

Oregon SONEC Working Wet Meadows Initiative

Conservation Delivery Business Plan

March 2014

Executive Summary

The wetlands of Southern Oregon-Northeastern California (SONEC) comprise some of the most important spring and fall staging habitat for waterfowl in North America, supporting over 70% of the Pacific Flyway's dabbling ducks and 30% of the continent's northern pintails during spring migration. Managed marshes on refuges and wildlife areas have long received the majority of the attention due to their high value to migratory birds, but recent research and conservation planning has shed light on an important fact: traditional ranching practices such as flood-irrigation, haying, and grazing provide critical habitat for spring staging waterfowl, and these must continue if SONEC is to remain a wetland bird mecca. This fits with a new resource conservation paradigm that is sweeping the West. Natural resource agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, land trusts, and watershed organizations have increasingly embraced the notion that what's good for ranching is often also good for wildlife. Working ranchlands serve as an anchor for iconic wildlife species, such as greater sage grouse, mule deer, pronghorn and a host of migratory birds. In a nutshell, Pacific Flyway waterfowl and other waterbirds are highly dependent upon the SONEC ranchers who use flood-irrigation to raise grass and hay for cattle.

The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV), a public-private partnership dedicated to bird habitat conservation, recognized the importance of privately-owned *working wetlands* in SONEC. The IWJV developed a scientifically-based and defensible habitat objective for this unique wet meadow habitat type that involves conserving 64,700 acres to meet the needs of spring migrating waterfowl at North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) goal levels (see [2013 IWJV Implementation Plan](#)). This habitat objective was designed to be met entirely within the context of working lands – i.e., on working ranches operated and financially sustained through annual haying, grazing, and flood-irrigation or subirrigation. Next, the IWJV and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Oregon, worked together to establish a Conservation Implementation Strategy (CIS) for working wetlands in the Oregon portion of SONEC, intended to deliver technical and financial assistance to producers. Finally, NRCS, the IWJV, and several other partners recently committed funding to establish two new cost-shared Farm Bill biologist/range conservationist positions in NRCS Field Offices in Hines and Lakeview, Oregon, to work with ranchers on conservation planning and implementation. This partnership-driven effort to help conserve working wetlands on private lands calls for a high level of coordination among conservation partners in SONEC.



The partnership developed this Business Plan as a means of clearly articulating the objectives, approaches, and expected outcomes of the partnership in this science-based conservation endeavor. It is built upon the foundation of progress achieved by a dedicated cadre of conservation partners and landowners that have worked together in SONEC for many years, including NRCS, Ducks Unlimited, Inc. (DU), Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), soil and water conservation districts, watershed councils, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and most importantly, the ranchers that have effectively managed their wet meadows for livestock and migratory birds for generations. The plan is modeled after certain elements of the successful Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team partnership between NRCS and dozens of conservation partners, which is coordinated by the IWJV. This Business Plan lays out a game plan for maintaining rural lifestyles and wildlife habitat in one of the Nation's most important wetland landscapes, amidst an array of landscape changes that threaten ranching and migratory bird habitat. It is a "win-win" endeavor in which the needs of birds and ranchers can be addressed through the same set of conservation practices.

