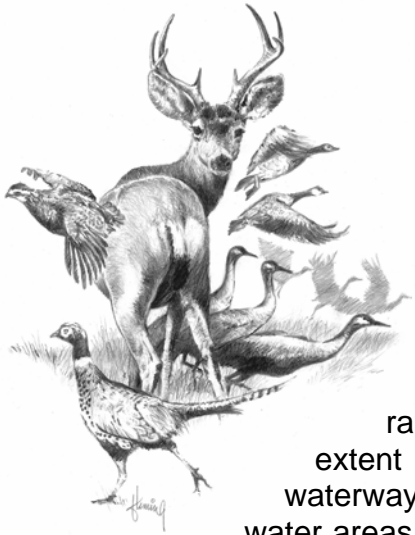


APPENDIX P

Wildlife Considerations in the Management of CRP Lands



Permanent vegetative cover afforded by the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is generally beneficial to wildlife in the Southern Great Plains. Voluntary retention of these lands in permanent cover will provide long term benefits to soil, water, wildlife, and wetland resources through increased infiltration of rainwater, reduced runoff, and improved soil fertility. To the extent that the 1996 Farm Act recognized filterstrips, grass waterways, riparian areas, field windbreaks, shelterbelts, shallow water areas, and acreage with an erodibility index of more than 15 as ineligible for “early out” contract provisions, a positive consideration for wildlife and wildlife habitat was provided. Likewise, a determination by the Secretary of Agriculture that acreage enrolled under the wetland criteria during the 8th and 9th signup periods and acreage on which a CRP useful life easement is filed will be ineligible for “early out”, as stated in the Interim Rule for CRP, dated August 27, 1996, was another positive consideration for wildlife and wetland habitat. Finally, the most significant consideration given to wildlife and wildlife habitat was elevation to *co-equal status with soil and water resources* in the language of the Act itself.

What are some key wildlife considerations for CRP landowners in the High Plains and Rolling Plains of Texas? As a rule, increasing plant species diversity greatly improves the wildlife habitat value of CRP, especially within *microhabitats*, at the farm and neighborhood level. In most cases, CRP grass monocultures cannot be expected to provide optimum wildlife habitat because they lack the required diversity to address limiting factors (food, cover, water, interspersions) of many groups of species endemic to ecological areas within the SGP (i.e. High Plains & Rolling Plains Ecological Areas in Texas). Also, the size, shape, and interspersions of these tracts in relation to other land use greatly influences their value as a component of habitat. For example, no less than several thousand acres of CRP comprised of buffalograss, blue grama, sideoats grama, and native forbs, located adjacent to native shortgrass rangeland and managed with a rotational grazing/burning system favoring a forb (food) component, would be required to significantly impact pronghorn antelope or certain grassland birds. On the other hand, 40, 80, and 160-acre parcels of diverse native grass/legume mixtures, strategically located at quarter-mile intervals in intensively-farmed (feed grain) areas, could be expected to greatly increase carrying capacity for ring-necked pheasants. In short, if habitat enhancement for species/groups of species is a (CRP) landowner objective, there are key factors to consider in a) retention and enhancement of existing tracts and b) establishment of new lands in the program. The following suggestions are based on life history and ecology of species found within rangeland and agricultural habitats in the Southern Great Plains.

Big Game (Mule Deer, White-tailed Deer, Pronghorn Antelope)



These animals benefit from planned grazing/burning systems on CRP lands because of improved vegetative composition and increased digestibility and palatability of plant material, especially native legumes and forbs. Deferment of strategically located grazing units will help increase productivity by providing fawning and escape cover to minimize losses to coyotes. The most intensive systems with higher stocking rates may tend to favor pronghorn antelope and “species of special concern” such as swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) on larger CRP tracts that were seeded to shortgrass and are surrounded by remnant (shortgrass) prairie. Maintenance of livestock water will satisfy the needs of these species. CRP areas located between brush tracts/canyonlands and agricultural crops will act as

travel corridors and tend to promote range expansion of mule deer and white-tailed deer. Intensive grazing/burning systems augmented by interseeding of legumes/forbs (i.e. Eldorado engelmann daisy, maximilian sunflower, Illinois bundleflower, and alfalfa) may help alleviate real/perceived crop damage on adjacent agricultural lands. Brush encroachment will favor white-tailed deer over mule deer where they occur sympatrically, and will eventually disfavor pronghorns, depending on plant density and reduction of visibility. Browse establishment (fourwing saltbush, aromatic sumac) for big game will also benefit upland game birds. Finally, retention of larger tracts *with management* where big game is present, often only in moderate densities in “plains” habitats, can be expected to positively impact this species group and other grassland birds and mammals by reducing habitat fragmentation.

