

Federal Fiscal Year 2023 Rainwater Basin Joint Venture Annual Operation Plan



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INTRODUCTION

The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture's (RWBJV) 2023 Annual Operation Plan (AOP) establishes the priorities, activities, and budget of the RWBJV for Federal Fiscal Year 2023 (FFY 23).

Audience and Purpose: This AOP has been developed to guide the RWBJV Partnership in prioritizing activities that will most contribute to the goals and objectives outlined in the RWBJV Implementation Plan. This version of the AOP was developed by the RWBJV Coordinator in conjunction with a RWBJV Management Board working group. The AOP was vetted by RWBJV Technical Committee and review from RWBJV workgroups. This AOP was approved by the full RWBJV Management Board and will be used to prioritize FFY 23 activities.

Quantifiable objectives allow the RWBJV Management Board to commit funding, RWBJV staff time, resources, and energy toward the highest-priority efforts in the FFY. This process is extremely important because it helps direct limited time and financial resources to implement conservation strategies that contribute to a RWBJV landscape which supports an estimated 34.7 million wetland and grassland dependent birds. Implementation of sufficient conservation in a landscape that is largely privately owned requires strong relationships within the conservation community and with private landowners. As we come out of the pandemic, we are being forced to take a strategic pause, to assess the new normal, find ways to reengage and improve communication, and reestablish the relationships that will support our success. As a result, this FFY 23 AOP has a significant emphasis on a communications reboot. The focus will be both internal between partners and external with landowners and agriculture industry. Facilitating this open communication and improving personal relationships is foundational to achieving our collective goals and objectives. A primary focus of this AOP will be in-person events that will bring our partners and landowners together. These in-person meetings will help maintain trust with existing partners, build and foster new relationships, and rebuild the conservation network. A strong network will support all the partners in their missions and, as a result, contribute to achieving the goals and objectives outlined in the RWBJV Implementation Plan.

Summary of Content: Each element in this plan—**Playa Wetland Conservation, Grassland Conservation, Operations and Administration**—includes **Strategies** that will be undertaken and accomplished in FFY 23, as well as a **Budget Implications** section that describes the funding allocations needed to implement the stated strategies. For help with acronyms used in this plan, see **Appendix A**.

2023 Areas of Emphasis

The RWBJV has been the model of collaborative conservation since it was established in 1992. Over the last three decades the RWBJV partnership has evolved and adapted to shifting conservation challenges. Despite the challenges, our commitment to bird conservation has remained. The partners that established the RWBJV built a foundation based on trust, transparency, and accountability. This foundation resulted in new partners from various sectors supporting the partnership in achieving the RWBJV Implementation Plan goals and objectives. The global COVID pandemic tested this foundation, but the partnership has persevered and is looking forward to continuing to strengthen the partnership through a robust set of communication venues and collaborative conservation delivery. Investing in these communication tools will be important as the conservation community is experiencing significant turnover, primarily due to attrition. Providing these events will build off existing relationships, help establish new relationships, and provide opportunities to engage new partners. This will result in new prospects to achieve "win-win" conservation in a privately owned landscape. As in the past, most of these conservation successes will be developed through public-private partnerships and recognize that a

landowner's economic viability is, and will continue to be, a cornerstone of these projects. A special emphasis this year will focus on developing new opportunities for grassland conservation along with communicating the ecosystem services provided by the partnership's wetland and grassland conservation projects. These projects provide wildlife habitat, improve water quality, increase aquifer recharge, contribute to in-stream flows, and help maintain economically viable private farm and ranch operations. Diversified funding and an entrepreneurial business model are also areas of emphasis for the RWBJV. This will ensure sufficient funding is available for the on-the-ground conservation delivery and the out-side-the-box solutions that make our projects fit into working farm and ranch operations.

1) Economic Viability: Recognizing that the RWBJV landscape is 97% privately owned, conservation programs must be economically viable and able to be integrated into producers' operations. Developing projects that make economic sense is dependent on our ability to work with a diverse set of partners to benefit migratory birds, resident wildlife, and producers. As a partnership, our experience is that the greatest conservation impact happens when we work together with multiple public, private, non-governmental organizations, and agriculture industry through an open, transparent process. This approach requires that we bring people together to focus on relevant conservation issues (e.g., water quality, water quantity, forage production, migratory birds, and resident wildlife), find common interests, build resources and capacity, and then put conservation on the ground. In FFY 23, we will emphasize economically viable conservation approaches in all aspects of our work.

2) Ecosystem Goods and Services: Conservation programs are often promoted by agencies and entities for the benefit of wildlife. This is a result of their organizational mission and focus. Unfortunately, habitat for birds, while valued by landowners, does not drive many farm/ranch operation decisions. Profitability and regulatory oversight significantly influence conservation program adoption. Highlighting the contribution of our conservation projects to groundwater quality and quantity is resulting in more support for the current wetland conservation programs. Quantification of ecosystem services has allowed partners with a regulatory nexus the ability to roll-up partner project accomplishments and report these as local, state, and/or federal accomplishments within the Blue, Platte, and Republican River Basins. This helps demonstrate the value of wetland conservation projects beyond birds. Accomplishments to these federal and state compacts is allowing federal, state, and local level government entities the ability to achieve desired outcomes and ultimately reduce regulatory mandates when addressing water issues.

Our understanding the ecosystem benefits of grassland conservation programs delivered by the RWBJV partners is in its infancy, but through our work with university researchers and scientists we are beginning to quantify the benefits. New and ongoing work is focused on impacts that eastern red cedar (ERC) has on fire behavior, water use, and available forage production. The RWBJV staff are also working to quantify the benefits of our conservation work towards supporting populations of grassland birds.

3) Support and Maintain Partner Funding and Capacity: To maintain the success of the RWBJV, partner capacity and funding will need to be maintained and increased to offset inflation. Ducks Unlimited (DU), Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Pheasants Forever (PF), and multiple Natural Resource Districts (NRDs) rely on grant funding to support staff and on-the-ground conservation activities. Leveraging our collective financial resources will maximize use of match and help partners develop competitive grants. Maintaining the existing capacity will ensure we can continue to successfully implement projects to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the RWBJV Implementation Plan in a timely manner.

4) Entrepreneurial Business Model: The RWBJV's recent successes builds off the traditional leverage of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), NGPC, and Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) funding. The RWBJV continues to expand funding revenues with significant new investments by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), local NRDs, Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NeDNR), and agriculture industry. In 2022, the funding portfolio included new investments by Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD), T&L Irrigation, Lindsay, Valley, and Reinke. The RWBJV has also been successful securing grants from the National Fish and wildlife Foundation (NFWF) as well as a new funding agreement with World Wildlife Fund (WWF). This entrepreneurial business model that leverages a combination of soft money, grants, and partner contributions drives the RWBJV fiscal engine.

Playa Wetland Conservation

The RWBJV Management Board, staff, and partners have invested significantly, since the inception of the RWBJV, to restore, protect, and enhance playa wetlands in the Rainwater Basin Wetland Complex (RWB). With the revision of the RWBJV Implementation Plan in 2013, explicit playa wetland conservation goals were outlined for both public and private lands in the RWB. Conservation benchmarks were also set for the Central Table Playa Wetland Complex (CTP). Playa wetlands in the Southwest Playa Wetland Complex (SWP) were recognized, but no conservation goals were outlined. RWBJV funded monitoring and directed research projects have provided new information about groundwater recharge and forage production provided by playa wetlands. This information highlights the important value of these unique features for migratory birds, but also Nebraska's agriculture industry. Functional Playa wetlands recharge the aquifer and provide producers an economically viable option for flood-prone cropland through grazing or haying. The ability of the RWBJV partnership to demonstrate the value of playa wetlands to Nebraska's agriculture industry has and will continue to help broaden the financial support for the partnership as well as social acceptance for the work that we do. There are four initiatives that will drive our playa conservation work for the next FFY: Divots in the Pivots, Watershed Restoration Initiative, Water Development Fund, and the Working Lands Initiative.

Grassland Conservation

Similar to playas, the 2013 revision of the RWBJV Implementation Plan increased the scope and vision of the RWBJV Partnership with regards to grasslands. This revision marked the first time the Management Board adopted habitat goals and objectives outside of the RWB. Four Geographic Focus Areas (GFAs), identified in the RWBJV Implementation Plan, have significant grassland resources with multiple threats and opportunities. These GFAs are the Central Loess Hills, Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons, Sandhills, and Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages. These landscapes have unique abiotic factors (soils, land use, agriculture practices, etc.) that influence the grassland communities and avian species that occur. Regardless of the difference in grassland communities found in these GFAs, they are important grassland complexes that have continental relevance.

The impacts of grassland conversion and habitat degradation have been well documented at the local scale, but only recently have we been able to accurately map conversion and quantify woody infestation rates in grasslands at the landscape scale. Analysis of the annual Rangeland Analysis Platform ([RAP](#)) datasets over a 10-year period (2011 - 2021) suggests 414,955 acres of grasslands have transitioned to woody cover (>5% canopy cover). This is concerning because woody invasion does not occur in contiguous blocks, but rather as individual trees encroaching into existing grasslands. Even at low densities (1 – 3 trees/acre) some area sensitive species (e.g. Greater Prairie Chickens) will not use these acres. In addition to habitat degradation, direct grassland conversion is also happening at alarming rates. Grassland conversion rates from 2008 – 2018 averaged 45,088

acres of grassland being converted to row crops based on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) Common Land Unit (CLU) layer. Based on these assessments, 460,045 acres of grassland have been negatively impacted through direct conversion, and indirectly through woody invasion over the last 10 years.

Negative impacts to grasslands in the RWBJV, and continentally, have had a significant negative impact on bird populations. A recent report has documented the loss of nearly 3 billion birds over the last 50 years. Landbird species have been particularly hard hit with 59% of species experiencing population declines. Grassland breeding bird population numbers have fallen by 53% since 1970, the steepest decline of all breeding guilds.

