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Corn Crowds Out Wildlife in Prairie Pothole Region

Study shows how government incentives are driving corn ethanol expansion, impacting wildlife

Ann Arbor, MI – A University of Michigan study released today shows how government incentives for corn ethanol are driving farmers to shift land into corn production, resulting in significant decreases in grassland bird populations throughout the fragile Prairie Pothole Region. The study, conducted for the National Wildlife Federation by a team of graduate students from the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and the Environment, analyzes the current and potential impacts of increased corn ethanol production on wildlife and habitat in the Prairie Pothole states of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

“Our research shows that native grassland is being converted into cropland at an alarming rate throughout the Prairie Pothole Region,” said Greg Fogel, study co-author and MS/MPP candidate at the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and Environment and Ford School of Public Policy. “As a result, populations of sensitive wildlife species are declining significantly in areas with high increases in corn plantings.”

According to the report, U.S. ethanol capacity has grown almost 200 percent since the passage of the 2005 Energy Bill, which mandated a large increase in domestic ethanol production. In addition, the updated Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS), passed in 2007, requires corn ethanol production to increase from 10.57 billion gallons in 2009 to 15 billion in 2015. This means corn ethanol production will continue to increase, with no end in sight for the destruction of natural habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region.

“Oftentimes these incentives are redundant, driving market demand for corn ethanol and putting undue pressure on the land,” said Julie Sibbing, director of global warming, agriculture and wildlife at the National Wildlife Federation. “The system makes it hard for farmers to resist converting native grassland into cropland or to keep their land in the Conservation Reserve Program.”

By identifying areas with the most dramatic land-use changes in Prairie Pothole states, researchers were able to see where there are “hotspots” of increased corn plantings and habitat loss. In North and South Dakota alone, more than 475,000 acres of previously untilled land were broken between 2002 and 2007. When researchers analyzed the relationship between corn plantings and grassland bird populations, the results showed that counties with high increases in corn plantings had

significant declines of nearly 30 percent in populations of sensitive grassland birds between 2005 and 2008.

“Grassland birds were already in steep decline, making this additional habitat loss quite alarming,” says Gary Botzek, executive director at the Minnesota Conservation Federation. “Often called America’s duck factory, the Prairie Pothole Region is vital to keeping our outdoor traditions thriving. We need to change course if we want to keep this ecosystem working for the entire nation’s benefit.”

Researchers conclude that “if we proceed along the current trajectory without changing federal policies, the prairie pothole will be further degraded and fragmented, and the many services it provides will be impossible to restore.” In order to preserve the ecological integrity of the Prairie Pothole Region, the study puts forth several recommendations:

- **Reconsider government mandates and financial support for corn ethanol.** Allow cellulosic ethanol to replace corn ethanol as technology improves. Phase out federal and state incentives for corn ethanol production.
- **Protect prairies and wetlands from conversion.** Disqualify landowners who plow native prairie from receiving federal financial support on that land. Help willing landowners preserve native prairie and wetlands in perpetuity.
- **Strengthen the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).** Increase the CRP cap to prevent dramatic CRP losses. Improve the flexibility and responsiveness of CRP rental rates.
- **Pursue Additional Research.** Collect and make available data measuring conversion of grassland to cropland. Initiate a U.S. Government Accountability Office study of the full cost of government incentives for corn ethanol.

"State and federal incentives for corn ethanol are resulting in habitat loss and grassland bird declines in the Prairie Pothole Region," said Becca Brooke, study co-author and MS/MBA candidate at the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and Environment and Ross School of Business. "If we want to achieve widespread protection of wildlife and native prairie, policy changes are needed."

Corn Ethanol and Wildlife: How increases in corn plantings are affecting habitat and wildlife in the Prairie Pothole Region was authored by:

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To read the complete study, visit www.nwf.org/farmland

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