

**Contract No. 002-032**

**“Conservation of Grasslands and Long-billed Curlews on Private Lands in SW North Dakota”**

Submitted by American Bird Conservancy

Principal Investigator: Cheryl Mandich

Directives C & B

**PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Sponsor</b>	<b>Cost Share</b>	
National Fish and Wildlife Federation	\$144,175	
Northern Great Plains Joint Venture	<u>\$ 20,825</u>	
Subtotal Cash Cost Share		\$165,000
National Fish and Wildlife Federation	<u>\$ 19,608</u>	
Subtotal In-kind Cost Share		\$ 19,608
North Dakota Industrial Commission	<u>\$ 29,322**</u>	
Total Project Cost	\$213,930	

Project Schedule – 24 months\*  
Contract Date – 7/30/14  
Start Date – 8/1/14  
Completion Date – 7/31/16\*

Project Deliverables:  
Status Report: October 1, 2014✓  
Status Report: January 31, 2015✓  
Status Report: August 31, 2015\*  
Final Report: July 31, 2016\*✓

\*reflects amendment to contract

\*\*actual amount used was \$13,794. The remaining commitment of \$15,528 will not be expended on this project.

**OBJECTIVE/STATEMENT OF WORK:**

This project will implement conservation practices on private lands that enhance habitat for grassland birds while providing sustainable agricultural practices. OHF funds will be used for fencing, native seed, and travel costs.

**STATUS:**

Contract 002-032 has been signed

10/1/2014 - We are in the process of finalizing our ranking criteria for projects. To provide the greatest ecological benefit to grassland birds, we will use a quantitative and qualitative process. Our intent is to implement projects on grassland blocks >=120 acres (native prairie, expired or soon to expire CRP lands) although areas >80 will be considered if in the vicinity of a wetland or native grasslands. Criteria will include a perimeter/area ratio (interior habitat is preferable to grassland birds so a square area would rank higher than a long, thin, rectangular one of the same area), implementation of a voluntary grazing program, whether or not public access is allowed, distance from vertical structures and how likely is the project to benefit grassland birds. We have been working with our partners to identify specific opportunities where the funds could be best applied. We have held preliminary discussions with producers who are interested in using temporary electric fencing to distribute livestock grazing with the goal of controlling noxious weeds on native grasslands and areas recently seeded with native grasses and forbs.

1/31/2015 - \*The applicant has been granted an amendment to the contract extending the deadline by two months to June 30, 2015 for submission of the final report. The January 31, 2015 status report provided the following information:

Native seed plantings and fencing projects implemented using this grant will improve habitat for the Long-billed Curlew and other grassland birds in southwest North Dakota. We have developed an application which prioritizes projects based on the following criteria:

**Size:** *Priority will be given to projects of 120 acres or more.* Size is defined as contiguous acres (native grasslands, expired or soon to expire CRP, or pasture) that will be enhanced or maintained by implementing the conservation practice. The decline in grassland birds is attributed to the loss and fragmentation of habitat. Fragmentation reduced the size of habitat patches below the threshold at which curlews and many other grassland birds will use them. Habitat areas for Long-billed Curlews need to be approximately  $\geq 3$  times as large as their roughly 35 acre territory. So as to provide a buffer around the edge of suitable habitat, projects of 120 acres or more will be given priority. Parcels of 80-119 acres will be considered if in the vicinity of native grasslands and/or wetlands. Parcels less than 80 acres are not eligible for this particular funding opportunity.

**Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) enrollment:** *Priority will be given to lands enrolled in the WRP program.* Lands enrolled in this program offer a benefit to wildlife by protecting and enhancing wetlands. By incorporating conservation practices, such as fencing to allow grazing, we can improve the vegetative community and provide added benefits to many grassland birds.

**Site Type:** *Priority will be given to native grasslands then Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands and tame grass pastures.* The priority is based on the value to grassland birds. The grass and forb diversity found in native grasslands provides habitat for a multitude of bird species and will have the highest priority. Following native grasslands will be lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that have expired or will soon expire and then tame grass pastures as it is essential that we keep grass on the landscape. These sites can be re-seeded to native grasses and forbs or managed to provide a variety of vegetative heights that will benefit multiple species of wildlife.

**Perimeter/Area Ratio:** *Priority will be given to projects with a smaller ratio of perimeter to total acreage.* The ratio is determined by dividing the perimeter of the contiguous acres (ft.) by the acreage (ft<sup>2</sup>). Many grassland bird species prefer the core of habitat areas as there are typically fewer disturbances and predators. The smaller the ratio the greater the habitat value to grassland birds. For example, a square parcel of habitat would have a lower ratio than a rectangular parcel with the same acreage.

**Type of Fencing:** Perimeter (boundary) or interior (cross) fencing are eligible. *If cross fencing and resulting pastures are  $\leq 80$  acres, priority will be given to projects using temporary electric fencing.* This allows the dividing of pastures to better impact the plant community and removal when the desired effect has been obtained.

**Documentation of Long-billed Curlew Presence:** *Priority will be given to recipients willing to provide information on curlews observed.* If fund recipients see Long-billed Curlews, we'd appreciate the date, number of curlews observed, and county. Locations will be recorded by county not project area. With its large size and distinctive bill, the Long-billed Curlew is easy to identify. Using citizen science to determine presence of curlews aids us in determining population trends and distribution.

