

Cooperative Farming on the Bosque del Apache NWR

by Gary Montoya

The Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge cooperatively farms about 1,040 acres. The two farmers that do the farming are local and have many years of farming experience. The farmer gets 3/4 of the crop and the Refuge gets 1/4 of the crop. That is due to the fact that the farmer supplies the labor, his own machinery i.e. tractors, balers, rakes, etc., the seed, fertilizer, and herbicide. The Refuge provides the land, water, and some of the facilities i. e. concrete ditches, culverts, etc. The farmer is expected to maintain all the facilities, while he is contracted to do the farming. One thing the farmers know is that the Refuge is for wildlife and they are very supportive of it. They have provided a very much needed tie to the community for the Refuge and the Service.

Some people ask, "Why do you farm?" The Refuge can only provide a limited amount of natural foods for the migrating waterfowl and waterbirds. We are especially concerned with the welfare of sandhill cranes, since this is a major wintering area for them. We are also concerned with the depredation of surrounding farm fields off-refuge from sandhill cranes and other migrating waterfowl. Therefore, we supplement the natural food on-refuge with corn. The farmers provide the Refuge's 1/4 of the crop by growing corn, which is doled out to the cranes and waterfowl over the winter. The farmers grow alfalfa for their part of the crop, because they can sell it. Alfalfa is also a nitrogen fixing crop that rebuilds nitrogen within the soil, which is a

requirement by plants. Corn uses the nitrogen within the soil. So every two years the corn land is rotated with the alfalfa lands, so that a good yield of corn can be produced every year. The alfalfa fields are rotated on a 5-6 year period. That is why there has to be more alfalfa than corn. This rotation of crops also keeps the pests and disease within the crops from becoming a problem, in general. The migratory and resident wildlife also use alfalfa for food and escape cover.

Dennis Harris, Jr. one of the current farmers, has been farming on the refuge with his father, Dennis Harris, Sr., who initially started farming on the refuge in 1968. After Dennis Harris, Sr. passed away, Dennis Harris, Jr. continued farming on the Refuge and now includes his son, Travis, and his daughter, Tammy. They are excellent farmers who stay abreast of new technology and farming methods, and are really concerned about the land and wildlife. They are members in good standing with the Farm Bureau of New Mexico and involved nationally with this group, as well as with the local community. They also own land off-refuge that they farm near San Antonio, NM.

Felix Padilla is the other farmer for the Refuge. He has lived in this area his whole life. He also owns land off-refuge, which he farms. Felix's whole life has been farming and it shows. He cares very much about the land and the wildlife. Felix started farming on the Refuge in 1991.