Upland Game Birds (Bobwhite Quail, Scaled Quail, Ring-necked Pheasants, Lesser Prairie Chickens, and Rio Grande Wild Turkeys)

These species also benefit from rotational grazing/burning systems on CRP lands because of increased forb (food) production and insect (food) availability, improved brood range (bare ground shaded by vegetation of differing heights), and interspersions created by this type of management. Retention of smaller tracts associated with range or farmed areas and “fencerow” habitat will favor bobwhite quail and ring-necked pheasants, while larger tracts adjacent to rangeland can benefit bobwhite or scaled quail, provided that other essential habitat components are located nearby on adjacent lands. Generally, lack of woody cover is limiting to quail on



CRP lands, and can be remedied by brush establishment along fencerows, field borders, and in clumps or “mottes” when compatibly planned with grazing, burning, or haying operations. Less woody cover (~10-15%) generally favors scaled quail; conversely, increased woody canopy (~25-30%) promotes bobwhites, provided other management is included. Lesser prairie chickens and Rio Grande wild turkeys require greater diversity of woody cover, legumes, forbs, and native grasses on larger CRP



tracts adjacent to occupied habitats. Retention of larger tracts in occupied prairie chicken and wild turkey range, *with management*, can be expected to eventually benefit these species that have higher mobility and larger home ranges. Ring-necked pheasants will thrive in areas of diverse native grass/legume/forb tracts of 40-160 acres interspersed with playa wetlands, agricultural feed grains, fencerows, and roadsides because of the interspersion created to provide heavy winter cover, nesting cover, brood range, and food afforded

by retention of smaller CRP tracts. Even retention of *circle irrigation corners in CRP cover* at the farm level can provide excellent pheasant habitat in association with grain production. Haying can be compatible with upland “ground-nesting” bird production, provided a) it is delayed until *after the peak of nesting season* (generally July 15th), b) portions of fields are left undisturbed in strategic locations (i.e. adjacent to fencerows, crop fields, playa wetlands, brush, “no-mow” roadside areas), and c) fields are periodically managed with fire to prevent accumulation of excessive ground litter. A policy of periodic managed haying on CRP lands, rather than “emergency” haying, could be a positive consideration for wildlife in the SGP.

Grassland Birds (i.e. Song Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Dickcissel, Red-winged Blackbird, Grasshopper Sparrow)

CRP fields seeded to permanent vegetation provide superior nesting habitat for grassland birds compared to rowcrop fields. Long term studies conducted in the SGP have documented *21 times the number of grassland bird nests in CRP fields* compared to rowcrop fields, and *31 times the number of successful nests*. This is considered a true success of CRP by wildlifers, as many of these grassland bird species have been in decline. Species like the mountain plover, long-billed curlew, upland sandpiper, Swainson’s hawk, common nighthawk, lark bunting, yellow-headed blackbird, common yellowthroat, Cassin’s kingbird, Baird’s sparrow, and bobolink will all benefit from grazing/burning management systems on CRP tracts adjacent to shortgrass and mid-grass



rangeland in the SGP. Notice that management practices/considerations for this group are compatible with those for other species/groups affiliated with retention of larger CRP tracts and rangelands in the SGP.

Waterfowl and Wetland Wildlife (Ducks, Geese, Cranes, Reptiles, Amphibians, Shorebirds)

Retaining a 3:1 ratio (or at least 2:1) of CRP upland grass buffer to playa basin acreage would effectively protect any playa in the SGP, especially in intensively agricultural areas, to provide quality habitat for reptiles and amphibians, prevent further degradation/siltation of basins, and provide quality nesting cover for pheasants and ducks in many neighborhoods. Our region is a major waterfowl wintering area for ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, and American bald eagles. Additionally, we summer many neotropical migratory birds, including shorebirds, in and around wet playas, and our Ogallala Aquifer is recharged through the 25,390 playas located throughout the SGP. Retention of permanent vegetative buffers in CRP



around playas, protection with fencing, management of buffers with planned grazing/burning, and interseeding of legumes is *highly recommended* for the benefit of waterfowl and wetland habitats. These practices are totally compatible with the goals of the **Playa Lakes Joint Venture**, our region's contribution to the *North American Waterfowl Management Plan*, and to strategies set forth by farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen, including CRP contract holders, serving on the Panhandle Regional Advisory Group currently helping to craft the *State Wetlands Plan*, a voluntary initiative being guided by Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

For more detail on wildlife considerations in the management of CRP lands, please see the accompanying publication entitled "**Wildlife Habitat Management on Former CRP Lands**", consult with your NRCS Field Office for current rules as they evolve, and seek advise from your local wildlife biologist with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department @ 806/655-3782 or -3975; FAX 806/655-4045 (Panhandle District). Free, confidential, non-binding assistance is available to landowners through the Department's **Private Lands & Public Hunting Program**.