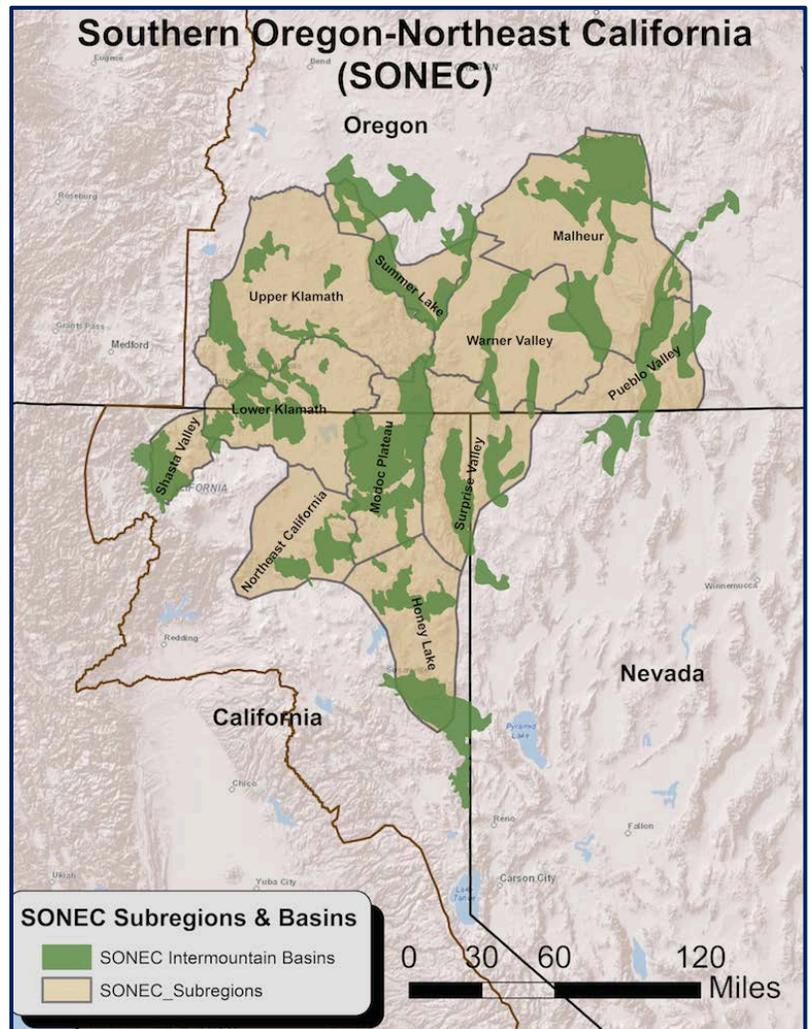
Background

The SONEC region, which encompasses parts of California, Oregon, and northwestern Nevada, has been divided into nine subregions for the purpose of the IWJV's waterfowl planning (Table 1). Portions of SONEC, particularly the Lower Klamath and Malheur subregions, have long been recognized as areas of continental and Flyway significance for waterbirds. They serve as a primary migration hub with strong linkages to wintering habitat in the Central Valley of California. Over the past decade, research has shed a better understanding of SONEC's significance to spring migrating waterfowl and their reliance on private wetlands, particularly those on working ranches (Miller et al. 2005, Fleskes and Gregory 2010). Approximately 70% of Pacific Flyway and nearly a third of the continental population of northern pintails migrate through SONEC en route between wintering areas in California and northerly breeding areas.

Wet meadows and flood-irrigated pastures which are hayed and grazed provide available habitat and valuable food source that fuels spring migration for these birds on their way to breeding areas in North America, such as the U.S. and Canadian prairies and tundra of Alaska. These food resources found on SONEC ranches have significant ramifications for sustaining waterfowl populations in the Pacific Flyway. Food fuels migration and builds energy reserves for breeding. Females who have easy access to abundant food supplies arrive on the nesting grounds in peak physical condition. Conversely, inadequate or inconsistent food availability results in increased hen mortality, reduced clutch sizes, and low brood survival. Therefore, these food resources found on SONEC ranches have significant ramifications for sustaining waterfowl populations at continental and Flyway scales.

Because of SONEC's importance to waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway and to continental populations, the IWJV initiated a biological planning effort to identify habitat conservation targets linked to the biological needs of spring migrating dabbling ducks and NAWMP goals. This planning effort identified a population objective of approximately 4.87 million dabbling ducks in SONEC during spring migration to meet NAWMP goals. These population objectives were distributed across seven of the 11 SONEC subregions, based on waterfowl distributions published by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Western Ecological Research Center (Fleskes et al. 2007).

Research by USGS has also provided estimates of waterfowl food densities in SONEC flood-irrigated habitats (Fleskes et al. 2013). This information was used in bioenergetic models to quantify the amount of habitat required to meet the food demands of 4.87 million dabbling ducks. These bioenergetic evaluations identified approximately 64,700 acres of flood-irrigated habitats are needed across SONEC to sustain spring migrating ducks (Petrie et al. 2013).



SONEC floodplains have undergone considerable change since European settlement. Historically, shallow seasonal wetlands were recharged by snowmelt and early spring rains. Today, much of the natural runoff is diverted to provide



irrigation water for producing livestock forage. In SONEC, these practices have been in place since the late 1800s. Ironically, flood-irrigation closely mimics the natural hydrologic cycle, and research from the USGS on spring migrating northern pintails shows that SONEC continues to provide valuable bird habitat while producing high quality forage for ranchers.

