

# Conservation of Sensitive Lands

## CASE STUDY

The Prairie Pothole Region is a huge expanse of grassland, stretching from Iowa, through the Dakotas, and into Canada. Small wetlands called “potholes” or “sloughs” spatter the rolling grasses and provide ideal habitat for waterfowl. Birds such as pintails, mallards, and shovelers rely on the region for breeding habitat—others, including snow geese, depend on the area during migration. The potholes also benefit people by recharging groundwater and storing carbon that builds up over years in the prairie soil. The prairie provides an ideal setting for ranching, allowing cattle to feed on plentiful native grasses.



A Missouri Coteau wetland near Bismark, ND, in the heart of the Prairie Pothole Region. Photo courtesy of Jim Ringelman, Ducks Unlimited.

But all is not well in the Pothole Region. An estimated 194,000 acres of grassland have vanished since 1984, and over half of the potholes in some regions are either gone or degraded. The prairies are increasingly falling under the plow for crop production, as producing certain crops has recently offered farmers higher incomes than traditional ranching. Cultivating grasses for crop production releases carbon into the atmosphere as soil organic carbon oxidizes. It also causes erosion and destroys habitats. Conserving these sensitive lands is a key part of both fighting climate change and ensuring critical habitat is retained for future generations.

Recently, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service teamed up with Ducks Unlimited to combat these losses. The USDA awarded Ducks Unlimited with a Conservation Innovation Grant aimed at providing incentives for ranchers to retain rangeland instead of converting their acres to crop production. By registering stored carbon that would otherwise be released via crop farming, ranchers can sell carbon offsets, which act as an alternative source of income. In turn, the partnership protects water quality, reduces erosion, and retains habitat by placing an avoided tillage easement on the ranches to ensure that the working grasslands will be available for grazing and duck nesting habitat for years to come.

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South Dakota native Brad Magness made the choice to preserve his ranchland. “I have a concern not just because I’m a rancher, but because I run a livestock auction market. And when I see grass get torn up, that’s just that many fewer cattle that have a chance to come through my sales... (conserving grassland) wasn’t a hard decision, because it wasn’t going to alter any of my operations.”

“There’s interest from landowners to protect these areas that’s consistent with their view of how this land should be used. And really we need the funding to get that job done,” said Scott Stephens, Director of Planning at Ducks Unlimited. Luckily, the USDA is ready to rise to the challenge and work with partners to preserve these critical lands—and at the same time, benefit ranchers, wildlife, and the environment.