

OHF FINAL REPORT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Number: 009-112

Recipient: Audubon Dakota

Award Amount: \$121,220

Total Project Costs: \$250,420

Total OHF Funds Received: \$97,352.73



Goal of Project:

The Grand Forks County Prairie Management Toolbox (GFCPMT) aimed to provide forage and habitat enhancement resources to landowners including cost-share for prairie restoration, invasive woody vegetation removal and grazing infrastructure support. Through its implementation, Audubon Dakota and partners sought to improve habitat diversity and landowner access to financial and technical assistance. Audubon Dakota staff provided technical assistance through the development of site-specific habitat management plans, which incorporated management suggestions and described the vegetation community and avian population of the individual property. Acreage impact goals included supporting grazing infrastructure on 1,500 acres (10-year associated non-conversion agreement), invasive species removal on 10,000 acres (5-year associated non-conversion agreement) and prairie restoration on 200 acres (10-year associated non-conversion agreement) within the project area.

Work Accomplished:

Since receiving the OHF grant award for the GFCPMT, Audubon Dakota and partners connected with over 35 landowners within Grand Forks County who sought financial and technical assistance for their grassland management needs. By working with the USFWS, NRCS, and the Grand Forks County Prairie Partners, Audubon Dakota staff initiated and completed 14 different working lands projects during the project period (2017-2020) across 5,324.5 acres. From the start, there was great landowner demand for the financial assistance for woody vegetation removal on acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which was a management priority for the GFCPMT. Additionally, Grand Forks landowners readily signed up for the cost-share assistance offered by the GFCPMT for grazing infrastructure and accepted the technical assistance offered by Audubon staff.

Throughout the project period, challenges related to budgeting and landowner interest did arise. Specifically, Audubon discovered that landowners were not motivated to restore/reconstruct grasslands without additional transition support, such as annual deferred income payments. Therefore, accomplishing the goal of restoring 200 acres of prairie proved difficult within this region and led to just 6 acres (1 project) ultimately being restored through the GFCPMT. Additionally, as the invasive species removal began, it was soon realized that the grant budget had not considered the widely varied levels of invasion that project sites could have. Therefore, the average per acre rate for invasive species removal was much higher than expected, which stunted the planned acreage impact for this management tool to 3,483 acres (9 projects).

Project Results:

Through the GFCPMT, Audubon Dakota completed 14 projects across 5,324.5 acres by implementing and supporting the following management tools for private landowners:

- Grazing Infrastructure: 4 projects across 2,312 acres, with 10-year term non-conversion agreement.

- Woody Invasive Species Mechanical Removal: 9 projects across 3,006.5 unique acres, with 5-year non-conversion agreement. *2 projects were completed on acres receiving grazing infrastructure and prairie restoration/reconstruction (469.5 and 6 acres, respectively), and are therefore excluded from total woody invasive species mechanical removal acreage impact.
- Prairie Restoration/Reconstruction: 1 project across 6 acres, with 10-year non-conversion agreement.

Two GFCPMT landowners enrolled in the Private Lands Open to Sportsmen (PLOTS) program during the project period.

Audubon Dakota staff monitored 7 project sites in 2020 through vegetation community and avian population surveys, for a total of 19 man hours. The remaining sites will be monitored in 2021. This data is incorporated into the habitat management plans created for nearly all project sites to inform continued habitat improvement.

Value to North Dakota:

The grassland management tools and technical assistance provided by the GFCPMT bolstered private landowners' ability to improve habitat and forage quality on 5,324.5 acres. This is of great value to North Dakota's natural heritage within the Grand Forks County Prairie (GFCP), a conservation planning and restoration area of 70,000 acres composed of rare saline prairie, which encompasses a total of a 300,000 acre landscape. The GFCP in northeast North Dakota is one of the few remaining prairie tracts left of the North American tallgrass prairie range, of which only 1% of the original acreage remains. Thus, enhancing and protecting remaining acres is of utmost importance for North Dakota's native wildlife, like sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chicken, in addition to North Dakota's recreational community who hike, hunt, bird, and enjoy the state's natural bounties.