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EXTENSION WETLANDS EDUCATION IN TEXAS

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The United States has lost more than half of the wetlands that existed prior to European settlement. Wetlands continue to be lost at an alarming rate due to human disturbance and natural processes. The loss of our countries' wetlands is costing our society greatly. Wetlands perform many functions that are beneficial, such as water filtration, recharging groundwater, providing natural flood control, and supporting a wide variety of birds, fish, mammals, amphibians, insects, and plants. Numerous commercially important fish also require wetlands to survive. Wetlands also provide many recreational opportunities.

Nearly 75% of the wetlands in the lower 48 states are located on private property. Many of these wetlands exist or existed on agricultural and industrial lands. The recent attention to wetlands by the news media, politicians, environmentalists, and the public has heightened the awareness of farmers, ranchers, urban developers, and industrialists to the value of wetlands. Many farmers, ranchers, urban developers, and industrialists are concerned about wetlands and the role they play in the natural environment. Many do not know, however, how to enhance or manage existing wetlands, restore a converted wetland, create new wetlands, or reduce the impact farming has on existing wetlands.

The Texas Agricultural Extension Service (Extension) has a long-standing, positive relationship with landowners and land managers in Texas. Extension conveys information to landowners and land managers by consistently training and updating its staff and providing educational opportunities for clientele. Since wetlands are a relatively new issue, few Extension staff and even fewer landowners and land managers are knowledgeable about wetlands and wetland management. Extension is, therefore, committed to educating its staff and farmers and ranchers about wetlands and the role wetlands play in our society.

1994-95 WETLAND IN-SERVICE TRAINING WORKSHOPS

In 1994-95, EPA funded and Extension developed a program designed to increase the capacity of Texas to protect its wetlands by educating personnel from Extension, pertinent state and federal agencies, and agricultural and industrial landowners and land managers about the role of wetlands in the environment and their respective values to society. Educating professionals that regularly interact with farmers and ranchers will better equip them to make management recommendations that

consider the value of wetlands. In addition, they will be educating landowners and land managers about wetlands and providing them with the appreciation and knowledge necessary to consider and manage wetlands on lands they control. This was accomplished by developing a wetlands information manual, wetland information video, and conducting three wetland in-service training workshops in south, southcentral, and east Texas.

The wetlands manual entitled *Wetland and Coastal Resources Information Manual for Texas* was developed as a wetland information source for south, southcentral, and east Texas. The manual was adapted from the wetlands protection manual developed by the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. The manual was also used as a training guide for the three wetland in-service training workshops conducted in south, southcentral, and east Texas, to educate Extension staff and state and other federal agency personnel about wetlands. The manual should also prove an invaluable reference source for professionals when they are advising landowners and land managers about wetland issues. A complimentary wetlands video entitled *Wetland and Coastal Resources Information for Texas* was also developed as an overview of the material included in the manual.

The three wetlands in-service workshops were conducted in Corpus Christi, Houston, and Overton, Texas, to teach Extension staff and state and federal agency personnel about the functions and values of wetlands, best-management practices, wetland regulations, wetland conservation incentives, and wetland management. The information obtained at the workshops will in turn be used to assist landowners and land managers with general wetland questions as well as wetland management, enhancement, and restoration.

1995-96 WETLAND IN-SERVICE TRAINING WORKSHOPS

In 1995-96, Extension expanded its program to further increase the capacity of Texas to protect its wetlands by updating and revising the wetlands information manual and video developed in 1994-95, for south, southcentral, and east Texas. The manual and video will be updated to include information pertinent to north, northcentral, and west Texas. Extension will then conduct 3 in-service training workshops on wetlands and wetland management for Extension staff and other state and federal agency personnel in this region of Texas. Extension will also conduct 10 multi-county landowner/land manager wetland education workshops in south, southcentral, and

east Texas. Additionally, computerized versions of the Texas and Louisiana wetland information manuals will be developed and implemented on the Texas Wetlands Resource Database network and Internet to make this information more accessible.

The three wetlands in-service workshops will be held in Amarillo, Lubbock, and Abilene, Texas to teach Extension agents, Extension specialists, and other state and federal agency personnel about the functions and values of wetlands, best-management practices, wetland regulations, wetland conservation and management, and programs available for assisting landowners and land managers with wetland conservation, enhancement, and management. The updated wetland information manual will be used to train participants.

Four multi-county landowner/land manager workshop/field days about wetlands management, restoration, enhancement, preservation, function and values, best-management practices, regulations, and economic incentives were conducted in Cameron and Angelena counties. The workshop/field days were designed to educate clientele and influence their decision-making process regarding wetlands on their property. There were initially 10 multi-county landowner/land manager workshop/field days scheduled; however, due to lack of interest and poor turnout only 4 were conducted. The problem may have been that many of the individuals farming and managing the land do not own the land; thus there is no incentive to conserve and manage wetlands for hunting leases. In place of the six remaining workshop/field days, a Farmers, Waterfowl, and Wetlands Shortcourse will be conducted in the Houston area. This shortcourse will focus on economic incentives from wetlands and target landowners who may be interested in gaining additional revenue from wetlands on their property.

