



Pheasants and the Farm Bill: *What Do We Need to Fulfill the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan?*

Preliminary Recommendations

**National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan Management Board
and
National Wild Pheasant Technical Committee
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Note: These preliminary recommendations are provided as a reference for others in the conservation community crafting their own Farm Bill priorities and recommendations. Final recommendations will be developed following discussions with other partners to ensure our priorities and messages are consistent with other groups who share our goals.

First, Why Are Pheasants Important?

Across a wide swath of the northern and western United States (Figure 1), hundreds of thousands of people consider pheasants to be uniquely beautiful, challenging to hunt, and culturally emblematic of our agricultural landscapes. Ring-necked pheasant hunters have been a core constituency for many state wildlife agencies for nearly a century, and their hunting license fees have generated roughly \$1 billion into agency budgets for conservation work over that time, in turn benefiting hundreds of wildlife species, reducing soil erosion, and improving water quality.

The impact of pheasant hunters remains strong today. Although the abundance of pheasants and pheasant hunters peaked in many states during the 1950s and 1960s, from 2006 to 2009 an average of nearly 1.1 million sportsmen pursued pheasants in 25 states, generating an estimated \$502 million annually in economic activity, much of it in rural communities.

Further, many pheasant hunters do not limit their spending on pheasants to licenses, equipment and hunting trips. Pheasants Forever, Inc., a conservation organization started in 1982 by and for pheasant hunters, currently serves 145,000 members in over 700 local chapters. Since its inception PF has raised and spent \$634 million improving habitat on 14.1 million acres (nearly 10% of those in 2015 alone), further leveraging the conservation efforts of the states for a variety of farmland wildlife.

Clearly, pheasants and hunters continue to be important drivers of conservation and commerce across a broad swath of the country, and the “pheasant states” place a high priority on maintaining those benefits.

What is the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan?

To maintain the benefits associated with pheasants, 23 state wildlife agencies within the pheasant range collaborated on a plan to conserve the species. Completed in 2013, the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan’s goal is to restore and maintain self-sustaining wild pheasant populations in each state to provide maximum recreational opportunities. Specifically, the Plan calls for restoring and

maintaining habitats needed to sustain a harvest of 5.9 million rooster pheasants across the 23 states. State wildlife agencies and Pheasants Forever have already committed additional resources to work toward that goal.

What Do Pheasants Need?

To understand which Farm Bill policies are most favorable to accomplishing Plan goals, policy options must be viewed through the lens of the pheasant's basic needs. Successful policies create habitats that fulfill these needs in ways that are economically and culturally acceptable to landowners and cost effective to deliver.

First and foremost, pheasants need grassland habitats in which to feed, hide from predators, and raise their young. Wetland and brushy habitats within or adjacent to grasslands often enhance their value, as they provide additional options for predator avoidance and shelter from extreme weather, particularly during winter. Pheasants are somewhat unique in that they are well adapted to fulfill their needs within a wide variety of agricultural landscapes, but those adaptations have limits.

The core needs of pheasants include:

- For nesting, herbaceous vegetation (alive or dead) that is at least 10 inches tall by mid-April, provides enough structure to hide a nesting pheasant from predators, and remains undisturbed through at least the end of July (most initial nests hatch in June, but when initial attempts fail, hens will renest through mid-summer). Herbaceous vegetation consists of grasses, broad-leaved plants, or a combination of the two. Winter wheat can provide suitable nesting cover and produce a significant proportion of a local population's chicks, but this crop is increasingly uncommon east of the High Plains. Heavy rains during the nesting period usually lead to lower success rates, but these effects are more consistently seen in the eastern part of the pheasant range than in the west. In the west, drought is more likely to cause lower nesting effort and success.
- For raising broods, herbaceous vegetation that is open enough at ground level to allow small chicks to walk through it, is tall enough to conceal chicks and hens from predators, is diverse enough to support an abundant insect community near the ground for chicks to feed on, and remains undisturbed from the beginning of June to the end of August. Vegetation with a strong broad-leaved plant component is generally considered necessary to provide all the brood habitat needs. Heavy rains and cool temperatures can reduce survival rates when chicks are young, as can drought, particularly in the western part of the range.
- For feeding, herbaceous vegetation that produces nutritious seeds that are accessible to pheasants throughout the year, preferably containing species that drop relatively large seeds onto open ground. Waste grain in harvested crop fields provides an important source of fall and winter food across nearly all the pheasant range. Regarding water, pheasants will drink from streams, ponds, and puddles, but the absence of water in these forms does not preclude pheasants from persisting in an area.
- For general shelter, vegetation that is tall enough and thick enough to hide a walking pheasant from both avian and mammalian predators, but remaining open enough to allow unimpeded movements. Pheasants use this cover to rest during the day, roost at night, or move to and from feeding areas without being detected.
- For shelter during severe winter conditions, vegetation that is tall and stout enough to stand above heavy snowfall and conceal pheasants from predators. Cattail stands and shrub thickets are the classic models of winter shelter. This cover is obviously most important in the northern

part of the pheasant range. The longer deep snow or ice persists, the lower survival rates tend to be.