NRCS has played a prominent role in wetland conservation activities on private land in SONEC. They developed a program-neutral CIS and allocated NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to support its **"Working Lands Habitat Conservation for**

Waterfowl" project. This initiative is designed to provide cost-share to private landowners for flood-irrigation infrastructure repair. In addition, NRCS has used the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) to restore and protect thousands of acres of wetland habitat in SONEC. Oregon NRCS holds approximately 50,000 acres of WRP easements within SONEC.

Conservation agencies and organizations have long recognized SONEC as an important bird area. This diverse partnership understands that continuing flood-irrigation practices on private land can maintain SONEC's value to both birds and ranchers. Rigorous biological planning by IWJV science staff revealed that conserving spring migration wetland habitat for waterfowl in SONEC is their top conservation delivery priority. DU has secured numerous North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants to protect, restore and enhance wetlands in the region. The High Desert Partnership (HDP), a community-based organization that fosters cooperation, communication and collaboration on natural resource stewardship in eastern Oregon, worked with a coalition of local stakeholders to launch the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative. Local county watershed councils have also supported flood-irrigation practices by offering financial and technical assistance to landowners to screen irrigation structures and provide fish passage.

Clearly, SONEC's flood-irrigated grasslands, pastures and wet meadows are the life-blood for both livestock producers and migratory birds. This Business Plan outlines a partner-based, collaborative strategy for working cooperatively with livestock producers to maintain flood-irrigation practices and extremely valuable waterfowl habitat in priority bird habitat areas in Lake and Harney County, Oregon.

Biological Planning & Conservation Design

Since 2002, NRCS has tried to balance the habitat needs of wetland birds with national directives to conserve water for SONEC's native fish. In 2006, Oregon NRCS began to assess the bird habitat impacts of converting flood irrigation practices to more efficient sprinkler systems. This assessment was initiated because sprinkler irrigation systems eliminate the temporary flooding conditions attractive to migrating birds. The impetus for this review came from local biologists and landowners. In 2008, Oregon NRCS identified key bird conservation areas across the High Desert Basin, where flood-irrigation practices were providing critical wetland habitat. This exercise generated priority bird

conservation maps in Harney, Lake and Klamath Counties, using Bird Habitat Conservation Areas identified by the IWJV and NRCS soil permeability data. A decision support tool was developed to provide practitioners with a 'roadmap' for conservation activities in SONEC.

In 2010, NRCS developed long-range natural resource strategies for every county in Oregon. In Harney County, invasive common carp were identified as the top natural resource problem to be addressed because of their impacts on water quality, native fish, and migratory bird populations in the Harney Basin. As a result, the Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement CIS was developed. This CIS lays out a long-term comprehensive plan for addressing common carp control and aquatic health in the Harney Basin.

NRCS continued to engage partners in 2012. The goal was to expand the use of existing Farm Bill programs to provide landowners with additional conservation tools. NRCS recognizes that WRP is attractive to some landowners, but the program doesn't always fit the traditional working lands scenario. EQIP was selected as a viable alternative. Under the Working Lands Habitat Conservation for Waterfowl CIS, NRCS recently launched an EQIP Pilot Program to assist landowners with flood-irrigation infrastructure repairs. This pilot program provides an opportunity to improve and secure these flood irrigated habitats in the short term, while also laying the foundations for implementation of the Harney Basin Aquatic Health Improvement CIS and for future opportunities for conservation easements.

In 2013, Oregon NRCS convened a "Waterbird Conservation – Meeting of the Minds" forum with key partners. The purpose of the meeting was to: ***"Assist private landowners to manage lands in areas important to migratory waterbirds in a manner that provides for the habitat needs of the birds while continuing to provide the agricultural production values necessary to the landowner."*** One outcome from that meeting was the realization that Oregon SONEC NRCS Field Offices are facing increasing workloads with declining staffs. This situation limits their ability to work with flood-irrigators. The meeting also revealed that NRCS must identify a defensible flood-irrigation resource concern to implement EQIP on flood-irrigated pastures and haylands.

