

COVER STORY

As a local coordinator in the Rainwater Basin, Randall Williams works as a liaison between agencies and farmers. His work helps farmers deal with government agencies to improve wetlands.



Bridging the Gap

Local coordinators unite all sides to improve wetlands

Nebraska Farmer
December 2000

by
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To some landowners in Nebraska's sprawling Rainwater Basin, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and state Game and Parks Commission wear black hats.

Over the years, the two agencies have ruffled more than a few feathers in their zeal to restore wetlands in this 17-county, 4,200-square-mile area of south central Nebraska.

One farmer, Randall Williams of Davenport, has been smoothing those feathers the past year, and his efforts benefit landowners, agencies and the wetlands in the process.

Williams is one of two local coordinators who works part-time for an effort called the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture. The other farmer-coordinator is Kyle Kinyoun of Clay Center.

As a farmer, avid hunter and wildlife enthusiast, Williams locates wetlands that need restoring and works with landowners who agree to restore them. In effect, he acts as a liaison between farmers and government agencies.

He does concede, however, that "some farmers tell me they still don't want anything to do with the two agencies."

"A local coordinator knows the farmers in the area and the problems with wetlands," Williams says. "We give the agency a farmer contact and vice versa. We can get things done more quickly than the agencies working alone.

The joint venture involves state, federal and local agencies, wildlife and environmental groups and individuals to restore wetlands and improve waterfowl habitat. Its goal is to improve 30,000 acres of wetlands.

"Some 10 to 14 million ducks and geese stop over here each spring to feed before heading north to their breeding grounds," says Steve Moran, coordinator of the multi-agency program.

Moran, formerly with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, says the venture's wetlands projects are voluntary. "We needed contacts and better relationships with farmers, so that's where the local coordinators came in. Carl Anderson, a farmer from Edgar, thought of the idea."

A two-year, pilot project grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust funded the positions and the projects they coordinate.

Landowners are the most important partner in this effort, Moran notes. "They alone make the decision on whether to improve a wetland. There are no mandates."

The problem, according to Williams, is that wetlands become overgrown with vegetation. Bulrush, reed canary grass and cattails clog wetlands, preventing waterfowl from getting to open water.

In many cases, landowners themselves want a better wetland but don't know where to turn. Williams can find agency incentive programs to help the landowners.

Disking and debris removal, even burning, solves the problem.

A WIN FOR EVERYONE

Williams cites one example of how his job functions. A year ago, three landowners near Edgar agreed to improve a 50-acre wetland they shared. One farmer disked the wetland vegetation and was compensated through the Environmental Trust grant.

Disking alone didn't do the job, so Williams and the landowners decided to burn the area. "When I went to the Edgar Volunteer Fire Department for a permit, they laughed at me, since it was so dry last fall (1999). So, I asked the fire chief if the department would do the burn."

The fire fighters not only gained much needed experience, but the grant provided \$500 in compensation to the department for its work. The money was applied to the new fire hall in Edgar.

"The joint venture got a wetland improved. Wildlife and waterfowl benefited and so did the landowners and the fire department," Williams says.

Two people locally also were hired, using grant money, to pull out an old fence in the wetland.

Moran says the local coordinator idea works so well that the joint venture may add to the local coordinator positions. For information, contact Moran at (308) 382-8112, or Williams at (402) 364-2478.