In 2022, the RWBJV revised the 2013 Landbird Plan. This plan integrates desired grassland bird populations, grassland conversion trends, and woody encroachment rates to establish new grassland habitat objectives and conservation targets for each GFA. The science and tools presented in the RWBJV Landbird Plan are being leveraged with other datasets to inform the recently announced NRCS Great Plains Grassland Initiative (GPGI). The RWBJV has been the leader in developing the geospatial tools that are being used to define grassland cores and support the vision of protecting core grasslands and implementing projects that build out from the core areas. Strategies will focus on control ERC, maintaining economically viable ranching operations, and developing viable restoration options to increase working grasslands.

Operations and Administration

The RWBJV has evolved dramatically over the past decade. It has grown from two full-time staff in 2010 to having six full-time RWBJV staff and three shared partner positions. These shared positions are all focused on on-the-ground delivery. The RWBJV partnership has also gone from leveraging \$1.0 million for conservation projects to over \$3.4 million in FFY 22. Over the last decade, the RWBJV has significantly leveraged grant funding and interagency contributions to achieve these conservation outcomes. In 2010, the RWBJV administered two NET grants and a cooperative agreement. Today the RWBJV is actively managing over 11 different grants, two cooperative agreements, and other funding mechanisms.

The remainder of this AOP is structured around each of these elements (Playa Wetland Conservation, Grassland Conservation, Operations and Administration). For each element, the habitat goals, delivery capacity, science and planning, communication needs, as well as budget implications, are presented. This will provide guidance and focus for JV staff. These objectives will also highlight opportunities for partners to leverage their resources to support these activities.

PLAYA WETLAND CONSERVATION

Playa wetlands are shallow depressions embedded in an upland setting with no natural outlet. Each playa has an isolated watershed, typically not connected to natural drainages. The closed watershed funnels water to the playa at the lowest point. These wetlands generally exhibit temporary, seasonal, or semi-permanent water regimes, causing, in an average year, ponded water for weeks or months. However, these wetlands can occasionally remain ponded or dry for greater durations that may extend more than a year. Playas are critically important for a variety of migratory waterfowl and other wetland dependent birds. Recent research suggests 50% of the mid-continent population of mallards and 30% of the continent's population of northern pintails use playa wetlands in the RWB during spring migration. In addition to waterfowl, over 257 species of birds have been recorded in the RWB. Recent surveys have identified that a minimum of 500,000 shorebirds representing 34 different species migrate through the RWBJV with 200,000-300,000 using the RWB during spring migration. Thirty-four species of waterbirds including herons, egrets, rails, terns and gulls have been observed in playa wetlands. These wetlands are also regularly used by the federally endangered whooping crane. Although most research and monitoring activities have been completed in the RWB, playa wetlands in both the CTP and SWP also receive extensive use by wetland dependent birds.

Birds are the core of the RWBJV mission, but the RWBJV Management Board recognizes the importance of our conservation work to address multiple natural resource concerns. Water quality and quantity issues are impacting both municipalities and agriculture producers throughout the RWBJV. Monitoring work, completed in the western RWB provided the first quantifiable recharge rates through playa wetlands. Based on the modeling work completed, each acre of playa wetland can recharge 1.14 million gallons of water. This is sufficient water for 110 residents of Lincoln for a year based on the 2010 average municipal water use for the city of Lincoln, or enough groundwater to irrigate 3.5 acres with 6 inch irrigation allocation. Depending on the juxtaposition of the playa, upwards of 40% of the recharged water will result in instream flow contributions to the Platte River in a 10-15 year period. Being able to quantify these ecosystem goods and services will help the RWBJV partners highlight the contribution of our projects to both wildlife habitat and the natural resource concerns that impacts the citizens of Nebraska.

The RWBJV Partnership commitment to playa wetlands remains consistent for the following reasons:

- **Previous Loss of Habitat:** Approximately 80% of the playa wetland acres and 90% of the historic wetlands no longer exhibit wetland function (ponded acres or presences of hydrophytes) in the RWB.
- **Importance to Continental Species of Concern:** Adequate playa wetland habitat has cross seasonal effects that contribute population sustainability of waterfowl and other priority migratory species. Harvestable populations of waterfowl help perpetuate the North American Model of Wildlife Management, whereby consumptive users, through license sales, support the protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitat.
- **Undesirable Species:** Protection of playa wetlands provides little benefit if hydrology is not restored, and the sites are not managed. Playas, like other habitats across the Great Plains, evolved under variable and intense disturbance regimes. Periodic fires, periods of drought and deluge, as well as grazing, maintained diverse wetland vegetation communities. These communities contain a variety of native cool and warm season grasses/forbs. The Working Lands Initiative is central to restoring this disturbance regime through prescribed grazing and fire to promote desired vegetation communities and integrate these wetlands into working farm and ranch operations. Vigorous native plant communities reduce the opportunity for invasive plants to establish and dominate these important habitats.
- **Contribution to State and Federal Water Compacts:** RWBJV implemented a groundwater recharge monitoring project in 2019. This monitoring project is ongoing at five Waterfowl Production Areas

(WPAs) that are part of the Western Basins Recharge Project. Data collected as part of project suggests that, on average, an acre of playa wetlands, flooded 10% of the year, will recharge 1.14 million gallons of water. In addition to quantifying groundwater recharge, this project has also calculated return flows to the Platte River. Results suggest that approximately 40% of the recharge at Victor Lakes WPA will result in return flows to the Platte River over the next 15 – 20 years. This information is being used by Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (TBNRD) and NeDNR to account for the water quantity benefits provided by RWB wetlands. This highlights the value of the RWBJV partnership to local, state, and federal agencies collectively working to address these water issues.

- **Management of Playa Wetlands Protected through Long-term Conservation Actions:** The RWBJV partners have leveraged significant resources and continue to protect and restore wetlands through fee title acquisition and perpetual easements. The “protection” element must be followed up with the management elements or these sites will transition to undesirable or invasive plant communities. Capacity is a limiting factor for the RWBJV to actively manage these sites in the long-term.

RWBJV Playa Wetland Conservation Successes

Over the past 20 years, the RWBJV has focused primarily on playa wetland conservation in the RWB. During the last seven years, the partnership has expanded our programmatic opportunities and offerings to the CTP and SWP. The most recent new programmatic development was the Migratory Bird State Acres for Wildlife (SAFE) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) practice. This CRP option provides landowners annual rental payments up to the county irrigated rental rate. This option is administered by Farm Service Agency (FSA) and is available in the CTP, RWB, and SWP wetland complexes. The Wetland Reserve Easement Partnership (WREP) option available in the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) option is now available in both the CTP and RWB. This NRCS initiative provides easement compensation through ACEP at appraised value and allows the producer to retain their water right. This additional flexibility allows pivot irrigation systems to pass over enrolled acres. This is an important concession since 72% of historic playa wetlands are intersected by pivot irrigations systems. The RWBJV also received a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) that added some additional options. The Agriculture Land Easement (ALE) option in the RCP is a unique easement that provides producers compensation for restoring hydrologic function to drained wetlands. These easements are held by the local NRDs. As part of this program the producer retains the right to crop the enrolled acres. This type of program is a good fit for producers with seasonal or temporary wetlands. Generally these wetlands will pond water after intense events, but the ponding duration and frequency is not sufficient to cause complete crop loss. This programmatic flexibility has resulted in protection, restoration, and enhancement of over 6,197 acres of playa wetlands in the RWB, CTP, SWP as part of 230 projects since 2010.

To support enrollment in ACEP (ALE, WRE, WREP) and CRP SAFE the RWBJV has received grants from the NET, developed cooperative agreements with USFWS and NRCS through the Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) for the benefit of (FBO) RWBJV, and entered into agreements with the WWF. These financial opportunities provide additional funding to complete on-the-ground restoration work, establish grazing infrastructure, and upgrade pivots. These agreements also allow the RWBJV to hire contractors to perform due diligence work (Environmental Database Search, Title, Physical Boundary Surveys, Closing, and Easement Filing) to streamline the application and easement closing process. These agreements provide funds that have been leveraged to hire an easement specialist, RWBJV Communications Assistant, RWBJV Habitat Specialist, and CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist. These positions directly support the NRCS ACEP Team Leaders with administration of the program. This support takes many forms, but often includes organizing data and maps for the NRCS Biological and Engineering Teams (BE-Teams) for site visits and ranking, developing materials for marketing and outreach, working with landowners to complete application packages, supporting restoration planning, developing, and implementing management plans, as well as completing monitoring. Since the initial

agreement, one of the first hires has transitioned into a fulltime permanent NRCS employee. This additional capacity, and full time NRCS BE-TEAM Leaders, has dramatically improved the administration, management, and enrollment in NRCS easements.

The additional capacity has also improved engagement with easement landowners. Working with these landowners, this staff has been able to implement easement management plans more effectively. To manage NRCS easements and other privately owned wetlands, a significant number of Working Lands Initiative projects have been implemented. These projects often include development of grazing infrastructure (i.e. livestock water, cross fence, perimeter fence, pipelines etc.). This infrastructure has helped seamlessly transition these sites into producers' operations through grazing. The grazing on the NRCS easements has been implemented with adaptive grazing plans that ensures the grazing is working for the producer and promoting desired habitat conditions within programmatic guidelines.

Traditionally, the RWBJV Private Lands Workgroup (PLWG) has provided a forum for partners implementing on-the-ground private lands projects to discuss and address issues. With the increased project workload, monthly virtual meetings have also been implemented. These meetings allow partners to discuss ongoing projects and future projects. All members of the PLWG are also provided a project summary report and associated maps for background and information if they are unable to make these virtual meetings.

Federal Fiscal Year 2023 PLAYA WETLAND CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

In FFY 23 playa wetland conservation efforts will focus on the following Strategies:

- Advance efforts of PLWG to complete private lands conservation projects in the RWB.
- Maintain programmatic flexibility through the Divots in the Pivots and Working Lands Initiative.
- Support Watershed Restoration Initiative to improve wetland function and watershed integrity of public wetlands and private wetlands enrolled in long-term conservation programs.
- Leverage funds to continue to grow the Water Development Fund.
- Evaluate opportunities to improve capacity to support playa conservation in the CTP.
- Maintain capacity to support ACEP delivery in the NRCS Central Area.

