

Pheasant News and Notes

June 2020



Trivia Question

What poet wrote the following?

*You said you would kill it this morning.
Do not kill it. It startles me still,
The jut of that odd, dark head, pacing*

*Through the uncut grass on the elm's hill.
It is something to own a pheasant,
Or just to be visited at all.*

Farm Bill and USDA News

For the time being, it does not appear that USDA-FSA will be bending over backwards to keep CRP enrollments on pace with expirations, let alone growing toward the new higher acreage caps. FSA's decision to move SAFE and several other wildlife-centric practices out of continuous and into general signups has limited their competitiveness, and states are scrambling to redefine their current SAFEs to adhere to [new policies](#) restricting enrollments to Conservation Priority Areas (CPAs) and wildlife zones. AFWA and other conservation advocates are asking for reconsideration of these changes, but federal spending on coronavirus relief has created a significant headwind for increased incentives. FSA did throw us a bone by [increasing the practice incentive payment](#) (PIP) for the current continuous signup period from zero to five percent for non-CREP practices, which helps but is far from a game-changer. This lukewarm demand for CRP now, when the farm economy is struggling, does not bode well; demand has historically risen in tough times. One shudders to think what will happen to enrollments under the new rules when farm prices rebound.

As most of you probably saw, a national expansion of the pilot Soil Health and Income Protection Program (SHIPP) was included in the [Heroes Act](#) passed by the House on May 15th. Provisions include a five million-acre national cap, a \$70 per acre annual payment, prohibition of haying and grazing during the primary nesting season, a three-year contract period, and an establishment cost share payment of no more than \$30 per acre. By most accounts the bill probably isn't going anywhere in the Senate, but positioning the SHIPP as a producer relief program may be significant going forward. On one hand, securing an additional five million acres of herbaceous cover that is generally undisturbed during the nesting season is a good thing, but on the other, the program may outcompete CRP (particularly west of the 100th meridian) and yield much lower quality habitat. I attended a MAFWA Private Lands Working Group conference call recently and the fear of a lower quality CRP competitor was high. Most attendees saw an expanded SHIPP as a negative, not a positive. That opinion may hold for now, but eventually the wildlife community (including our partnership) will need to do some hard thinking about habitat quantity versus quality trade-offs, politically viable policy alternatives, and federal budget pressures in the future if CRP continues to struggle.

Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

First off, Tom Keller (Technical Committee, Pennsylvania) sends the following panoramic photo and description: “While pheasant habitat to most people is fairly flat topography with endless horizons, the northeast is a bit different. At this crowing count listening point in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, the sun prepares to rise over the south mountain while the moon inches closer to setting over the blue mountain.” Thanks, Tom!



Speaking of new beginnings, many of you have probably heard that our own Dave Nomsen (Management Board, Pheasants Forever) has announced his retirement effective July 1st. Dave has been PF’s leading voice for conservation in D.C. since 1992, working on the last five(!) farm bills. The Conservation Reserve Program has been his Sisyphean boulder to forever roll up Capitol Hill, and he had a large influence on many of the program’s improvements over the years. Hundreds of thousands of pheasant hunters benefited from Dave’s work, as have the agencies who sold hunting licenses to all those folks. He was also an integral part of getting our partnership established and provided the administrative support I needed to function as the Plan Coordinator. On behalf of the partnership, thanks, Dave, for all you have done for conservation and our organization over the years, and we will miss you!



Some of us had hoped to share a beverage with Dave before he retired at the MAFWA Director’s meeting at the end of this month in South Dakota, but that meeting has now been [tentatively postponed](#) until October 5-9. The business meeting will be held as planned on July 1 via video or conference call. The whole [WAFWA summer meeting](#) is being conducted virtually in July, so those of you who don’t generally get to travel to that one might see about dropping into a meeting or two on the cheap.

Our own Joseph Lautenbach (Technical Committee, Ohio) and his coauthors made the short list for The Wildlife Society’s publication of the year award for their paper “Strategic conservation for lesser prairie-chickens among landscapes of varying anthropogenic influence.” The [paper](#) was published last year in *Biological Conservation*. Congratulations, Joseph!

