

The Road to Recovery

About half of the duck hunters surveyed after the 2000 season reported their overall satisfaction with duck hunting in Minnesota had fallen. Why? They weren't seeing as many ducks over their favorite lakes and wetlands. That year, the Department of Natural Resources, in cooperation with Ducks Unlimited, Minnesota Waterfowl Association and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, began drafting a plan to restore wetlands and waterfowl. In 2001, the Division of Fish and Wildlife approved the plan entitled *Restore Minnesota's Wetland and Waterfowl Hunting Heritage*.

As a result, the DNR initiated new management of wild rice lakes, increased focus on improving shallow lakes, began an inventory of waterfowl refuges and completed more frequent hunter opinion surveys. Also in each of the ensuing years the DNR added some 3,000 acres to our wildlife management areas system, re-stored 50 to 100 wetlands and planted 10,000 to 20,000 acres of grasslands and managed at least 250 shallow lakes.

In 2005, after the worst duck hunting season in recent memory, a new urgency prompted more action among hunters, biologists and conservationists.

April-June

- Duck hunters, birders, conservationists gather on the steps of the capital to voice their frustration with Minnesota's duck hunting and call for ducks, wetlands and clean water.
- Minnesota Legislature approves \$10 million bonding package that will step up acquisition of high priority habitat, adding thousands of acres to the state's wildlife management area system.
- DNR holds a series of statewide input meetings to clarify hunters' concerns and begin formulating a duck recovery plan that builds on the concerns and successes of the 2001 plan.
- DNR, with its many partners – Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, Izaak Walton League, Minnesota Conservation Federation, Minnesota Waterfowl Association, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services – form partnerships to advise on new habitat and population goals.

July-September

- DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approve the Working Lands Initiative to focus state and federal conservation programs in Minnesota on restoration of high priority wetland and grassland complexes.
- The new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP II) begins protecting an estimated 120,000 acres of wetlands and grasslands.

October-December

- Partnerships made up of conservation organizations, state and federal agencies agree to target levels of 1 million breeding birds and 2 million acres of habitat in new duck plan.
- The Wetlands Loan Act, supported by Gov. Tim Pawlenty and numerous conservation groups is introduced to the House of Representatives by Minnesota Congressman Mark Kennedy. The act would draw on future revenues from duck stamp sales to purchase federal easements and land today for migratory bird refuges and waterfowl production areas.

One million ducks Two million acres Three steps to success

Highlights from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' draft plan to recover ducks, wetlands and shallow lakes.



1. Set clear goals

Building on the 2001 plan to *Restore Minnesota's Wetland and Waterfowl Hunting Heritage*, the DNR proposes an ambitious new vision in collaboration with conservation groups, state and federal agencies. Among these are:

- Boost the state's average breeding duck population from 636,000 to 1 million birds producing a fall population of 1.4 million birds from Minnesota.
- Restore hunting opportunities that existed during the 1970s.
- Average of 140,000 resident hunters with high satisfaction rates.

What's different about these goals? The bar has been set higher and the buy in is bigger. Biologists, habitat specialists and conservation partners who collaborated on these goals are committed to making this plan more than just words on paper. By 2025, we will add 600,000 acres of habitat. With support and determination, we will make the goal of 2 million acres a reality.

Strategies for success

- Restore long-term protection for 2 million acres of additional habitat including 64,000 wetlands covering 570,000 acres and 1.4 million acres of grassland. Protect 600,000 acres by 2025.



- Accelerate efforts to restore 1,800 shallow lakes, including wild rice lakes.

- Provide waterfowl sanctuaries, refuges or rest areas every 50 miles within the major waterfowl habitat areas across Minnesota.

- Improve hunter satisfaction, performance and recruitment through education partnerships with a long-term goal of averaging 140,000 hunters with a high satisfaction rate.

- Continue targeted enforcement through DNR Waterfowl Enforcement Task Force.

- Increase average duck abundance during fall migration. Continue monitoring to provide duck abundance estimates.

- Continue duck population, harvest monitoring and long-term shallow lake case studies. Pilot statewide wetland inventory in 2006.

- Develop and apply new technologies to reduce the impact of invasive species.

- Continue to address affects of fish on wetlands and shallow lakes.

Protecting the best

The most productive prairie waterfowl habitat is a mix of wetland and grassland as a habitat complex.

- Four to nine square miles
- 10% temporary/seasonal wetlands
- 10% permanent wetlands
- 40% grasslands
- 40% available for crops

Shallow lakes and permanent wetlands add significant benefit for migrating birds.

2. Focus on habitat

Looking for ways to use the latest technology to protect the state's best duck breeding and migration habitat while keeping working lands working, the DNR began meeting with federal agencies, conservation and agricultural organizations in 2004.

This discussion led to a collaboration known as the Working Lands Initiative, an effort to focus on high-quality prairie wetland complexes that are critical to waterfowl and shorebird production.

Specifically, this means hunters will see greater emphasis on creating four- to nine-square mile wetland and grassland complexes that provide nesting habitat in spring and rest areas during fall migration.

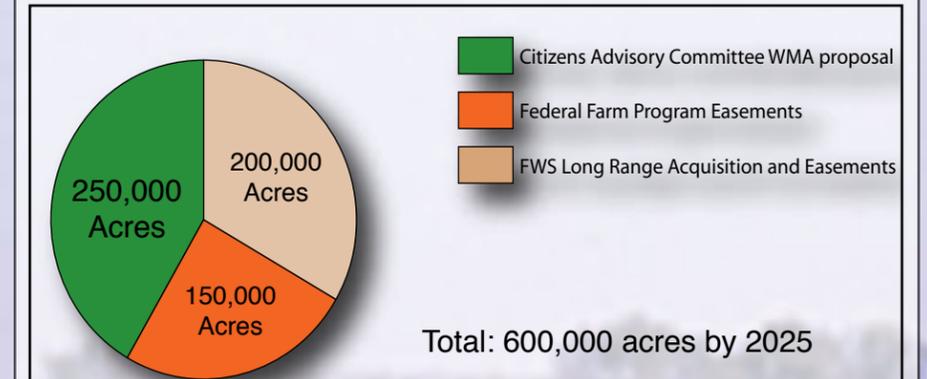
At its heart, the Working Lands Initiative is about using satellite mapping, biological data and conservation programs to protect the state's best duck habitat while keeping farmland in production.

Extra efforts to improve duck hunting

Working together on the following efforts will increase our potential for boosting Minnesota's duck population to average 1 million breeding birds.

- Support forest management to include cavity-nesting trees.
- Work with organizations to add nest boxes and structures.
- Support expansion of waterfowl education for youth and adults.

Toward 2 million acres



The potential for meeting the 2 million-acre challenge can be seen in other established wildlife habitat acquisition plans.

3. Enhance teamwork

Protecting 2 million acres of duck habitat would be impossible without a long-term commitment from many partners. As a result, the new duck plan calls for even greater coordination and collaboration among conservation partners. Together, citizens need to support Wetland Loan Act legislation, the Working Lands Initiative, federal farm bill conservation provisions and local initiatives to protect wetlands.

Hundreds of thousands of acres are already being proposed for long-term protection through federal, state and private programs. And there's much more to do.

So, the DNR looks forward to working with you to improve our shallow lakes, increase nest boxes, protect resident hens, reduce the affects of invasive species, and accomplish other actions that will make a difference for this and future generations.