



PHOTO: ANDREAS KRAPPWEIS

Teamwork: Ducks Unlimited's Winter Wheat Initiative

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

For wildlife conservationists, the healthy diversity of grassland bird species in predominantly crop-producing areas is a major concern. While livestock grazing is seen as compatible with nesting habitat, field crops are generally not. Tillage, planting, harvesting and other field passes all make any longer-term bird residence impossible.

"The impact on birds has been known a long time in the research, dating back to 1918," said James DeVries, regional research biologist at Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) in Stonewall, Manitoba, Canada.

However, there is one popular crop that is easy on the birds that became focus of a special initiative by DUC and Bayer CropScience started in 2009, particularly in the Prairie Pothole Region stretching from Alberta, Canada, through north-central Iowa, including the entire East River of South Dakota.

DeVries and Paul Thoroughgood, DUC regional agronomist, gave an update on the DUC Winter Wheat Initiative last week.

The initiative covers Alberta and Saskatchewan, North and South Dakota, encouraging producers to grow winter wheat as way to combine profit and conservation. Winter wheat, seeded in the fall and harvested in mid-summer of the next year, already accounts for up to 80 percent of total U.S. wheat production and is produced from Canada through the Gulf Coast.

"When you look around the world, most wheat is winter wheat," Thoroughgood said.

DUC's primary interest in promoting winter wheat began in duck conservation, but DUC research has found that other grassland birds species, including ring-necked pheasants, that typically try to nest in crop stubble will choose winter wheat stands if given the option.

"By reducing spring tillage operations, fall-seeded crops have the potential to increase hatching success," DeVries said.

DUC research, conducted in 1996 to

native. There is also a long list of grassland birds species that like winter wheat as a nesting habitat, from the mourning dove and ringneck pheasant to the killdeer and western meadowlark.

Although winter wheat was already well-established as a viable crop when the DUC initiative began, Thoroughgood says there have been challenges in promoting the crop to producers. Particularly in the Northern Plains, winter wheat is not as

popular as spring wheat, though both crops are equally successfully grown here. Producers concerns align with time management in juggling spring-seeded/fall-harvested crops with the winter wheat timeline, fears of dry-growing conditions and rumors of high rates of winter kill with

winter wheat.

"The actual annual winter kill was 9 percent from 1998 to 2012," Thoroughgood said. "Needless to say, that's an acceptable rate of risk."

The real challenge of growing winter wheat, he says, are the same as any crop: pest management, but only because producers tend to forget about this aspect in the winter. A major advantage of growing winter wheat is diversification and utilizing the same number of acres for more income potential. By itself, winter wheat is very profitable, gleaming almost \$100 more in profit per acre over spring wheat.

"But it is not a cheap crop to grow," Thoroughgood warned, meaning it's not a crop that a producer can plant, forget about over the winter and expect to reap big yields at harvest. Like other high-input crops, it requires seed treatments, fertilizer applications, pest management and attention.

Evolution of DUC's Winter Wheat Initiative

- 1991 — DUC includes winter wheat in its Prairie Care Recommendations
- 1992 — DUC begins funding winter wheat variety development
- 1994 — DUC partners with the Saskatchewan Winter Cereals Growers Association in promoting winter wheat
- 2009 — DUC partners with Bayer CropScience in developing the Wheat Initiative

1999 in Canada, compared cropland duck nesting in spring-seeded versus fall-seeded crops and found that winter wheat was a much-preferred habitat with a nest distribution of one hatched nest per 16 acres and a 38 percent nest survival. Fall rye saw one hatched nest per 56 acres with an 18 percent nest survival. And spring wheat saw one hatched nest per 694 acres with a 12 percent nest survival. About 13 percent of nests in spring-seeded crop stubble were destroyed by tillage.

Additional DUC research, done in 2011 and 2012 in North Dakota, found nesting rates in winter wheat — one hatched nest per 37 acres — to be comparable with perennial cover: one hatched nest per 22 acres.

DeVries' own data shows that most duck species thrive in winter wheat. And while mallard ducks prefer tree habitats, they will choose winter wheat as an alter-

Commentary

Short Season Hits Christmas Tree Farmers

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

While many farmers in the area are either done for the year or in a quiet lull before calving season, for some, this is the busiest time of the year. For Christmas tree farmers, there are only four sale weekends a year, between Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve — just one month to make the past 11 months of tree work worth it.

I admit this is all new to me. My family never took part in the Christmas tree industry. Growing up, we all loaded into the pickup truck and drove around the countryside looking for the perfect cedar tree growing in someone's ditch, more often fence line it seems. My dad cut it down with a hand-saw and loaded it in the bed of the pickup and once we got home, there seemed to be a lot of cussing and cursing to get the tree into the tree stand but not leaning too far one way or another. Once it got into the house, and the needles were

vacuumed up, it was magical for us four kids: the smell of Christmas, the lights, garland, ornaments and tinsel. The tree was the center of our holiday traditions, and it was always a long-awaited family event.