MARSHMALLOW PROJECT

Extension is currently developing a program designed to generate youth interest and involvement in wetland conservation and management. One of the most effective methods for changing the behavior of society is to educate its young people. One method of teaching our youth that has proven effective is where youths voluntarily educate themselves through self-study and participation in hands-on activities. Extension is developing a hands-on youth wetlands educational project entitled Marsh Management Activities for Learning the Lifestyles of Wildlife (MarshMALLOW Project), that will educate rural and urban youths and adults about the importance of wetland wildlife and the wetlands they inhabit. The primary purpose of this project is to educate youths and adults about wetland wildlife and wetland habitats, who will, in turn, encourage private urban and rural landowners to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands on their property.

To accomplish this, interested youths and volunteer leaders will form a wetland conservation club, whose goal is to learn about the functions and values, management, and restoration of wetlands. Youths in the wetlands conservation club will communicate with local agricultural and industrial landowners to locate a wetland on their property that they are willing to have restored, enhanced, or managed.

The club will then develop a management plan for their adopted wetland, using information obtained from the wetland management manual specifically developed for the MarshMALLOW Project. Wetland conservation clubs will submit their management plans for review by the judging panel. Clubs submitting quality management plans will be awarded grants on a 1:1 cash or in-kind match ratio up to \$750/club. If a club cannot raise enough cash or in-kind support to be awarded all of the \$750 grant, they will be awarded that portion of the grant they can match. They must match at least 50% of the \$750 in order to receive any money at all. The matching requirement provides an incentive for clubs to circulate in the community, increasing public awareness about wetlands and encouraging community participation.

Immediately after grants are awarded, clubs will be expected to implement their wetland management plans. Clubs will have 8 months to carry out their management plans, at which time wetland management reports must be submitted to the judging panel. Wetland management reports will detail the activities of the wetland conservation clubs to manage, restore, or enhance their chosen wetland. Quality management reports will warrant an on-site visit and evaluation by the judging panel.

Clubs that pass the on-site visit will give a 10-minute oral presentation about their project, which will be evaluated by the judging panel. Scores for the management plan, wetland management report, on-site visit, and presentation will be totaled. The three clubs with the most points will receive awards of \$1,000 (first prize), \$750 (second prize), \$500 (third prize). All clubs participating in the project will be given achievement awards corresponding to the competition level they attained.

CHOCOLATE BAYOU EXTENSION DEMONSTRATION FARM

The Chocolate Bayou Extension Demonstration Farm is a 2,450-acre farm donated to and managed by Extension for the demonstration of methods and techniques for integrating wetlands with rice, cattle, and waterfowl production in an economically viable unit that is environmentally friendly. Current and proposed demonstrations at the farm include the development of a 56-acre moist-soil management unit for waterfowl, 35 acre and 24 acre constructed wetlands, a Chinese tallow tree and sea myrtle control study, deferred-rotation cattle

grazing management, and fencing of depressional wetlands to control grazing. In the near future Extension is planning to lease the area to waterfowl hunters to demonstrate the compatibility of rice, cattle, and waterfowl.

WORLD WIDE WEB WILDLIFE ENTERPRISES INCUBATOR SITE

Texas is the nation's leader in the sale of hunting and fishing opportunities on private lands. Thousands of dollars each year are spent by hunters, fishermen, and bird watchers as they pursue their sport. One of the greatest challenges to many landowners and land managers in the recreational wildlife business is marketing the hunting, fishing, and birdwatching opportunities they offer. Recently there has been a major expansion of the use of the Internet and the world wide web for the marketing and sale of commercial and business products.

The Internet and the world wide web are an inexpensive way for businesses to market their products and services to literally a worldwide audience. However, the remote nature of many ranches and farms and the limited knowledge landowners and land managers have about the Internet and the world wide web have precluded them from participating in this rapid explosion of business on the web. Therefore, Extension proposes to develop a model world wide web site for marketing hunting, fishing, and birdwatching opportunities on private lands in Texas. Extension wants to demonstrate to landowners and land managers the potential of the Internet and world wide web for marketing hunting, fishing, and birdwatching opportunities to potential customers. A minimum of 10 landowners/land managers from south Texas and along the coast who sell hunting, fishing, and/or birdwatching

opportunities on their land will be asked to cooperate with Extension to develop a wildlife enterprise world wide web incubator site on the Internet. The purpose of the site is to help farmers, ranchers, landowners, and land managers market hunting, fishing, and birdwatching opportunities on their land to customers searching the world wide web.

Specific home pages will be developed for each enterprise owner. The pages will provide information about each wildlife enterprise that will be useful to customers searching the web in making a decision to pursue or not pursue the purchase of a seller's product. Customers will be able to request more information about the products for sale from the enterprise owner. The operator will then be able to send more specific information to the customer via electronic mail or ground mail. Ranchers, farmers, and land managers who agree to cooperate by posting their services on the site will be expected to maintain their site after the initial home page setup is provided by Extension.

The number of accesses by surfing customers to individual home pages and the web site will be monitored on a regular basis. Cooperators will keep records on how many inquiries they receive about their enterprise and how many inquiries actually result in sales of their products. Web site visitation, customer inquiries to cooperators, and customer inquiries resulting in sales will be collected monthly for 1 year after each home page is established. After 1 year participants will be encouraged to either move their sites to commercial web site providers or, if approved by Extension, we may convert this to a fee-based service. Results of this study will help us determine if wildlife and wildlife-associated recreational enterprise world wide web incubator sites are a viable option for landowners and land managers to market hunting, fishing, and birdwatching opportunities in Texas.