted Acres*
- 58,754 acres protected, restored and/or enhanced
- Dollars Invested
- \$8,588,361

*Impacted acres combine unique conservation acres with acres where DU has multiple project objectives.

[Visit the ND interactive project map >>](#)

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