

WRP Management in Nebraska: *Past, Present, and Future*

**The Wetlands Reserve Program's history in
Nebraska. Where have we been, where are we
now, and where are we going?**

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WRP Management Biologist**

What is WRP?

- **The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program to assist eligible landowners in restoring and protecting wetlands.**
 - **The primary vehicle for protecting wetlands is the use of conservation easements on wetland properties.**
 - **Permanent: Pays up to 100% of the agricultural value of the land and 100% of the costs for restoration. This property is permanently protected and will remain as wildlife habitat.**
 - **30 Year Easement: Pays up to 75% of the agricultural value of the land and 75% of the costs for restoration.**
 - **Conservation Program Contract (CPC): 10 year management agreement, no easement on the property, pays for restoration work.**

WRP Conservation Easements

- **Landowners sell NRCS most of the rights to their property, yet they retain ownership and the right to peaceful recreation.**
- **Because the land rights have been sold to NRCS. Landowners who want to perform management actions (burning, grazing, tree clearing, etc.) on the property, need to seek a Compatible Use Authorization (CUA).**

Compatible Use Authorizations (CUA)

- **The CUA makes sure that the management activity will be compatible with the purpose of the easement: providing wildlife habitat.**
 - **The current CUA approval process is generated by the field office agent or landowner.**
 - **That request is sent to the NRCS state office in Lincoln for approval.**
 - **Because the CUA needs to be reviewed and signed by the state conservationist this process can take weeks to get signed and returned to the field office.**
 - **So, at the field office the request for management involves paperwork and waiting for a response.**

