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Opportunities for rural development through “bird friendly” farms and agricultural/nature tourism

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Opportunities for rural development through “bird friendly” farms and agricultural/nature tourism.

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This project contributes to our understanding of bird habitat management practices in cropland farming systems and to our knowledge of Nebraska farmers’ opinions regarding birds, their habitats, children’s roles on the farm, and a certification process that would tie all of these together. A “bird friendly” farm certification could involve a professional assessment of bird habitat and populations and include various farming practices and non-cropped areas. Certified farms would be publicly recognized by a label, which could help market Nebraska farm products, provide increased opportunities for tourism, and give desirable cropland birds a boost.

Approximately 85 birds are frequently found in Nebraska cropland. Information on basic life history, agricultural associations, and suggested management practices of these birds was compiled in a database. We then chose 32 management practices that would benefit these birds and that could be accomplished on farms. These practices were put in a survey and sent to 1,241 Nebraska farmers from March-May 2007. The members of both the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society (NSAS) and the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) were included in the mailing, along with 1,000 other Nebraska farmers whose names and addresses were obtained from Experian Marketing Solutions (www.experianmarketingsolutions.com). Returned questionnaires included 289 that were completed and usable, which is 25% of the farming recipients; 37 were non-deliverable and 57 indicated they were not farming. This 25% response rate is within the expected range (Dillman 2000).

The surveys have yielded many interesting results:

- Of the 285 people responding to the question about interest in a “bird friendly” farm program, 64% indicated that they were somewhat or very interested. Responses from those who indicated they were members of NSAS (74 responses) showed even greater interest (93% somewhat or very interested) as did responses from those who indicated they were farming organically (81 responses; 85% somewhat or very interested).
- Out of 275 people who answered the question, “In general, how important is it to you to have children involved in farm operations or chores?” 230 (80%) answered somewhat or very important.

Along with this information, some general trends with regards to specific management practices are emerging. Many of the farming practices that would increase habitat for cropland birds had great support from our survey participants. Those management practices with the greatest

support, where 100 or more participants answered that they already do this or would be willing to do this on their own were:

- Leave crop stubble through winter: 219 participants
- Limit mowing of grass waterways or fence lines between April and about mid-August: 203 participants
- Allow grasses and forbs (native flowers and weeds) to grow unmowed in fence rows: 196 participants
- No-till: 191 participants
- Mow around known nests: 187 participants
- Limit mowing of grass borders until about mid-August: 187 participants
- Maintain or plant farmstead windbreaks: 182 participants
- Leave standing dead trees (snags) where safe: 181 participants
- Leave dead trees on ground in woodland areas: 180 participants
- Leave 5% of the farm as non-cropped wildlife habitat: 137 participants
- Allow trees and shrubs to grow in fence rows: 136 participants
- Create buffer strips and leave them unmanaged (farm borders, fence lines): 125 participants
- Maintain woodland areas: 123 participants
- Convert or maintain 20-60 acres of native prairie: 114 participants
- No insecticide use: 110 participants
- Maintain or plant field windbreaks: 108 participants

Those management practices that survey participants would be most likely to consider doing if the farmer received partial or full compensation were:

- Leave turn rows planted, unsprayed and unharvested as winter food plots: 115 participants
- Create buffer strips and mow about 1/3 of them every year (where strips won't interfere with farm operation): 106 participants
- Leave small areas of crops unharvested as winter food plots: 101 participants
- Leave turn rows unsprayed with herbicides or insecticides: 99 participants
- Plant grass strips (6ft. wide) across the middle of large crop fields: 83 participants
- Employ grazing practices that benefits birds: 77 participants
- Incorporate cover crops in your rotations: 70 participants
- Provide habitat corridors (strips of non-cropped land) connecting large non-cropped areas: 70 participants
- Grow several crops (3-5) of varying heights in a field at the same time: 66 participants
- Create and maintain strips of native vegetation along streams (strips 15 ft wide) and rivers (strips 30 ft wide): 63 participants
- Plant native grasses and forbs in corners of field where pivot doesn't reach: 57 participants
- Remove tall trees surrounding grasslands: 54 participants
- Maintain wetland areas: 52 participants

- Protect streams and ponds from livestock trampling: 52 participants
- No herbicide use: 42 participants
- Use selective timber harvest methods that include wildlife habitat considerations: 36 participants

These results will be useful for future considerations of creating a “bird friendly” farm certification for Nebraska. Many of these practices already have support and funding from other organizations. For instance, some Natural Resources Districts and non-governmental organizations, such as Pheasants Forever, have programs to create wildlife habitat on private land by seeding central pivot corners with native plants. This certification has the potential to increase collaboration between local, state, and federal programs designed to enhance conservation, family farming, and rural opportunities throughout the State. In addition, this project has added to our understanding of potential educational opportunities regarding integrated pest management, cost benefit analyses of lower yield farm areas, and windbreak effects on crop yield.

Currently, this project is in the final stages of analysis and writing. This project will be reported in a Master’s thesis, journal articles, Extension publications and on the School of Natural Resources web site. Information regarding this project was released through Cooperative Extension offices earlier this year.

This project is the initial step in exploring whether a “bird friendly” farm certification process would work in Nebraska, what practices might be included, who the main supporters and participants might be, and if funding would need to be secured to offer compensation for the various practices necessary to become certified. The information will be used to inform legislators, governmental organizations, and private citizens about the possibility for farms to create quality bird habitat and how this can provide opportunities for rural communities throughout the State.

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