United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Livestock Water Tanks and Sage-Grouse

A Landowners Guide

Watering tanks installed for livestock are often used by wildlife as well. These tanks benefit livestock, big game and other wildlife but can have unintentional negative consequences for some species if they are not designed properly. Sage-grouse are known to drown in livestock water tanks that do not have escape ramps. Considering the needs of wildlife in the installation of these facilities is not only the right thing to do but results in cleaner water for livestock and less maintenance for the operator.

To provide effective escape opportunity, the design should assure that animals swimming around the edges of the tank will come in contact with the ramp. If the ramp does not extend to the edges of the tank, wildlife will swim under it and ultimately perish. A local drowning example occurred in Musselshell County, where 17 birds drowned in the same tank. A Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks memo states, "Following the discovery of the first 9 birds in the tank, a plank covered with chicken wire was placed in the water to make it possible for the birds to escape. Unfortunately the plank did not prevent additional mortalities (because the birds swam around the edge of the tank and did not encounter the floating board) and 8 additional birds drowned."

New tank has built-in ramp.

To address this problem, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers both technical and financial assistance to landowners to develop escape opportunities in existing tanks or design them into new tank installations. Both expanded metal and fiberglass options currently exist to retro-fit existing tanks, and some companies now offer built-in ramps in new facilities. These escape ramps have been extensively tested and monitored with exceptional results and are available at a very low cost. Please see your local NRCS office for more information.

Older tanks can be retro-fitted with ramp inserts.

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