

## **JOINING FORCES TO ACHIEVE WILDLIFE HABITAT RESTORATION**

Two large prescribed burns were conducted in mid-April in the Mud-Goose Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA), and in the Boy Bay area of Leech Lake to improve wildlife habitat. Intermixed land ownership is common on the Chippewa National Forest, providing opportunities for joint work. Part of a sustained effort that has existed since 1990, fire treatment of wet meadows involves burning mixed ownership lands that include Forest Service, State, Cass County, Leech Lake Indian Reservation, and private lands. The cooperative burn plan was developed in order to allow this important landscape ecosystem to be managed across boundaries.



Wet meadow ecosystems are fire-dependent communities occurring on the floodplains of streams and lakes. These are non-forested communities, dominated by sedges, grasses, and forbs. These meadows, when in suitable ecological condition, provide potential habitat for breeding waterfowl, as well as some rare bird species. Wet meadows serve as habitat for over 70 vertebrate wildlife species, including waterfowl, songbirds, raptors, shorebirds, small mammals, and fish. These areas are particularly important for breeding populations of ring-necked ducks, which need open meadows for nesting.

Ring-necked ducks are common diving ducks in Minnesota. They breed across the continent's northern forests, nesting in boggy marshes. Their nests are built amongst sedges or below leatherleaf or bog laurel. A recent study revealed that Mud-Goose WMA is among the top 3 waterfowl refuges used by locally produced ring-necks. In the fall, large concentrations of perhaps 500,000 or more ring-necked ducks are found in Minnesota, using our shallow lakes and wild rice during their migration south from Canada.

Large expanses of wet meadows are relatively uncommon on the Chippewa National Forest. Fire control results in a gradual conversion away from an open condition, dominated by sedges, grasses, and forbs, to a shrub-dominated community. Periodically applying prescribed fire to the meadows sets back the brush, maintaining the open community and all the wildlife associated with this habitat.

This spring's burn involved over 4,400 acres of wet meadows, ignited using a helicopter equipped with a plastic sphere dispenser (PSD). The PSD dispenses ping pong balls filled with flammable liquid, which ignite after they are dropped into the meadows. Ignition is specifically

timed to occur during spring conditions when the grassy meadows are relatively dry, and surrounding forest is quite wet. The meadow burns fairly vigorously, but the flames go out when they hit the woods. Ground crews of firefighters are deployed in strategic locations to help ensure the fire stays only where it is wanted.

Partial funding for this year's project was provided by the Secure Rural Schools Act, which allows counties to make investments in projects that enhance forest ecosystems. A committee reflecting diverse interests, known as a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) selected this project, as well as 24 other projects, for funding under this Act. Additional funding was provided by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the Chippewa National Forest.

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