

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT TO SEE IN A PLAYA?

Playas are unique and each one is different in size and function. They also change over time and function differently year to year or even season to season. They are very dynamic wetland ecosystems.

PLANT COMMUNITIES

The amount of timing of moisture dictates an individual playa's plant community. The wetter playas support barnyard grass, smartweed, bulrush, cattail, spikerush, arrowhead and knotgrass. The dryer playas support woolly-leaf bursage, blueweed sunflower, western wheatgrass, buffalograss, curly-cup gumweed, frog-fruit and spotted primrose.

ANIMALS

Some animals spend their whole lives in playas; for others, playas are a critical habitat for feeding, breeding, resting, nesting, and escape cover.

Different animals can be seen during certain seasons, while other animals can be seen year-round. Some animals that might be seen in playa wetlands include:

1. Geese
2. Ducks
3. Shorebirds
4. Wading Birds
5. Mice
6. Pheasants
7. Rabbits
8. Hawks
9. Coyotes

WETLANDS CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE AND PROGRAMS

The NRCS offers the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to improve wetland areas and to help achieve the national goal of increasing wetland acres. WRP is a voluntary conservation easement program offering landowners the opportunity to restore degraded wetlands on their property. Of particular interest is restoring those wetlands which have been converted to agricultural use. Through the WRP program, the NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts.

Conservation practices applied through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) can also help improve or restore wetland functions and values.

Help for enhancing or restoring wetlands is available for any interested Texas landowner or group that wants to help to improve a wetland area. NRCS has offices in almost every county, with specialists trained in identifying wetlands and helping create management plans for them. The NRCS works in partnership with other agencies, tribes, local government, and the private sector to protect and restore wetlands.

For more information on the NRCS conservation assistance and programs, visit the NRCS Texas Web site at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov or contact the local NRCS office at the USDA Service Center in your county.



WETLANDS

IN THE TEXAS PLAYA REGION

AVOIDING FARM BILL WETLAND VIOLATIONS

Wetland provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985 and the Farm Bills that followed, encourage participants in USDA programs to adopt measures that protect wetland functions and values. The protection is linked to eligibility for certain USDA program benefits.

A program participant can become ineligible for certain program benefits by the conversion of a wetland that makes production of an agricultural commodity possible.

Conversion activities can include draining, dredging, filling, leveling or any other manipulation that has the effect of making possible production of an agricultural commodity.

The removal of woody vegetation or any activity that results in impairing or reducing the flow and circulation of water is also considered a conversion activity.

Producing an agricultural commodity under natural conditions is not considered a conversion. Natural conditions are times when the wetland dries so that it can be plowed, planted and harvested and does not include any conversion activities.

Some exceptions apply to production of an agricultural commodity on wetlands where the conversion activities were carried out prior to December 23, 1985. If the wetland was farmed and manipulated prior to December 23, 1985 but still ponds water for seven consecutive days most years, then the area still meets wetland criteria but the manipulations can be maintained and the wetland farmed. If the area does not meet the seven-day ponding criteria then it is considered a non wetland and the wetland provisions do not apply.

By contacting the Farm Service Agency (FSA) or Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) prior to undertaking any new activities, or carrying out maintenance on manipulations installed prior to December 23, 1985, you can save yourself many headaches and possible loss of program benefits. Landowners are required to report these activities to FSA before carrying them out.





WHAT IS A PLAYA WETLAND?

Playa wetlands have their own unique soils, plant communities and wetness regimes. With all these variables there are a lot of differences between playas. It can be stated “that no two playas are alike.” They are common in that the soils developed under wet conditions. Most playas are covered by shallow water at times during some years. This results in a plant community that is generally dominated by species that are adapted to conditions where there are periods of ponding or the soil is saturated by water and deficient in oxygen.

With the uniqueness of playas, it causes some to be subject to Farm Bill regulations and some to be exempt from these regulations. Playas that were manipulated and farmed prior to the 1985 Farm Bill and no longer meet jurisdictional wetland criteria are considered non-wetlands for Farm Bill purposes. Also any playa that naturally does not meet the jurisdictional wetland criteria is not subject to Farm Bill wetland regulations.

Playas that meet the jurisdictional criteria are subject to Farm Bill wetland regulations.

The jurisdictional criteria for a Farm Bill wetland includes the following:

1. The playa has hydric soils. These are soils that are formed under conditions of saturation and/or ponding long enough during the growing season to develop anaerobic conditions in the upper part of the soil profile.
2. The playa ponds water or the soil is saturated for a long enough period (hydrology conditions) to create oxygen deficient soil and promote plants that grow in these type of conditions.
3. The playa has a plant community that is dominated by wetland plants some time during the growing season in most years.

If the playa meets all three of the above criteria it is subject to Farm Bill Wetland regulations. For more details and complete wetland regulations, contact the local NRCS office in your county.



EVERY PLAYA IS UNIQUE



PLAYA FUNCTION AND VALUES

Playas provide numerous ecological and social benefits. Some of these benefits include:

FLOODWATER RETENTION

Playas are the lowest feature on the landscape. Most water runoff is stored in the playas. Some of the runoff is recharging the aquifer, but most of it is evaporated and the remaining runoff provides wetland habitat.

INCREASED WATER QUALITY

The cleaning power of wetlands provides natural pollution control. Wetland plants and soils have the ability to absorb and filter pollutants ranging from pesticides to animal waste.

PLANT AND ANIMAL HABITAT

Many wildlife species are dependent on playas for their breeding, nesting, or feeding habitat. Waterfowl, wading birds, and shore birds are the best known wetland dependent wildlife. Also important is the habitat for invertebrates and amphibians. Playas provide habitat for many upland species.

PERSONAL ENJOYMENT

Playas are an ideal place to hunt, view wildlife, take photographs or just relax and enjoy nature. They make wonderful outdoor classrooms for people of all ages.