Strategy 1a. Advance Efforts of the Private Lands Workgroup

The PLWG is one of the longest standing workgroups associated with the RWBJV. The PLWG is comprised of on-the-ground biologists, engineers, and habitat managers focused on private land project delivery in the RWB. This workgroup strives to provide a diverse set of perspectives that result in field level solutions to address bottlenecks that are impeding on-the-ground delivery. In FFY 23, the PLWG will:

- **Ensure** each PLWG meeting has a presentation highlighting new conservation program opportunities. Priorities will include a presentation from the CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist, updates on the Nebraska Buffer Strip Program, as well as NGPC Berggren Plan incentives.
- **Develop** Working Lands Initiative outreach tools to increase participation. Goal is that 90% of tracts enrolled in long-term conservation programs, and greater than 30 acres, have grazing infrastructure to facilitate prescribed grazing management. Outreach materials will highlight resources available on RWBJV webpage like the Cattle Grazers Network.
- **Build** off NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Rill and Gully Erosion Initiative, National Water Quality Initiative, and Nebraska Healthy Soils Task Force to increase adoption of buffer strips and TNC's edge of field initiative to reduce sedimentation into playa wetlands and lotic systems.
- **Determine** and strategically increase resources and capacity necessary to deliver short- and long-term playa habitat conservation.

- **Incorporate** case study discussions at each PLWG meeting to focus on emerging or existing bottlenecks that are impeding conservation.

Strategy 1b. Maintain Programmatic Flexibility

The RWBJV will strive to maintain programmatic flexibility through both USDA Farm Bill programs (ACEP, CRP and EQIP) and through RWBJV partner agencies (NGPC, PF, RWBJV, USFWS). This diversity of partners will ensure landowner agreements provide programmatic flexibility and document match for future grant applications. These agreements will ensure the following priorities can be achieved:

- **Complete** restoration of tracts enrolled in ACEP WREP as part of the 2020, 2021 and 2022 sign-ups.
- **Construct** grazing infrastructure through 10 landowner agreements. Focus will be on expanding the Working Lands Initiative to sites that are not currently enrolled in USDA programs.
- **Ensure** the new forage production estimates and grazing plan calculators are being used to develop adaptive grazing plans that maximize forage utilization to achieve desired habitat conditions. These plans will allow producers and agency staff to annually evaluate and subsequently modify grazing to promote and maintain desired vegetation communities. Develop template available for all partners to use as a starting point when working with landowners.
- **Coordinate** with FSA to conduct another SAFE enrollment with the reverse auction and batching by wetland complex.
- **Generate** decision tree for playa restoration projects to facilitate and streamline collaboration between partners when developing playa restoration plans.

Strategy 1c. Support Watershed Restoration Initiative

Based on the RWBJV Implementation Plan, 50% of the habitat will be provided by public wetlands (NGPC/USFWS), 25% will be provided by wetlands enrolled in long-term conservation programs, 10% through short-term conservation programs, and 15% from wetlands with no conservation program nexus. To achieve 45% ponding on public and private wetlands enrolled in long-term conservation programs, hydrology will need to be restored to the extent possible. Hydrologic restoration includes both on-site wetland restoration, as well as off-site watershed restoration.

- **Conduct** direct mailing and outreach to highlight watershed restoration opportunities through the EQIP Wildlife Incentives Nebraska (WIN) fund pool.
- **Provide** training to PLWG about EQIP 657 practice for pit fills in hydric soil footprints or as standalone wetland restorations in sub-basins to support Watershed Restoration Initiative.
- **Delineate** portions of public wetland watersheds and perpetually protected wetland watersheds that are most susceptible to erosion. Use a combination of outreach tools to promote grass waterways, cover crops, and other agriculture practices that will reduce sedimentation. Directed mailings will be developed to promote the practices available through EQIP and NGPC Berggren Plan.
- **Complete** five pit fills to support watershed restorations of WPAs, Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), and wetlands enrolled in long-term conservation programs (≥ 30 years).
- **Coordinate** with RWB Wetland Management District (WMD) and partners to leverage additional grant sources NDEE, NET, and North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) to complete watershed restoration priorities outlined in RWB WMD Habitat Management Plan (HMP).
- **Work** with USFWS and NGPC managers on pit fills to maximize opportunities to use material from public properties for pit fills.
- **Leverage** additional funding through NRDs to support watershed restoration activities.

Strategy 1d. Leverage Funding for the Water Development Fund

In addition to the watershed restoration, supplemental water deliveries and infrastructure will also be required to achieve the 45% desired ponding levels. The RWBJV Water Plan suggests that 4,285 additional acres will need to be flooded with supplemental water deliveries to provide desired habitat conditions. It is estimated \$9.0 million will need to be endowed to offset inflation and provide a \$300,000 dividend for supplemental water deliveries. Annually \$100,000 will be required to maintain infrastructure.

- **Support** DU staff with materials and tour opportunities to showcase successes to major donors, philanthropies, and industry that could contribute to the Water Development fund.
- **Develop** report highlighting expenditures and outcomes from the Water Development Fund contributions to deliveries.
- **Complete** water delivery infrastructure assessment to identify priorities for FFY 23.
- **Upgrade** water delivery infrastructure at two public wetland sites.
- **Coordinate** meeting with public lands managers, private lands biologists, and other partners to identify priority sites for supplemental water deliveries.
- **Expand** funding to include both public and private land pumping opportunities.

Strategy 1e. Increase Capacity for Central Table Playa Conservation

In the CTP there were over 6,300 playas covering more than 18,000 acres. Today, approximately 65% still demonstrate some level of function (pond water or grow hydrophytes). Nearly all remaining wetlands have been hydrologically modified to increase farmable acres and/or increase forage production. These wetlands provide redundancy in the migration corridor. Having functional wetlands in multiple playa complexes insures that, even in drought conditions sporadic precipitation events, will fill playas throughout the corridor. The RWBJV Implementation Plan goal is to protect and restore 4,000 acres in the CTP. Benchmarks to improve CTP conservation include:

- **Improve** conservation community understanding about programmatic opportunities in the CTP. Priority will be on ACEP, Migratory Bird SAFE CRP, and WREP.
- **Coordinate** with Lower Loup NRD, CPNRD, NGPC, NRCS, PF, USFWS and other partners to add/maintain necessary capacity to support conservation delivery in the CTP landscape.
- **Complete** directed mailings to all producers with 10 acres or more of hydric soils within the CTP, highlighting the importance of playa wetlands and available programs.

Strategy 1f. Maintain ACEP Delivery Capacity for NRCS Central Area

The NRCS Central Area mirrors the RWBJV administrative boundary. ACEP, EQIP, and RCPP are important playa and riverine conservation programs in many GFAs, including the Central Platte River, CTP and RWB. Over the last five years, RWBJV staff have coordinated with NRCS to develop solutions to address bottlenecks in ACEP delivery statewide. This has included contracting for environmental database searches, title work, and physical boundary surveys. This collaboration has also included hiring ACEP Easement Specialist, RWBJV Communications Assistant, RWBJV Habitat Specialist, and CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist. This additional capacity has significantly increased the ability of the Central Area ACEP Team to complete applications, develop and implement management plans, as well as maintain necessary paperwork to ensure program compliance. Since the initial agreement the easement administrative specialist has been transitioned into a full time NRCS employee. In addition to the due diligence activities, the modification will also include funds for contracted restoration activities, management, and monitoring. To secure necessary funding for these contracted activities and staff positions, in the long-term, the following actions will be pursued:

- **Modify** existing RWBJV/NCF/NRCS Collaborative Conservation Grant Agreement (CCGA) to support contracting for due diligence (environmental database search, title work, physical boundary surveys)

through 2025 applications. Modification will also include funding for monitoring, management (prescribed fire, chemical applications, and disking) and restoration elements (dirt work, seeding, etc.).

- **Maintain** funding to support CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist, ACEP Easement Specialist, RWBJV Communications Assistant, and RWBJV Habitat Specialist.
- **Evaluate** opportunities to secure permanent funding for the RWBJV Habitat Specialist, ACEP Easement Specialist, RWBJV Communications Assistant, and CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist to support ACEP delivery and management in the NRCS Central Area.

Science, Monitoring, and Technical Transfer

The cornerstone of the RWBJV Implementation Plan is the Strategic Habitat Conservation Framework. This framework requires a commitment to applied science and geospatial analysis to target on-the-ground projects and evaluate success. Using these spatial targeting tools maximizes the Return on Investment (ROI) for priority species. Due to the relatively small geography of the RWB, the partnership collects color infrared aerial photography for the entire RWB to evaluate habitat conditions (ponded area/hydrophytes). This imagery and resulting dataset are invaluable for targeting outreach to producers with flood-prone cropland, as well as quantify the benefits of conservation programs for both waterfowl and water quality/quantity. The partnership is also completing a long-term waterfowl survey that is designed to better understand local and landscape factors that drive habitat selection. The priority will be to analyze the data collected as part of these two projects and develop final reports. Quantification of ecosystem benefits will be the other priority for FFY 23:

