

# Pheasant News and Notes

September 2018



## Trivia Question

Who wrote the following:

*The prairie is a poem rarely read.  
Its looseleaf pages blow.  
Too many students of this landscape fled  
its poverty and snow.  
Today I limp on stiffening knees,  
hoping that heedless pheasants take their ease  
  
in pigeon grasses sprung from durum stubble,  
in fragrant cedar shadow  
where a boy watched his father down a double.  
Maker of marsh and meadow,  
grant me more time to understand,  
more years to walk and memorize this land.*

## Farm Bill and USDA News

The first public meeting of the Farm Bill conference committee will be held the morning of September 5<sup>th</sup>, and stakeholders are working hard to influence the compromises necessary to create the final bill. Top lawmakers from the House and Senate agriculture committees are communicating ahead of the initial formal meeting, and Senate Ag Committee Chairman Pat Roberts said he hopes to have a draft bill ready by that time.

Within the conservation community, the lack of landowner interest in this summer's CRP sign-up reported in many areas – due to lower rental rate caps resulting from a change in how USDA chose to calculate them this time around – has many worried about the lower rental and cost share payments called for in both the House and Senate bills. Some are wondering aloud if the status quo (lower statutory acreage cap, higher per-acre payments) might be preferable to the alternatives in the either bill (higher acreage caps, lower per-acre payments). This has not made congressional staffers happy, because many in the wildlife community (including our partnership) have maintained that a higher cap was our top priority. Apparently some failed to realize we were asking for more CRP acres on the ground, not just on paper. Raising the cap won't do much good if incentives aren't high enough to enroll more acres than are expiring. We'll find out in the coming weeks where and how many acres were enrolled compared to expiring acres, which may or may not come too late to inform decisions on the pending bill.

Finally, House leaders have hinted they may shorten their session in September, meaning there would be less time to pass a compromise bill. If a bill doesn't pass before the recess, an extension of the 2014

bill would be necessary to keep the current USDA programs running. This Congress could then pass a bill in the lame duck session after the elections, or the next Congress can start from scratch.

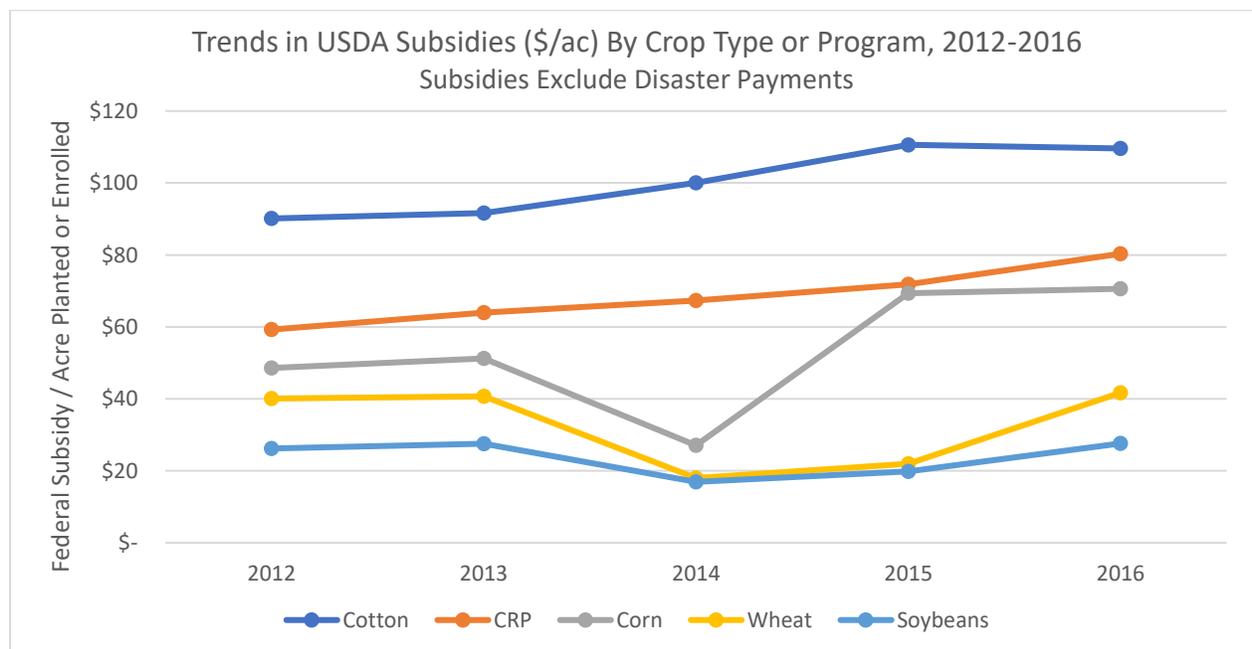
### Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

It's pheasant hunting forecast season, and I've seen a few reports so far. Statewide, compared to last year, summer counts were up [47% in South Dakota](#) and [39% in Iowa](#), but [basically unchanged in Nebraska](#). If you would, please send me a heads-up when additional forecasts are published.