**Sportsmen Access:** *Priority will be given to projects that provide access to sportsmen.* One of the Directives of the OHF is to provide access for sportsmen, and if two projects provide equal benefits to curlews, this will be the deciding factor. This does not open the property up to public access. The landowner will still need to provide the appropriate access permission.

We have distributed the application to all west river Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) offices, provided an article for the Adams County Soil Conservation District Newsletter, and distributed the application to private lands biologists with multiple entities. We are in the process of accepting and prioritizing applications. Approved projects will be implemented in the spring of 2015.

**7/15/2015** - The applicant requested additional time to complete the native seed plantings and to complete the fencing projects. That request was granted and the contract has been extended to July 31, 2016.

**9/4/2015** - The following status report has been received:

When the grant was awarded, \$12,144 was allocated for fencing projects and \$15,528 for native seeding projects. We've worked with five producers in Bowman, Slope, Grant and Sioux Counties on fencing projects with \$6,272.96 being disbursed for three completed projects. One project has been delayed due to extenuating circumstances on the part of the producer and another is in the initial planning stages. Both projects are anticipated to be implemented in the spring of 2016. The completion of these projects will expend those monies allocated to fencing. We do have several more producers interested and are looking for additional funding for these projects. The monies have been used to fund fencing projects that have enabled the producers to distribute livestock grazing thereby improving the plant community and providing a mosaic of habitats for grassland birds, especially the Long-billed Curlew. Two of the completed projects involved the use of temporary electric fencing. The producers created smaller paddocks within their pastures which allows them to vary the intensity and duration of the grazing depending on their goals for that particular pasture. In the coming months, we will be focusing on locating private landowners interested in planting native seed.

**7/31/2016** - The following final report has been received:

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) appreciates the grant from the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund. The funding enabled ABC and partners to assist landowners in implementing land stewardship practices on private lands in southwest North Dakota. Practices implemented were focused on creating a mosaic of diverse plant communities across the landscape that benefit livestock, wildlife, and a multitude of bird species. To guide our efforts, we used the Recommended Management Actions developed for enhancing habitat for the Long-billed Curlew. Since the curlew co-occurs with other declining species across its range, sustainable management of working lands for curlews can also provide for the needs of other birds and wildlife. We worked with Natural Resources Conservation Service to identify opportunities to implement conservation actions that were not covered by existing programs and practices or to supplement existing practices.

We've worked with producers in Slope, Grant and Sioux counties on six different projects. The monies have been used to fund fencing projects that have enabled the producers to distribute livestock grazing thereby improving the plant community and provide a mosaic of habitats for grassland birds, especially the Long-billed Curlew, on 1370 acres and five miles of fencing. A portion of our award was to go

towards native seed plantings. We did not have the interest in these plants that we anticipated and were unable to use the monies allocated to it.

One of the projects involved the use of temporary electric netting. The producers use sheep as part of an integrated management approach to control leafy spurge on native prairie. A short-duration, high-intensity, grazing method was and continues to be used to reduce the amount of the noxious weed. Portable electric netting is used to create grazing paddocks for the sheep and to deter predators from harassing the sheep. Grazing alone will not eradicate leafy spurge, but is anticipated to reduce and slow the spread of the weed thereby improving the rangeland for use by livestock, wildlife and grassland birds. Two Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) projects involved the use of temporary electric fencing to create smaller paddocks within the pastures. Cattle grazing was and continues to be used as a management tool to improve the plant community for wildlife and birds. The smaller temporary paddocks provided the flexibility to vary the intensity and duration of grazing depending on the goals for that particular pasture. The producers are using cattle to control Canada thistle, a noxious weed. The animals will graze on the thistle before it becomes too mature. All temporary fencing is removed by November of each year so as not to compromise wildlife movement. Cross-fencing was implemented in the remaining three projects to distribute livestock grazing. On two of the these three projects we partnered with USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) and leveraged OHF funds with PFW funds on the fencing portion of fencing/water distribution projects. These projects were initiated to improve pasture conditions by implementing a rotational grazing system. Activities being implemented through the joint funding will result in improved vegetative conditions and trends for the benefit of prairie, wetlands, livestock, wildlife and birds.

We assessed the initial curlew response by enlisting volunteers to conduct road surveys. The surveys were 20 miles long with stops every half mile. At each stop, the volunteer would record curlews if they were observed. These transects traverse multiple habitats and ownerships, and help provide an index of curlew abundance, as well as a list of other grassland species inhabiting these areas. Eight different survey routes were run in southwest North Dakota, some of them run twice - early and late spring. Curlews were observed on five of these routes.

The value to the citizens of North Dakota is multifold. The projects implemented maintain sustainable land use for those private landowners who rely on those lands for their livelihood. Cattle and sheep grazing are used as a management tool to decrease the presence of noxious weeds, thereby reducing herbicide expenses for the landowner and improving water quality and soil health. As the diversity of the habitat increases so will the different wildlife and bird species that use the habitat. Hunting and bird watching opportunities will improve. Our native prairie will be maintained for future generations to enjoy. Leveraging these funds with partner collaboration allows these benefits to be even more far reaching.

The original amount awarded was \$29,322. The American Bird Conservancy utilized \$13,794. They are returning the commitment of \$15,528.

This contract is now closed.

Updated: 9/26/2016