



Photo: Joe Banta

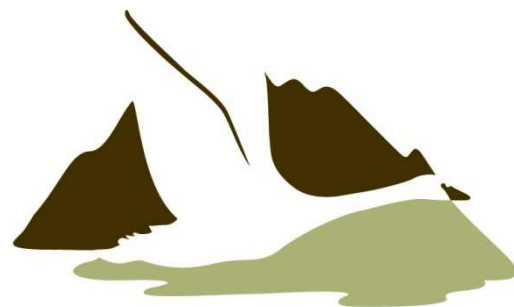


Photo: Dan Casey



Photo: Iowa Department of Conservation

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INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

Note: This paper serves as the Executive Summary of a more detailed Farm Bill Biological Delivery Capacity Report prepared by the U.S. NABCI Private Lands Subcommittee.



Photo: Missouri Department of Conservation

the background

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has provided effective conservation technical assistance since its inception, successful in part due to its decentralized structure and continued emphasis on input from the state and local level. Strong consensus exists among the wildlife community and NRCS that the level of biological capacity at the local level (e.g., NRCS biologists, cost-shared Farm Bill biologists and other partnership-based biological technical assistance) is strongly correlated with wildlife conservation results achieved through the Farm Bill conservation programs. The presence of local Farm Bill delivery capacity influences the return on the wildlife community's investment in national agricultural policy. Therefore, national agricultural policy favoring wildlife conservation is as successful as the local delivery capacity.

Biologists accelerate fish and wildlife conservation through Farm Bill programs by:

- Bringing specialized fish and wildlife knowledge and habitat management skills into conservation planning.
- Marketing the fish and wildlife aspects of the Farm Bill programs and benefits of practices to farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners.
- Facilitating timely implementation of planning, contracting, and practice implementation necessary to bring habitat projects to fruition.
- Being locally involved and maintaining landowner trust.

The services provided by field-level habitat biologists are invaluable to NRCS staff, predominately trained in other disciplines, and also for the implementation of Farm Service Agency (FSA) programs. The results are very clear: **The Farm Bill conservation programs are most successful for wildlife where we have boots on the ground in the form of biological technical assistance capacity—be it internal or with partners.**