As a reminder, the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan Management Board will meet at the AFWA annual conference in Tampa, FL, on September 10<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 am. The National Wild Pheasant Technical Committee will meet the following week in Etter, PA, September 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>. Hope to see everyone there.

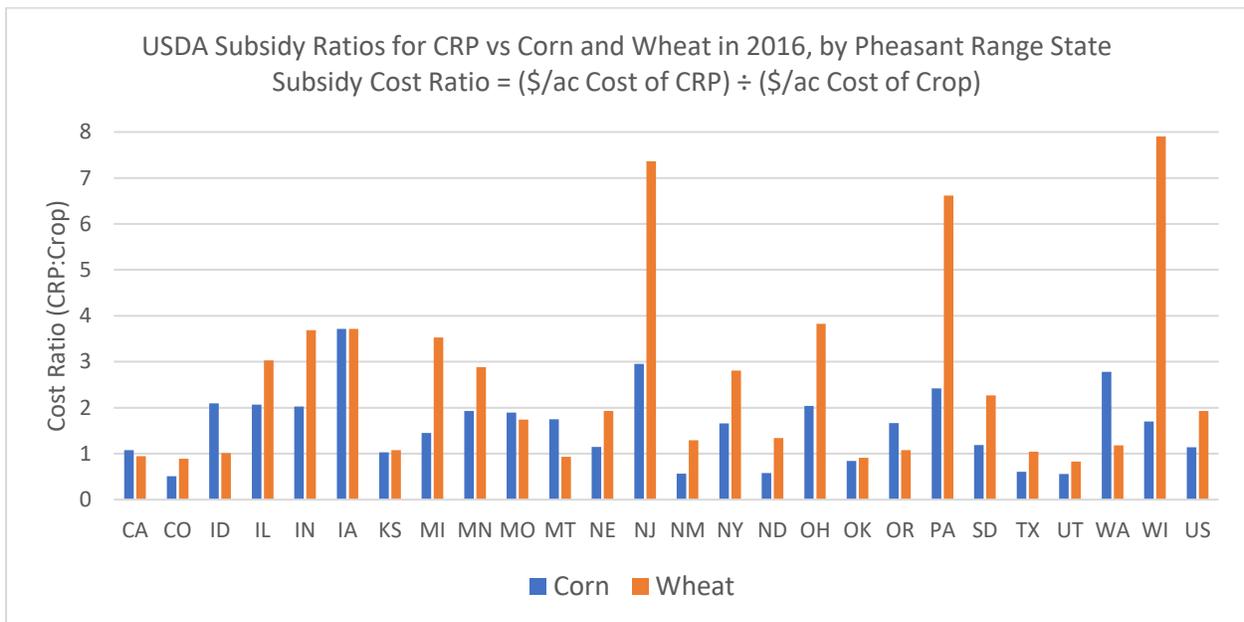
Your Plan Coordinator recently attended the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Management Board meeting in Bismarck, ND. While there I was able to meet with Sean Fields (Acting PPJV Coordinator) and Rich Iovanna (Agricultural Economist with USDA-FSA) about our range-wide pheasant habitat modeling project. Rich said the project was among his top priorities to fund this year, but no promises yet. I'm currently working with the Technical Committee to round up the state survey data that might be useful to the project, and with the joint ventures (Prairie Potholes, Rainwater Basin, Playa Lakes, and Northern Great Plains) to get a project proposal and budget request to Rich by the end of September.

In thinking about the Farm Bill, I began wondering about the federal expenditures per acre of cropland (via USDA subsidies) versus those for CRP. I couldn't find where USDA either calculates those figures or makes them public, so I used the [Environmental Working Group's compilation of USDA data](#) to define the subsidy figures, and [USDA's year-end estimates of acres planted](#) by crop type to calculate per-acre subsidies. I can't absolutely vouch for EWG's data compilation, so reserve a grain of salt there. Another important note – the EWG's database did not present crop disaster payments in a way that was amenable to this analysis, so they are excluded. Also, some planted acres may not be enrolled in subsidy programs, although the vast majority probably are. Both those factors would tend to make the per-acre crop subsidy figures conservative. With those caveats, the results are below.



As you can see, CRP doesn't stack up as badly as you might imagine. For every acre taken out of CRP and planted to cotton, for example, USDA loses about \$25 on average. (It's actually more than that in reality; using Texas-specific numbers, where CRP is cheap and cotton is common, the 2016 discrepancy is more like \$70.) Recent CRP costs compare pretty favorably to corn, as well, though CRP is slightly more expensive. The 2014 dip in subsidies is deceiving, as USDA made over \$4.5 billion in disaster payments that year, compared with \$1.9 billion, \$1.4 billion, and \$0.6 billion in 2013, 2015, and 2016, respectively (remember that in the 2014 Farm Bill, crop insurance subsidies were bolstered to reduce the need for disaster payments).