In 2013, NRCS and the IWJV completed a Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) Conservation Insight in SONEC, entitled, ***"Farm Bill Conservation Programs Can Help Meet the Needs of Spring-Migrating Waterfowl in Southern Oregon-Northeastern California."*** CEAP is designed to evaluate the effects of conservation actions from Farm Bill programs; project findings guide USDA conservation program implementation and help farmers and ranchers make informed conservation decisions. One of the management insights from the SONEC CEAP project is that working lands conservation programs should be used to support flood irrigation on SONEC's working ranches to meet spring migrating waterfowl habitat requirements. The CEAP Conservation Insight provides flood-irrigation-specific habitat objectives for each SONEC subregions and suggests that subregions in the eastern portion of SONEC may be the best areas to provide landowner assistance.

Conservation organizations have established science-based habitat objectives in SONEC. The IWJV's 2013 Implementation Plan determined that privately-owned, flood-irrigated grassland and wet meadow habitat is critical to meeting the spring migration energy demands for 4.8 million dabbling ducks and 700,000 geese. The IWJV established a habitat objective of **64,700 acres** of managed flood-irrigated hay meadows and pastures in SONEC to meet NAWMP goals for spring migrating waterfowl (see [2013 Implementation Plan Chapter 8: Habitat Conservation Strategy](#)).



Table 1. The amount of flood-irrigated habitat assumed to currently exist based on estimates from Fleskes and Gregory (2010) and the amount required to meet 75 percent of dabbling duck needs (acres) within seven SONEC subregions. Dabbling duck needs not met by this habitat are assumed to be met on public lands.

SONEC Subregions	Existing Habitat (acres)	Habitat Required to Meet 75% of Dabbling Duck Needs (acres)
Modoc Plateau	13,000	13,500
Malheur	15,300	5,300
NE California	13,500	9,800
Upper Klamath	18,000	17,300
Summer Lake	4,100	8,300
Warner Valley	7,500	10,500
Lower Klamath	7,100	not determined
TOTAL*	79,300	64,700

**These estimates exclude that portion of the SONEC dabbling duck population that relies on Lower Klamath subregion.*

In addition, the Ecology Work Group established by Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to assist with adaptive management of the refuge's wet meadows has begun developing state and transition models to more clearly delineate the relationships between hydrology, plant communities and habitat values in these wetland systems. These models are expected to be broadly applicable to management of other flood-irrigated hay meadows and pastures across SONEC.

Private Landowner (Customer) Needs

Reaching the 64,700-acre flood-irrigated habitat objective identified by the IWJV presents both challenges and opportunities. Success will require collaboration and coordination between landowners, agencies, local watershed groups, NGOs and other conservation partners.

We have discovered through discussions with local leaders, landowners, conservation districts and field office personnel that many livestock producers want to continue flood-irrigation practices. In some cases, the reasons are cultural, and for others, it is an economic decision. Converting to a sprinkler irrigation system is expensive. Equipment costs vary but a center-pivot irrigation system on a typical quarter section (160 acres) will cost approximately \$75,000. Electrical costs to run a pivot system average about \$7,500 per year.

Federal and state funding programs are available to private landowners to conserve, enhance and manage agricultural lands for wildlife and other natural resource benefits. Programs best suited for meeting the habitat objectives described herein on working lands are as follows:

- USDA Farm Bill Conservation Programs (e.g., EQIP, Agricultural Land Easements, Regional Conservation Partnership Program)
- NAWCA

Landowner interest in conservation programs is difficult to quantify. Over the past ten years, Lake County landowners have taken advantage of financial and technical assistance provided through NAWCA grants on working ranchlands to rehabilitate flood-irrigation infrastructure. NRCS has assessed producer interest in the EQIP program through individual contacts and targeted landowner meetings; in concept, most landowners embrace additional working lands conservation program options and funding opportunities. DU and the Lake County Watershed Council have worked cooperatively to implement projects and raise awareness about the value of flood-irrigated habitat. A landowner meeting was held in Harney County in April 2013, and all the attendees expressed guarded interest in enrolling in

programs that address aging irrigation infrastructure. One thing is certain: improving the ability of NRCS to provide financial and technical assistance to flood-irrigators will result in tangible benefits to livestock producers and migratory birds.

