

Farm Programs—and Wildlife

C. D. BESADNY, Research and Planning Division

For the first time, the federal farm program now gives farmers an incentive to manage land for wildlife and recreation. In view of what has happened to land in the past 25 years, the new program can be of utmost importance to sportsmen.

After World War II, technological advances in agriculture changed the dream of both sportsman and farmer. Hybrid seed corn, chemicals, greater use of fertilizers, and high-powered equipment were infiltrating the farming community. Old Dobbin was on the way out—along with nickel beer. Crop surpluses were beginning to appear. And the wildlife squeeze was on.

Land-use practices associated with more intensive agriculture were rapidly changing the landscape. Cornfields and truck farms invaded sedge marshes. Industrial developments and cities expanded on recently-filled lowlands. Brushy fencerow cover gave way to wider roads and larger fields. Pheasants, quail and cottontails were forced to find new homes or disappeared entirely from these areas.

The loss of individual parcels of cover seemed insignificant and was shrugged off as "progress." But the progress was costly. In the past 25-30 years, over 2 million acres of wetland have been drained and converted to cropland. In some southeastern Wisconsin counties between 30 and 50 per cent of the original wetland areas have disappeared. There are no accurate records on miles of fencerow cover grubbed out, but some battle scars remain.

New crop-harvesting methods also affected wildlife. Earlier hay-cutting and better varieties of alfalfa made possible three cuttings a year. Corn-pickers and combines left little food in the fields for wildlife, and fall plowing destroyed what little food and cover did remain.

But *the major bottleneck for upland game is a shortage of undisturbed nesting cover, once so abundant both in hayfields which were cut late and in undrained wetlands.*

No one can blame the farmer for changing with the times. It was modernize or perish. Many farms grew in size—some perished. But sportsmen had a big stake in the land, too. Should they be denied the opportunity to hunt and fish or observe wildlife? Wildlife is a commodity to be shared and enjoyed by all.

Today, state fish and game agencies throughout the country are faced with the same problem: How to increase the supply of game and make it available to the public at reasonable cost. In Wisconsin as in other states, wildlife is the property of the state. But about 80 per cent of the wildlife is produced on private lands. What the landowner does to his land directly or indirectly affects wildlife. Thus, we are dependent upon the farmer for all our agricultural products *and much of our wildlife.*

To offset some of the cover loss and provide a place to hunt and fish, the Wisconsin Conservation Department has acquired through purchase, gift and lease over 300,000 acres of wildlife lands. When the state parks and county, state and national forest lands are added, this represents a sizeable acreage of public land available for outdoor recreation.

Still, the total acreage in public ownership is small and amounts to less than 15 per cent of Wisconsin's total land area. In heavily farmed and populated southeastern Wisconsin where outdoor recreation demands are greatest, only 2 per cent of the land is publicly owned—far short of space needed to fulfill recreational needs; far short of space required to produce adequate supplies of wildlife.

It is obvious that no one agency will ever have the funds necessary to secure enough land for public use and wildlife management. Also, there is

resistance to public land acquisition in many areas and lack of sufficient funds to develop and manage these lands after they are purchased. Thus, public ownership of land, though helpful so far as it goes, *is not a complete answer.*

The most logical solution would be the practice of wildlife management on private lands, but sufficient incentive for landowners has been lacking. Agricultural economics usually dictate which acres should be planted and what crops should be grown. However, in recent years this philosophy has been changing and federal farm legislation included various cropland diversion programs to reduce production of certain crops. On some of the diverted acres, efforts were made to manage wildlife.

Today, with the enactment of a new four-year farm program, a challenging opportunity exists which could provide more wildlife benefits, more campgrounds and picnic areas, and in general, a greater recreation resource base on private lands. In addition to reducing the number of acres planted to crops now in surplus, *the new farm program contains specific incentives for landowners to deliberately manage many of the diverted acres for wildlife.* This idealistic approach resulted from several years of intensive studies of the previous cropland diversion programs. Let's briefly review these programs.

Beginning in 1956, wildlife management received recognition on private farmlands when the federal government developed the soil bank program. Designed as a three, five or 10-year program the conservation reserve phase made possible the diversion of some cropland from agricultural production. On diverted acres, the landowner was required to establish or maintain a cover crop—grasses,

legumes, trees or even water. While the program made some provision for wildlife practices, interpretation of the various regulations often resulted in wildlife coming in a poor runner-up. As the program gained acceptance, some wildlife benefits did accrue.

The total conservation reserve acreage within Wisconsin's prime upland game range was small, amounting to less than 5 per cent of the cropland area in most counties. However, in Racine and Waukesha counties over 10 per cent of the cropland was under conservation reserve contract and in a good grass cover. Research by the Wisconsin Conservation Department showed that upland game populations increased significantly in these two counties compared with surrounding counties as a result of the large amount of available undisturbed nesting cover. Similar increases in upland game occurred in St. Croix county in northwestern Wisconsin where almost 15 per cent of the land was in conservation reserve.

In 1961, another opportunity for wildlife management developed when the federal feed grain program was offered as a means of reducing grain surpluses. Farmers were eligible for both diversion and price support payments on barley corn and grain sorghum lands. It was a popular but expensive program compared with the conservation reserve on an acre basis.

