



A wetland on the Fotheringham farm. As part of Ducks Unlimited Canada's No Drain No Fill agreements, landowners can cultivate into the wetland basin in drier years but can't fill the pothole.

New program offers maximum benefits

A CONSERVATION EASEMENT WITH BUILT-IN FLEXIBILITY IS PRODUCER FRIENDLY

By Shel Zolkewich

In the thick of Manitoba's Prairie Pothole Region, the whims of weather deal a mighty blow to farmers on this landscape dotted with thousands of shallow wetland basins. Sometimes they're wet; sometimes they're dry. But predicting seasonal moisture levels from year to year is all but impossible.

"We realize we're farming in pothole country. It's poorly drained land," says Gregg Fotheringham, who along with his wife Nellie, have a grain and oilseed operation near Reston, Man. "The last three out of four years, we've been wet like we've never seen. I would call it monumentally wet."

Fotheringham is one of the first landowners to take advantage of Ducks Unlimited Canada's (DUC) new version of a conservation easement that has built-in flexibility. The No Drain No Fill (NDNF) agreement allows landowners to cultivate into the wetland basin in drier years but doesn't go as far as allowing potholes to be filled. It's different from a No Break No Drain (NBND) easement that maintained a perimeter around the wetland regardless of annual moisture conditions.

"We're protecting wetlands from the greatest threat which is drainage," says Mark Francis, head of conservation programs for Manitoba. "Even though the fringes may have been cultivated, undrained wetlands are fairly resistant. The vegetation is still there and will respond in wet conditions."

The Prairie Pothole Region stretches across four states and three provinces to support more than 50 per cent of North America's migratory waterfowl. Francis says DUC hopes to have 4,000 new acres under conservation agreements this year in this critical area.

"There's a high density of shallow wetlands here that are important for breeding waterfowl," he says. "They are at risk of being drained because of high land values in the area."

It's a program made possible with funding from the federal Natural Areas Conservation Program. The program was launched in 2007 with a vision of investing in direct, on-the-ground action to conserve important natural habitat in communities across southern Canada. Government funding was renewed in 2013. So far, there's been more than \$600 million invested in conservation activity through combined funding contributions and land donations.

The new NDNF easements offer landowners a one-time payout based on individual assessments that take into account wetland types and value to waterfowl. Agreements are signed in perpetuity.

Fotheringham first heard about the new program through radio advertisements. After meeting with DUC and having several family discussions, the Fotheringhams decided this was the right fit.

"We've seen as much of 800 acres of our property under water," he says. "This agreement doesn't limit the producer. When it dries up, we can go back and farm those acres."

Fotheringham says he considered the partnership with DUC with the help of his son Jamie, who recently joined the operation.

"It's an agreement in perpetuity, so we really had to look to the future. The most serious question we had was if this would affect land values if we wanted to sell. We came to the conclusion that it would not. Everyone around here knows that we don't farm 160 acres on these quarters," he says.

Fotheringham says he likes to think of his family as conservation-minded. He's worked with the Virden chapter of DUC and is past president of the Manitoba North Dakota Zero Tillage Farmers Association. He's also held posts with the West Souris River Conservation District.

"I applaud DU for coming up with something that is really producer-friendly. No one has ever come up with something that works this well for us before," he adds.