- **RWB Annual Habitat Survey:** This monitoring dataset has been collected using color infrared aerial photography since 2004. The imagery is collected in collaboration with the USFWS Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET). A USFWS Refuge pilot and plane equipped with a Leica camera system collects the imagery. RWBJV staff will process the imagery and use image object orientated classification to map ponded water, hydrophytes, and nonfunctional areas in wetland footprints. RWBJV Science office will update the document summarizing data collected over the last 19 years. All imagery will be available to partners on Science Base for project planning and wetland determinations.
- **RWB Waterfowl Survey:** This project was initiated in 2018 and has been completed for the last six years. A seventh year of data will not be collected as the FFY 23 priority will be to complete the analysis. The analysis will incorporate survey specific waterfowl counts to spatially describe how local (i.e. wetland size, existing buffer, etc.) and landscape factors (i.e. wetland density at different scales) influence waterfowl habitat selection. Decision Support Tools (DSTs) will be developed to help prioritize future marketing and outreach efforts to focus enrollment on wetlands that provide the greatest potential to provide migration habitat. Analysis will be completed by RWBJV staff.
- **Evaluate** existing RCPP tracts to determine if pivot infrastructure is meeting program, landowner, and wetland goals and objectives. This evaluation will be completed through a multi-NRD effort that will compare enrolled tracts to pumping by adjacent landowners and to the NRD average pumping to evaluate groundwater pumping savings because of Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI) technology adoption.
- **Groundwater Recharge Monitoring:** During the last decade the RWBJV has focused most of its research and monitoring activities on avian species' responses to conservation actions. Over the last five years, the partnership has transitioned our monitoring and research to quantify ecosystem services that our conservation programs provide. To quantify groundwater recharge benefits, the RWBJV has developed a partnership including the RWB WMD, NeDNR, Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID), TBNRD, and Upper Big Blue NRD (UBBNRD) to support groundwater monitoring at several wetlands across the RWB. The monitoring associated with the Western Basin Recharge Project will be finalized in FFY 23. A final report will present the data and results for recharge rates at the different basins. The model outputs for the in-stream flow contributions by these wetlands will also be presented. The monitoring work will be expanded to UBBNRD with one wetland being

instrumented in FFY 23 to quantify recharge through natural precipitation events. The RWBJV staff will support development of the digital elevation models, stage storage estimates, and hiring the hydrologist that will conduct the monitoring.

- **Playa Research Symposium:** The RWBJV will host a Playa Research Symposium in conjunction with the Platte River Basin Conference. The focus of this symposium will be on current research, inventory, and monitoring, and projects that have been completed since 2017. The RWBJV Research Inventory and Monitoring Plan will be updated based on panel discussions and input from public land managers and private lands biologists. Plan will prioritize one or two research projects that focus on key uncertainties identified at the symposium or in development of the decision tree for playa restoration. All efforts possible will be made to ensure projects are developed in partnership and complimentary to work being completed by USFWS RWB WMD as part of their Inventory and Monitoring Plan (IMP).

Field Delivery Capacity

Capacity to deliver conservation programs has limited the success of the RWBJV to implement private lands projects in the past. To help address this capacity bottleneck, the RWBJV has leveraged partner funds to support a variety of shared positions. These positions include the RWBJV Habitat Specialist, RWBJV Communication Assistant, ACEP Easement Specialist, and CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist. These four positions complement the DU, NGPC, NRCS, and USFWS private lands staff that are focused on playa wetland conservation. Maintaining this capacity will be a priority in FFY 2023.

- **Maintain** capacity by leveraging funding for the four delivery positions (RWBJV Habitat Specialist, RWBJV Communications Assistant, ACEP Easement Specialist, and CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist) that are funded through soft money. Goal over the next year will be to evaluate staffing needs and define critical positions. The RWBJV will continue to explore options to transition critical positions into permanent positions and opportunities for additional shared positions.
- **Expand** exposure across agencies and within NRCS field office staff about ACEP and opportunities to support the BE-Teams and ACEP Team Leaders.

Communications

RWBJV communications related to playa conservation is primarily completed through our webpage, eNewsletter, Partnership Update, social media, videos, testimonials, and RWBJV Annual Report. To support communications efforts, the RWBJV partnership has entered into a multiple year agreement with CPNRD and NRCS to support the RWBJV Communications Assistant. This individual works collaboratively with the CPNRD Information and Education Specialist and the NRCS Public Relations Officer to support RWBJV communications.

The primary audiences are natural resource professionals (federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as non-government conservation organizations) and private landowners. These two target audiences are vastly different. Recognizing the diversity of these two different audiences, our communications strategies will vary significantly.

Here are the major projects that will be pursued in FFY 23:

- **Develop** new marketing and outreach tools to help promote ACEP and SAFE enrollment. Focus will be on landowner-led field days. Will be structured as three-hour meetings around lunch. Focus will be on in-person meetings to the extent possible.
- **Continue** to market ACEP programmatic options and CRP SAFE to landowners and producers with high priority wetlands through media campaigns. Campaigns will include direct mailings (post cards and letters), radio and TV spots, as well as social media elements.

- **Create** more social media material including landowner testimonials, landowner interviews, time lapse photography, programmatic landing pages on website, social media posts, story maps, as well as radio and television adds highlighting opportunities.
- **Update** the webpage with landowner testimonials and Science to Solutions highlighting the RWBJV.
- **Complete** 2022 Annual Report highlighting partnership successes. Annual Report will be structured to highlight the strategies that were outlined and successfully completed as part of the FFY 22 AOP.
- **Host** four Conservation Practitioner Symposiums for NRCS staff, relevant NRD staff, FSA CRP program leads, NGPC Biologists, Farm Bill Biologists, and USFWS biologists and field staff for a continuing education workshop. Focus will be on developing the interpersonal relationships that drive successful conservation delivery. There will also be a round robin session that will focus on what resources (Financial Assistance – FA and Technical Assistance – TA) partners need from each other.
- **Complete** three ACEP workshops to improve collaboration and develop opportunities to maximize partner contributions to streamline ACEP delivery.
- **Support** partners in completing three directed mailings to eligible producers about the habitat and ecosystem benefits of playa wetlands, as well as the conservation programs that are available. Focus will be on the WREP, SAFE, CRP, ACEP, EQIP and other partner programs that support the Working Lands Initiative and Watershed Restoration Initiative.
- **Work** with the consultant hired to complete interviews with ACEP participants to gain feedback on why participants enrolled, impacts of wetland grazing on animal health, feedback on grazing plans, and opportunities to achieve programmatic and landowner objectives.
- **Develop** three programmatic focused videos (3 -5 minutes) that highlight the natural resource concerns, project planning, restoration, and restoration outcomes. Videos will be available on social medial platforms and be a conduit to promote landowners to contact partner staff as the point of contact to initiate a conversation about opportunities. Priority topics will be pit fills, wetland restoration, wetland grazing, and VRI. Combination of standard video and time lapse videos.
- **Develop** easement field days (3 days) to allow producers to host a tour of their site (DU, NRD, USDA, USFWS easements) and highlight how the program fits into their operation. Include invitations to financial advisors and agriculture lenders to introduce conservation stewardship opportunities.
- **Revive** the RWBJV Informational Seminar.
- **Reach** out to Nebraska Grazing Conference regarding easement tour as part of conference.
- **Collaborate** with University of Nebraska Lincoln and National Science Teaching Association with development of Nebraska centric curriculum units prioritized by the Nebraska Department of Education. Focus will be on six priority topic areas (NE river systems and ecosystems, NE native species, conservation organizations, agriculture practices, NE plants and animals, NE resource management). RWBJV partners will serve as subject matter experts and RWBJV Communications Assistant will coproduce videos and other digital resources to compliment the curriculum.

Partnership Development

In FFY 23, the RWBJV will coordinate with NRCS and other partners to maintain funding and support for ACEP delivery and other partner led wetland conservation programs. The RWBJV partnership will leverage FA and TA resources from federal, state, private landowners, and agriculture industry to advance playa wetland conservation. Each of these unique partners bring FA and TA to support the partnership and achieve our overarching goals. To support the Water Development Fund, the partnership will expand our network to engage agriculture industry and corporate partners to build this fund for supplemental water deliveries. The RWBJV partnership will also continue to build our relationships with pivot dealers and manufacturers to advance the goals and objectives of the Divots in the Pivots Initiative.

Staff Roles: Playa Wetland Conservation: Strategies 1a -1f.

Coordinator and Grant and Operations Manager—All Strategies. The coordinator will update the RWBJV Management Board on all playa restoration activities and ensure support for playa conservation strategies. Conservation strategies will be developed and refined based on input from the associated workgroups. The RWBJV Grant and Operations Manager will provide grant and agreement administration that support many aspects of playa wetland conservation.

RWBJV Habitat Specialist—Strategy 1a, 1b, 1c. This position will support the PLWG in marketing and outreach of different conservation programs and be the point of contact for implementation of grazing infrastructure developed as part of the Working Lands Initiative. This position will also coordinate management (chemical, mechanical, tree cutting, and prescribed fire) on public and private wetlands.

RWBJV Communications Assistant—Strategy 1a, 1c, 1e. The RWBJV Communications Assistant will support all aspects of outreach for playa wetland conservation. The primary focus will be on supporting the PLWG in marketing available conservation programs to eligible landowners, organizing the Conservation Practitioner Symposiums, managing the eNewsletters and Partnership Updates, and acting as RWBJV webmaster. RWBJV Communications Assistant will also oversee development of all videos and materials for social media. The RWBJV Geographic Information System (GIS) Analyst and Science Coordinator will assist the RWBJV Communications Assistant to focus marketing and outreach for different mailings and promotional materials.

RWBJV GIS Analyst and Science Coordinator—Strategy 1a, 1c. The RWBJV Science Office will support the ongoing monitoring projects that are currently being completed to evaluate contemporary wetland function and habitat selection by waterfowl. These datasets will be used to develop Decision Support Tools to guide marketing and outreach to eligible producers with priority wetlands.

Leveraged Capacity—Strategy 1a, 1c, 1e. The RWBJV will continue to coordinate with NRCS to maintain CCGA funding to support the RWBJV Habitat Specialists, ACEP Easement Specialist, CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist, and RWBJV Communications Assistant.

