Pheasant News and Notes

March 2019

Trivia Question

Most of us were taught Aesop's fable of "The Fox and the Grapes" when we were kids, but what is the moral of Aesop's "The Fox and the Pheasants?"

Farm Bill and USDA News

Thankfully another government shutdown was averted in mid-February and USDA was able to begin catching up on their delayed work. USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue spoke to the Pheasant Fest banquet crowd in Schaumburg and seemed to predict a summer CRP sign-up for both general and continuous practices (the new Farm Bill requires a sign-up every year) but then pushed the general date back to perhaps December in remarks later in the week. Senators Thune and Brown recently urged Perdue to open both sign-up periods by the middle of the year, so maybe that will help encourage a more timely new enrollment opportunity.

USDA is now gearing up to prepare rules to fully implement the 2018 Farm Bill. NRCS leadership has been quoted as wanting to finalize their interim rules for some conservation programs by mid-fall, and USDA held a public listening session on Farm Bill implementation this week to kick off the process.

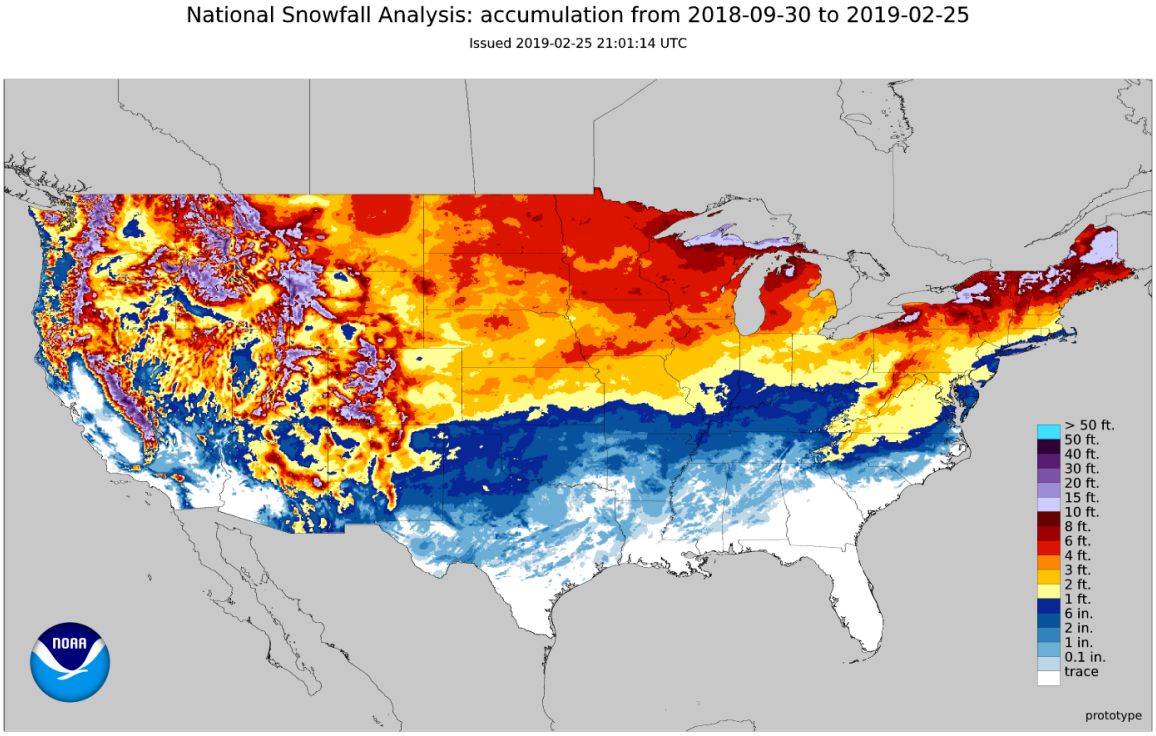
Secretary Purdue has also suggested the President will recommend some steep cuts in USDA funding for the next fiscal year. OMB Director Russell Vought said the administration would likely propose a 5% cut for all non-defense discretionary programs, and Purdue intimated that USDA would be asked to cut even more that that. In what could be related news, there are rumors that some in USDA are souring on Pollinator and SAFE practices in CRP (which some see as complex and/or expensive), as well as the Working Lands for Wildlife Program. Whether those sentiments will end up translating into operational changes remains to be seen. As we know, Congress usually disregards the President's budget request and goes its own way, so any budget hand-wringing is probably premature.

