Pheasant News and Notes

August 2025

Trivia Question

According to Partners in Flight, which resident upland game bird has the largest estimated population size in the U.S. and Canada combined?

USDA and Legislative News

The following information was provided by the Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever Government Affairs staff via Andrew Schmidt – many thanks for their insights and work on these issues. Please take particular note of the material on the introduction of the CRP Improvement and Flexibility Act – it has the potential to affect CRP's habitat benefits in significant ways.

Federal News

Reconciliation, Farm Bill, and CRP

Much of the attention in Congress this year has been focused on efforts by Republicans to negotiate pass their budget reconciliation package (also known as the "One Big Beautiful Bill" or OBBB), culminating in its signing by the President over the July 4 weekend. While PF did not take a position on the overall bill, we did work to influence the areas of the OBBB where it would impact our mission. This included keeping language mandating the sale of public lands out of the final bill and securing long-term investments in farm bill conservation and hunting access programs. To read more, check out PF's recent blog on the OBBB and the July edition of *Pheasant News and Notes*.

As you undoubtedly know by now, one notable program that was missing from the bill is the Conservation Reserve Program, which is still set to expire on September 30. The good news is, with 2 of PF's top 3 farm bill priorities largely addressed in the OBBB (baselining IRA dollars and VPA-HIP funding), we are now able to devote more time and attention specifically to building support for improving CRP in a bipartisan farm bill, along with other policy improvements to farm bill programs that were not able to be addressed through the reconciliation process due to Senate rules.

House Ag Committee Chairman GT Thompson (R-PA) has indicated that he plans to mark up his version of what he's calling "farm bill 2.0" this September. This could prove to be a difficult task, as lawmakers won't return until next month and still need to fund the government beyond this fiscal year. We fully expect this bill to look very close to what passed out of the House Ag Committee in 2024.

The timeline for Committee action and the release of bill text is less clear on the Senate side, where Senate Ag Chairman John Boozman (R-AR) will need at least some Democratic votes to pass something out of the chamber. But there has been positive movement when it comes to bipartisan support for CRP with the introduction of the CRP Improvement and Flexibility Act. The bill, which is co-sponsored by Sens. Thune (R-SD), Klobuchar (D-MN), Moran (R-KS), and Smith (D-MN), builds upon the previously introduced CRP Improvement Act of 2023 and includes many of PF's top CRP priorities, including:

- Restoring cost-share for mid-contract management activities not related to haying or grazing;

- Increasing the annual payment limitation from $50,000, which was established in 1985, to $125,000 to account for changes in land values, inflation, and other economic factors;
- Providing cost-share for grazing infrastructure, including fencing and water distribution, for CRP contracts if grazing is included in the conservation plan;
- Permanently establishing the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement practice under continuous CRP;
- Limiting emergency haying of CRP to 50 percent of contract acres, restoring the limitation that existed in CRP policy prior to the 2018 Farm Bill; and
- Allowing emergency haying in the final 2 weeks of the primary nesting season unless the haying would cause long-term damage to vegetative cover for wildlife populations supported by the applicable practice.

Some may recall the CRP Flexibility Act, which was also introduced in 2023 with bipartisan support in both the Senate and House (including support from now Senate and House Ag Ranking Members Klobuchar and Craig). That bill would have removed any restrictions on emergency haying and grazing with respect to the primary nesting season. The goal of the CRP Improvement and Flexibility Act is to merge the two 2023 bills with compromise language and prevent other, more harmful provisions related to emergency haying from being proposed while also securing more co-sponsors for our priorities. Contact Andrew Schmidt on PF's Government Affairs team for more information.

Appropriations

In one of the chamber's final actions before leaving DC for the August recess, the Senate passed its first three spending bills on Friday, August 1, including voting 87-9 to pass the USDA appropriations bill. The bill would fund NRCS conservation operations at $895 million, level with FY2025 funding (which was a continuation of FY2024 levels), with $775 million for NRCS conservation technical assistance.