GRASSLAND CONSERVATION

The RWBJV partnership was formed with a focus on playa wetland conservation. This focus has driven the mission of the partnership for over 20 years. As part of the 2013 revision of the RWBJV Implementation Plan, the partnership expanded the focus and scope of the partnership. This new plan established population and habitat objectives for priority species located throughout the RWBJV. Priority species for the RWBJV were selected based on criteria in the four national/international bird plans (North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight Continental Landbird Plan, United States Shorebird Plan, and Waterbird Conservation Plan for the Americas). Based on the significant population declines and loss of habitat, grassland obligates were flagged as a priority. Four GFAs (Central Loess Hills, Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons, Sandhills, and Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages) were identified as priority landscapes for grassland conservation. In 2022, the RWBJV adopted a revised landbird plan that integrated new data datasets on grassland conversion and woody encroachment. This plan highlighted that it could cost \$13.1 million annually across priority grasslands to protect, restore, and enhance sufficient acres to impact sufficient acres needed to support desired populations. These revised habitat objectives and associated costs highlighted the need for the partnership to on leveraging additional FA and TA for on-the-ground projects in the priority GFAs. The GPGI was recently announced by NRCS as one of the first large-scale conservation investments. GPGI allocates half of the EQIP WIN fund pool (\$1.2 million) towards grassland restoration and management practices. Unfortunately, even with this significant increase in funding, there is not sufficient on-the-ground delivery capacity or financial resources to protect, restore, or enhance sufficient grasslands to sustain desired populations of grassland birds in the RWBJV.

Grassland conservation is and will continue to be a priority for the RWBJV for following reasons:

- **Continued Loss of Grasslands within the RWBJV:** Analysis of the FSA CLU and USDA Cropland Data Layer (CDL) highlighted that between 260,130 to 420,385 acres of grassland had been converted in the RWBJV between 2008 – 2018. Annual conversion rates ranged from as low as -0.02% in the Sandhills to as high as high as -3.15% in the Rainwater Basin.
- **Invasion of Eastern Red Cedar into Grasslands:** Analysis of the RAP datasets from 2011 – 2021 has highlighted over 167,479 acres of grassland conversion to woody cover over 3% in the RWBJV. This does not include the 90-meter area around woody encroached areas where seed dispersal and new ERC recruitment occurs. Just treating the Dispersal and Recruitment Zone to maintain current grasslands and manage against future invasion would require treatment of 750,000 acres annually in the RWBJV.
- **Population Declines of Grassland Birds:** Grassland breeding bird population numbers have fallen by 53% since 1970, the steepest decline of all breeding guilds.
- **Insufficient Funding:** Existing programs and funding sources are not sufficient to address the 460,045-acre habitat loss that has been experienced since 2008, or to successfully maintain the grassland acres currently in the RWBJV. For example, it is estimated that it will cost \$6.7 million to treat acres that reach a 3% ERC canopy cover each year. This would require the partners to leverage sufficient funds to treat 750,000 acres annually to keep ERC from continued expansion, unfortunately less than \$1.5 million is annually expended on these activities.
- **Collaborative and Community-Based Conservation:** ERC control and management will require a collaborative and community-based conservation approach. This will require a diverse set of stakeholders to develop strategies where this native, yet invasive species, can be planted in the appropriate places yet managed effectively to maximize grasslands for both birds and Nebraska's livestock industry.

The grand opportunity, paradoxically, stems from the mutual opportunities to benefit both grassland birds and livestock producers. Loss of grass from the landscape has direct negative impacts to both these interests. If the RWBJV can help support a viable livestock industry in Nebraska, it will help bring credibility and funding to the partnership for our grassland conservation actions. This will result in a supercharged level of relevancy: success or failure in grassland conservation will have a profound effect on the quality of life for people within and beyond the RWBJV boundary. There's a clear niche and opportunity for the RWBJV to develop, support, and foster innovative solutions with existing and new partners to address these grassland conservation issues.

Grassland Conservation in the RWBJV

In 2015, the RWBJV expanded our support of grassland conservation delivery. Prior to 2015, the focus of the partnership was on developing a biological foundation to assist partners with grassland conservation delivery. In 2014, a new funding opportunity was introduced by NFWF - Northern Great Plains Initiative. Nebraska's Sandhills are a focus area for this NFWF initiative. This initial grant provided funding for grazing infrastructure, mechanical removal of ERC on both public and private lands, as well as wetland restoration. This grant also provided additional funding to extend the tour of duty for U.S. Forest Service (USFS) seasonal staff to complete mechanical removal of ERC and implement prescribed fire on the Bessey and Samuel R. McKelvie (SRM) National Forests. The success of the prescribed fire on public lands resulted in a second grant that mirrored the framework of the initial grant, but also provided funding for prescribed fire equipment and USFS staff to burn on both public and adjacent private lands. To date, there have been seven subsequent NFWF grants awarded to the RWBJV, Pheasants Forever, and the Sandhills Task Force (STF). These grants have leveraged partner contributions to complete on-the-ground grassland projects and increase capacity. Grant funds were leveraged with partner funds to allow TNC to hire a Burn Boss, and PF to hire a Farm Bill Biologist. The TNC Burn Boss is focused on helping landowners and public lands managers develop burn plans and implement prescribed fire to improve grassland habitat and manage against ERC. The PF Farm Bill Biologist is working with NRCS staff to help producers sign up for EQIP to implement mechanical control of ERC and prescribed fire. The NFWF grant funds have been leveraged with nearly \$2.0 million in funds (NET, NGPC, NRCS, STF, USFS, and USFWS) to support grassland restoration and enhancement activities on both public and private lands in the Sandhills. These projects have resulted in over 125,000 acres being impacted.

In 2016, a similar collaborative prescribed fire and grassland management partnership was supported in the Central Loess Hills through a grant awarded to the RWBJV by NET. This grant supported a Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX). This exchange has become an annual event where wildland fire fighters, agency fire staff, landowners, and local fire departments come together to complete large scale (>2,000 acres) prescribed fire in the Central Loess Hills. The burn plans associated with these prescribed fires often contain multiple private landowner tracts. This requires that these individuals work together to ensure sufficient planning and preparatory actions (fire breaks, access points, fuel load management, etc.) are in place before the 20 to 30 firefighters arrive for the 10-day training event. This project has been tremendously successful helping demonstrate that large scale prescribed fire can be implemented on private lands through collaborative efforts. The initial grant was so successful that a second TREX grant was submitted to support these activities in the Central Loess Hills. It is not just the acres impacted; equally important is the education and experience that both the agency fire staff and the landowners gain. As a result of the TREX, landowners are becoming more comfortable with prescribed fire. This comfort level has translated into more producers implementing prescribed fire on their own, outside of the TREX.

The RWBJV has successfully supported five NRDs to develop additional NET and NFWF grants to expand grassland conservation in the Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons and Loess Hills. This

NRD let effort is in the initial phases and will require support from the RWBJV to leverage partner resources to work with landowners, develop contracts, and ensure actions are completed within grant deadlines.

Federal Fiscal Year 2023 Grassland Conservation Strategies

In FFY 23, our grassland habitat efforts will focus on the following Strategies:

- Increase FA and TA available to maximize impact of EQIP brush management practices to improve grassland habitat in the priority GFAs in the RWBJV.
- Leverage financial resources to incentivize enrollment in CRP and other grassland restoration practices as outlined in the RWBJV Landbird Plan.
- Engage partners to identify RWBJV role in the Central Loess Hills, Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons, as well as Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages.
- Leverage additional financial resources to support new prescribed fire positions that will increase implementation of prescribed fire in the four priority grassland GFAs.
- Transfer prescribed fire equipment to Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District (MNNRD) and Erickson volunteer Fire Department to ensure new Prescribed Burn Associations (PBA) in having access to the necessary equipment to safely implement prescribed fire.
- Support tours and other communication venues for conservation practitioners and landowners to see firsthand different control techniques that can be implemented to manage ERC invasion.
- Leverage resources to support grassland conservation efforts through increased science to help target grassland conservation practices.

Strategy 2a. Leverage Resources for Sandhills Conservation

Nebraska's Sandhills are an iconic landscape containing the largest intact dune stabilized grasslands in North America and most intact grassland in the world. This landscape is over 97% privately owned, requiring projects to be developed at the ranch level and scaled-up through neighbor buy-in. The STF is a locally led partnership between the ranching community and conservation entities (DU, NGPC, NRCS, TNC, and USFWS). This partnership has been a leader in fostering relationships with landowners and ultimately their neighbors to promote grassland and wetland conservation projects that support both birds and beef producers in this landscape.

The RWBJV has been able to support partners working in the Sandhills by sponsoring agency initiatives, securing grant funding for on-the-ground project delivery and/or partner capacity. Specifically, the RWBJV and Nebraska Cattlemen jointly sponsored NRCS's Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) proposal for the eastern Sandhills. The RWBJV has also submitted and been awarded four of the seven NFWF grants for work in the Sandhills. RWBJV grant administration capacity allowed sub-awards to be completed with STF and TNC. This approach has reduced overhead and administrative burden on the STF partnership/ staff and TNC staff. These sub-awards have provided funds for STF capacity, ERC removal, grazing infrastructure, wetland restoration, and payments to Volunteer Fire Departments (VFDs) for implementing prescribed fire on private lands.

As part of these same NFWF grants, the RWBJV has also provided funding to USFS for mechanical removal of ERC and development of grazing infrastructure on USFS lands to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the Rangeland Allotment Management Plan (RAMP) for the Bessey and SRM National Forests. These grants provided funding to allow USFS staff to plan and implement prescribed fire on both public and private lands. NFWF grant funds have also been leveraged with TNC grant funds to hire a burn boss that has been focused on implementation of prescribed fire in the Sandhills. The primary focus of this individual has been working with landowners that have been involved in STF projects to ensure that prescribed fire can be integrated into their grassland management plan to promote forage production as well as manage against reinvasion by ERC.