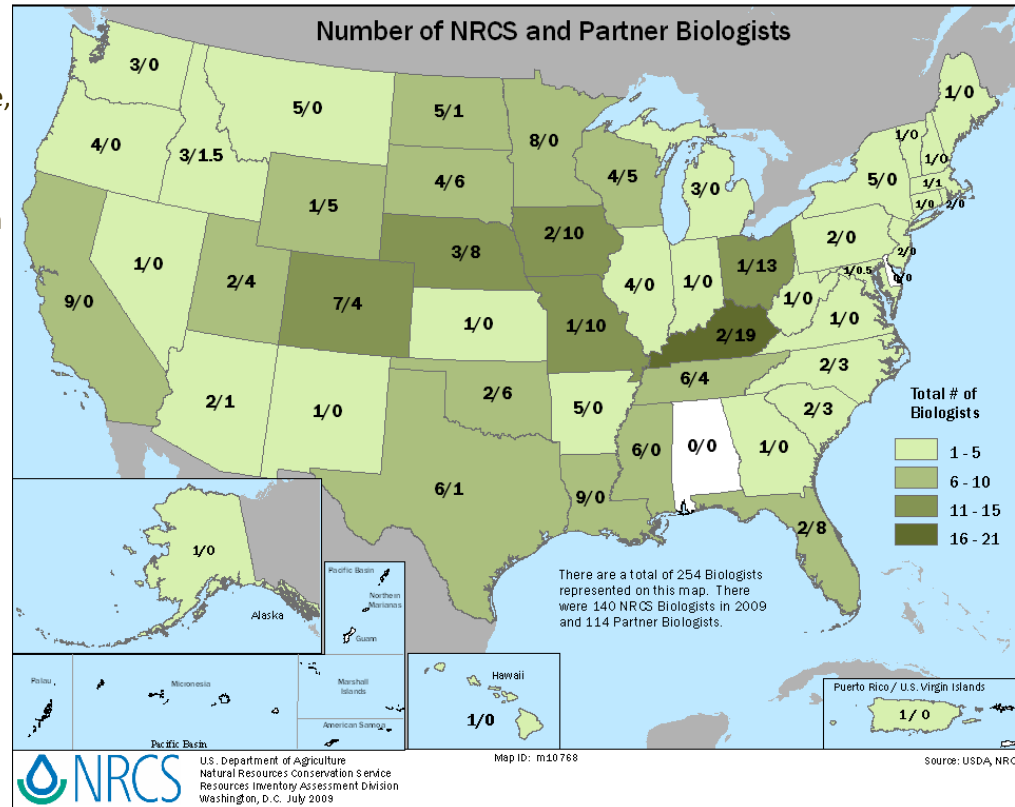
the supply

NRCS now employs 140 biologists nationwide, though this number has decreased by 21% since 2006 (NRCS data). The Agency has also demonstrated significant commitment to fish and wildlife conservation by working with its wildlife partners to establish 114 Farm Bill Partner Biologists, nearly all of which are located in USDA Service Centers. States have indicated a need for an additional 260 field biologists nationwide.

NRCS has executed agreements for Farm Bill Biologists through Cooperative Agreements, Contribution Agreements, Interpersonal Agreements, and other Technical Service Provider arrangements with State fish and wildlife agencies, non-governmental organizations, Joint Ventures, and other wildlife partners.

Nongovernmental organizations such as Pheasants Forever and Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) are currently assisting NRCS and FSA with Farm Bill program delivery through agreements with NRCS. Pheasants Forever has developed numerous Farm Bill biologist positions and has a full-time Farm Bill Biologist Coordinator that provides critical training and logistical support to the field biologists. Likewise, RMBO and the Colorado Division of Wildlife are working with NRCS to facilitate Farm Bill program delivery as part of Colorado's Private Lands Biologist (PLB) Program; RMBO also employs a program coordinator to support the PLBs. Finally, the Intermountain West Joint Venture has developed a Capacity Grants Program and brokered new Farm Bill biologist positions in Wyoming, Nevada, California, and Oregon to facilitate focused habitat work for sage grouse, migratory waterfowl, and shorebirds.

The FSA has reaped the benefits of many of these efforts by partners helping FSA administer many aspects of the CRP through the General Sign-up, CREP, and CCRP. In many of the examples of successful partner programs with state agencies and NGOs, the biologists have spent much of their effort working with FSA to bring wildlife technical expertise to bear in working directly with landowners, local field offices, and state office personnel.



the demand

The demand for fish and wildlife delivery capacity has increased steadily over the last decade with increased emphasis on fish and wildlife in the Farm Bill and other conservation statutes. New initiatives impacting fish and wildlife conservation include:

- Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE)
- CP 33 (Upland Buffers – Continuous signup) and other CRP initiatives
- CRP State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) special initiatives for fish and wildlife
- Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP)
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)

This increased emphasis builds on fundamental fish and wildlife programs such as the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). With over two million acres under conservation easements in WRP alone, NRCS is now responsible for ensuring that proper management is being accomplished on these lands. In addition, the 2008 Farm Bill includes language directing NRCS to develop evaluation criteria “that will ensure that national, state and local conservation priorities are addressed” for several programs.

the recommendation

Clearly, achievement of NRCS National Indicator Goals, State Wildlife Action Plan objectives, and the habitat objectives of Joint Venture implementation plans will be best achieved through development of additional Farm Bill wildlife delivery capacity. We offer the following recommendations:

1. NRCS should maintain maximum flexibility and creativity within their statutory authority to work with the wildlife community to maintain and build additional fish and wildlife capacity at the Field Office level through Cooperative Agreements, Contribution Agreements, and other Technical Service Provider arrangements.
2. NRCS should support the addition of NRCS staff biologists in key areas or the reassessment of current job announcements to better meet the shifted focus (e.g., from soils to habitat restoration and management) of Farm Bill programs.
3. FSA should pursue additional funding to support the increased demand for technical assistance to improve CRP wildlife values and target CRP enrollment in pivotal landscapes for priority wildlife (e.g., Playa Lakes Region for lesser prairie chicken).
4. State fish and wildlife agencies should explore options with NRCS for developing long-term commitments to increase Farm Bill delivery capacity in priority landscapes (competitively bid Cooperative Agreements with NRCS is one potential model).
5. Private foundations, non-governmental conservation organizations, Joint Ventures, corporations, and other fish and wildlife partnerships should consider the importance of conservation funding to increase Farm Bill biological delivery capacity.

We strongly believe that additional biology capacity for delivery of the Farm Bill will provide significant benefits to NRCS, FSA and their customers in achieving fish and wildlife objectives.