How To Take Advantage Of “Rancher Friendly” Programs:
For landowners interested in learning more about financial and technical assistance options, your first step should be a conversation with your local Natural Resources Conservation Service field office. They will explain conservation programs and help landowners develop a conservation plan. A conservation plan will identify the resources needed and develop solutions for solving the problem. Cost share availability, project design and project implementation will follow.

Above Left: Landowner and Fish and Wildlife Service personnel discussing projects.
Left: Lower Chewaucan Marsh, a privately owned, flood-irrigated hay meadow.

For more information, see the inserted contact list.

Southern Oregon-Northeastern California (SONEC) Wetlands
Keeping Ranchers And Birds In Business

Photos: Cover, Larry Kruckenberg; Inside middle left, Dave Smith; Inside top right, Don Paul; Inside lower right, Larry Kruckenberg; Back upper, Larry Kruckenberg; Back lower, Martin St. Louis.
In 2010, a cooperative agreement between several government agencies and the Summer Lake Irrigation District provided for the installation of 7,000 feet of pipe in an existing earth canal, which restored 12 cubic feet per second of ditch loss. “The project has improved water flow conditions to my private property and improved my hay production and pasture ground,” said Marie Leehmann, a cattle rancher in Summer Lake. “Wetland quality has also improved the bird population by 15 to 20 percent due to enhanced wetland vegetation for birds.”

What Is SONEC?

The Southern Oregon-Northeastern California (SONEC) landscape is a unique region that has been identified as a continentally important migration and breeding area for birds moving along the Pacific Flyway. Comprised of eight counties across Oregon, California, and Nevada, this is some of the most productive land on the continent for livestock and wetland birds.

What Programs Are Available To Help?

Several programs can provide financial and technical assistance to landowners interested in enhancing, restoring, managing and conserving privately owned working lands. Financial assistance is available for the following practices:

- Flood irrigation infrastructure repair or replacement
- Ditch efficiency and water delivery
- Field levee enhancements
- Pasture and hayland management
- Invasive weed management
- Riparian habitat enhancement
- Fish passage issues
- Wetland restoration
- Voluntary “working lands” conservation easements

Working Lands: Critical For Birds

SONEC IS RANCHING COUNTRY. Livestock producers tend over 150,000 cow-calf pairs and raise 250,000 tons of hay annually. Harney County ranches are also notably large, averaging nearly 3,000 acres.

Since 75 percent of all freshwater emergent wetlands in SONEC are privately owned, these private lands are essential to strategic bird conservation efforts. Flood irrigation in historic floodplains, haying, and grazing create the ideal setting for these birds. Traditional agricultural practices mimic the seasonal flooding that occurred before European settlement. The SONEC region can support over 4.8 million dabbling ducks for an estimated 21 days during the spring migration. The region’s wet meadow habitats provide rich food resources that help fuel migration and breeding activities. Without this critical habitat during the spring migration these birds would suffer a higher mortality rate and reduced ability to produce ducklings at their breeding grounds.

Due to the fact that so many birds spend so much time feeding in SONEC’s wet meadows during spring migration, these flood-irrigated habitats are now recognized as a key ingredient for maintaining continental bird populations.

Nearly 30 percent of North America’s Northern Pintail rely on SONEC wetlands in the spring as they make their way to their northern nesting grounds.

What Can You Do?

Continue to irrigate your wet meadows and pastures each spring to meet ranching objectives and provide shallow, seasonally flooded habitat conditions. In many cases, the management practices used for generations are ideally suited for conserving migratory bird habitat – a “win-win” for agriculture and wildlife.

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