

# Pheasant News and Notes

April 2023



## Trivia Question

According to OpenAI's [ChatGPT](#), which is the more cost-effective way to increase wild pheasant populations, habitat management or predator control?

## USDA and Legislative News

Senators Daines (R-Montana), Bennet (D-Colorado), and Marshall (R-Kansas) [introduced the Voluntary Public Access Improvement Act of 2023](#) last month. This bill would triple the funding for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) from its current \$50 million to \$150 million in the next Farm Bill. As in the current version, those funds would be available in total over the five-year life of the upcoming legislation.

This marker bill and others like the [Conservation Reserve Program Improvement Act](#) are meant to garner support for their sponsors' policy preferences as the new Farm Bill is hammered out. Both markers would help pheasant managers and have bipartisan support, so there is optimism that these ideas will make the final cut.

For a recap of other Farm Bill-related news we heard at the North American conference last month, see below.

## Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

We held our spring National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan Management Board meeting last month in association with the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. Eight states (SD, NE, OH, IA, ND, MI, KS, and WI) and Pheasants Forever were represented at the meeting. Among my notes were:

- Jim Inglis (Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever) said the House and Senate agriculture committees are working to get the new Farm Bill done by September. Several marker bills should be introduced in the next couple of weeks and subcommittee hearings should start to occur during that same time. Committee members also continue to schedule listening sessions in Washington and around the country. Notably there is some talk about making CRP a dollar-limited program instead of an acre-limited program, although it is still too early to tell how much momentum this idea might have. The conservation community has historically resisted this idea, but with demand for the program currently at a low point it may be worth considering the potential risks and benefits of such a change.
- The budget for the Plan Coordinator position is in good shape. The invoices that MAFWA will send to the states in May will be the last round for the current three-year Coordinator term, so the Management Board will need to decide on support levels for the next three-year term at its meeting this fall. Initial discussions will therefore need to start sometime this summer.
- Concurrent with the funding decision process, the Management Board will have the chance to revisit our list of partnership work items and their priority order. The Coordinator will solicit

ideas for new work items this spring, then each state will submit its ranking of the revised list this summer. The process will culminate in a discussion and finalization of the priority list at the fall Board meeting.

- I provided a tour of a draft GIS-based habitat decision support tool that we identified as our partnership's highest priority work item. The feedback from the group was generally positive, and I will continue to improve the tool's functionality.
- Tyler Harms of the Iowa DNR gave a presentation on the formation of a Midwest Grasslands Roadmap. This is meant to be complementary to the Central Grasslands Roadmap, covering the areas in the Midwest lying mainly east of that effort. The idea is to try to scale up local grassland conservation efforts to have a greater regional impact, doing so through the creation of a Conservation Delivery Network (CDN) of public and private stakeholders.
- In a discussion of disease and genetic issues, Russ Mason (Michigan, below top) relayed that HPAI specialists are predicting the impacts of the disease will be worse this spring than they were last year, which is worrisome.
- Last but not least, the group thanked Russ Mason for his long and distinguished service as the Board's chairperson. The Board then unanimously approved Alicia Hardin (below right) of Nebraska to succeed Russ as the new chair. Congratulations and many thanks to both!



Other Farm Bill-related notes from the North American:

- Besides murmurs about potentially making CRP a dollar-based program, other potential reforms being circulated around Congress included inverting the CRP soil rental rates based on soil productivity such that the most productive soils receive the lowest rates; for partial field enrollments, using the whole tract's average productivity to calculate rates, thus encouraging the least productive acres to be enrolled; and creating region-specific Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) scoring rubrics and mid-contract management requirements. Andrew Schmidt (PF/QF) also suggested the conservation community should do a better job of framing conservation programs as important parts of the financial safety net for farmers and ranchers rather than focusing solely on their natural resource benefits.
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working on a Biological Opinion which in part will provide protections for landowners enrolled in CRP within lesser prairie-chicken range. The exact nature of those protections was not specified.
- Regarding Grasslands CRP, current enrollment sits at about 6.3 million acres. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA's) draft Farm Bill platform calls for no more than 20% of total CRP acres being enrolled in Grasslands, but we are already beyond that threshold. Currently, Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) dollars cannot be used to cost-share grazing infrastructure improvements on land enrolled in Grasslands CRP, but FSA is piloting a project in Wyoming to do just that. The World Wildlife Federation is proposing 30-year contracts for Grasslands tracts, priority zones for enrollment that include more core and vulnerable grasslands, prioritizing sustainable grazing practices, and more incentives to transition expiring



General CRP contracts into Grasslands. Currently less than 5% of Grassland tracts were previously enrolled in General or Continuous CRP.