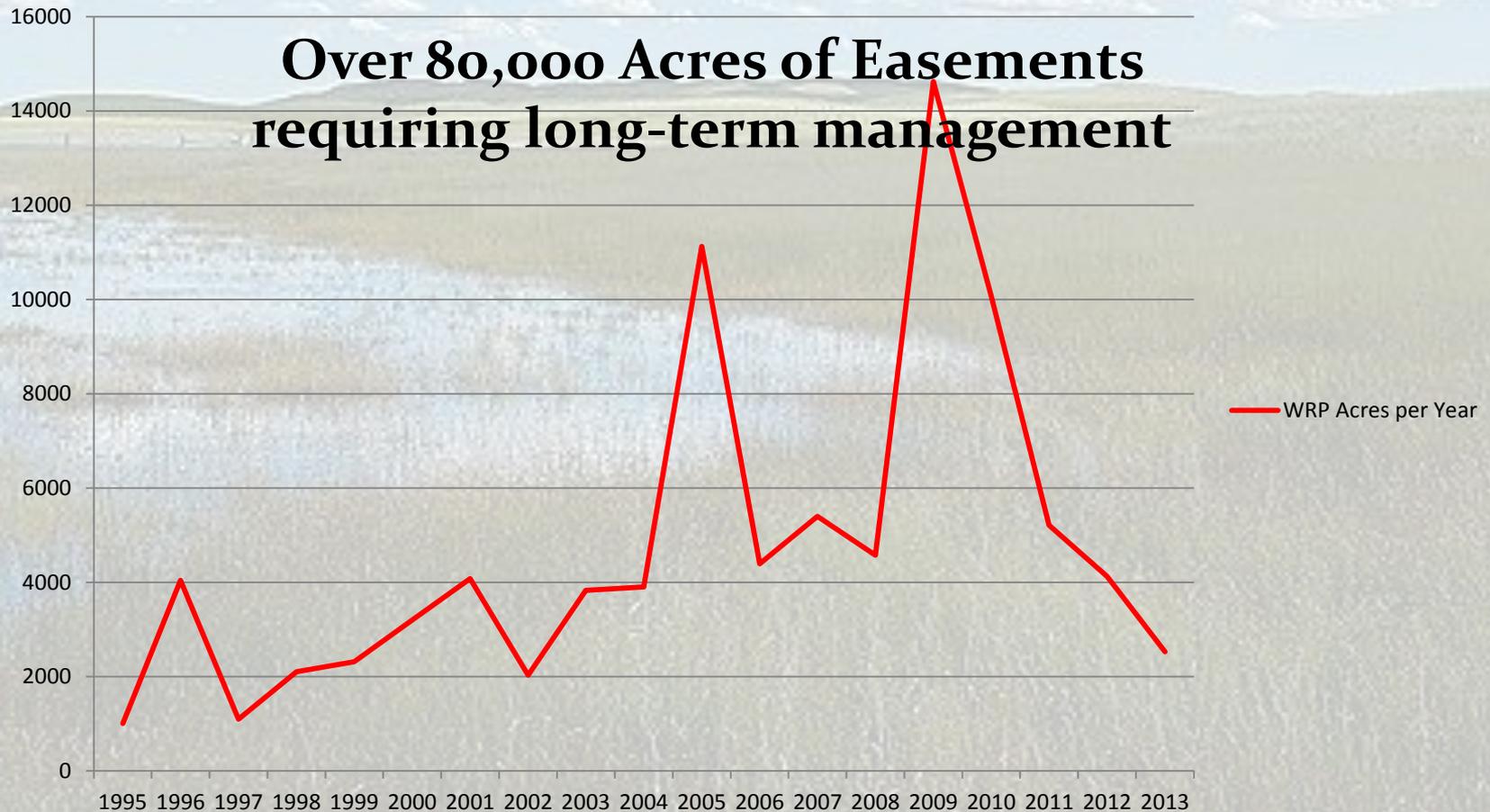
History of WRP in Nebraska

- **WRP was authorized in 1993, as an emergency response to flooding events that year.**
- **NRCS in Nebraska pushed for a goal of 100,000 acres in WRP.**
- **Nebraska staff did a great job of maintaining funding to keep WRP acquisitions going, making for a dramatic upward trend in projects in a short period of time.**