Pheasant densities increase as the proportion of grassland in the landscape increases to a maximum of about 50% (with cropland making up most of the remaining 50%). The sizes of habitat patches, their juxtaposition, and the land use around them are also important. Initial research suggests that 1) nests in larger blocks of grassland tend to be more successful than those in smaller patches, 2) habitat patches that are part of a complex of nearby patches typically support more pheasants than isolated patches, and 3) among landscapes with similar percentages of grassland, those that also contain large blocks of woodland tend to support fewer pheasants.

Historically, agricultural landscapes often produced pheasant habitats as unintentional byproducts of the farming methods of the day. However, in most states, as agricultural production became more efficient (at least in the short term), key pheasant habitats became more scarce. Most current farming landscapes require purposeful creation and management of the habitats pheasants need.

How Can the Farm Bill Help Fulfill the Goal of the Plan?

Pheasants are predominately birds of private lands and agricultural landscapes, so the forces that shape those landscapes inevitably shape the distribution and abundance of pheasants, as well. History has shown that outside of climate and technological advances, nothing shapes agricultural landscapes – and hence pheasant populations – more than the federal Farm Bill and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s associated policies and administrative rules.

Both the Commodity and Conservation titles of the Farm Bill, as well as their interplay, can have large impacts on the state of pheasant habitats. However, the Conservation Title and its administration are of greatest concern to those promoting pheasants. Both general and specific recommendations related to these programs are below.

General Principles

- Although pheasants need a variety of habitats, the amount of available nesting habitat in a landscape is often the best predictor of its pheasant numbers over the long term. The National Plan is therefore focused most strongly on the provision of grasslands and croplands (i.e., hay and small grains) in which pheasants can successfully nest, as well as the Farm Bill programs that have historically influenced those habitats the most.
- Given the broad array of climates and landscapes that pheasants inhabit, Farm Bill programs, practices, and policies created at the national level must include enough flexibility to allow local priorities and conditions to be accounted for during implementation. National programs must recognize management activities that are vitally important in creating and maintaining habitats in one state may be completely unnecessary in another, and national rules must be crafted accordingly.
- Program flexibility must be paired with strong partnerships between state-level USDA offices and state wildlife agencies to keep programs working properly. When specific programs and policies are intended to benefit wildlife, state wildlife agencies should have the strongest voice in determining how those instruments function in the respective states, provided congressional intent and USDA’s legal and administrative sideboards are respected. Program flexibility without state agency oversight will lead to inefficiency, missed opportunities, and diminished wildlife responses.

- Partnership biologists located in county USDA offices and jointly funded by USDA, state wildlife agencies, and conservation organizations have proven to be very effective in implementing Farm Bill conservation programs where they are needed most. This model should be strongly supported at the federal level.
- In determining the federal funding necessary to maintain or expand the acreage enrolled in conservation programs, calculations should account for the alternative costs of Commodity Title programs in which those acres would likely otherwise be enrolled. Previous studies have suggested it is often a net savings for the federal government to enroll cropland in conservation programs (see Ugarte, D. D., and Chad Hellwinckel, 2006. Analysis of the economic impacts on the agricultural sector of the elimination of the Conservation Reserve Program. Agricultural Policy Analysis Center, University of Tennessee).

Program Specifics

The Conservation Title of the 2014 Farm Bill can be divided into four so-called “buckets” of program offerings – the Conservation Reserve Program, Working Lands Programs, Partnerships, and Easements.

Specific recommendations needed for each Farm Bill program category to fulfill goals defined in the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan are highlighted below.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Since its inception in 1985, the CRP has been the single most beneficial Farm Bill program for pheasants. It has become a critical component of pheasant habitat in most states, and the 2014 Farm Bill’s reduction of the enrollment cap to 24 million acres had negative consequences throughout the pheasant range.

