Pheasant News and Notes

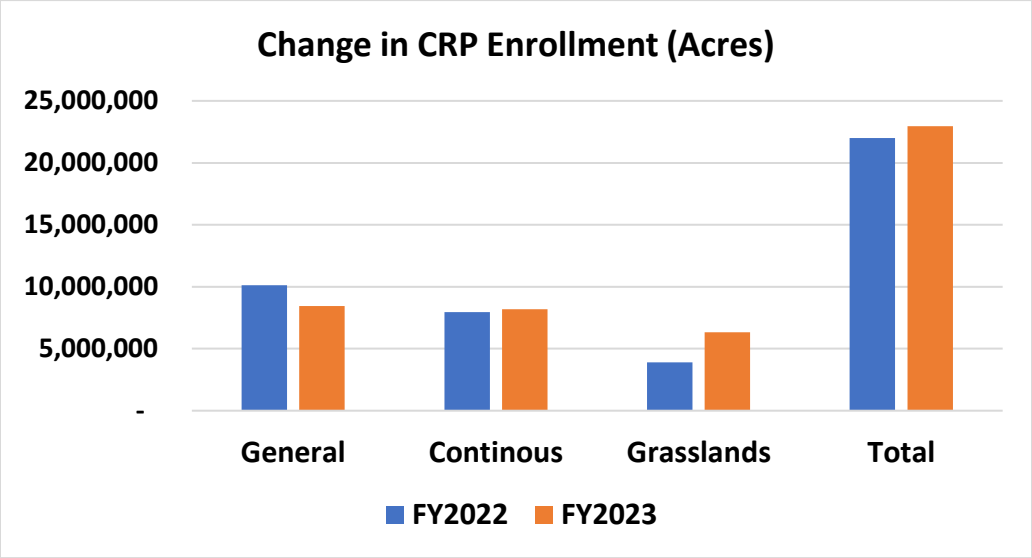
January 2023

Trivia Question

Who painted these?

USDA and Legislative News

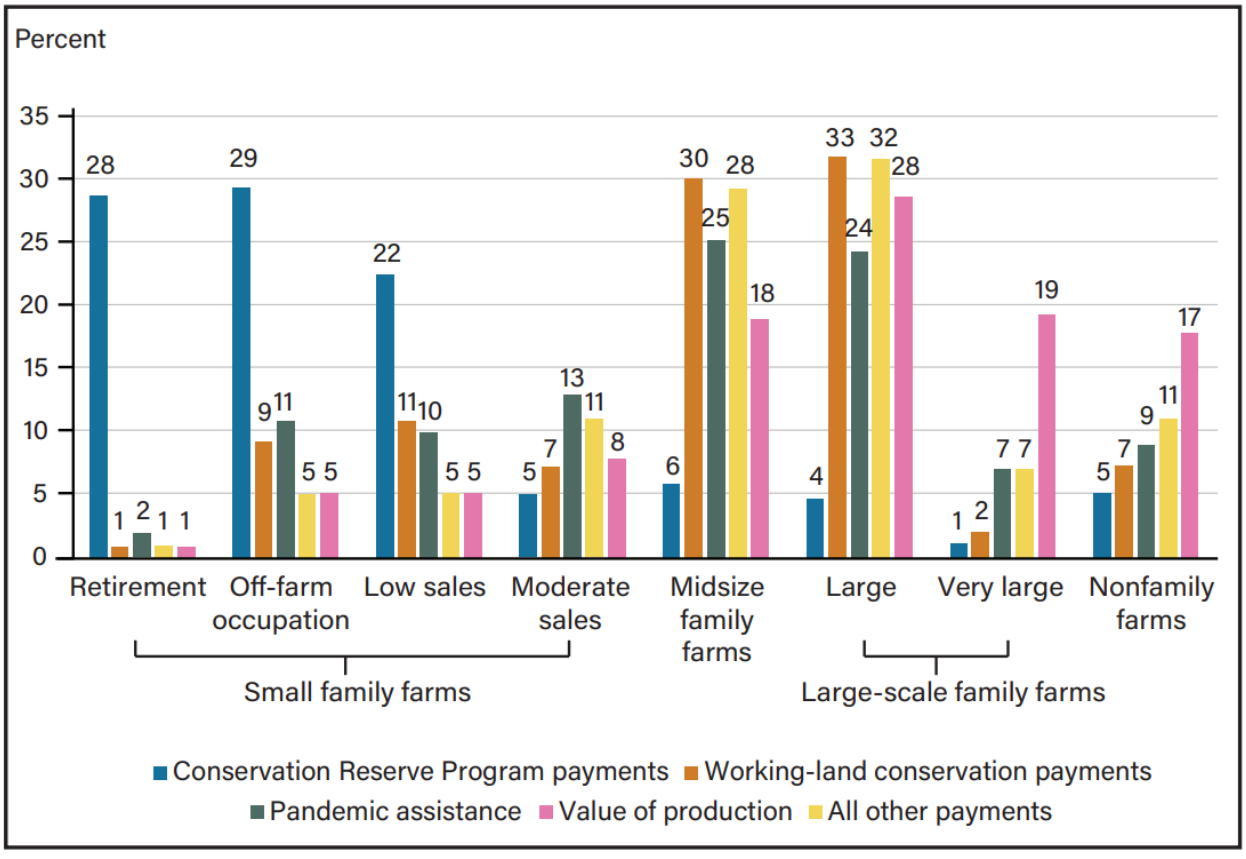
USDA-FSA released their first couple of monthly CRP reports for FY2023, so we have our first look at the net impact of last year's signups and expirations. Total CRP enrollment increased to just under 23 million acres in November, a 973,000 acre (4.4%) increase from the end of FY2022. The big winner, of course, was Grasslands CRP, which increased from 3.90 to 6.32 million acres (up 62%). Continuous acres increased 3% to 8.19 million acres, and General signup acres declined by 17% to 1.67 million acres.