We believe that landowner interest in conserving working hay meadow wetlands will increase with provision of technical assistance at the NRCS Field Office level, as has been the case with SGI in these same landscapes. As such, we are poised to implement a win-win approach to assist livestock producers. Through this collaborative effort, we will conserve critical migration habitat, motivate partners, energize the bird conservation community, and preserve working ranches in southern Oregon.

Implementation Strategy

This Business Plan outlines a partner-supported conservation delivery strategy in SONEC. It focuses on two major objectives:

- 1) **Field Delivery Capacity:** Increase field-level capacity by placing specialized human skill sets at critical geographic “pinch points” to catalyze the conservation of working wetlands. Building trust and credibility between private landowners, partners, and agencies will be critical. Hiring a talented local project champion is the single most important factor in achieving success in SONEC. We will add two new, non-federal partner positions stationed in NRCS Field Offices in Lakeview and Hines, Oregon. NRCS District Conservationists will be responsible for day-to-day supervision. We will be flexible on position classifications; potential options include range management specialist, irrigation technician, and biologist. To be successful, we plan to recruit well-trained, highly motivated conservation practitioners who fully understand the intricacies of NRCS programs and can market these programs to willing landowners. A diverse management oversight team will develop a game plan to address employee hiring, orientation, delivery obstacles and training needs. The team will also provide field staff with effective outreach tools. Consistent and frequent partner coordination will be critical. The new field office positions will focus on delivering EQIP and other Farm Bill conservation programs. However, the new employees will also work with partners to coordinate project permit requirements and leverage funding from sources, such as NAWCA and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB). During the first 12 months, partner positions will assist with NRCS Conservation Planning activities in preparation for future EQIP funding obligations. We have gathered enough funding to support two positions for two years and are optimistic that we will raise additional funds. The partnership strongly believes that increased technical assistance capacity at the field office level is the key to successfully delivering Farm Bill conservation programs.
- 2) **Science, Communications & Partner Development:** Strategically conserve working wetlands in SONEC through the following activities:
 - *Increase science capacity to better focus conservation program implementation, evaluate biological outcomes, and continually improve program delivery.*
 - *Improve and enhance outreach and communication strategies to increase partner buy-in and participation from landowners.*
 - *Expand the SONEC Working Wetlands partnership to further leverage NRCS and partner contributions resulting in increased outcomes and participation.*

This effort is based on the solid biological foundation of the IWJV’s conservation planning for one of the most important spring staging areas for waterfowl in North America. The habitat objectives described herein serve as a defensible basis for the proposed conservation delivery. However, the partnership recognizes the need to assess wetlands trends and develop additional spatial targeting tools to foster increasingly strategic conservation implementation; the IWJV has identified SONEC as one of its highest priorities for future science investments. The partnership is also poised to carry

out communications and outreach, such that landowners and conservation partners are fully aware of the technical and financial assistance available. Finally, while EQIP is the primary initial focus of this effort, effective project delivery under EQIP will also require close coordination with local practitioners implementing other conservation programs and projects, specifically OWEB and NAWCA. Likewise, the 2014 Farm Bill authorized the Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) program, a working lands conservation easement program that may fit with waterfowl habitat and agricultural objectives in the SONEC region better than former NRCS easement programs. The proposed utilization of ALE in SONEC would allow traditional haying and grazing activities to continue under perpetual conservation easements that remove other threats to wildlife habitat and ranching sustainability. In the future, the Oregon SONEC Partnership will work to capitalize on this new conservation easement tool. The success of this endeavor will require a high degree of partnership contributions and collaborations. The IWJV is providing, coordinating, and leveraging investments that will accelerate achievement of these objectives.

Strategic Conservation Delivery Timelines & Tasks

September 2013 – December 2013

- Initial Planning Activities and Business Plan Development
- Partner Scoping Meetings
- Funding Agreement Administration

January 2014 – March 2014

- Finalize the SONEC Conservation Delivery Business Plan
- Hold Coordination Meetings with Agencies and Conservation Partners
- Establish SONEC Oversight and Conservation Strategy Teams
- Identify a Defensible Resource Concern for EQIP Delivery on Flood-Irrigated Wet Meadows
- Develop Partner Position Scope of Work Descriptions
- Develop Training Plan
- Establish Hiring Panel
- Advertise Position Vacancies
- Interview Candidates and Fill Partner Positions