Administrative Updates

CRP signups

- Following the end of the signup period, FSA posted the signup results for the General signup on the CRP Statistics page here. According to the table, 255,994 acres were offered and 203,983 were deemed acceptable following an EBI cutoff of 202 (a 79% acceptance rate). This is comparable to last year's General signup which accepted 199,214 acres (also a 79% acceptance rate). No numbers for the Continuous signup have been made available yet.
- The Grassland CRP enrollment period was announced in mid-July, with the signup running from July 14 to August 8. As part of the new signup, USDA has removed the $13 per acre minimum rental rate that has been in place since 2021. This has resulted in significant decreases in rental rates for most counties with high enrollment in the Grassland signup. Counties in National Priority Areas (Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and Dust Bowl) receive a $5 bonus to the rental rate. It remains to be seen what the effect of these changes will be, but in all likelihood, it will mean less demand for Grassland signup compared to previous years.

USDA reorganization

- On July 24, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced a long-awaited plan to transfer most of the Washington-area USDA staff to five regional hubs around the country. According to the plan, five hubs will be: Salt Lake City, UT; Fort Collins, CO; Indianapolis, IN; Kansas City, MO; and Raleigh, NC. On August 1, USDA opened a 30-day comment period for stakeholders to provide feedback and input on the plan.

State News

As many of you know, we recently hired a Director of State Government Affairs and are doubling down on policy engagement in the states. A major part of this effort involves empowering PF & QF members to quickly and effectively engage with their elected officials.

To support this, we are piloting a powerful new advocacy tool: the Upland Action Center. This platform enables supporters to send pre-drafted, customizable messages to lawmakers in just minutes. Over the past few weeks, we have deployed the tool through Action Alerts tied to three critical state-level issues, resulting in more than 6,000 emails sent to legislators:

- Pennsylvania: For years, outdated laws banned Sunday hunting, cutting opportunity in half for many hunters. Thanks in part to persistent advocacy, including hundreds of messages from PF & QF members, House Bill 1431passed both chambers and was signed by Governor Josh Shapiro, expanding access for sportsmen and women in the Keystone State (read the blog here).
- Wisconsin: The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, which has protected public access and habitat for over 30 years, faces expiration in 2026 despite overwhelming public support. Our Action Alert encouraged PF & QF supporters to thank the 26 lawmakers who signed on to legislation (AB 315 / SB 316) to reauthorize the program, prompting a strong show of support from Wisconsin's conservation community.
- Ohio: Budget negotiations threatened funding for several successful conservation programs, including H2Ohio. While the final budget did include cuts, PF & QF supporters sent a clear message about the importance of these programs. Governor DeWine ultimately used his line-item veto authority to strike language that would have blocked land acquisitions, a vital conservation tool.

These recent wins and ongoing challenges underscore the power of and opportunity for grassroots advocacy. The Upland Action Center is just one way we are ensuring PF & QF supporters have a voice in the decisions that shape our natural resources. We continue to work with elected officials, partners, and the respective state natural resources agencies across the country to advocate for policies that support upland habitat and hunting.

Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

August is roadside brood count month for several primary pheasant states. Here's hoping for good weather and high counts all around. It is a lot easier to write fall hunting forecasts when the news is good.

On a related note, Todd Bogenschutz (Technical Committee, Iowa) and I have been working with Dr. Adam Janke of Iowa State University to submit a manuscript for publication concerning our multi-state brood count research. Adam revised the analysis and hopefully the results are fairly straightforward. Bottom-line conclusions include: 1) dewpoint depression, which is an indicator of dew formation, was the most influential environmental variable on the probability of detecting broods, and 2) even under optimal counting conditions, brood detection probabilities were low (<0.3). The M.S. thesis upon which the manuscript is based also found that even with low detection probabilities, state indices derived from the counts generally do a pretty good job of tracking population changes.