As we noted last year when the signup results were announced, these changes are a mixed bag for pheasant enthusiasts. Loss of 17% of our large-tract General signup acres is a huge bummer, because these big patches of heavier, less disturbed cover usually maximize per-acre chick production. It could have been worse, though – given the high grain prices last year, it was a pleasant surprise that Continuous acres eked out a small increase. And if you look past the details, an overall increase in program enrollment demonstrates to lawmakers that landowner demand for CRP is still there. That, plus getting those extra acres for the same overall cost ($1.78 billion, because the average rent per acre dropped from $80.83 to $78.01) may provide a few toeholds in advocating for improvements in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Those improvements might include limiting Grasslands enrollments and improving incentives for "traditional" General and Continuous signups. Who is currently saying 'yes' to those incentives? Todd Bogenschutz (Technical Committee, Iowa) passed along a link to a new report from the USDA-Economic Research Service that includes information about what types of farms receive various USDA conservation and commodity program payments.

Distribution of selected Government agricultural program payments and value of production by farm type, 2021

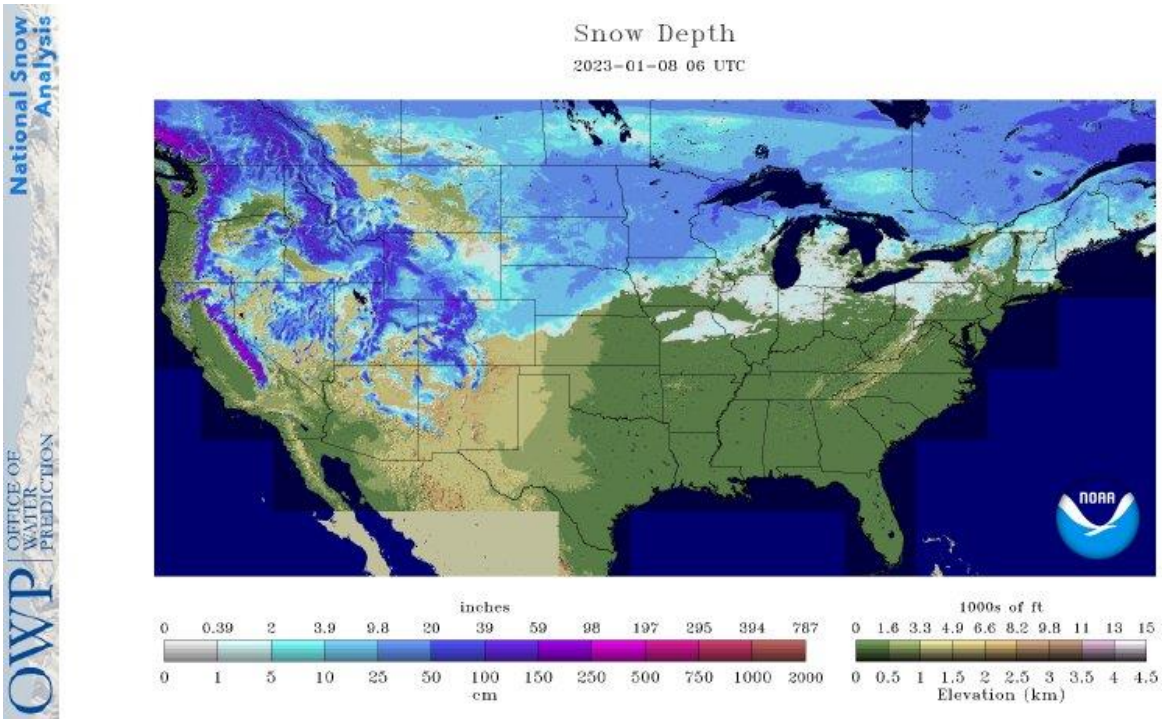


As you can see, CRP payments go to a much different cohort of landowners than those for other USDA programs. The lion's share (79%) of CRP participants consists of retired, part-time, or lower-ag-income farmers. Collectively this group generates only about 10% of the total national value of ag production but operates 35% of farm acres. This suggests CRP's primary customers are earning much less per acre

than other farmers, making CRP's currently lower-than-market-price rental rates adequately attractive. But to farmers of moderate or higher profitability? – not so much.

