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More Waterfowl To Make Grand Prairie A Winter Home
Habitat, food and sanctuary are critical for long-term survival

MEMPHIS, Tenn., Wednesday, May 2, 2001 — During the 1920s winter duck populations peaked at between 2 and 3 million birds on Arkansas' Grand Prairie. Surveys conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission since, indicate that wintering populations declined to less than 250,000 during the 1990s.

Waterfowl used the prime habitat including the Grand Prairie and floodplains of the Arkansas River just to the south of the prairie and the White River to the east of the prairie. As more and more of the bottomland hardwoods were cleared, waterfowl came to depend on the food source provided by the rice field in the Grand Prairie. Now the rice production that made Stuttgart in the heart of the Grand Prairie the "Rice and Duck Capitol of the World" is in danger. The depletion of the ground water will reduce rice production by 77% in the Grand Prairie by 2015.

The Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Project (GPADP) will not only protect the rice production but has waterfowl features designed in part to bring back wintering waterfowl numbers to the region by increasing the number of on-farm reservoirs and making more surface water available to flood harvested rice fields each fall. In the process, this project will also reduce the local demand for groundwater, a declining resource beneath the region.

Mallard ducks – the most sought-after species by the thousands of hunters who annually visit Arkansas – have slowly improved their numbers since the 1950s and their North American population currently ranges between 9 and 11 million. About half of this population annually passes along the Mississippi Flyway, the continent's largest waterfowl migration corridor that tracks the Mississippi River drainage. Waterfowl biologists believe that more puddle ducks can be attracted to the Grand Prairie each fall

as more viable wetland habitat is created. Adequate supplies of surface water are environmentally and economically critical for this purpose.

Today, the Grand Prairie region contains approximately 250,000 acres of irrigated cropland, most of which farmers rotate between rice and soybean production. Whether flooded naturally by rainfall or intentionally by man, these fields can provide the needed winter habitat, sanctuary and food for migrating waterfowl.

The on-farm reservoirs associated with the GPADP will add nearly 9,000 acres of surface water to the region's 15,566-existing acres. This new construction will enable area farmers and landowners to annually flood about 38,500-additional acres of rice or soybean stubble for waterfowl. This flooding would help emulate historic flooding patterns that existed back during the 1920s.

Flooding new acreage on the Grand Prairie will help supplement the natural resources already available to waterfowl on agricultural lands, including the increased availability of waste grains and rice field invertebrates (snails and worms). The additional water will allow the fields to be flooded earlier both to reliably provide habitat earlier and allow more time for stubble decomposition and invertebrate growth. Waterfowl biologists at both the University of Missouri and Mississippi State University have shown that a winter-spring diet of invertebrates increases clutch sizes (the number of eggs laid in nests) on the breeding grounds. Meanwhile, their research has shown that seasonal flooding reduces unwanted weeds and grasses; reduced run off improves water quality as the slowed flow of water decreases soil erosion.

The GPADP will not replace the seasonally flooded bottomland hardwoods that have been cleared in this portion of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley.

What the GPADP will do, is significantly increase the amount of habitat available to waterfowl. More habitat will bring more ducks to the Grand Prairie region each fall and provide the flooded food source to have them stay longer and leave healthier.

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