

[From Winter 2001]

Why the Dry Impoundments?

Beginning in the 1950's the Chincoteague Refuge constructed a series of 14 impoundments covering more than 2600 acres. These impoundments were constructed to provide freshwater habitat for a variety of migratory birds during the spring, fall, and winter seasons.

In the beginning, water levels were not manipulated and refuge staff tried to hold as much water as possible for as long as possible. When summer came, the impoundments would eventually dry up from evaporation. By drying out much later in the year, the impoundments could not provide the conditions necessary for plants to germinate or provide the suitable habitat needed for the diversity of wildlife found on the refuge. Starting in the late 1980's, the refuge began a unique water management program called Moist Soil Management (MSM). Each impoundment's water levels are drawn down in spring to a prescribed level depending on management objectives. This draw-down provides important feeding and resting areas for both north and southward migrating shorebirds. It also allows plants, which waterfowl depend on, to grow and establish a root system. This keeps the plants alive through the summer months when the Refuge receives limited rainfall, and allows the plants to mature and produce the seeds that waterfowl feed upon. Water control structures in these impoundments are closed when the September rains arrive, thereby capturing water for the fall/winter migrants.

In the end, the practice of lowering water levels in the spring has no effect on the absence of water in the impoundments in the fall. When the rains do come, and they will, there will be a late season food source available to the wintering birds because of the refuge's moist soil management program.

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