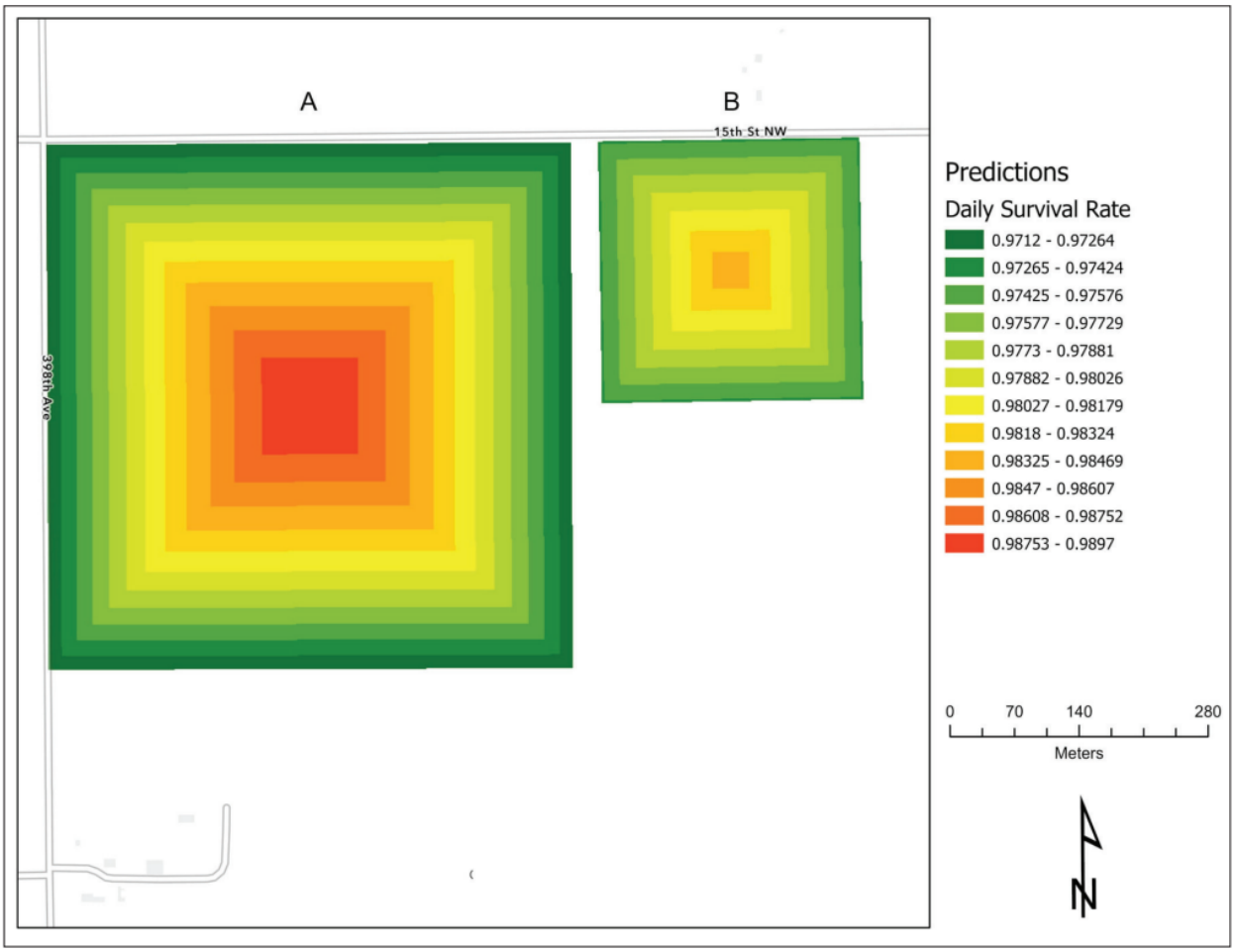
Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

Well, the fun part of the pheasant year is drawing to an end, with most states' hunting seasons already closed or closing this month. We now return to the "hand-wringing" season wherein we watch the weather and hope we're not dealt too bad a hand until Opening Day 2023. The Northern Plains are not off to a great start, with more than a foot of snow covering much of the region's pheasant range. Here's hoping you've gotten enough wind and sun to open up a few south-facing slopes out there.



The news has just been released that Marilyn Vetter will succeed Howard Vincent as Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever President and CEO as of February 1st. Marilyn (right) was chosen after a nationwide search and consideration of more than 150 candidates. She has volunteered on PF/QF's Board of Directors since 2015 and brings an impressive array of skills and experience to the position. Our partnership looks forward to getting to know Marilyn better, and congratulates Howard on his decades of outstanding work for upland habitat and our favorite bird. Well done and a sincere thank you!

Kudos also to Alex Solem (Technical Committee, South Dakota) and former TC member Travis Runia for publishing a new paper on the effects of CRP patch size on nest survival. Using artificial nests, they showed the interiors of large patches had the highest probability of nest success (below), which supports earlier work with radio-tagged hens in Iowa. However, small patches had value, too, outperforming large patches when the surrounding landscape had around 50% or more land cover in grassland. Their work is published in the latest edition of the *Prairie Naturalist*.



Congrats also to Jeff Knetter (Technical Committee, Idaho) for coauthoring a new Columbian sharp-tailed grouse paper in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, which found positive effects of CRP.

Also, I've updated our "Primary Ring-necked Pheasant Literature" document available on the National Plan website. If you know of any papers or resources with final citations (as opposed to early online versions that haven't been officially published yet) that aren't included in this version, please let me know.

Todd Bogenschutz sent this photo of an albino pheasant hen that was found road-killed in Iowa. You always wonder if an odd-colored pheasant didn't owe its heritage to a game farm somewhere, but this specimen's plumage appears to be in great shape, a relative rarity among first-generation pen-reared birds. It's a cool find in any event – thanks to Todd for passing it along.

