

HABITAT, DOLLARS AND DUCKS

By James H. Phillips

In recent years, as flights have thinned, increasing numbers of hunters have asked, “After spending billions of dollars on habitat, where are the ducks?”

It is a key question that goes to the heart of habitat management, a fundamental component of waterfowl conservation.

A new Canadian report provides a sobering answer.

The draft report, titled *Prairie Habitat Joint Venture (PHJV) Waterfowl Habitat Goals Update: Phase I*, focuses on habitat acquisitions that followed the 1986 adoption of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). The habitat objectives were “designed to meet population goals set out by NAWMP, using the best biological models linking landscape conditions to waterfowl productivity.”

The report, co-authored by a consortium of biologists from Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service, states that from 1986-2001 a total of 1.3 million acres across the southern prairie provinces were secured at a cost of approximately \$338 million.

The sobering reality is this: *The 1.3 million acres of secured habitat increased productivity by only 6,000 “hatched nests,”* the report concluded.

Assuming five young fledged per hatched nest, this works out to a total of 30,000 additional juveniles added to the fall flight, too few to provide a visible increase in a fall migration estimated to number from 80-to-100 million ducks. (If these additional ducks were apportioned equally to the three western flyways, each flyway’s fall flight would increase by only 10,000 ducks.)

Some might complain the \$56,000 cost per additional hatched nest is exorbitant.

Yet, in fairness, it would be simplistic to judge the prairie habitat joint venture solely on the number of ducks added to the fall flight, even though the number is shockingly low. Money also is spent to secure existing habitat. This prevents the potential loss of breeding habitat and a decline in numbers of migrant ducks, a key consideration. (The report does not state how many – if any – of the 1.3 million acres faced immediate peril.)

But the dismally low number of additional ducks raises several critical issues about our billion-dollar Canadian prairie habitat program, issues that should give all of us cause for concern.

As the report emphasized, habitat management consists of more than simply protecting existing parcels of wetlands and uplands through purchase or easement. It also involves enhancing acquired lands to increase productivity. These can range from predator fencing to grazing restrictions to crop conversion.

The report noted that 200,000 of the 1.3 million acres had been converted from cropland to grassland, either dense nesting cover, hayland or pasture, and that this proved the most effective management technique to increase juvenile productivity.

If we attribute all 30,000 additional ducks to cropland conversion, we find that the converted Canadian prairie cropland produced one additional juvenile per 6.7 acres.

We can compare this juvenile-per-acre productivity rate to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the Dakotas and Montana. The CRP program resulted in the conversion of 4.7 million acres from cropland to grassland. A study estimated the CRP program produced 2.07 million additional ducks per year – or one additional juvenile per 2.3 acres.

This tells us *CRP produced nearly three times as many additional juvenile ducks per acre.*

The question must be asked: What does the U.S. Department of Agriculture know about raising waterfowl that makes it a far more efficient duck producer than the experts at Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service?

The irony of this should not be lost on waterfowl hunters.

America's CRP is an *agricultural* program designed to provide some *conservation* benefits. Canada's PHJV is a *conservation* program designed to provide some *agricultural* benefits.

Moreover, the report states the ultimate goal of the billion-dollar prairie habitat joint venture is to convert 1.5 million acres of Canadian cropland into grassland in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. On completion, "*annual duck productivity would increase by about 14,000 hatched nests,*" the report concluded.

The 14,000 additional nests would add an estimated 70,000 juveniles to the fall flight – a productivity rate of *one additional juvenile per 21 acres*. This compares to CRP's one additional juvenile per 2.3 acres, a productivity rate nearly nine times greater.

The 70,000 additional ducks can be viewed in another context. During last year's 60-day duck season in the Mississippi Flyway, hunters killed 5.5 million ducks – an

average of 91,758 ducks per season-day. We could put more ducks into the population by shortening the hunting season by one day.

The findings call into question the competence of those who administer the prairie habitat joint-venture program, including the primary administrator -- Ducks Unlimited. Further, lest we be accused of "DU bashing," it must be emphasized that the two lead authors of the report are biologists with DU Canada, and that DU representatives often publicly state they only secure the "best of the best" habitat.

A secondary issue is why authorities waited 15 years to judge the results. According to Environment Canada, since 1986 more than \$500 million has been spent to date on the Canadian Prairie Habitat Joint Venture. Of this total, nearly two-thirds has been provided by Americans, either federal government money (31 percent) or nonfederal funds such as DU donations (34 percent.) The half-billion dollars has secured 4.6 million acres of the program's goal of 9.8 million acres across the provinces of Manitoba (509,000 acres), Saskatchewan (5.7 million acres) and Alberta (3.6 million acres).

The report suggests a lot of money is being squandered and that administrators possess exceedingly modest ambitions for habitat preservation and restoration, a truth made manifest by the fact the area in question involves the Canadian prairies, once the most productive waterfowl breeding grounds on the North American continent.

This suggests we need ambitious program managers with greater vision. We also need much greater financial and biological scrutiny to insure we are getting the most productivity for the dollar.

Thus, if you ever wondered why you see so few ducks after spending billions to preserve habitat, you now know the answer. The habitat-preservation ducks do not exist in meaningful number. The 70,000 additional ducks the Canadian prairie habitat joint venture is ultimately projected to produce, at a cost of approximately \$1 billion, works out to *one-twentieth of a duck annually per U.S. hunter.*

Does this suggest to you that it is time for a wholesale rethinking of our habitat preservation efforts?

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