In FFY 2023, focus will remain on building off the successes described above:

- **Closeout** NFWF grant that has been awarded to RWBJV for purchase of additional prescribed fire equipment and contract for low- and ultra-low density ERC removal on 19,500 acres at SRM.
- **Transfer** two mobile prescribed fire burn units. One unit to MNNRD, while the other will be held by the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition (NGLC) and managed by the Erickson Volunteer Fire Department. Units are available to private landowners interested in implementing prescribed fire.
- **Implement** America the Beautiful (AtB) NFWF grant, if awarded. Grant will support focused delivery of 58,000 acres of ERC removal on SRM and within 5-mile buffer around the National Forest.
- **Leverage** additional NRCS WLFW project funding to achieve goals and objectives outlined in original proposal submitted by Nebraska Cattlemen and RWBJV. Assessment of biological outcomes of WLFW projects will be a priority this year. Focus will be on estimating number of priority species impacted.
- **Support** landowner, NGLC, STF, TNC, VFD, and USFS collaboration to implement prescribed fire within the Sandhills. Long-term goal is to support partners and landowners by leveraging capacity, influence cultural will, and acquire additional equipment to support 600,000 acres of prescribed fire annually. This equates to roughly 5% of the landscape annually. FFY 23 goal is to double prescribed fire (50,000 acres) through RWBJV supported projects.
- **Reseed** 5,000 acres through the WWF incentives program that supports high diversity seeding on new CRP contracts.
- **Support** consultant working with NRCS to evaluate ERC removal and grazing management practices implemented through EQIP. Focus will be on receiving landowner feedback on the program, results, opportunities for improvement, and changes that were implemented in the operation because of program participation.
- **Submit** NFWF grant to expand ERC removal efforts around Valentine National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Work will compliment the AtB proposal at SRM and result in a 1.0 million acre core grassland with work completed on both private lands and public lands.

Strategy 2b. Improve Central Loess Hills Grasslands

The Central Loess Hills are a patchwork of highly productive agriculture table lands which sit on rugged grasslands that transition into the Loup River Valleys. For the past nine years, the RWBJV has supported NGPC in implementation of the Nebraska State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), in this landscape. SWAPs are unique to each state but are generally designed to support conservation in landscapes that have significant biological resources. The SWAP also provides additional funding to address the key threats to these Biologically Unique Landscapes (BULs). The Central Loess Hills was identified as one of these landscapes in Nebraska's SWAP.

Grasslands in the Central Loess Hills have been degraded by overgrazing and invasion by ERC. Most landowners recognize the problem, however these producers are diversified operators with both cropland and livestock. Prescribed fire is one of the cheapest and most effective tools to manage ERC, as well as promoting and enhancing healthy grasslands. Unfortunately, most producers in the Central Loess Hills are fire adverse. The TRES program provides both FA and TA to develop burn plans, compensate for grazing deferment, conduct mechanical removal of ERC, modify grazing infrastructure, and personnel to conduct prescribed fire. The Lower Loup NRD (LLNRD) is part of the five NRD grassland project and will be reinvigorating their range program to offer incentives for grazing deferment, implementation of prescribed fire, and mechanical removal of ERC. The RWBJV will build off the TRES program and support implementation of LLNRD's expanded Range Program to maximize grassland conservation in 2023: Prioritizes for the next FFY are:

- **Submit** a new NET grant to continue the TRES for the FFY 23, 24, and 25 fire seasons.

- **Support** LLNRD with development and administration of their revised Range Program. This will include GIS support to track all activities, evaluation of conservation actions towards migratory bird population response, and marketing/outreach to landowners about opportunities available through the LLNRD Range Program.
- **Develop** biological planning and conservation design tools to focus EQIP and LLNRD Range Program brush management and other partner projects to areas where we can get the greatest ROI for the priority grassland birds outlined in the RWBJV Landbird Plan.
- **Improve** project tracking to support outcome-based evaluation of conservation practices delivered by all RWBJV partners in the Loess Hills.
- **Reseed** 2,500 acres through the WWF incentives program that supports high diversity seeding on new CRP contracts.

Strategy 2c. Identify Conservation Opportunities in Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons as well as Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages Geographic Focus Areas

The Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons as well as Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages were both identified as GFAs with significant grassland resources in the 2022 Landbird Plan. In the Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons, the goal was to restore 125,360 acres of grassland through ERC removal and transition 31,340 acres of cropland to grasslands through CRP. In the Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainage, the goal was to transition, at a minimum, 14,525 acres of ERC invaded grasslands to tree free grasslands while restoring a minimum of 3,630 acres of cropland to grasslands through CRP. In the two geographies, the goal is to implement at least 53,500 acres of prescribed fire annually to maintain grasslands and reduce the potential for reinvasion on mechanically treated acres. Benchmarks to improve grasslands in these GFAs include:

- **Collaborate** with CPNRD, Middle Republican Natural Resources District (MRNRD), TBNRD, and Twin Platte Natural Resources District (TPNRD) to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the five NRD grants. This will include GIS support to track all activities, evaluation of conservation actions towards migratory bird population response, and marketing/outreach to landowners about opportunities available through these Range Programs.
- **Reseed** 2,500 acres through the WWF incentives program that supports high diversity seeding on new CRP contracts.

Science, Monitoring, and Technical Transfer

The RWBJV partnership has and continues to support federal, state, and local government agencies as well as non-government conservation organizations with a variety of geospatial tools and other applied science tools over the last 20 years. As budgets and capacity continue to decline, there will be a greater need to integrate science to maximize conservation ROI. With grasslands as a conservation priority, the partnership has expanded our science, monitoring, and planning work to include a variety of universities, federal research agencies, and other grassland Joint Ventures. These collaborations have helped the partnership to quantify ERC encroachment in priority grassland GFAs, understand grassland loss through direct conversion to agriculture and other land uses, monitor priority species to model core areas, describe species habitat relationships, and develop a robust project tracking database to evaluate programmatic and species response to project delivery. In FFY 23, focus will be placed on these eight grassland projects:

- **Ensure** the Rangeland Brush Estimation Toolbox (RaBET) is operational in the Sandhills, Central Loess Hills, and Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons GFAs. RaBET is an on-line ArcGIS application that allows users to evaluate canopy cover within a defined area. The percent canopy cover is defined based on the NRCS practice payment scenarios. This geospatial output will help streamline

general EQIP and WLFW contract development. RaBET outputs will also help in development of burn plans by providing an estimate of fuel loads. This will require additional field data to be collected acquisition and acquisition of 10-cm color infrared aerial photography to finish generating the algorithms and test the accuracy. The National Wetlands Inventory will also be revised for the Sandhills to provide an accurate mask to avoid misclassification of sub-irrigated meadows as woody cover.

- **Support** integration of a grassland project tracking database. Since 1992, the RWBJV has closely tracked all wetland conservation actions in the RWB. This provided partners the opportunity to evaluate projects to determine if the desired programmatic and biological returns were being achieved. These assessments helped refine conservation delivery to maximize ROI. In FFY 23, the RWBJV will significantly expand this geospatial database to include all partner activities to the extent possible. Most NRCS, STF, USFS, and USFWS projects have already been incorporated, with the FFY 23 focus being on integration of NRD projects and projects funded through the AtB NFWF grants.
- **Complete** Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) that will highlight the contribution of past partner projects (over the last five years) to populations of priority grassland birds. Scenarios around the GPGI approach of “Protect the Core” will also be summarized to understand ROI through implementation of different conservation practices in the Sandhills for priority species.
- **Replicate** the Sandhills CEAP to develop DSTs to prioritize conservation actions in the other priority grassland GFAs to maximize benefits for prairie grouse and other priority grassland species.
- **Initiate** the Grassland Bird Response project. This project is funded by USFWS Science Applications and United State Geological Survey (USGS). The project lead is the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (Coop Unit). The Coop Unit will hire two graduate students to complete this project. Field data will be collected to evaluate grassland bird occurrence pre- and post-treatment of grasslands receiving treatments to remove woody cover. Results will provide insights into the response of priority species at the local and landscape related to changes in woody cover. The results from this work will help target future delivery to maximize ROI for these priority species.
- **Nebraska Prairie Grouse Survey:** This project was initiated in 2019 with section level surveys completed March through April in 2020, 2021, and 2022. This was a collaborative project between NGPC, NRCS, RWBJV, HAPET, and USFWS Science Applications. Final Greater Prairie Chicken and Sharp-tailed Grouse Species Distribution Models (SDMs) and relative abundance models will be completed during FFY 2023. Associated DSTs will also be developed to help prioritize protection, restoration, and enhancement actions for these priority species. These datasets, in conjunction with the project tracking database, will allow programmatic and biological (impact to bird populations) outcomes to be quantified by agency program. Methods and results will be prepared and presented in the same format as the Sandhills CEAP.
- **NRCS GPGI:** NRCS prioritized grassland management and enhancement. Nebraska NRCS has partnered with four states (Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota), to focus grassland conservation at the Grassland Biome scale through the GPGI. In FFY 23, the RWBJV will work with the NRCS Science Advisor for the GPGI to integrate the partnership’s geospatial data into this initiative. This will involve existing data as well as new datasets that will be coproduced by RWBJV, NGPC, NRCS, and the University of Nebraska. This collaboration will ensure shared vision among partners and will help focus partner planning and delivery resources to areas on the landscape that will provide the greatest ROI.
- **Statewide Erosion Index:** The RWBJV has worked with NRCS to develop a raster based geospatial Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE) dataset. The RWBJV staff will incorporate this dataset and the FSA CLU to estimate erosion rates at the field level. This dataset will be incorporated into a Decision Support Tool to prioritize grassland restoration through EQIP and CRP to help achieve the habitat goals outlined in the RWBJV Landbird Plan.

Field Delivery Capacity

Education, policy, and prescribed fire capacity are all bottlenecks to successful grassland conservation in the RWBJV. The RWBJV has worked with both USFS and TNC to support staff that help promote and implement successful prescribed fire on private lands. Acceptance of prescribed fire often comes from experience so these positions are critical to ensure successful information transfer to landowners, ranchers, and VFDs that may be reluctant to issue burn permits or conduct prescribed fires. Maintaining this capacity will be a priority in FFY 2023.

- **Maintain** capacity with CPNRD, landowners, NGLC, TNC, and USFS to support safe implementation of prescribed fire on private lands and public lands. Focus will be on helping NGLC administer the NFWF grant supporting their two prescribed fire specialists and TNC capacity.
- **Submit** a Southern Great Plains Initiative grant to support additional grassland management in the Central and North Platte River, Central Loess Hills and Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons GFAs. Grant will also provide funding to add capacity to support range programs administered by the five NRDs that intersect these GFAs.
- **Maintain** funding for the CPNRD Burn Plan Specialist to focus on development of burn plans for additional prescribed fire on private lands.
- **Coordinate** with RWBJV partners to evaluate where strategic investments in staff can be made to address bottlenecks in on-the-ground delivery of grassland conservation practices.