Looking at individual states in the pheasant range, as you might expect, relative CRP costs vary when compared to corn and wheat, the two most common crops across the range.



With this metric, a cost ratio equal to one means the per-acre cost of CRP was equal to that for the crop, below one means CRP was cheaper, and greater than one means CRP was more expensive. As you can see, in 2016 it was cheaper for USDA to subsidize CRP than corn in Colorado, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah; and cheaper than wheat in California, Colorado, Montana, Oklahoma, and Utah.

Pro-agriculture critics of CRP might say that the U.S. gets more for its subsidy investment from cropland because of the greater economic activity those commodities generate as they move from the field to the table, clothing store, or fuel tank. Pro-CRP critics of expansive cropland agriculture might say [CRP more than pays for itself](#) in terms of avoided environmental problems, which governments are often left to pay for in the usual “privatize the gains, socialize the costs” paradigm. Small-government fiscal conservatives might say both cropland subsidies and CRP payments create inefficient market distortions and aren't financially sustainable given our country's \$21 trillion (and counting) debt, regardless of the relative size or benefits of the different outlays. So which “values prism” would you like to view the data through? They're all probably valid, so take your pick.

## **Pheasants in the Media**

There were lots of media stories this month about how various state agencies were surveying pheasants this time of year. I figured this group already knows plenty about that subject, so I chose not to post all the links. Feel free to Google “2018 pheasant surveys” if you want to read them all.

Here’s a nice recap of some of Minnesota’s recent research:

[Research project continues on nesting success factors for ring-necked pheasant](#)

Indiana has a relatively new program providing reserved hunts on private land. Anyone else doing this?

[Applications open for reserved bird hunts in Indiana](#)

A new-to-science, cool-looking bird:

[New sub-species of pheasants found in Sarawak](#)

A couple of reminders that things are a little “different” in the UK:

[Controversy over upland game hunting on public lands](#)

[Plucking pheasants no longer a “traditional housewife skill”](#)

Is it better for the environment to farm fewer acres more intensively, or farm more acres less intensively? If storing carbon is your yardstick, apparently it’s the former.

[Which vision of farming is better for the planet?](#)

And thanks to Todd Bogenschutz of Iowa for these:

[Corn discovery could transform agriculture](#)

[Among Minnesota farmers, support rises for expanding federal Conservation Reserve Program](#)

Finally, in last month’s trivia question we met Palladius, pheasant farmer extraordinaire of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and his recipe for raising healthy ringnecks involving wine, tar, and locusts. Since Palladius’ time, humanity muddled through the Middle Ages, then scientifically and creatively blossomed in the Renaissance Period and the Age of Enlightenment. It’s no surprise, then, that pheasant husbandry also became more philosophically advanced, as evidenced by [this video](#) sent in by Jeff Lusk of Nebraska. It is one of those rare instances where art, science, and public service come together to create something truly awe-inspiring. The scene at 9:50 is nearly Shakespearian. Palladius would no doubt be bewildered on a number of fronts.

## **Recent Literature**

[Williamson, L. T., W. D. Walter, S. R. Klinger, and D. R. Diefenbach. 2018. Incorporating detection probability to estimate pheasant density. 82\(7\). \(Early e-version\).](#)

[Orth, M. R. 2018. Evaluation of methods used to improve grasslands as ring-necked pheasant \(\*Phasianus colchicus\*\) brood habitat. Dissertation, South Dakota State University, Brookings.](#)

[Madden, J. R., E. J. G. Langley, M. A. Whiteside, C. E. Beardsworth, and J. O. van Horik. 2018. The quick are the dead: pheasants that are slow to reverse a learned association survive for longer in the wild. \*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B\*.](#)

[Gethings, O. J. 2018. The influence of \*Syngamus trachea\* on pheasant populations. Dissertation, Harper Adams University, United Kingdom.](#)

[Rhoden, C. M., J. P. Orange, E. P. Tanner, D. L. Baxley, J. J. Morgan, and B. A. Robinson. 2018. Factors influencing hunter flush success of three small game species. Wildlife Society Bulletin 42\(3\). \(Early e-version\).](#)

[Whiteside, M. A., J. O. Van Horik, E. J. G. Langley, C. E. Beardsworth, L. A. Capstick, and J. R. Madden. 2018. Patterns of association at feeder stations for common pheasants released into the wild: sexual segregation by space and time. Ibis \(early e-version\)](#)

**Trivia Answer**

Tim Murphy (1951-2018), late of Fargo, North Dakota. If you're interested in learning more about Murphy, maybe start with [this obituary](#), then on to this [more complex remembrance](#).

See you in Tampa and Etter!

*This update is brought to you by the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan and Partnerships. Our mission is to foster science-based, socially-supported policies and programs that enhance wild pheasant populations, provide recreational opportunities to pheasant hunters, and support the economics and social values of communities. You can find us on the web at <http://nationalpheasantplan.org>.*