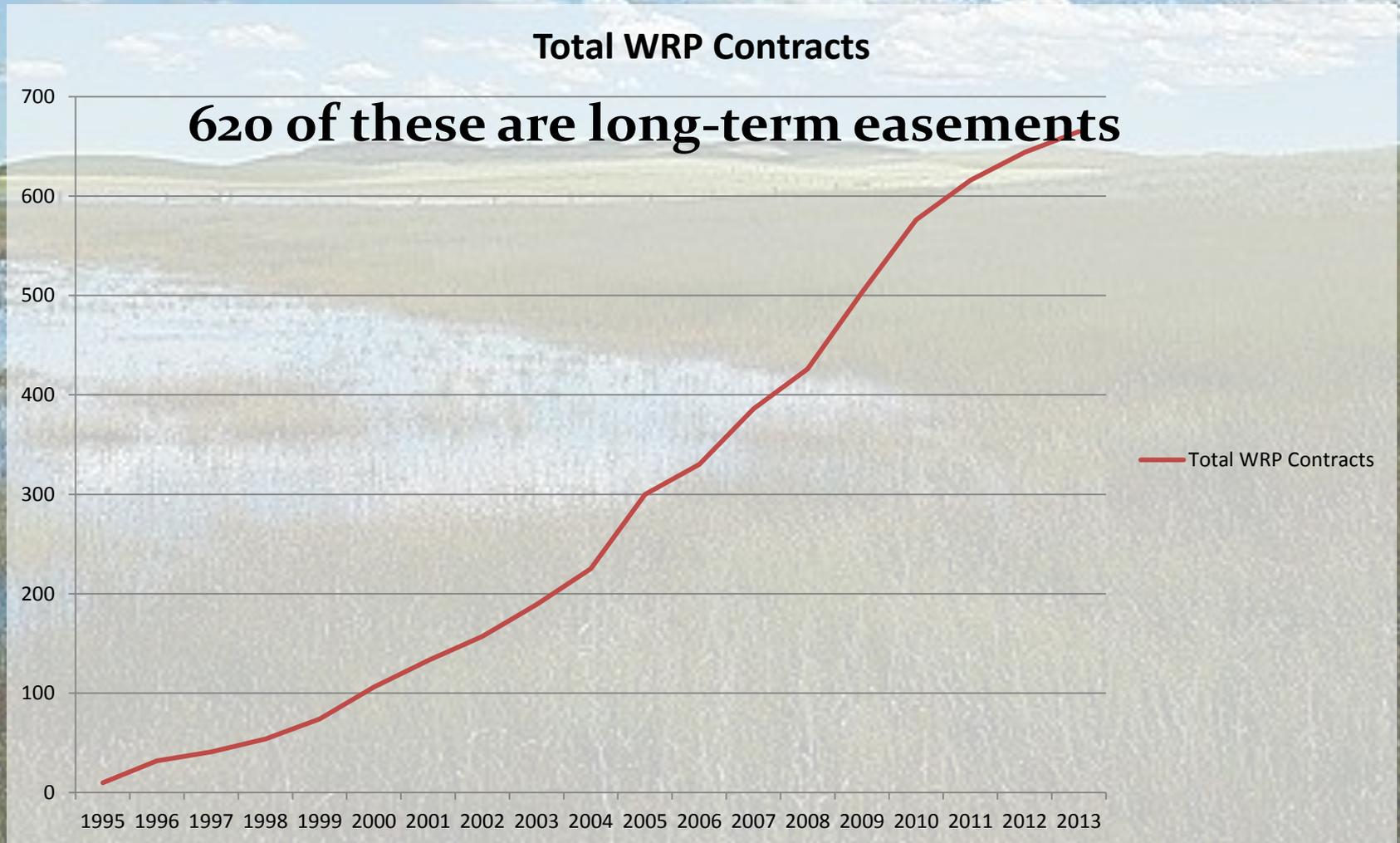
Plenty of WRP to Work With

WRP Acres Gained per Year

**Over 80,000 Acres of Easements
requiring long-term management**



WRP's Increasing Workload



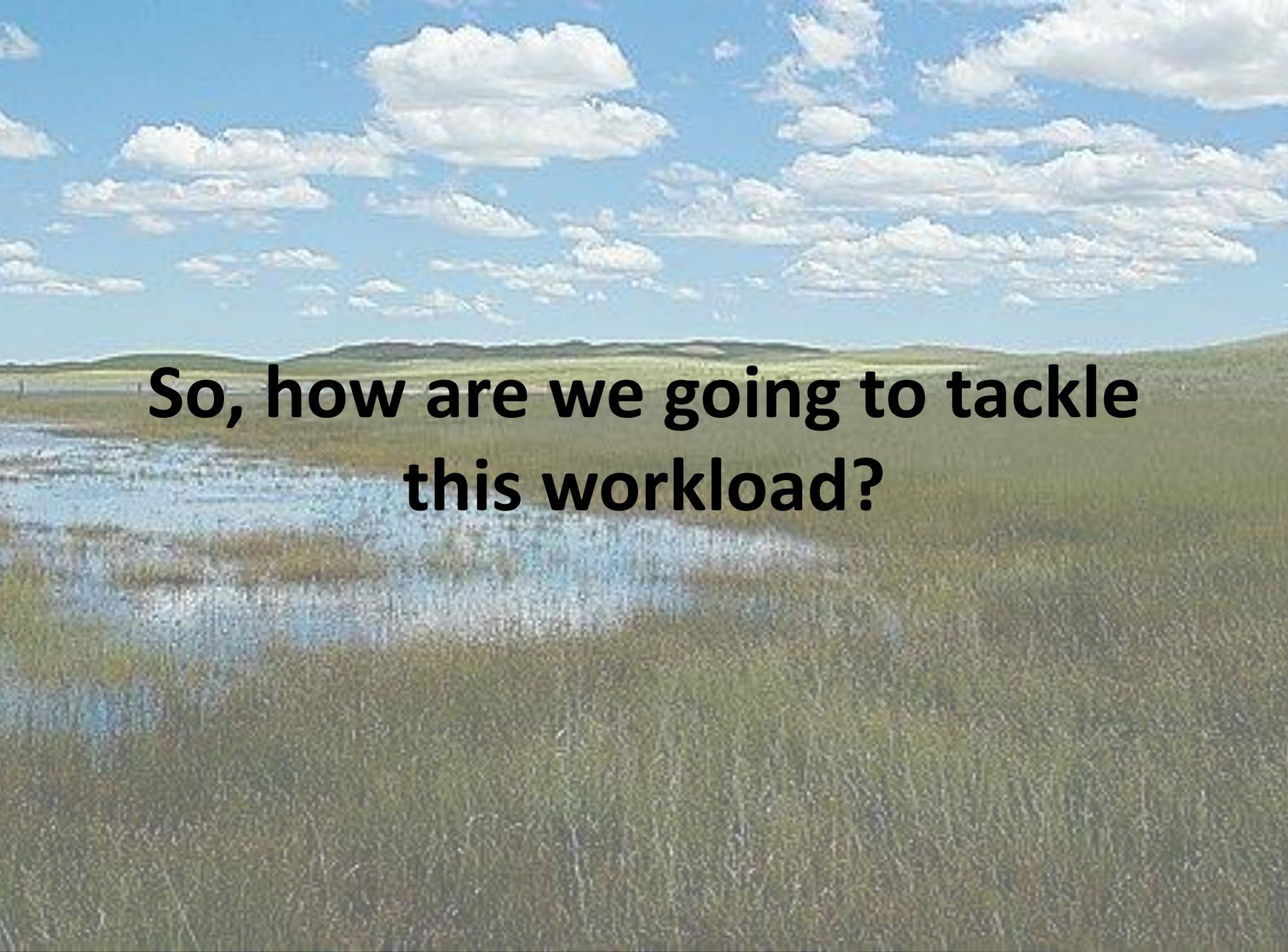
So, where does that put us now?