The University of Nebraska [paper on pheasant genetics](#) is now available in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*. Using mitochondrial DNA, which does not recombine and preserves matrilineal identities, the authors

found two primary clades exist in the wild populations of Nebraska and South Dakota. The Chinese ring-neck line dominates, while a few birds have an original black-neck matrilineal ancestor way back in their family tree. There are several possible explanations for this ratio, which the authors discuss. Back in 1945 in *The Ring-necked Pheasant and Its Management in North America*, Frederic Walcott wrote, “Doubtless these [early] importations [to North America] were of the so-called English black-necked pheasant, that is, the typical Colchican strain. In the course of time a number of other varieties have been liberated, including Japanese, Mongolian, and Chinese pheasants. They have become thoroughly mixed but have a preponderance of Chinese blood, especially toward the west, and are generally known as ring-necked pheasants.” So it is certainly plausible that the current mix of lineages simply reflects, more or less, the original genetic makeup of birds in those early introductions a century ago. Take a look at the paper and see what you think.

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks announced a few months ago that it was continuing its predator bounty program but paying only half as much per tail this year (\$5), with a limit of 50,000 tails purchased. You can again see how many bounties have been paid in real time on their [Tail Tracker](#) page. So far, it looks like this year’s submissions are about half of what they were at this point last year.

Soil health practices are good for producers’ mental health. That seems to be the conclusion drawn from the [South Dakota Farmer/Rancher 2019 Stress Survey](#) conducted by South Dakota State University and the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition. The more soil health practices a producer reported employing, the less stressed and more hopeful for the future they were. A skeptic might point out that sample sizes were small and that happier, less stressed producers might have been more likely to adopt soil health practices in the first place, but regardless, the results are encouraging.

Also, you might remember last summer [I reported](#) visiting some South Dakota Soil Health Coalition test plots of corn planted in 60-inch rows (compared to conventional 30-inch rows, but sown such that the seeds per acre were equal) grown concurrently with a mixed-species cover crop. The [results](#) of that trial are now in and show an average yield reduction of 9% in the 60-inch rows, but soil moisture and bulk density were improved. Soil moisture was not limiting in 2019 so yield results might be different in a dry year. Although the jury is still out on the wildlife benefits of cover crops, it is good to know there are producers out there trying to figure out economical ways of increasing the biodiversity of row crop landscapes.

Finally, I will be giving a webinar on AFWA’s small game R3 resolution to the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports’ R3 Community on June 11th at 1:00 pm Central time. If you’d like to attend the webinar, you can join the Community [here](#).

Pheasant-relevant Media

[Winter split for North Dakota pheasants](#)

[Youth pheasant season has been extended in South Dakota](#)

[Earliest “chickens” were actually pheasants](#)

[Pheasant hunting with Tom Brokaw](#)

[PBS “Reconnecting Roots” episode on hunting](#)

[Children are increasingly likely to be afraid of nature](#)

[Extreme poverty counties found solely in rural areas in 2018](#)

[The message of conservation failed](#)

Recent Literature

[Vazquez-Miranda, H., M. J. Olson, and R. M. Zink. 2020. Evolutionary origin and genetic diversity of ring-necked pheasants in the Upper Midwest United States. Wildlife Society Bulletin \(early view\).](#)

[Giudice, J. H. and J. T. Ratti. 2020. Ring-necked Pheasant \(*Phasianus colchicus*\), version 1.0. In S. M. Billerman, editor. Birds of the world. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA.](#)

[Gibson, M. C. 2020. Wild turkeys, quail, grouse, and pheasants. In R. S. Duerr and L. J. Gage, editors. Hand-rearing birds. Second edition. John Wiley and Sons, Inc.](#)

[Vodehnal, W. L., G. L. Schenbeck, and D. W. Uresk. 2020. Sharp-tailed grouse in the Nebraska sandhills select residual cover patches for nest sites. Wildlife Society Bulletin \(early view\).](#)

[Ringelman, K. M., B. A. Collier, L. P. Laborde, Jr., F. C. Rohwer, L. A. Reynolds, J. Messerli, M. R. Mclandress, G. Oberstandt, and J. M. Eadie. 2020. Successes and challenges of university first hunt programs. Journal of Wildlife Management \(early view\).](#)

Trivia Answer

Those are the first two stanzas of “Pheasant” by Sylvia Plath. Not exactly a paean to R3, but she seems to have a soft spot for our favorite bird so we’ll give her a pass.

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>.