Communications

The RWBJV communications related to grassland conservation are provided through the RWBJV webpage, eNewsletter, RWBJV Partnership Update, and RWBJV Annual Report. In addition, the RWBJV staff will support partners in conducting direct mailings, hosting landowner meetings, and marketing conservation programs to eligible landowners and ranch operators. The messaging will be refined based on feedback from past landowner meetings, to connect with target audiences with regards to grassland management and implementation of prescribed fire. Coming out of the pandemic, the focus will be on in-person meetings to help reintroduce the conservation community. This is important recognizing the significant number of new hires and individuals that have transitioned into different positions since the pandemic eliminated personal interaction. The RWBJV Communications Assistant will be the point of contact for organizing tours, developing materials, and maintaining social media and webpage content. In addition to the internal communication amongst partners, there will be a renewed effort to support field tours and landowner meetings to improve communication and build trust with landowners.

Here are the major and new projects we plan to accomplish in FFY 23:

- **Develop** timelapse videos highlighting different management treatments (chipping, mechanical removal, prescribed fire) commonly used to control ERC.
- **Promote** implementation of EQIP in the three GPGI focus area that intersect the Verdigris – Bazile, Loess Hills, and Republican River/Blue River Drainages GFAs.
- **Continue** directed mailings to promote CRP sign-ups for grassland restoration, as well as EQIP grassland restoration and management activities.
- **Coordinate** with NRCS and NGLC to host landowner meetings and tours to highlight the different ERC control methods (chipping, cutting, prescribed fire). Tours will highlight the economic and habitat benefits from this work. Tours participation will focus on landowners but also be open to natural resource professionals. Goal will be to increase dialogue between landowners and partner staff.
- **Organize** two Sandhills partner meetings during FFY 23 to coordinate on-the-ground delivery and leverage matching funds to support additional grants. January meeting focus will be on Keystone

Initiative Proposal and opportunities to replicate the AtB proposal for Valentine NWR and adjacent private lands and NGPC managed WMAs.

- **Engage** three landowners to develop testimonials about the importance of ERC control for their operation and to provide grassland bird habitat.
- **Update** the webpage with landowner testimonials and factsheets about grassland conservation projects.
- **Complete** 2022 RWBJV Annual Report highlighting partnership successes with regards to ERC removal and grassland conservation.
- **Hold** a Conservation Practitioner Symposium in Ord or Burwell to provide an overview of grassland habitat needs and programmatic opportunities for agency staff.
- **Maintain** a landing page on the RWBJV web page for prescribed fire.
- **Meet** with Nebraska Cattlemen and Nebraska Farm Bureau local affiliates to begin the dialogue on how the RWBJV can support their members with ERC control to maximize profitability and habitat for priority grassland birds.

Partnership Development

In FFY 23, the RWBJV will develop additional opportunities for partnership interaction and leverage FA and TA to improve grassland habitat delivery in the Sandhills and Central Loess Hills. The five NRD NFWF grant will significantly increase opportunities in the Republican River/Blue River Drainages. New opportunities will need to be explored in the Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages GFAs. The RWBJV recognizes that the amount of FA and TA to be successful will vary by GFA. The RWBJV partnership will also continue to build our relationships with Nebraska Cattlemen, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, and the agriculture industry to support our grassland conservation strategies and expand opportunities.

Staff Roles: Grassland Conservation

Coordinator and Grant and Operations Manager—All Strategies. The Coordinator will assure that the Management Board is engaged and has sufficient information from the different workgroups and partners to make informed decisions regarding grassland conservation strategies. The RWBJV Grant and Operations Manager provides grant administration that support all aspects of grassland conservation funded or supported by the RWBJV.

RWBJV Communications Assistant—Strategy 2a, 2b. The RWBJV Communications Assistant will support all aspects of RWBJV communications efforts. The primary focus will be on supporting the partners with implementing the landowner tours and Conservation Practitioner Symposiums, and managing the eNewsletters/Webpage/Partnership Updates.

RWBJV GIS Analyst and Science Coordinator—Strategy 2a, 2b, 2c. The RWBJV Science Office will support refinement of the RaBET tool within three Major Land Resource Areas (MLRAs). Priorities will be MLRA 65 – Nebraska Sandhills, MLRA 71 - Central Nebraska Loess Hills, and MLRA 73 - Rolling Plains and Breaks. Accurate RaBET outputs will streamline ERC clearing projects in the Sandhills and Central Loess Hills. Staff will support the prairie grouse monitoring project through section selection and data management. The RWBJV Science Office will also work to incorporate the BBS models to help identify priority landscapes and help focus marketing and outreach to increase landowner awareness and program participation. The RWBJV staff have already started to integrate the project tracking database to include all grassland project activities in the different GFAs. The RWBJV Science Office staff will closely coordinate with the Ne Coop Unit staff to support sample point selection, methods for evaluation, and integration of results into DSTs.

OPERATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

The RWBJV has evolved dramatically over the past decade. It has grown from two full-time staff in 2010 to six full-time staff and three shared positions. The staff supports the partnership through a variety of skills and activities including biological planning, conservation design, and on-the-ground conservation delivery. In federal fiscal year 2022, the RWBJV partnership leveraged \$3.4 million to meet the goals and objectives outlined in the RWBJV Implementation Plan. This is an threefold increase in less than a decade. Perhaps most telling, is the number of non-USFWS 1234 funding sources that have increased.

FFY 23 Operations and Administration Strategies

In FFY 23, the RWBJV will continue to expand the partnership to leverage resources to achieve conservation objectives that make our operations more efficient.

Our operational and administrative focus will be on the following:

- Cultivate and maintain funding partnerships to increase conservation delivery capacity
- Maintain efficient operations
- Effectively administer agreements
- Strengthen government relations activities

Strategy 3a. Cultivate Funding Partnerships to Increase Conservation Capacity

We will seek to grow our conservation capacity and impact by building relationships with the following as potential new or ongoing sources of funding:

- **USFWS Programs:** The USFWS 1234 funds are integral to the RWBJV. These funds provide the base funding for staff, office space, supplies, and occasionally are used to introduce new partner initiatives. The RWBJV did receive a slight increase in FFY 22 and now is base funded at \$500,000.

In FFY 2022, the RWBJV also received funding from USFWS Science Applications to support the remapping of the National Wetland Inventory (NWI) for the Sandhills and to conduct the grassland bird assessment research project being led by the Coop Unit.

The USFWS – Refuges supported data collection for the AHS by providing an aircraft, camera system, and pilot. The Refuge System also provided vehicles to complete the waterfowl surveys. Grassland conservation continues to be a high priority for USFWS and the RWBJV will work to leverage partner resources to help collectively address issue on Valentine NWR.

The USFWS –Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (USFWS PFW), through cooperative agreements with numerous conservation partners, provides funding and technical assistance towards on-the-ground conservation projects.

The Western Basin Recharge Project provides benefits to Refuge lands and the USFWS Ecological Services (ES) for the Platte River Recovery and Implementation Program (PRRIP). The RWBJV will explore options to use the Water Development Fund to offset costs for supplemental deliveries to WPAs and add an additional tool to assist ES with management of the “Environmental Account”. The Environmental Account water account is administered by the USFWS ES to provide habitat for threatened and endangered species. This water account is a major contribution of the USFWS towards achieving the PRRIP goals. RWBJV staff will explore opportunities for new collaborations with USFWS leadership to prioritize alignment of current partner programs and USFWS initiatives.

- **Nebraska NRCS Collaboration:** Farm Bill conservation programs are the single largest source of funding for both playa wetland and grassland conservation actions in the RWBJV. The CCGA program has significantly improved on-the-ground capacity and communications support for ACEP, EQIP, WLFW, and the RWBJV. In FFY 22, the RWBJV entered into a three year agreement with NRCS for over \$1.2 million to continue these activities for the next three years. The RWBJV staff is also working with NRCS staff to execute an Interagency Agreement that will allow support NWI remapping in the sandhills and five unique communication campaigns in FFY 23 to highlight programmatic opportunities available through ACEP, EQIP, and CSP. The RWBJV staff will work with the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships and Initiatives, ACEP Program Manager, EQIP Program Manager, and NRCS Public Relations Officer to support programmatic objectives and communication goals associated with CCGA awarded funding.
- **Develop and Support Partner Grant Applications:** The RWBJV will continue to pursue NET, NFWF, NeDNR Water Sustainability Fund, and foundation funds to support operation and management. All non-federal funds will be leveraged by the RWBJV or other partners to secure federal grant sources. In FFY 23, the RWBJV will submit four NET grants. This will include the RWBJV General Grant that supports conservation on public and private lands, as well as communication and evaluation activities. Other grants will focus on the Watershed Restoration Initiative in the RWB, TREX grant for the Central Loess Hills, and a new grant focused on removing ERC in pastures that experienced wildfires in the spring of 2022 or prescribed fires. This will be focused on hand-work because the unaffected trees are probably in steep terrain. Removing the last of the trees will eliminate seed sources and hopefully reduce the chances for reinfestation.