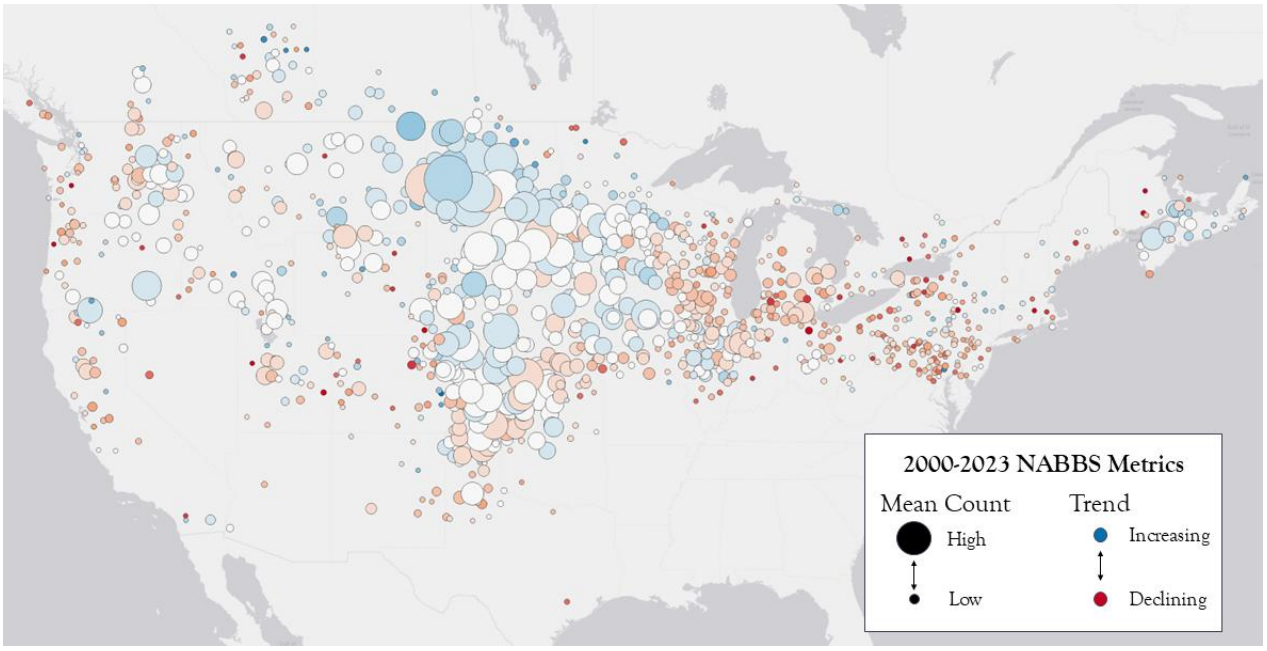
Plans for the upcoming Management Board and Technical Committee meetings are taking shape. The Management Board will meet on Monday, September 22nd from 3-5pm at the AFWA Annual Meeting in

Tucson, Arizona. I've discussed some potential discussion items with Board chair Alicia Hardin (Nebraska) and will send a draft agenda out for members to review soon. Also, it looks like the Technical Committee will meet January 14-16, 2026, in a yet-to-be-determined location along the Oregon-Washington border. The meeting will be held just after the Western Quail Working Group and Western Gamebird Workshop meetings earlier that week in the same location. More details to follow in the coming weeks.

Bryan O'Connor (Technical Committee) reported that results from Nebraska's 2024-25 hunter survey data are now available. Pheasant harvest was almost 160,000 roosters taken by about 37,000 hunters. Both harvest and participation were the highest since 2015. Thanks, Bryan – good news is always welcome!