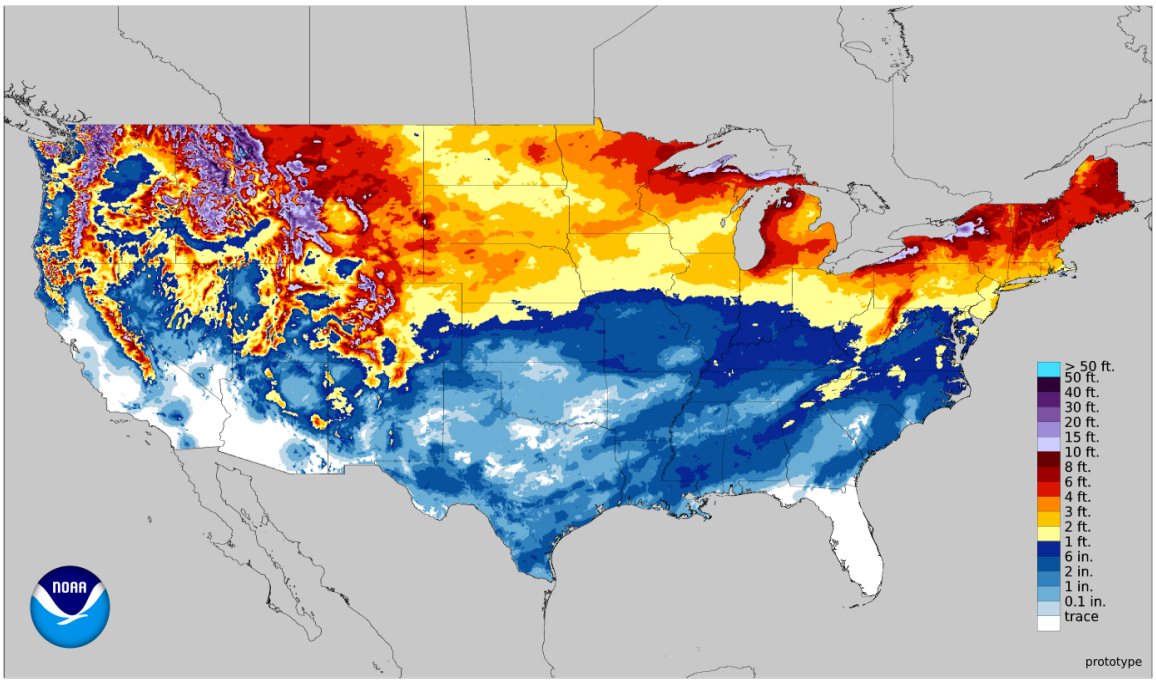
Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

Spring is supposedly only three weeks away but that seems like a cruel joke here in eastern South Dakota. We've already euthanized the groundhog who predicted only four more weeks of winter because he was obviously deranged with some sort of rodent CWD. Todd Bogenschutz had some thoughts on how all the cold and snow might affect Iowa's pheasants published recently, and most biologists in the upper Midwest and northern Plains are probably similarly concerned. A comparison of cumulative snowfall between this winter and last (Figure 1) shows the depth of the problem; we certainly hope this white background dissipates before the raptors start migrating north in big numbers.

One thing winter *is* good for is flush counts. Tom Keller (Technical Committee, Pennsylvania) reports the following: "*At our Central Susquehanna Wild Pheasant Recovery Area we had 27 volunteers and their dogs help survey 5 farms flushing 151 pheasants. That survey also yielded 12 short-eared owls, 12 rabbits, and 1 coyote. It's only because of dedicated volunteers, many of whom are active PF members, that we can complete these surveys which are a crucial part in determining population estimates.*"

Figure 1. Cumulative snowfall amounts to date this winter (top) and last winter (bottom).





Tom also sent along this photo taken during the flush counts. We hope there was an excited dog and its owner enjoying an adrenaline rush just outside the frame.