Strategy 3b. Maintain Efficient Operations

Well-organized, highly impactful events and meetings are a cornerstone of the RWBJV partnership. Our Management Board meetings and workgroup meetings provide unique venues to ensure communication among partners. As described in the RWBJV by-laws, the partnership will have three RWBJV Management Board meetings annually (January, May, and September). Workgroup reports have been a reoccurring agenda item to ensure the RWBJV Management Board is aware of the different issues that are being addressed by the partnership. This requires these workgroups try to meet at least a month before the Management Board Meeting. This ensures recommendations/action items can be filtered to the Technical Committee and up to the Management Board with thorough review. Specific meetings that we will regularly host in FFY 23:

- RWBJV Management Board Meetings (3)
- Technical Committee (3)
- Acquisition Workgroup (at least 2)
- Communication Workgroup (at least 2)
- Conservation Planning Workgroup (at least 2)
- Private Lands Workgroup (3)
- Public Lands Workgroup (1 - Annual Wetland Pumping Meeting)
- Monthly RWBJV Project Calls (12)
- Monthly NRCS ACEP Coordination Meetings (12)
- ACEP Workshops (3)
- Conservation Practitioner Symposiums (6-8)

The growth of the RWBJV is unquestionably positive, but as we embrace the new opportunities associated with grassland conservation, the partnership may need to develop more focused workgroups based on GFAs. This

would mirror the meeting structure that has been established as part of the WLFW initiative. As we explore the opportunities that exist in the Republican River/Blue River Drainages and Loess Canyons as well as Verdigris – Bazile Creek Drainages GFAs, this will provide new insights on the necessary level of coordination.

Strategy 3c. Effectively Administer Agreements

The RWBJV Conservation Business Model is built off leveraging competitive grants with partner funds. This model requires a variety of intra-agency, inter-agency, federal grant sources, and non-federal funding agreements. Managing agreements requires significant time and attention to deliver on expected outcomes. This is especially true since the NCF is the financial management entity for the RWBJV. NCF is a 501c (3) nonprofit organization and is annually audited based on the single audit (A-133) standard. To ensure compliance with these audits, the RWBJV has adopted a robust procurement policy to ensure compliance. The RWBJV staff will work with partner staff to ensure necessary documentation is provided when invoices are provided for payment. Administration and management of these funds is being completed by RWBJV staff. Currently the RWBJV staff are administrating over 12 grants and agreements. RWBJV will try to work with partners to streamline methods to get documentation for the procurement policy and ways to minimize direct and indirect costs to maximize funds for on-the-ground conservation. The RWBJV will also work with partners to streamline invoicing to limit the amount of paperwork landowners must complete for reimbursement.

Strategy 3d. Strengthen Government Relations Activities

Relationships are the lifeblood of the RWBJV —especially with respect to policy, and decision makers in Nebraska and in Washington, D.C. To maintain strong relationships requires ongoing, two-way communications about challenges, successes, priorities, and common ground.

In FFY 2023, the RWBJV will continue to build and maintain relationships with local NRD Board Members, Nebraska’s congressional delegation and key staff members, as well as agency decision-makers. RWBJV Board Members will resume annual JV Hill Visits in partnership with the Association of Joint Venture Management Boards (AJVMB). As in the past, the RWBJV will sponsor a fall Coordination Meeting between NGPC and USFWS. This is a two-day meeting, with the first day being dedicated to the congressional delegation, and the second day focused on agency collaboration. In FFY 2023, this will transition to a spring meeting recognizing the limited ability for meetings to occur because of COVID. This event will include both an in-person briefing and tour for both state senators and the congressional delegation to highlight projects and conservation successes.

Relationships built from these efforts result in trust and credibility and pay dividends in decision-making that supports meaningful, strategic, and on-the-ground habitat conservation delivery that matters to Nebraska’s agriculture industry and residents of Nebraska.

Staff Roles: Operations and Administration

Coordinator and Grant and Operations Manager—All Strategies. The Coordinator will work with the Grant and Operations Manager to manage grants awarded to the RWBJV and leverage funds to support partner grant applications. This will require grant writing and reporting as well as coordination with the partners to implement the on-the-ground conservation actions. The RWBJV Coordinator and Office Manager will also work with partners and workgroup chairs to schedule meetings handle logistics.

FFY 2023 BUDGET

This AOP is written for FFY 23. This section provides the budget projections for FFY 23. This aligns with the federal allocation process that provides the base funding or 1234 funds for the RWBJV and allows the RWBJV to account for both the 1234 funds and awarded grant funds. This detailed budget is provided to the RWBJV Management Board outlining all funds secured and available and expected income and expenses for FFY 23. These funds include the existing multi-year awards from NET, NFWF, NRCS, and other FWS programs as part of the income table. Additional projected revenue is also listed. The overall \$3.4 million RWBJV budget reflects the funds that flow through the RWBJV office only; the RWBJV facilitates additional funding contributions directly to JV partners. This budget does not include additional funds leveraged from other programs (e.g., USFWS PFW, NRCS - ACEP).

The RWBJV entrepreneurial business model has been successfully implemented to support a majority of the playa and grassland conservation strategies outlined in the RWBJV Implementation Plan. Unfortunately, the partnership will need to continue to identify new funding sources and partners if we are going to achieve our conservation objectives. USFWS base JV funding is important to our operation, and we are poised to accelerate our major initiatives through expanded capacity building if Congress enacts an Interior Appropriations bill with increased funding for Migratory Bird JVs. Meanwhile, we are accomplishing our goals through partner contributions, pooled funding arrangements, and other innovative constructs that, in the long run, are extremely powerful and durable. However, we are at a point in time in which we truly need an increase in FWS base JV funding to be efficient, effective, and sustainable into the next decade.

Table 1. FWS JV 1234 appropriations and RWBJV allocations, FY 2015–2022.

Fiscal Year	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022
National JV Appropriation	13,139,000	13,139,000	13,139,000	13,139,000	13,140,000	13,140,000	14,640,000	14,640,000
FWS RWBJV Allocation	\$458,465	\$457,695	\$449,802	\$455,039	\$454,658	\$448,719	\$498,820	\$502,767
FWS Regional Overhead	(\$36,929)	(\$36,975)	(\$39,229)	(\$39,049)	(\$32,691)	(\$31,670)	(\$39,000)	(\$28,878)
RWBJV Annual Budget	\$421,536	\$420,720	\$410,573	\$415,990	\$421,697	\$417,049	\$459,820	\$473,889

Thanks to Niki Messmer (RWBJV Office Manager) and Laura Hillenbrand (USFWS Budget Analyst) that track RWBJV grants and federal allocation. Based on their budget tracking and grant management, this year’s RWBJV budget is based on funding that we have secured through grants or agreements with partners. However, budgetary outcomes will not be known until the 2023 NET grants are officially awarded.

In summary, this budget is defined by a theme of co-investment that greatly exceeds what the RWBJV could do if we simply allocated our base funding and settled for the corresponding levels of accomplishment. Case in point: The \$3.4 million FY 2022 budget represents nearly a threefold increase in the amount of conservation we could facilitate with our base USFWS funding. As such, we will fully embrace and refine the RWBJV model in the coming year to deliver high impact results and sustainability over the long run. In total, the RWBJV will leverage \$3.4 million for actions associated with the goals outlined in the FFY 23 AOP. This is approximately \$20,000 over the expenses outlined in the above budget. These funds are part of the 1234 carryover funds from the

2022 USFWS allocation and will not be expended this fiscal year. Grant Administration from the NFWF and NET grants will be rolled into the RWBJV General and Administrative Accounts based on federal or non-federal nature and used to support the RWBJV Office Manager position. A full itemized budget (estimated expenses and revenue) is provided as part of this AOP.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF ACRONYMS

Agriculture Conservation Easement Program	ACEP
Agriculture Land Easement	ALE
America the Beautiful	AtB
Annual Operation Plan	AOP
Biological and Engineering Team	BE-Team
Breeding Bird Survey	BBS
Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District	CNPPID
Central Platte Natural Resources District	CPNRD
Central Table Wetland Complex	CTP
Collaborative Conservation Grant Agreement	CCGA
Common Land Unit	CLU
Conservation Reserve Program	CRP
Cropland Data Layer	CDL
Decision Support Tool	DST
Ducks Unlimited	DU
Eastern Red Cedar	ERC
Ecological Services	ES
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	EQIP
Farm Service Agency	FSA
Federal Fiscal Year	FFY
Financial Assistance	FA
for Business of	FBO
Geographic Focus Area	GFA
Geographic Information System	GIS
Great Plains Grassland Initiative	GPGI
Habitat Management Plan	HMP
Habitat and Population and Evaluation Team	HAPET
Inventory and Monitoring Plan	IMP
Lower Loup Natural Resources District	LLNRD
Major Land Resource Area	MLRA
Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District	MNNRD
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	NFWF
National Wildlife Refuge	NWR
Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit	Coop Unit
Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition	NGLC
Natural Resources Districts	NRD
Natural Resources Conservation Service	NRCS
Nebraska Community Foundation	NCF
Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy	NDEE
Nebraska Department of Natural Resources	NDNR
Nebraska Environmental Trust	NET
Nebraska Forest Service	NFS

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission	NGPC
North American Wetlands Conservation Act Grant	NAWCA
Partners for Fish and Wildlife	PFW
Platte River Recovery and Implementation Program	PRRIP
Pheasants Forever	PF
Prescribed Burn Association	PBA
Private Lands Workgroup	PLWG
Rainwater Basin Joint Venture	RWBJV
Rainwater Basin Wetland Complex	RWB
Range Allotment Management Plan	RAMP
Rangeland Analysis Platform	RAP
Rangeland Brush Assessment Toolbox	RaBET
Regional Conservation Partnership Program	RCPP
Return on Investment	ROI
Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation	RUSLE
State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement CRP	SAFE
Species Distribution Models	SDM
Sandhills Task Force	STF
Southwest Playa Wetland Complex	SWP
Technical Assistance	TA
Tri-Basin Natural Resources District	TBNRD
Prescribed Fire Training Exchange	TREX
The Nature Conservancy	TNC
Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District	UBBNRD
United States Department of Agriculture	USDA
United States Forest Service	USFS
United States Fish and Wildlife Service	USFWS
United States Geological Survey	USGS
Volunteer Fire Department	VFD
Variable Rate Irrigation	VRI
Waterfowl Production Area	WPA
Wetland Management District	WMD
Wetland Reserve Easement Program	WREP
Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program	WREP
Wetland Reserve Program	WRP
Wildlife Incentives Nebraska	WIN
Wildlife Management Area	WMA
Working Lands for Wildlife	WLFW
World Wildlife Fund	WWF