80,000+ acres in 620 contracts that require regular management when workloads are already full.



Trying Something New...

- **So, several partners (NRCS, the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, USFWS, and NE Game & Parks) came together to find funding to add a management biologist position to address this workload issue.**
- **I was brought on in late September to begin assisting WRP Team Leaders with their management backlogs.**

A landscape photograph showing a blue sky with scattered white clouds, a green field, and a blue stream or wetland area in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the image.

**So, how are we going to tackle
this workload?**

Challenges Ahead

- **Managing 80,000 acres over a landscape the size of Nebraska does present a significant challenge.**
- **So, we are focusing on priority areas where workloads are high and the overall number of projects represents a large management obstacle.**
- **We're also trying to streamline the CUA process to make it more efficient and user friendly.**

Individual Management Plans

- **Individual sites without comprehensive management plans are going to have them written. Plans represent the ecology of the wetland landscape that the WRP site resides in as well as site specific plans for management.**
- **The detailed 5-year plan for each site provides an opportunity to streamline the authorization of CUAs. This makes the process much more efficient and empowers Team Leaders to grant authorizations at the field office level.**

Individual Management Plans (cont.)

- **Individual management plans will alter the entire CUA process. Going forward the CUA will authorize the management plan; thus any action outlined in the management plan will be allowable as long as it fits the parameters detailed in the plan.**
 - **Rather than send authorization requests to the state office each time a practice is requested, the field offices will be able to sign off on management actions. This will be much more efficient and empower field office personnel to work with landowners to get maintenance done.**

Helping to Get Management Done

- **Working with Landowners.** The best option for long term success of an easement is working closely with landowners to get them engaged in to the management of the site. This is done through landowner cost-share agreements.
- **For landowners who choose not to be involved in the management there is an alternate process:**
 - IDIQ – federal contracting process to get work done on the landscape.

Helping to Get Management Done

- I'm going to help get management work done by coordinating federal contractors through the IDIQ process.
 - this approach will take some work off the Team Leaders' hands.
 - A new IDIQ process will focus heavily on the quality of the work being done. Emphasis will key in on the timing of work and provides quality guidelines that define what needs to be done.

Getting the work done

- **Trees are the greatest maintenance challenge across the state (green ash, cottonwood, and Siberian elm)**
- **Management actions include:**
 - **Prescribed Burning**
 - **Chemical Application**
 - **Shredding**
 - **Mechanical Clearing**



Invasive Species

- **Phragmites, Reed Canary Grass, River Bulrush, Narrow-leaf Cattail, and others need control to maintain a healthy plant community on a site.**
 - **Main control actions include:**
 - Intensive grazing
 - Spraying
 - Prescribed Burning
 - Tillage

WRP's future in Nebraska

- **The new Farm Bill**
 - **WRP will become part of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**
 - **There will be funding available for additional conservation easements and habitat work for wetlands in Nebraska.**
 - **Reserved Rights Grazing will be allowed statewide. Landowners maintain grazing rights to their property. The program pays 75% of the ag cost of the land for permanent easements.**
 - **This program allows for some landowner flexibility for landowners with a interest in maintaining grazing rights.**

The future looks bright

- **There's a lot to look forward to for WRP management in Nebraska.**
 - **New partnerships will help to reduce the workload for WRP Teams.**
 - **Improving the paperwork process should make management more efficient.**
 - **The future looks both exciting and challenging but we hope that the results of these new efforts will be an improvement for WRP in Nebraska.**

A wide landscape of tall grasses and a blue water body under a blue sky with white clouds. The foreground is dominated by tall, green grasses. A body of blue water is visible in the middle ground, reflecting the sky. The background shows rolling green hills under a bright blue sky filled with scattered white clouds. The word "Questions?" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Questions?