



PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM

Wet Meadow Working Group Meeting Notes

ED Office Conference Room

September 18, 2012

Attendees

Mike Besson – State of Wyoming (TAC Chair)

Jerry Kenny – ED

Chad Smith – ED Office

Jason Farnsworth – ED Office

Dave Baasch – ED Office

Tim Tunnel – ED Office

Bruce Sackett – ED Office

Jim Jenniges – Nebraska Public Power District

Mark Czaplewski – Central Platte Natural Resource District

Matt Rabbe – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Rich Walters – Nature Conservancy

Duane Woodward – Nebraska Wildlife Federation

Mark Peyton – Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District

Mike Fritz – Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Mary Harner – Crane Trust

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Besson called the meeting to order.

Vegetation Monitoring

Farnsworth led the discussion and described the background on vegetation monitoring on Program wet meadow and other grassland habitat as well as what was needed in order to develop an RFP and monitoring protocols.

- Rabbe – the vegetation monitoring idea came about when the WMWG did a site visit at Binfield and the group agreed that it was wet meadow habitat and should be managed as it had in the past to maintain the existing vegetation community.
- Peyton – Kent Pfeiffer (Trust researcher) couldn't find a change in plant community composition after 10 years of implementing management actions.
- Farnsworth – the group should discourage people from trying to associate changes in plant community composition with specific management actions without intensive, long-term research because it will be difficult to link the two given the potential influence abiotic factors (i.e., precipitation, temperature, etc.) may have on results.
- Jenniges – the Program needs to define what change we want/need to detect over time.
- Farnsworth – the group appears to support monitoring grassland sites on a community scale and track invasive/noxious species; all agreed.
- Fritz – the Program should implement management actions that support diversity; Farnsworth and others stated Program grazing management has been pretty well thought out and include rest/rotation/fire regimes to provide diversity.



- Walters – the Program should use National Vegetation Classification Standard definitions to classify vegetation communities.
- Tunnel – EDO staff contacted Kay Kottas and will ask her to submit a proposal based on meeting discussions, but if other had a suggestion they should let us know.
- Rabbe and others – we should monitor grassland sites in 2013, 2016, and 2019; all agreed.

Wet Meadows White Paper

Farnsworth led the discussion and presented background information on how/why the EDO developed the white paper and highlighted methods and results that seemed to stand out.

- Harner – the results are evident that the loss of water has resulted in a huge social, economic, and environment and that it would cost about 25 million dollars to reach Service Target Flow objectives, but they do not capture historic water availability; Farnsworth stated applying the model to historic water availability isn't a good idea where price is related to availability.
- Jenniges and others – price is likely exponentially related to water availability.
- Jenniges – results of this investigation seem to indicate there is more characteristics observed in wet meadow habitat than ground water levels; factors such as site specific ground water contours likely play a role. Jenniges asked if contours at sites such as Cottonwood Ranch and Mormon Island were similar; Woodward stated ground water contours are likely dissimilar and that seasonal impacts effect the shape of ground water contours.
- Rabbe – whooping crane use of wet meadow areas has occurred primarily in the spring when water areas appear to be more available and the Program should verify the relationships and look into ways to provide water areas within wet meadows to increase whooping crane use.
- Farnsworth – the investigation was a starting point for future discussions to determine what drives open water habitat availability (e.g., precipitation, river flows, etc.) and how best the Program can provide habitat conditions whooping cranes would select for (e.g. flow, pumping water, etc.).
- Czaplewski – results of this work should be presented to the ISAC and GC.
- Rabbe – there appears to be some uncertainty in the relationships between flow and ground water levels in wet meadows that should be investigated before the GC or others make decisions on whether to use flows or other means to provide wet meadow habitat conditions for whooping cranes.
- Czaplewski – the Program is planning to spend 60 million dollars on a reservoir project that is planned to be managed to manipulate Platte River flows and the GC should be informed about the results of this investigation.
- Jenniges – ISAC or others should peer review results of the investigation to determine its validity; Rabbe and others agreed, but stated the Program needed to confirm the modeled relationships with additional research.
- Farnsworth – the intent of the investigation was to look at similarities and differences between site conditions and to evaluate the expected response of ground water levels to water releases.
- Rabbe and Harner - The Program should install additional ground water monitoring wells on Program grassland areas to confirm assumptions and relationships reported in past research and used in this modeling effort; the group agreed.
- Rabbe – the ISAC and GC should see results of the investigation so long it is clear that results are pending an outside (i.e., ISAC or others) review and the Program will use future ground water monitoring results to confirm the relationships between ground water levels and flows.



- Jenniges and others – need to determine where existing ground water wells are located and where the Program should install new wells.

BREAK

Flooding Potential Whooping Crane Habitat

Farnsworth led the discussion and presented mentioned EDO staff is still looking at opportunities to flood cornfield areas as outlined in the AMP, but currently the Program didn't have any areas that would work. Farnsworth also introduced the idea of pumping water onto some of the lowland wet meadow areas the Program manages such as Binfield and Cottonwood Ranch.

- Jenniges –we need to determine what the objective of flooding wet meadow habitat would be;
- Rabbe – objective would be to provide water areas within the wet meadows to potentially increase whooping crane use of the CPR.
- Fritz – need pump water during timeframes that we don't impact vegetation communities within the wet meadow habitat; Farnsworth stated water areas would only be provided during the WC migration seasons when vegetation is dormant and that the Program would only add water to lowland areas that are typically inundated during wet springs.
- Rabbe –the Program should consider adding bentonite or organic wetland soils to targeted wetland creation/restoration areas to create improve wetland hydrology and jump start wetland creation/restoration; Farnsworth said we plan to replace and pack the top soil at the Fox tract to see if that helps with water retention and jump starts the wetland restoration process.
- The group agreed that adding water to wet meadow areas would be fine if implemented during the whooping crane migration seasons.

Whooping Crane Monitoring Protocol Habitat Classifications

Baasch led the discussion and proposed the Program merge a few of the habitat classifications currently used by the whooping crane monitoring crew (e.g., merge herbaceous riparian, lowland grasses, and mown lowland grasses into lowland grassland; merge emergents, open water/pit/pond/lake, and emergents into palustrine wetland, etc.) that currently overlap so that the landcover classification scheme used in the field would be less subjective and open to interpretation and also so Program data would be more consistent.

- Jenniges – we could merge landcover classes during the data analysis process, but should leave them at a finer scale for the monitoring crew.
- Rabbe and Jenniges – could use location data to determine habitat classification at a later time.
- Farnsworth – the biggest issue seems to be with the scale used to classify the use sites, at a fine scale a use site may be classified as emergents and at a broader scale it may be a water area within a wet meadow or lowland grassland. Farnsworth stated we may need to classify habitat at 2 scales in our analysis which could be done at the fine scale we could use field classifications and at the broader scale use GIS classifications.
- The group decided to leave the classification scheme as is.