



Crop Insurance and Wildlife: Swift Fox at Risk

Crop insurance subsidies are taking center stage during the 2012 Farm Bill debate as the structure of farm support payments changes. The Agriculture, Food, Reform and Jobs Act of 2012 passed by the Senate in June, eliminated direct payments, and legislation passed by the House Agriculture Committee in July did the same. With direct payments gone, both the Senate and the House Agriculture Committee bills increased crop insurance subsidies – a change that encourages farmers to plow up habitat that is valuable for species such as the swift fox.

Grassland Conversion Threatens Swift Fox

Once abundant, swift fox now only inhabit about 60% of their former range.ⁱ They rely on shortgrass and mixed-grass prairies of the Great Plains for prey and shelter. As a generalist and opportunistic forager, swift fox hunt primarily in open plains for various mammals, birds, insects, plants, and carrion. A majority of this habitat overlaps with and has been greatly impacted by cropland and other habitat conversions.ⁱⁱ Subsidies are a driving force behind this habitat loss – a recent USDA report found that certain farm subsidies (crop insurance, marketing loans and disaster assistance payments) increased the conversion of wildlife habitat by 2.3 million acres in just a portion of the Northern Plains from 1997 to 2007.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent analysis shows that conversion of habitat to cropland is similarly high in swift fox range; counties in the swift fox range lost more than 900,000 acres of grassland, shrubland and wetland between 2008 and 2011.^{iv}



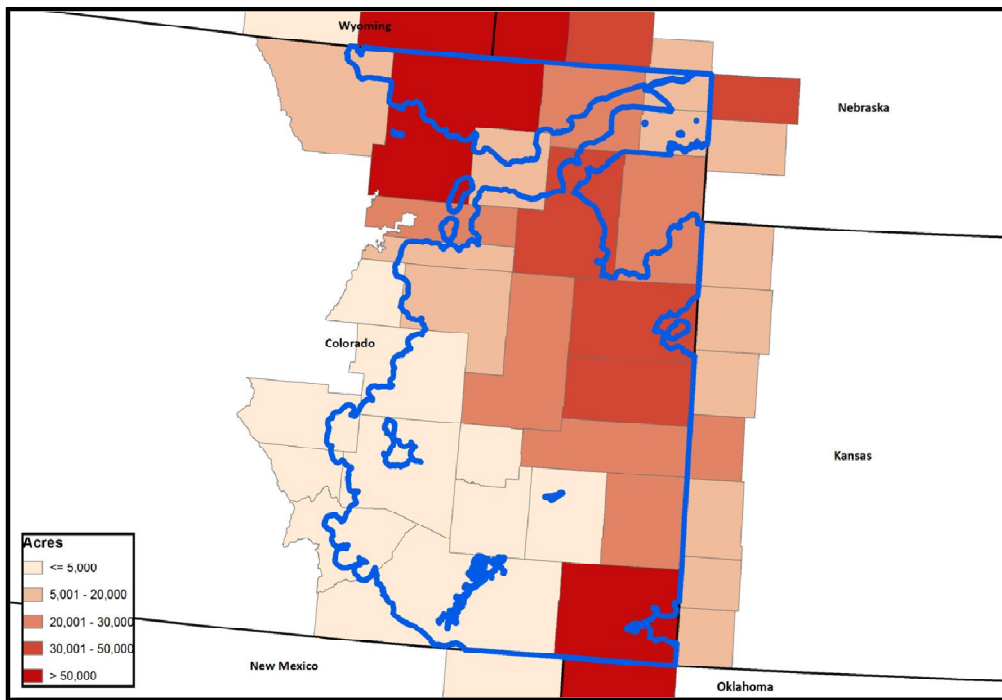
Swift fox. Photo by Lu Carbyn. Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sodsaver and Swampbuster: Tools to Protect Wildlife

In the past, farmers plowing up native grassland or draining wetlands would be denied certain subsidy payments, including direct payments, crop insurance, disaster payments and some farm loans. These programs, “sodsaver” and “swampbuster” respectively, became important tools in the fight to stem the loss of grasslands and wetlands and are part of “conservation compliance” requirements. Sodsaver denied payments on the newly plowed land, while Swampbuster was more effective because wetland conversion would result in the denial of all federal payments a farm would otherwise receive. The idea behind conservation compliance is that farmers receiving taxpayer support must take measures to protect environmental resources that provide valuable public benefits.

“Further conversion of grassland to cropland threatens the survival of swift foxes.”

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service –February 2006



Swift Fox Habitat on Converted Acres

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http://static.ewg.org/pdf/plowed_under.p

Compliance and Crop Insurance in the 2012 Farm Bill

The 1996 Farm Bill removed crop insurance subsidies from the list of farm payment programs that are subject to compliance provisions. With direct payments eliminated in both the Senate's and the House Agriculture Committee's version of the 2012 Farm Bill, the farm safety net has shifted to crop insurance. In many parts of the swift fox's current range farmers receive more in crop insurance subsidies than in direct payments^v and without conservation compliance provisions attached to crop insurance subsidies, these farmers will have an even bigger incentive to plow up native grasslands.

Conservation requirements under sodsaver, swampbuster and conservation compliance have been proven to protect clean water, prevent soil erosion and preserve wildlife on millions of acres of America's farmland. As a result of a bipartisan floor amendment, the Senate version of the 2012 Farm Bill reestablishes the link between conservation compliance provisions to crop insurance subsidies. Unfortunately the House Agriculture Committee bill fails to do so, compounding the threats that species like the swift fox and sage grouse are already facing from habitat loss.

More Information on the Farm Bill

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ⁱ US Fish and Wildlife. 2005. Swift Fox (*Vulpes velox*) accessed July 9, 2012. <http://www.fws.gov/southdakotafieldoffice/SwiftFox.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Carbyn, Ludwig N., and Marsha A. Sovada. *The Swift Fox: Ecology and Conservation of Swift Foxes in a Changing World*. Regina, Sask.: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Claassen, R., Carriazo, F. Cooper, J. and Hellerstein, D. 2011. Do Farm Programs Encourage Native Grass Losses? Amber Waves: The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources and Rural America. U.S. Economic Research Service. Accessed at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2011-september/native-grassland.aspx> on July 5, 2012.

^{iv} Faber, S., Rundquist, S., Male, T. 2012. Plowed Under: How Crop Subsidies Contribute to Massive Habitat Losses. Environmental Working Group and Defenders of Wildlife. Accessed at http://static.ewg.org/pdf/plowed_under.pdf on August 6, 2012.

^v Claassen, R. 2012. The Future of Environmental Compliance Incentives in U.S. Agriculture: The Role of Commodity, Conservation and Crop Insurance Programs. U.S. Economic Research Service. Accessed at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib-economic-information-bulletin/eib94.aspx> on July 9, 2012.