- Increase the national CRP cap to at least 40 million acres, with at least 35 million acres located within the pheasant range [i.e., maintain the existing percentage (88%) of the national acreage within the pheasant states]
- Ensure states have the flexibility to create management requirements that satisfy local habitat needs without becoming significant disincentives to enrollments, particularly in the following areas:
 - Mid-contract management frequency, timing, and methods, including input on associated payment reduction (if any) for practices such as haying and grazing
 - Acceptable plant species and diversity in seeding mixes for new plantings and upgrades
 - The designation of state Conservation Priority Areas (CPA’s), such that Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) points are only awarded if conservation practices and seeding mixes benefit state-designated priority species
 - Emergency haying and emergency and managed grazing activities, such that wildlife impacts are minimized
- Ensure adequate funding for multiple mid-contract management practices where needed
- Ensure practices and initiatives that states have had a significant role in crafting, such as the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative, remain available and well supported
- Ensure that new breakings of grassland for cropland are not eligible for financial assistance through any Farm Bill program (including crop insurance) for 15 years after crop production begins
- Ensure that wildlife habitat value is fully co-equal with erosion prevention and water quality in the EBI scoring system

Working Lands Programs

Different from CRP's approach, these cost-sharing and financial assistance programs are designed to improve the conservation benefits and sustainability of commodity-producing practices employed by landowners on lands that are currently in agricultural production. The two primary programs in this arena are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

- Where feasible, improve incentives for inclusion of small grains in row crop rotations. Without additional CRP acreage, an estimated 14 million acres of winter wheat or other small grains would be needed within the pheasant range to provide enough nesting habitat to satisfy the Plan's harvest goal
- Provide incentives for producers to create and maintain tall crop stubble in harvested small grain fields within EQIP and CSP
- Continue to encourage the use of cover and companion crops, and encourage USDA's Risk Management Agency to relax rules on cover crop termination such that structural benefits extend longer into the nesting and brood-rearing periods, or to create science-based premium adjustments for landowners wishing to delay termination
- Create a new multi-year cover crop program with no stand termination until the final spring, employing wildlife- and soil health-friendly mixes and management practices designed at the state level (i.e., short-term set aside)
- Maintain or increase the minimum 5% threshold of EQIP dollars for wildlife practices, and ensure that it is being employed at the state level
- Ensure that species used for plantings in each state are approved by that state's wildlife agency to avoid deleterious effects to priority wildlife species, and ensure that more diverse seeding mixes are properly incentivized to reflect their increased value to pheasants, pollinators, and other declining grassland wildlife

Partnerships

The current Farm Bill specifically encourages partnerships in multi-state and intrastate conservation delivery through two programs, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP).

- Make administration of RCPP grants more flexible (i.e., allow variance from NRCS practice standards) so the benefits delivered are maximized
- Increase funding for the VPA-HIP to \$70 million over the life of the next Farm Bill

Easements

The current Farm Bill includes the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) that funds longer-term voluntary easements to protect and restore wetlands and keep farms and ranches from being developed for other non-agricultural purposes.

- Restore funding of the ACEP to at least \$700 million annually (which would remain less than the annual average of \$780 million provided under predecessor easement programs prior to the 2014 Farm Bill), and ensure that agreements include plans and responsibilities for long-term habitat maintenance. Permanent protection should remain a key long-term grassland and wetland conservation strategy within the pheasant range.
- Waive the 25% non-USDA match requirement, and allow NRCS to hold ACEP easements in areas with "grasslands of special significance" status

- Ensure that species used for restoration plantings in each state are approved by that state’s wildlife agency to avoid deleterious effects to priority wildlife species, and ensure that more diverse seeding mixes are properly incentivized to reflect their increased value to pheasants, pollinators, and other wildlife

Commodity and Conservation Title Linkages

These provisions ensure that some fundamental resource conservation measures are required from landowners receiving assistance through the Farm Bill’s Commodity Title programs.

- Maintain the linkage of conservation compliance with eligibility for crop insurance premium subsidies that currently exists under the 2014 Farm Bill
- Support inclusion and implementation of a nationwide Sod-saver provision in the Farm Bill modeled on the provisions of the Senate floor-passed version of the Farm Bill passed December 14, 2007, N.R.2419, the Food and Energy Security Act of 2007
- Successfully resolve conservation compliance review deficiencies identified by the USDA’s Office of Inspector General in its June 2016 Audit Report 50601-005-31 (see <https://www.usda.gov/oig/webdocs/50601-0005-31.pdf>)

Figure 1. Ring-necked pheasant range in the U.S.