You'll notice in the "Recent Literature" section below that the first thesis has been published from the Kansas cover crop study at KSU. I encourage you to take a look for yourself, but some highlights included the positive association of cover crops with adult hen survival but the lack of nesting activity in that habitat. Jeff Prendergast (Technical Committee, Kansas) clarified that even though the multi-species cover crop was planted the previous fall it doesn't really grow quickly enough in western Kansas to produce nesting habitat; the main question revolved around its value as brood cover. A Ph.D. student on the project is yet to finish, so there will likely be additional results available on that topic when their dissertation is published.

When you're pheasant hunting, ever wonder why the hens all seem to flush at your feet while the roosters tend to flush wild? There's apparently an evolutionary reason for that. You can read the Moller et al. paper below for details, but basically the more cryptically-colored the bird, the more likely it is to try to save energy by hunkering down and only flushing when a predator is relatively close. Science rocks!

Finally, Pheasant Fest drew a respectable 22,387 weekend attendees in Schaumburg last week; thanks again to everyone who makes the show such a major draw. The show returns to Minneapolis in 2020.

Pheasant-relevant Media

New Jersey closes state pheasant farm due to avian flu compliance concerns
Why killing raptors in the name pheasants is stupid
American Farm Bureau Federation's take on the new CRP provisions
How hunters can save the Conservation Reserve Program
Plummeting insect numbers 'threaten collapse of nature'
The digital fertilizer challenge
A new breed of hunters focuses on the cooking
Urging African-Americans to hunt
Why hunters are really bad at recruiting new hunters and how to start fixing the problem

Recent Literature

Annis, A. C. 2019. Ring-necked pheasant survival, nest habitat use, and predator occupancy in Kansas spring cover crops. Thesis. Kansas State University, Manhattan, USA.

Moller, A. P., W. Liang, and D. Samia. 2019. Flight initiation distance, color and camouflage. Current Zoology zoz005.

Kanstrup, N., and T. J. S. Balsby. 2019. Danish pheasant and mallard hunters comply with the lead shot ban. Ambio (early e-version).

Sweikert, L. A., and L. M. Gigliotti. 2019. Understanding conservation decisions of agriculture producers. Journal of Wildlife Management (early e-version).

Stupak, N., J. Sanders, and B. Heinrich. 2019. The role of farmers' understanding of nature in shaping their uptake of nature protection measures. Ecological Economics 157:301-311.

Reiley, B. M., K. W. Stodola, and T. J. Benson. 2019. Are avian population targets achievable through programs that restore habitat on private-lands? Ecosphere 10:1.

Dover, J. W. (editor). 2019. The ecology of hedgerows and field margins. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom. 292pp.

Condon, T., I. L. Brisbin, and C. R. Chandler. 2019. Red junglefowl introductions in the southeastern United States: history and research legacy. Southeastern Naturalist 18:37-52.

Trivia Answer

"The Fox and the Pheasants," from Aesop for Children:

One moonlit evening as Master Fox was taking his usual stroll in the woods, he saw a number of Pheasants perched quite out of his reach on a limb of a tall old tree. The sly Fox soon found a bright patch of moonlight, where the Pheasants could see him clearly; there he raised himself up on his hind legs and began a wild dance. First he whirled 'round and 'round like a top, then he hopped up and down, cutting all sorts of strange capers. The Pheasants stared giddily. They hardly dared blink for fear of losing him out of their sight a single instant.

Now the Fox made as if to climb a tree, now he fell over and lay still, playing dead, and the next instant he was hopping on all fours, his back in the air, and his bushy tail shaking so that it seemed to throw out silver sparks in the moonlight.

By this time the poor birds' heads were in a whirl. And when the Fox began his performance all over again, so dazed did they become, that they lost their hold on the limb, and fell down one by one to the Fox.

Moral: Too much attention to danger may cause us to fall victims to it.

Not exactly a "sour grapes"-level gem, but oh well. Were he alive today, Aesop could have taught the same moral more realistically with "The Pheasants and the Night-lighting Truck," but he would have had to cite Labisky (1959). Think warm thoughts, everyone!

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.