- The American Bird Conservancy is promoting Farm Bill provisions that would incentivize a “Rest, Recover, and Recapture” approach to grazing land management, particularly in the western states. Rangeland management that includes periods of rest is needed for the conservation of several high priority grassland bird species.

Other legislative notes:

- The reintroduction of the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA) is expected in the first half of April in the Senate (this ended up [happening on March 31<sup>st</sup>](#)). It came close to being included in the omnibus budget bill last session but fell short at the eleventh hour. One of the sticking points last year was the lack of a widely agreed upon “pay-for,” or way to reallocate funds to cover the bill’s cost without increasing the overall federal budget. A new pay-for has been identified for this session but is not yet being publicized.
- The North American Grasslands Conservation Act is also expected to be reintroduced soon, with PF/QF again being a primary proponent of the bill. We anticipate a slightly slimmed-down version to be put forward this year to help attract broader support.

Resident game bird-related notes:

- AFWA’s Resident Game Bird Working Group is contemplating the need for a white paper on predator control/management and its relation to upland game bird conservation. This is a subject more states have been grappling with recently.
- Dr. Jessica McGuire (PF/QF) recently worked with NRCS to roll out the [“Bobscares” app](#), which allows professionals and citizen scientists to record geo-specific observations of bobwhites. The data will be used to help model the distribution and abundance of bobs across their range.
- The National Bobwhite and Grassland Initiative (NBGI) recently hired a new Science Coordinator, with Dr. Jared Elmore assuming that position. Molly Foley, NBGI’s data analyst, has taken another position, so Jared will be covering both positions for the foreseeable future.
- The USFWS has created a multi-state Pittman-Robertson grant program called the Collaborative Conservation Initiative. This program will make it much easier for states to use PR money to fund NBGI activities and other multi-state projects.
- Regarding sage grouse conservation, we have about 32 million acres of sagebrush core areas left, and we are losing about 1.3 million acres per year.
- Regarding prairie grouse conservation, we are losing about 4 million acres of central North American grassland each year, about half to cultivation and half to woody plant encroachment.

## **Pheasant-relevant Media**

[Pheasants, wildlife continue to face winter conditions](#)

[Bird flu detected at pheasant farm in Ithaca, New York’s sole supplier of the popular game bird](#)

[Over 6,000 pheasants killed due to bird flu outbreak in upstate New York](#)

[Bill would phase out Montana prison pheasant rearing program](#)

[New legislation would help increase walk-in access program acres](#)

[New “Bobscares” mobile app helps establish national bobwhite database](#)

[PA Game Commission seeking genetic info on ‘tame’ ruffed grouse](#)

[Even with pesticides, agricultural areas can boost monarch numbers](#)

## Recent Literature

[Kreh, C. D., B. S. Pease, and K. Pacifici. 2023. Efficacy of autonomous recording units to evaluate wild turkey gobbling chronology in North Carolina, USA. \*Wildlife Society Bulletin\* \(early online version\).](#)

[Grant, T. J., et al. 2023. Monarch butterfly ecology, behavior, and vulnerabilities in north central United States agricultural landscapes. \*BioScience\* 72:1176-1203.](#)

[Zhang, G., et al. 2023. Native vegetation embedded in landscapes dominated by corn and soybean improves honey bee health and productivity. \*Journal of Applied Ecology\* \(early online version\).](#)

[Dobson, R., et al. 2023. dynamicSDM: An R package for species geographical distribution and abundance modelling at high spatiotemporal resolution. \*Methods in Ecology and Evolution\* \(early online version\).](#)

[Mostert, P. S., and R. B. O'Hara. 2023. PointedSDMs: An R package to help facilitate the construction of integrated species distribution models. \*Methods in Ecology and Evolution\* \(early online version\).](#)