April 2014 – June 2014

- New Employee Training and Orientation
- Continue to Hold Coordination Meetings
- Devise Accomplishment Reporting Protocols
- Network with Key Local Partners
- Initiate Outreach Activities with Landowners
- Conduct Field Tours of SONEC with New Employees

July 2014 – September 2014

- Continue Training for New Employees
- Hold Coordination Meetings
- Begin Landowner Signup Process
- Initiate Conservation Planning Activities

October 2014 – December 2014

- Continue Conservation Planning Activities and Project Design
- Hold Coordination Meetings
- Outreach Efforts with Landowners and Funding Partners
- Meet with Management Oversight Team to Assess/Review Progress
- Develop 2015 Operational Plan (Year 2)

Coordination

SONEC Oversight Team – The SONEC Oversight Team (SOT) will include representatives from the organizations who contributed funds to support the partner positions. The SOT will meet quarterly to address employee training needs, accomplishment tracking metrics, financial and technical assistance gaps, program delivery challenges, and employee performance appraisals. The SOT will also ensure that program priorities are closely linked to bird habitat conservation needs and emerging science-based adaptive management strategies for SONEC floodplain habitats. Initially, core membership will include NRCS, IWJV, Malheur NWR and DU. As this project gains momentum, we expect to attract new funding partners. Representatives from these organizations will receive automatic membership on the SOT. To ensure consistency, the SOT will always include representatives from the funding partners. In some respects, the SOT will serve as a management board for the SONEC partner positions. At its core, the SOT will collaborate with the conservation delivery field personnel to help achieve the overall conservation goals and objectives in this important landscape.



SONEC Conservation Strategy Team – As described above, the primary task of the SOT is coordination of the SONEC partner positions. However, SONEC conservation partners have also identified the need for improved collaboration on strategic conservation delivery. To meet that need, we will form a SONEC Conservation Strategy Team. This group will be a forum for exchanging information on conservation opportunities and science needs in the landscape. It will explore ways to pool resources, identify priorities, facilitate the development of a science-based framework to inform future conservation actions, and remove impediments to habitat restoration and enhancement projects. Its mission will be improved coordination and cooperation between public agencies, conservation groups, scientists, and private landowners to conserve natural resources and protect working agricultural lands in Lake and Harney Counties. Membership will consist of local representatives from organizations and agencies actively involved in building the science foundation for targeted conservation delivery activities on private lands in southern Oregon. Core team members will include representatives from NRCS, FWS, ODFW, USGS, local watershed committees, soil and water conservation districts, DU, HDP, Oregon Wetlands Conservancy, Oregon Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, and the IWJV. This group will meet quarterly and submit meeting minutes to the Oregon Habitat Joint Venture.

Deliverables

1. Hire two (2) three-year, non-federal conservation delivery specialists to increase delivery of NRCS programs within Lake and Harney Counties. Specifically, increased capacity will help NRCS:
 - Initiate conservation planning activities related to EQIP on ten ranches in Fiscal Year 2014.
 - Finalize EQIP contracts on seven ranches in Fiscal Year 2015.
 - Assist partners with planning and delivery of NAWCA and OWEB projects in Lake County.
2. Collaborate with key partners to establish science priorities and identify key information needs, which will lead to a Decision Matrix tool to guide future conservation program investments in Lake and Harney Counties. Complete by December 2014.
3. Implement the IWJV SONEC Communications Mini-Strategy.
4. Strengthen conservation delivery efforts in SONEC by:
 - Building and maintaining partnerships that result in additional government and non-government funds directed towards SONEC program delivery capacity
 - Supporting NRCS staff in coordinating SONEC conservation activities.
 - Assisting partner organizations with delivering programs such as NAWCA and OWEB.

