Pheasant News and Notes

February 2026

Trivia Question
What is "feaking?"

USDA and Legislative News
The content below was submitted by Andrew Schmidt, Government Affairs Director for Pheasants Forever. Thanks, Andrew!

Possible farm bill action coming
After many months of waiting, we are closer than ever to a potential House Ag Committee farm bill markup, with Chairman GT Thompson telling committee members and reporters that he is targeting the week of February 23 for committee action. All indications are that the conservation title will look "mostly the same" as the bill considered by the committee in 2024, with one possible exception in the Conservation Reserve Program. Because of issues with CBO scoring and the costs of the CRP provisions in the 2024 bill, we have heard that it's likely the House bill this year will not include many of the more impactful changes previously proposed (including those on rental rates). However, it is still yet to be seen what exactly will be included with regards to CRP, such as MCM cost-share, payment limits, and eligibility. Assuming Chairman Thompson sticks to the Feb. 23 target date, we should expect to see bill text at some point in the week leading up to the committee markup.

PF & QF and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers MOU
Earlier this month, PF & QF signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, allowing PF & QF staff to work on habitat and access projects in and around land owned by USACE. The Corps owns over 12 million acres of public lands and waters, and this partnership will increase opportunities for joint conservation work to restore and manage grasslands and other upland habitat ecosystems on USACE lands. For more information, see the recent press release about the MOU.

National Wildlife Refuge System review
In December, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Director Brian Nesvik initiated a comprehensive review of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) to identify opportunities to improve interactions, efficiencies, and consistency throughout the system. The NWRS is one of the crown jewels of America's conservation story, with a long history of successful and impactful wildlife management, habitat restoration, and outdoor recreation. PF & QF will be working with USFWS to identify practical opportunities to further the mission of wildlife refuges.

Notes from Around the Pheasant Range
We held our "2025" National Wild Pheasant Technical Committee meeting last month in The Dalles, Oregon last month. Among my notes from the meeting:

- We had in-person and online participation from at least 13 states (Ohio, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Oregon, Nebraska, North Dakota, Washington, Utah, California, Iowa, and

Minnesota), as well as staff from Ohio State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, West Texas A&M University, Pheasants Forever, and Quail Forever.

- We started with a joint field techniques session with the Western Gamebird Workshop. Management Board member Stephanie Landry and Mike Schroeder (both from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife) led us through identifying species, sex, and age for three species of forest grouse (right), as well as noose pole capture demonstrations for these birds.
- Josh Brown of WTAMU reported on the first field season of a study of pheasant ecology and genomics, with an emphasis on assessing population connectivity. They are using GPS-equipped tags on pheasants to assess individual movements and productivity, as well as tissue samples from hunter-killed birds to look at spatial variation in genetic characteristics.
- Andy Little of UNL described his and his colleague's work developing spatial decision support tools for pheasants in Nebraska. They are finalizing abundance prediction models based on land cover metrics and disturbance events. Those models will then be housed within a GIS-based tool to identify areas where management actions will have the greatest impact on populations. They hope to have most of their work completed by the end of this summer.
- Joe Drake of OSU presented on the abundance prediction models he's developed so far based on historic pheasant crow count data provided by Ohio, Wisconsin, Kansas, and North Dakota. Models for Ohio, Wisconsin, and Kansas seem to behave as expected based on recent eBird relative abundance maps, and he is just getting started on the North Dakota models. Joe is also trying to find a way to characterize connectivity of pheasant habitats, and elicited input from meeting attendees to help in that effort.
- Steven Woodley of the Minnesota DNR reported on his ongoing work to ascertain the persistence of neonic pesticides in pheasants and other resources. Under their study design, they detected neonics or their metabolites in 83% of soil samples, 6% of forb samples, 56% of insect samples, 5% of pheasant muscle samples, and 5% of pheasant crop content samples collected in 2024. Results from 2025 are pending, and additional samples will be collected in 2026. Neonic detection costs $250-300 per sample to analyze, which limits feasible sample sizes.

