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New Survey Reveals High Landowner Demand for Playa Conservation

A new survey commissioned by the [Playa Lakes Joint Venture](#) (PLJV) found that most landowners with playas on their properties are willing to conserve them, and many say the wetlands are a positive presence on the land, primarily because they attract wildlife.

The data signal that playa landowners are a potentially significant market for wetlands and wildlife conservation programs, like those offered through the U.S. Farm Bill, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, state Landowner Incentive Programs and other private lands conservation programs.

“The results are encouraging for wildlife and wetlands conservation, especially going into the next Farm Bill reauthorization process,” said PLJV Coordinator Mike Carter. “I think we and our partners need to ensure that wetlands and playa conservation programs are given greater attention in the next Farm Bill.”

Based on the results of the “High Plains Landowner Survey 2006: Farmers, Ranchers and Conservation,” a majority of playa landowners (74 percent) were willing (28 percent ‘highly’ and 46 percent ‘moderately’) to plant native grass buffers around playas if given an incentive, which is what Farm Bill programs like the Farmable Wetlands Program and Wetlands Conservation Non-Floodplain Initiative - otherwise known as CP23a - do. Grass buffers protect playas by filtering out eroded soils from surrounding cropland that can wash into and bury playa basins, and by filtering out contaminants from irrigation and storm water runoff.

Survey data also revealed that landowners like playas and the wildlife they attract. Sixty-eight percent of playa landowners say that the wetlands are an ‘overall positive’ feature on the landscape, with wildlife being the top benefit. Also, landowner (playa and non-playa owners) willingness was fairly significant for many other conservation practices such as removing invasive plant species (52 percent willing) and implementing grazing management plans (48 percent willing).

Survey data also revealed that although landowners are concerned about the future of the Ogallala Aquifer, not all understand playas’ crucial role in groundwater recharge. Of 13 possible resources that might warrant additional conservation effort, landowners said they supported ‘more conservation than now’ for only one—the Ogallala Aquifer. However, about 50 percent of landowners did not know whether or not playas recharged groundwater, when in fact playas are the primary source of recharge for the aquifer.

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“We certainly have our work cut out for us in educating landowners about [playas’ link to the aquifer](#), and that by protecting playas, landowners are protecting their bottom line,” Carter said. “We expect that as more landowners understand this link, we might see a change in how they perceive playas. Perhaps recharge will begin to edge out wildlife in landowners’ minds as the most important playa benefit. And perhaps we’ll see even greater landowner willingness to conserve playas.”

Bill Smithton, an Oklahoma farmer who manages land in Harper County, needs no convincing about the benefits of playa conservation to his operation. Smithton enrolled his 160-acre playa into the CP23a program last year.

“Setting the playa aside makes good business sense,” Smithton said in a recent interview on [Playa Country](#) radio. “You certainly can’t count on it from one year to the next, and the past four years in a row it’s been un-farmable and still is. Setting it aside and enrolling it into a conservation program allows me to better manage my situation.”

Smithton does not hesitate in urging other playa landowners to follow in his footsteps.

“If one has a playa lake, I’d tell him he should consider enrolling it into a playa conservation program. It wouldn’t be in for long before he realizes the direct benefits,” he said.

The High Plains Landowner Survey was conducted from March through May, 2006, by DJ Case and Associates on behalf of the PLJV. The 21-question survey was mailed to 1,800 landowners randomly selected from a Farm Service Agency list of agricultural producers in a six-state region that includes portions of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Final response was 26 percent (429 respondents). Confidence level for this sample is +/-2 to 5 percentage points. Complete survey results and executive summary are available on the PLJV’s web site: www.pljv.org.

[Playas](#) are seasonal wetlands found in abundance throughout the Southern and Western High Plains. There are more than 60,000 playas, or 500,000 playa acres, in a six-state area of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Playas are the primary source of recharge for the Ogallala Aquifer and are critical habitat for migratory and resident birds and other wildlife in the region. More than 70 percent of all playas have been altered from their natural state and have lost much of their wetland values. Sedimentation is the number one threat to playas, and more than 50 percent of the wetlands have been buried by eroded soils and are effectively ‘fossilized’ and no longer function as wetlands.

The PLJV is a partnership of state and federal wildlife and agriculture agencies, national and local conservation groups, businesses and private landowners dedicated to conserving playas, other wetlands and grasslands for the benefit of birds, other wildlife and people in the Southern and Western High Plains. Since the JV’s inception in 1989, the partnership has raised nearly \$50 million to conduct more than 350 habitat conservation, research and outreach projects in the six-state playa lakes region. The playa lakes region includes: eastern Colorado and New Mexico, western Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. For more information, visit the PLJV web site: www.pljv.org.

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