My husband and I carried on this field cedar tree tradition for many years, but after our third child was born, we decided to purchase an artificial tree. The idea seemed like blasphemy, but for this time of our lives with several small children, it makes the most sense. Yet, I do miss the real tree.

The other day, at the gas station, I saw someone going home with their real tree probably purchased at a local tree farm and it brought back those memories of Christmas tree hunting. So I decided to check in to see how the Christmas tree industry is doing this past year. Turns out, according to the National Christmas Tree Association's weekly sales reports, though there has been some difficulty with "mold" rumors, the main sales barrier this winter has been the extreme cold and early season winter storms happening the past few weekends. The major positive has been an increasing

popularity to buy trees from local farmers rather than commercial outlets.

"Real trees seem to be back in style," said Steve Meier of Meier's Horse Shoe Pines in Jackson, Mo.

The late Thanksgiving date, shortening the sales season by a week, has been a real boon to some tree farms, though the anticipation is that sales will have leveled out the last weekend.

"Second weekend sales continue to be 40 percent ahead of second weekend in 2012, and unit sales are up 50 percent in spite of seasonably cold temperatures," said Blake Rafeld of Sugargrove Tree Farm in Ash-

land, Ohio. "Sales this coming weekend will determine if the sales increase is due to consumer demand or attributed to the late Thanksgiving date."

As for that mold problem, the National Christmas Tree Association says not to worry. Some farmers with true fir species have had difficulty with a soil fungus in low-lying areas of their operations, but overall, most farms and most trees sold will not have a problem. And if a retailer has raised tree prices due to root rot, the Association suggests shopping elsewhere. Learn more at www.realchristmastrees.org.



I-29 Dairy Conference In Sioux Falls

BROOKINGS — Planning for the ninth annual I-29 Dairy Conference to be held in Sioux Falls Jan. 15-16 is under way. The event will be held at the Best Western/Ramkota Inn in Sioux Falls and is a joint educational effort between Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota and SDSU Extension.

The overarching theme for this year's conference and our "I-29 Moo University" is focusing on the latest information in sustainable practices and programs that are available to dairy producers.

The Wednesday evening keynote will provide dairy producers and industry professionals with a better understanding of what is necessary to build a strong relationship with consumers. This point will be further addressed from a dairy producer's perspective on Thursday morning, and will be followed by sessions targeting the energy audit program now available to producers and the latest in recommended herd health practices.

Thursday afternoon will provide participants the opportunity to attend a variety of breakout sessions of their choice on topics including: Succession Planning, Using the Energy Audit on "My" Dairy Farm, Best Management Practices in Forage Selection Utilization, Understanding the New I-9 Requirements and Utilization of Cover Crops as part of the Forage Program.

There is a registration fee per person. Some state dairy associations are providing registration reimbursement to members who attend.

For hotel reservation contact the Best Western/Ramkota Hotel, Sioux Falls at 605-336-0650 and mention that rooms are reserved under: SDSU Dairy Science-I29 Dairy Conference. To receive this conference rate, reservations need to be made by Dec. 26.

Contact Tracey Renelt, SDSU Dairy Extension Field Specialist at 605-882-5140 or tracey.renelt@sdstate.edu.

Will Herds Expand Due To Better Prices?

BROOKINGS — On the production side of the beef industry, the focus has become whether the nation's beef cow herd will begin to grow and eventually result in more beef production, said Darrell R. Mark, Adjunct Professor of Economics at South Dakota State University.

"On the demand side of the industry, such growth could eventually mean an increase in beef consumption. However, even if beef cow numbers are modestly higher at the beginning of 2014, it will likely be 2016 before beef production, and therefore beef consumption, begins to increase," Mark explained.

In fact, Mark said beef consumption is forecasted to decline about 5 percent in 2014 to about 53 pounds per person (retail weight equivalent). In 2015, beef consumption could drop to 52 pounds per person.

The reason beef consumption is declining, Mark said, is because beef production has decreased as cattle feed costs have increased dramatically in recent years.

As a result, the reduced quantities of beef available have translated into record beef prices this year. From January through October, the price of all fresh retail beef averaged \$4.93 per pound.

Mark said consumer demand is a valid concern — one that is difficult to project for future years because it involves forecasting changing consumer tastes and preferences. However, available information about beef demand thus far in 2013 — while beef prices were continuously setting new record highs — Mark said would suggest that beef demand has been better than would have been expected.

"A number of factors will determine the demand for beef in the year to come, including consumer tastes and preferences, consumer disposable income, prices of competing meats, general economic conditions in the U.S. and around the globe, and foreign exchange rates," Mark said.

While these are not an inclusive list, Mark said most of these factors have created a bit of a headwind for beef demand in the last year. "So, given the strength of domestic beef demand at retail and good export market sales in this last year's challenging market environment, there is reason to be optimistic about beef demand in the year to come," he said.

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