Research investigations showed that *wildlife benefited from this program only if the same field was diverted for more than one year and if the field supported a reasonably good vegetative cover.* Pheasants, Hungarian partridge and cottontail rabbits utilized these diverted acres extensively and population increases were noted in many sections of southeastern Wisconsin. Again undisturbed nesting cover was the key. The feed grain program still continues on a year-to-year basis.

We learned a lot from these two federal programs. Basically a well-designed and coordinated cropland diversion program could provide tre-

mendous benefits for wildlife. And over the years it could save the taxpayer large sums of money.

Armed with a backlog of scientific data wildlife technicians in Wisconsin and several other midwestern states began the job of selling a new cropland diversion program. This was

back in 1963. The stimulus was there. Within several months public and private conservation groups were actively promoting legislation to convert excess cropland to other uses, wildlife being the primary target. Congress took the ball and Senator Gaylord Nelson's efforts for wildlife



Federal farm programs serve to maintain some land in grass cover without pasturing or haying. Where the cover is undisturbed for two or more years, it promotes wildlife production.



and outdoor recreation are now history.

The new farm program is Public Law 89-321 better known as the food and agriculture act of 1965. Its purpose is to maintain farm income, stabilize prices and assure adequate supplies of agricultural commodities, reduce surpluses, lower government costs, promote foreign trade and provide greater economic opportunities in rural areas. To be administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture this program is considered by many as a big step forward in the continuing struggle to provide for orderly production and marketing of agricultural commodities and control costly crop surpluses.

Title VI of this law is the cropland adjustment program. Patterned after the old soil bank program it authorizes the diversion of 40 million acres of unneeded cropland to other uses during the next five years at the rate of 8 million acres a year. Under the program the Secretary of Agriculture will enter into agreements with farm-

ers to assist them in turning surplus cropland to nonagricultural uses promoting the development and conservation of our soil, water, forest, wildlife and recreational resources, and establishing, protecting and conserving open spaces and natural beauty.

Specifically Title VI provides: (1) Five- to 10-year landowner contracts, (2) basic land rental payments for diverted acres, (3) cost-share payments to establish a conserving cover crop on the diverted acres, (4) service payments in recognition of benefits created for wildlife and other recreational uses, including opening these lands to the public, (5) transfer of funds to other federal and state agencies to acquire excess cropland for development of wildlife and recreational facilities, and (6) establishment of a 12-member national wildlife advisory board to assist the Secretary in administering the program.

The federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service is administering the program at the state

and county level. State fish and game departments have been requested to serve in a technical capacity to assist the ASCS with wildlife practices on diverted acres. This federal-state relationship should provide an excellent opportunity to promote a unique program and obtain maximum benefits for wildlife.

The cropland adjustment program offers a sound approach to several national problems. It should provide much of the acreage needed for outdoor recreation and wildlife management. It will provide economic opportunities and incentives for the farmer. And most importantly it will reduce crop surpluses and conserve the nation's soil and water resources. *Wisconsin sportsmen can support and promote this program by contacting their rural neighbors and encouraging them to divert some of their croplands for wildlife and outdoor recreation uses.*

Outdoor writer Clay Schoenfeld has referred to this program as "medicare for wildlife." It could be just that.

WHO NEEDS WETLANDS?

DONALD R. THOMPSON, Research and Planning Division

One of man's most colossal mistakes is the view that wetlands are "worthless." The fact is, our well-being is closely tied to them. One state found they are worth \$400 an acre, but in proper perspective their benefits are priceless.

Who needs wetlands? Aren't they a sign of lack of enterprise? Don't they breed mosquitoes and cause maladies? What about the flooding? Who wants a "swamp" in their backyard! Nobody but nobody needs wetlands!

Nobody but nobody needs wetlands! Such doubts and damnations portray some of the misconceptions commonly held about wetlands. People's sense of values varies with their background, experience and education. Unfortunately many people are either repulsed by wetlands, don't care about them or suppress whatever interest they may have when the promise of crop or real estate bonanzas shimmer before them.

What is a wetland, anyway? A

good working definition is that *wetlands are any lands wet enough to support a growth of moisture-loving plants or aquatics and having an accumulation of organic matter as peat or muck.* (Muck is broken-down peat.) This definition includes such areas called meadows, sloughs, marshes, brush and timber swamps, bogs and potholes, and shallow ponds. The larger open-water areas are excluded, such as lakes and streams, as well as seasonally-flooded alluvial lands.

At least in Wisconsin, wetlands owe their origin largely to the great ice sheets of the glacial periods. The earthy material transposed blocked

the old drainage patterns established in the eons preceding and created a rolling to hilly topography. Large ice blocks imbedded in the loose till formed lake basins as they melted away. Large lakes were also scoured out by the ice.

Since then surface erosion and vegetative growth have reduced the depth of these basins, converting shallower lakes to marsh and shallow marshes to meadows. Brush and timber were able to invade some areas where conditions were favorable. Bogs formed where more acid conditions prevailed.

These filling processes still continue, to the dismay of persons with