[Adde, A., et al. 2023. Too many candidates: Embedded covariate selection procedure for species distribution modelling with the covsel R package. \*Ecological Informatics\* \(early online version\).](#)

## Trivia Answer

Habitat management, but it seems a little fond of predator control, too. I asked the algorithm a series of increasingly specific questions about pheasant management; below is the whole chat. It got most of the basics right but also told some whoppers (30 pheasants per acre of CRP?) when pressed for specifics. That said, it was impressive that it “knew” it needed a pheasants-per-acre estimate to answer the predictive question I asked, looked high and low for one (I couldn't find the reference it used on Google, so I'm not sure where it resides), then moderated its prediction because the density it found was a maximum. The spookiest thing is probably the real-time speed with which it does all this – it's pretty mind-blowing.

**Me:**

**How could we improve the wild pheasant population in Kansas?**

*ChatGPT:*

*Improving the wild pheasant population in Kansas would require a multifaceted approach, which could include the following measures:*

*Habitat Management: One of the most important factors in supporting wild pheasant populations is managing and restoring their habitat. This can be done by planting native vegetation, creating grasslands and wetlands, and using conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and enhance water quality. Landowners can be incentivized to implement these practices through programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).*

*Predator Control: Predation is a major threat to pheasants, and controlling predators such as coyotes and foxes can help increase pheasant populations. This can be done through hunting, trapping, or other means.*

*Hunting Regulations: Harvest management is an important tool for maintaining healthy pheasant populations. Hunting regulations, such as bag limits and hunting seasons, can be adjusted to ensure that enough birds are left to breed and maintain populations.*

*Pheasant Releases: Releasing captive-bred pheasants into the wild can supplement existing populations and increase hunting opportunities. However, this strategy is not a long-term solution and should only be used as a short-term measure.*

*Education and Outreach: Education and outreach programs can help raise awareness about the importance of pheasant conservation and provide landowners and hunters with the tools and resources they need to support healthy populations.*

*Overall, improving the wild pheasant population in Kansas will require a collaborative effort between landowners, conservation organizations, hunters, and government agencies to implement effective habitat management and predator control measures, while also promoting sustainable hunting practices.*

### **How could we increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10%?**

*Increasing the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10% would require a combination of measures, such as:*

*Habitat Improvement: Pheasants need suitable habitat to thrive, and improving their habitat is one of the most effective ways to increase their population. Planting native vegetation, creating grasslands and wetlands, and using conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and enhance water quality can all help improve pheasant habitat.*

*Predator Control: Predators such as coyotes and foxes can have a significant impact on pheasant populations, and controlling their numbers can help increase the number of pheasants. This can be done through hunting, trapping, or other means.*

*Nesting Cover: Providing nesting cover can improve the survival rates of pheasant chicks. This can be done by creating brush piles, planting shrubs and trees, and leaving areas of uncut vegetation.*

*Winter Cover: Providing winter cover can also improve the survival rates of pheasants during the winter months. This can be done by planting cover crops or leaving areas of uncut vegetation.*

*Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): The CRP is a federal program that pays landowners to retire environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and convert it to native vegetation. Enrolling in the CRP can help improve pheasant habitat and increase their population.*

*Controlled Burning: Controlled burning can help improve pheasant habitat by removing old and dead vegetation and promoting new growth. This can also reduce the number of predators by exposing them to hunting.*

*Education and Outreach: Education and outreach programs can help raise awareness about the importance of pheasant conservation and provide landowners and hunters with the tools and resources they need to support healthy populations.*

*Implementing these measures in a coordinated and sustained manner can help increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10%. However, it is important to note that the success of these measures will depend on various factors such as weather conditions, pest control, and the cooperation of landowners and hunters.*

**How many acres of new CRP habitat would it take to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10%?**

*It is difficult to estimate the exact number of acres of new CRP habitat that would be required to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10% because there are many factors that can influence pheasant population growth, including habitat quality, weather conditions, predator populations, and hunting pressure.*

*However, according to the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism, high-quality CRP fields can support up to 30 pheasants per acre. Assuming an average of 15 pheasants per acre, it would take approximately 67,000 acres of new CRP habitat to support an additional 10% of the current wild pheasant population in Kansas, which is estimated to be around 300,000 birds.*