Budget Summary

The immediate funding need for the two positions for two years is \$230,000. The generosity of partners has been gratifying and shows their commitment to the project, as pledges from the partnership have fulfilled this initial need. We will continue to seek additional funding from multiple sources to reach our three-year fund target (\$390,000). In addition, IWJV has agreed to support the SONEC positions with staff support from their management, science, and communications teams. The following table summarizes our funding needs and commitments for the two new partner positions:

Harney County Position	NRCS Funds	IWJV Funds	Other Federal Funds	Partner Matching Funds	TOTAL
Year 1 (6/1/14 – 5/30/15)	\$34,917.25	\$7,500	\$12,000	\$3,082.75	\$57,500
Year 2 (6/1/15 – 5/30/16)	\$34,917.25	\$7,500	\$10,000	\$5,082.75	\$57,500
TOTAL	\$69,834.50	\$15,000	\$22,000	\$8,165.50	\$115,000

- NRCS Funds: Provided to FWS and administered by the IWJV through Oregon NRCS-FWS Interagency Agreement FRMB48720660080
- IWJV Funds: Awarded under FY 2013 Capacity Grants Program to DU for Oregon SONEC Farm Bill biologist proposal (\$7,500)
- IWJV Funds: FY 2014 Annual Operational Plan budget line item (\$7,500)
- Other Federal Funds: Provided by FWS Malheur NWR
- Partner Matching Funds: Provided by DU

Lake County Position	NRCS Funds	IWJV Funds	Other Federal Funds	Partner Matching Funds	TOTAL
Year 1 (6/1/14 – 5/30/15)	\$34,917.25	\$7,500	\$0	\$15,082.75	\$57,500
Year 2 (6/1/15 – 5/30/16)	\$34,917.25	\$7,500	\$0	\$15,082.75	\$57,500
TOTAL	\$69,834.50	\$15,000	\$0	\$30,165.50	\$115,000

- NRCS Funds: Provided to FWS and administered by the IWJV through Oregon NRCS-FWS Interagency Agreement FRMB48720660080
- IWJV Funds: Awarded under FY 2013 Capacity Grants Program to DU for Oregon SONEC Farm Bill biologist proposal (\$7,500)
- IWJV Funds: FY 2014 Annual Operational Plan budget line item (\$7,500)
- Partner Matching Funds: Provided by DU

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

Need: Funding to support the two partner positions for a minimum of two years has been met. We will continue to seek additional funding from multiple sources to reach our three-year fund target (\$390,000).

SCIENCE

Need: Investments in assessing wetland abundance, persistence, and trends in SONEC focal landscapes as needed to develop decision support tools that will help target SONEC working wetlands conservation. Specifically, a key question is: where is the flood-irrigated habitat in space and time? The IWJV will lead an effort through its Technical Committee to identify and address key science questions.

Current Funding Status: The IWJV will devote staff time of its Science Coordinator and Spatial Ecologist in addressing these science needs. The IWJV will also seek funding as needed to implement the highest priority science projects. These IWJV funds devoted to science will be used to leverage additional resources for this component and/or other elements of this endeavor.

COMMUNICATIONS

Need: Despite SONEC's continental significance for wetland dependent birds, the landscape's important bird values are not widely known. In 2013, the IWJV communications staff developed a SONEC Communications Mini-Strategy. This strategic communication plan will help raise awareness, engage private landowners and energize partners. The plan identifies goals, target audiences and communication objectives. The plan strives to improve behavioral objectives (e.g., conservation action) by addressing knowledge, attitudes, and skill deficiencies.

Tactics and tools for implementing the SONEC Communications Mini-Strategy include fact sheets, field tours, informational meetings, media spotlights, webinars, and videos. Enhanced communication will be a critical component of the SONEC conservation delivery strategy.

Current Funding Status: The IWJV communications staff and Habitat Delivery Specialist will implement the SONEC Communications Mini-Strategy. The IWJV is currently devoting core staff time to this endeavor. The IWJV may need to secure additional funds for communication activities as we assess our success in meeting specific objectives.



PARTNER DEVELOPMENT

Need: This Business Plan calls for a high level of partnership development and coordination. Specifically, this involves strengthening the initiative by building and maintaining partnerships that result in additional funds contributed to field delivery capacity, science, and communications; supporting NRCS staff in coordinating implementation among a diverse array of conservation partners, including state and federal agencies, conservation NGOs, conservation districts, and watershed councils; and, effectively managing contracts and agreements in accordance with the NRCS-FWS Interagency Agreement to facilitate the objectives of the initiative.

Current Funding Status: The IWJV is currently devoting core staff time, including a significant portion of the Habitat Delivery Specialist's daily activities, to enhancing partnership development. The IWJV may need to seek additional funds for these activities as the initiative matures and expands. IWJV funds devoted to partner development will be used to leverage additional resources for this component and/or other elements of this endeavor.

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