USDA-FSA sponsored a webinar last month detailing the results to date of the Iowa Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Unit's evaluation of the "prairie strips" practice within CRP (CP43). Pilot work beginning in 2007 on the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge suggested strategically converting 10% of acres within no-till crop fields resulted in 95% reduction in sediment loss, 37% reduction in water runoff, a 0.07 t/ac/year increase in soil organic carbon, and triple the bird and pollinator abundance, all at a cost comparable to cover crops. Follow-up work on paired, privately-owned fields found that in terms of bird productivity, diverse strips of cover outperformed low diversity, cool-season grass patches (i.e., existing waterways), though the species using both were not area sensitive. Pheasant nests made up less than 1% of the 1,604 total nests they monitored during the study, so no pheasant-specific inferences were drawn. You can read the abstract or watch the recorded webinar here.

Finally, last month we mentioned the American Bird Conservancy's proposed "Bird Saver" policies to improve grassland management associated with Farm Bill programs. They are looking for organizations (including agencies, I presume) to signal support for the "Rest-Recover-Recapture" component of the package by January 20th; if interested, you can learn more here.

Pheasant-relevant Media

Snowbound: Wildlife has hard going in early winter
Montana sportsmen back bills to fund habitat, hunter access
New USFWS dashboards provide decades of license and apportionment data
U.K. gamekeeper pleads guilty after illegally killed raptors and poisons found
People are only just discovering what 'five gold rings' means in 12 Days of Christmas
Why the U.S. government is (still) obsessed with corn
Growth and profit potential in carbon sequestration
Omnibus budget adds USDA carbon program

Recent Literature

Solem, A. J., and T. J. Runia. 2022. Assessing predation of artificial nests: does patch size matter? Prairie Naturalist 54:24-40.

Stevens, B. S., C. J. Conway, J. M. Knetter, S. B. Roberts, and P. Donnelly. 2023. Multi-scale effects of land cover, weather, and fire on Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. Journal of Wildlife Management (early online version).

Dierenfeld, E. S., L. C. Larsson, A. C. Pratt, and S. K. Sherrod. 2022. Liver fatty acid, mineral and fat-soluble nutrients in wild and captive greater prairie-chickens. Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management (early online version).

Wann, G. T., et al. 2023. A regionally varying habitat model to inform management for greater sage-grouse persistence across their range. Global Ecology and Conservation 41:e02349.

Whitt, C., N. Miller, and R. Olver. 2022. America's farms and ranches at a glance, 2022 edition. USDA-ERS Economic Information Bulletin 47.

Sharps, E., et al. 2023. Reversing declines in farmland birds: How much agri-environment provision is needed at farm and landscape scales? Journal of Applied Ecology (early online version).

Wesemeyer, M., J. Kamp, T. Schmitz, D. Muller, and T. Lakes. 2023. Multi-objective spatial optimization to balance trade-offs between farmland bird diversity and potential agricultural net returns. Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment 345:108316.

Leone, J. B., N. P. Pennarola, J. L. Larson, K. Oberhauser, and D. L. Larson. 2022. Divergent responses of butterflies and bees to burning and grazing management in tallgrass prairies. Ecology and Evolution 12:e9532.

Tinghao, J., S. Xingfeng, L. Juan, and D. Ping. 2022. An integrated animal tracking technology combining a GPS tracking system with a UAV. Methods in Ecology and Evolution (early online version).

Toomey, A. H. 2023. Why facts don't change minds: Insights from cognitive science for the improved communication of conservation research. Biological Conservation 278:109886.

Trivia Answer

No one; the images are what happens when you type "ring-necked pheasants in trouble" and "pheasant chicks need insects for food" into Hotpot.ai's free artificial intelligence art creator. The digital brain responsible for these is obviously higher than a digital kite, but I do find them weirdly attractive. How many "real" wildlife artists could free their imagination enough to put grasshopper wings *and* three beaks on a pheasant? None, that's how many. Sad!

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 https://nationalpheasantplan.org.