*It is important to note that while CRP habitat can be an effective tool for increasing pheasant populations, it is only one of many factors that can influence population growth. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that includes multiple conservation strategies, such as predator control, nesting cover, and winter cover, may be necessary to achieve the desired increase in pheasant populations.*

**In what publication does the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism say that high quality CRP fields can support up to 30 pheasants per acre?**

*The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism provides information on their website about the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and how it can benefit wildlife, including pheasants. While they do not specify the exact number of pheasants that high-quality CRP fields can support per acre, they do state that "CRP provides excellent nesting cover for pheasants and other grassland birds and can also provide winter cover and food."*

*However, according to a publication by the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach titled "Conservation Reserve Program: Benefits for Wildlife", high-quality CRP fields can support up to 30 pheasants per acre. It is possible that this information has been cited by other sources, including the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. (ST Note: I Googled this publication but was unable to find it.)*

## **How many predators would need to be killed to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10%?**

*It is difficult to estimate the exact number of predators that would need to be killed to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas by at least 10% because predator control alone is unlikely to achieve this goal. Additionally, the number of predators that need to be controlled will depend on various factors, such as the local predator population, pheasant habitat quality, and other factors that can influence pheasant population growth.*

*Predator control is just one of many factors that can be used to support healthy pheasant populations. Other factors, such as habitat management, conservation programs, and sustainable hunting practices, also play a critical role in supporting pheasant populations.*

*It is also important to note that predator control should be done in a responsible and ethical manner, taking into account the ecological role of predators and the potential impacts of predator control on other wildlife species. Wildlife professionals can help determine the appropriate level of predator control based on local conditions and scientific data.*

## **What differences in habitat needs exist for wild pheasants in Kansas versus Oregon?**

*There are several differences in habitat needs between wild pheasants in Kansas and Oregon due to the differences in climate, landscape, and vegetation between the two states. Some of the differences include:*

*Climate: Kansas has a humid subtropical climate with hot summers and cold winters, while Oregon has a variety of climates ranging from temperate rainforests to semi-arid regions. These differences in climate can impact vegetation growth and availability of water, which in turn affects pheasant habitat.*

*Vegetation: Pheasants in Kansas require a mix of grasses, forbs, and woody cover for nesting, brood-rearing, and winter cover. In contrast, pheasants in Oregon may require a mix of shrubs, grasses, and riparian vegetation along streams and rivers.*

*Landscapes: The landscapes of Kansas and Oregon differ greatly. Kansas is primarily composed of flat or gently rolling agricultural land, while Oregon has a diverse landscape including forests, mountains, and valleys. Pheasants in Kansas may require larger tracts of grassland habitat, while in Oregon they may require more diverse habitats due to the variety of landscapes.*

*Predator species: The types of predators that impact pheasant populations may differ between Kansas and Oregon. For example, coyotes are a significant predator of pheasants in Kansas, while birds of prey such as hawks and owls may be more prevalent predators in Oregon.*

*Overall, while wild pheasants in Kansas and Oregon share some habitat needs, such as cover for nesting and brood-rearing, the specific types of vegetation and landscapes that are suitable for pheasants may differ due to the differences in climate, vegetation, and predators between the two states.*

**Which is the more cost-effective way to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas, habitat management or predator control?**

*The most cost-effective way to increase the wild pheasant population in Kansas depends on various factors, such as the current status of the pheasant population, the extent of habitat loss, and the density of predators in the area. In general, habitat management may be a more cost-effective strategy in the long term compared to predator control.*

*While predator control can be an effective tool for managing predator populations and reducing the impact on pheasant populations, it can be expensive and may not address the underlying issues affecting pheasant populations, such as habitat loss or fragmentation. Habitat management, on the other hand, can address these underlying issues by improving the quality and quantity of habitat available for pheasants to nest, forage, and seek cover.*

*Effective habitat management practices for pheasants in Kansas may include planting and managing cover crops, establishing field borders, creating nesting habitat, and implementing conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These practices can be cost-effective in the long term, as they can create sustainable and healthy habitats that support pheasant populations and provide additional benefits such as soil conservation and water quality improvement.*

*In summary, while predator control can be a valuable tool in managing predator populations, habitat management may be a more cost-effective strategy for increasing the wild pheasant population in Kansas in the long term.*

(End of chat)

*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>.*