

OHF FINAL REPORT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Number: 003-047

Recipient: Delta Waterfowl

Award Amount: \$1,750,000

Total Project Costs: \$5,391,270.16

Total OHF Funds Received: \$1,733,630.71



Goal of Project:

The goal of the Working Wetlands project was to test a new approach to small wetland conservation. At its core was an approach, developed in concert with North Dakota's agricultural leaders, to conserve small, temporary and seasonal wetlands in cropland. The project resulted from a long and deliberative process with both agricultural and conservation interests to come up with an additional tool for wetland conservation.

The funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) was used to test the concept via a five-year pilot project. The goal was to learn if this type of approach could meet the two fundamental objectives of the approach-to conserve small wetlands while also ensuring strong demand from farmers.

Work Accomplished:

The enrollment for the program took place in partnership with the North Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Services (ND NRCS) and their county offices in April of 2015. In a thirty day enrollment period, applications significantly outpaced available program funding at a rate of nearly \$3 in applications for \$1 in available funds. This demand was very welcome news and illustrated that the concept would be well received amongst producers. Applications were then ranked, and agreements initiated. In all, 124 agreements were signed encompassing 9,568 individual wetlands and 4,822.2 acres.

Project Results:

The Working Wetlands pilot enrolled a total of 124 agreements encompassing 4,822.2 acres and 9,568 individual wetlands. While these are certainly meaningful programmatic accomplishments, the real core value of the project was to determine the utility of this program vision beyond the acres enrolled. It was a pilot to test a concept and approach for small wetland conservation. By any measure, the pilot proved a remarkable success. Initial demand, despite a short enrollment period, was robust and satisfaction with the program was very high amongst participating landowners which was quantified by surveys in collaboration with NDSU.

Results from the survey documented that satisfaction with the program increased from year one to year four and perceptions of small wetlands also improved over the time of the pilot. Additionally, pilot and survey work clearly indicated that a working lands approach, where annual cropping is allowed, while maintaining wetland structure, was a critical program feature for participating landowners.

All of the experience gained in the delivery of the pilot project and the information provided via the survey work played a key role in the creation of new NRCS programming that was included in the 2018 Farm Bill. As of this writing, NRCS is in the midst of designing Prairie Pothole Regionwide programming

to implement Working Wetlands as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Implementation at that scale will impact small wetlands all across the Region with a key focus on North Dakota.

Value to North Dakota:

Using the narrowest of assessments, the Working Wetland pilot provided a wide range of benefits to North Dakotans' and North Dakota natural resources. The 9,568 wetlands provided habitat to breeding and staging ducks, shorebirds and numerous other resident wildlife. Additionally, recent research documenting the "ecological goods and services" contribution of small wetlands allows for the quantification of other outcomes. Based on the acreage enrolled, the program acres annually stored 3,616.65 acre/feet of water, annually consumed 429,175.8 pounds of nitrogen and 8,197.74 pounds of phosphorus. Additionally, the wetland acres enrolled are sequestering 28,306.31 tons of carbon. These services represent a great value to North Dakota in mitigating flooding and maintaining high water quality.

Additionally, as this was a pilot project, the real and more durable benefit will accrue from the significant investment NRCS will make in the approach in the future. It is hoped the pilot project will ultimately result in a sustained multi-million dollar annual investment in small wetland conservation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this project harnessed a strong collaboration between agriculture and conservation interests on an issue that has often been contentious. It demonstrated that good conservation outcomes can be gained when the input and guidance from agriculture is harnessed. The project drew upon a wide breadth of perspectives from both the farming and ranching community as well as the conservation community to inform its development and ultimately how it was delivered.

In all, the Working Wetland project well demonstrated the potential of the Working Wetland vision, provided a broad suite of habitat and other public benefits and also served as a point of collaboration between the agricultural and conservation community.