Also out of Nebraska, the pheasant team at UNL just published a meta-analysis of seasonal and year-round pheasant habitat relationships in the central U.S. The conclusions they reach about some land uses (e.g., row crops and woodlands) didn't land exactly where I thought they would, but I think that is an artifact of the widely different types of studies they tried to synthesize. Conclusions about a habitat type effect can depend on the parameters you measure and the spatial scale at which you measure it. Effects estimated by monitoring individuals (usually via radiotelemetry) versus those estimated by monitoring local or regional abundance can also give you diverging perspectives and conclusions. Whatever your perspective, we thank the authors for a thought-provoking paper.

As for the rest of the pheasant range, I took a quick look at the route-level data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey from 2000 through the 2023 series, which is still the latest available. No real surprises, but the map does make the regional disparities stand out. Anybody interested in a little pheasant and ruffed grouse combo hunt in Nova Scotia?



Finally, from NABCI's July newsletter:

Sage Grouse May Be Extirpated from North Dakota

"State biologists in North Dakota confirmed this month that not a single male greater sage grouse was counted during their annual spring surveys year. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department noted that this was the first time in the history of the survey that zero male grouse were found during the active lek watches. While leks will continue to be monitored by the Department, biologists noted that recovery in the state would be unlikely without emigrating birds from neighboring states like Montana or South Dakota. Efforts to bolster the grouse population culminated in 2017 with a translocation project, moving in nearly 100 individuals from Wyoming over two years, but was halted around 2020 due to low nest success and poor brood survival. Since that time, lek counts have continued to decline. If the species is indeed no longer a breeder in the state, it would represent the first to lose their population since the 1950s."

Pheasant-relevant Media

State officials prepare for 2025 Minnesota Governor's Pheasant Hunting Opener
Where to hunt pheasants: The 4 best states for DIY hunters
Wyoming's Brian Nesvik confirmed as new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director
Thune, Klobuchar, Moran, Smith introduce legislation to bolster Conservation Reserve Program
More work is needed to finish Farm Bill
One Big Beautiful Bill Act: Agricultural Provisions
Big but not beautiful: Agricultural policy in the 2025 budget reconciliation bill
What's really inside the final budget reconciliation bill: A breakdown of food and agriculture provisions
USDA reorganization plans announced
Kansas burglary suspect took 80 pheasants

Recent Literature

Barg, A. J., M. Baldissara, D. R. Uden, J. P. Carroll, and A. Little. 2025. Pheasants 365: A review of seasonal ring-necked pheasant habitat in central North America. Ecology and Evolution 15:e71867.

Lewis, W. B., et al. 2025. Integrating multiple data sources with species distribution models to estimate the distribution and abundance of northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) in the United States. Ecological Modeling 509:111265.

Goldman, J., et al. 2025. Does a decision support tool designed to depict West Nile virus risk explain variation in ruffed grouse Bonasa umbellus use of managed forests? Wildlife Biology e01389.

Solomon, M. J., K. A. Fricke, C. Kruse, and L. B. McNew. 2025. Ensembled evaluations of habitat suitability for prioritizing lesser prairie-chicken conservation. Ecosphere 16Le70321.

Ditchkoff, S. S., and A. V. Belsare. 2025. Much ado about modeling: Why fieldwork should remain the soul of wildlife ecology and management. Wildlife Society Bulletin (early online version).

Perez-Granados, C., et al. 2025. Optimisation of passive acoustic bird surveys: a global assessment of BirdNET settings. Preprint.

Singer, D., et al. 2025. Diel and seasonal vocal activity patterns revealed by passive acoustic monitoring suggest expert recommendations for breeding bird surveys need adjustment. Journal of Ornithology.

Trivia Answer

According to PIF's latest estimates, there was an average of around 18 million ruffed grouse in North America during 2006-2015, which barely edged out pheasants at 17 million. Willow ptarmigan (13 million) and spruce grouse (11 million) were the only other species to average above the 10 million mark. Given the primarily Canadian distributions of the other species, it is safe to say that pheasants are the most abundant resident game bird in the U.S.

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.