- Last fall, the Management Board asked the Technical Committee for input regarding potential uses of state partnership funds that have accumulated in our MAFWA account. After hearing input from the Plan Coordinator (i.e., that some states may choose to reduce their annual contribution to the partnership this spring in response to the "surplus" in the account), the Committee suggested two potential uses for the funds: 1) hire a contractor to develop a highly reliable artificial intelligence-based classifier to identify pheasant crows on automated recording unit (ARU) sound samples that are scheduled to be collected by some states beginning this spring, and 2) purchase more ARUs to increase the number of samples the states can collect. However, it was further suggested that spending decisions be delayed until the collection of state funding contributions this spring, at which time any reductions in payments can be evaluated.
- The states in attendance provided highlights of their pheasant harvest, management, and research activities; written reports were collected after the meeting and will be compiled by the Plan Coordinator.
- Although we didn't have anyone at the meeting volunteer to host our 2026 gathering, after the meeting Don Kaul of Illinois agreed to host (thanks, Don!). The group thanked Mikal Cline (Technical Committee, Oregon) and Sarah Garrison (Technical Committee, Washington) for hosting a great set of meeting in The Dalles, and we look forward to seeing everyone next time in Illinois.

I attended the Kansas Natural Resources Conference last week, which included a plenary talk from former NRCS chief Bruce Knight. He made several disparaging comments about "traditional" CRP that I won't go into, but he also pointed out the new set of USDA research priorities released a couple of months ago. These include:

1. Increasing profitability of farmers and ranchers
2. Expanding markets and creating new uses of U.S. agricultural products
3. Protecting the integrity of American agriculture from invasive species
4. Promoting soil health to regenerate long-term productivity of land
5. Improving human health through precision nutrition and food quality

You'll notice that "soil health" is the only natural resource-related item that is mentioned, and only in the context of maintaining agricultural production. No water priority, let alone wildlife – make of that what you will.

Pheasant-relevant Media

North Dakota program seeks to transform less productive cropland into wildlife habitat
Pheasant hunting in Michigan to continue following law signing
North American Grouse Partnership seeks policy changes to support Kansas ranchers, grasslands and prairie chickens
Hunting and fishing access expanded
House Ag chair aiming for late February Farm Bill 2.0
A smaller farm bill is coming, with big consequences
Agricultural groups sound alarm about farmers' future
'Dust Bowl' agency at USDA looks to cut red tape and speed up slow computers that frustrate farmers
Corn growers disgusted as Congress leaves E15 out of government spending bills

Recent Literature

Niel, K. R., et al. 2026. Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI H5N1, clade 2.3.4.4b, genotype C2.1) in commercial ring-necked pheasants during the 2022 outbreak in the United States. Canadian Journal of Microbiology 72:1-17.

Booher, C. R., et al. 2026. Analysis of dedicated revenue scale and diversity among U.S. state fish and wildlife agencies. Journal of Wildlife Management (early online version).

Allison, L., S. Harrison, A. L. Shawler, and L. S. Wertz. 2026. The scale of landowner investments in conservation across the American West. Western Landowners Alliance & Southwick Associates.

Nimlos, N. M., E. F. Pienaar, and J. A. Martin. 2026. Does the public value ecosystem services secured by pine savanna restoration and bobwhite management on private lands? Forest Policy and Economics 184:103711.

Liao, Y., et al. 2026. Conservation and community: The local economic impacts of the Conservation Reserve Program. Resources for the Future, Report 26-02.

MacDougall, A. S., et al. 2026. The global extent of the grassland biome and implications for the terrestrial carbon sink. Nature Ecology and Evolution (early online version).

Trivia Answer

"Feaking" is a behavior in birds whereby they rub the sides of their bills against a perch or other object. This is thought to function as a way to clean the bill after feeding, as well as to maintain bill shape and as a social cue (see this overview). The term apparently originated in falconry to describe the behavior in raptors and is derived from the German word *fegen*, meaning to clean, sweep, or wipe.

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.