The Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area project would accelerate the conservation of native prairie and wetlands within the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of North and South Dakota. The PPR, carved out by glaciers 10,000 years ago, is one of the world’s most productive breeding grounds for waterfowl and other wetland and grassland birds. Dakota Grasslands would protect this severely threatened ecosystem while preserving the working landscape of ranching and livestock operations.

Partners on the Dakota Grasslands project include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), private landowners, state game and fish agencies and conservation organizations. The project would conserve 240,000 acres of wetlands and 1.7 million acres of grasslands, primarily though USFWS conservation easements purchased from willing sellers. These voluntary easements prevent land conversion, such as wetland drainage and plowing the prairie, but the landowners retain all other rights of use and access.

Perpetual wetland and grassland easements are extremely popular among landowners in North and South Dakota. To date, more than 5,000 landowners have sold perpetual easements to USFWS, covering more than 960,000 acres. The primary limitation to meeting this landowner interest is funding.

Dakota Grasslands authorizes USFWS to purchase the easements using Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) dollars. The intent of this fund, established in 1965, was to dedicate a percentage of offshore oil and gas revenues to conservation. Additional project funding would come from federal duck stamp sales, North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants and contributions from organizations, but Dakota Grasslands would not meet its goals without congressional appropriation of significant LWCF revenue.

The Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area was proposed as an integral component of the U.S. Department of Interior’s America’s Great Outdoors Initiative, a national effort to protect some of America’s most treasured natural resources.

For more information, go to fws.gov/audubon/dakotagrassland.html