



Report to Governor Daugaard

**Governor's Pheasant Habitat Work Group**  
**Report to Governor Dugaard, September 2014**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The members of the Pheasant Habitat Work Group (PHWG) believe that, in general, South Dakota landowners care about conservation efforts and are actively implementing them on their lands. In offering these recommendations, our goal is not to create a suite of new programs or entities. We strive to use many of the programs our conservation partners already have in place, but to fund them better, increase education of the public and landowners, and above all, make conservation convenient.

To this end, our objective is to offer recommendations for improving the quantity and quality of habitat suitable for pheasants. We commend the many land managers who actively consider habitat in their operations and hope more producers can use this report to implement practices that generate long-term financial benefits while increasing short-term revenue and assisting wildlife.

While these recommendations are targeted at all lands, we believe that many practices will best be implemented on marginal acres—the odd-shaped parcels that are difficult to farm with modern agricultural equipment, areas near existing wetlands, and other pieces—that are less productive than adjacent sections of agricultural land. There are many financial and environmental benefits to “farming the best and conserving the rest.”

The PHWG intends to send a copy of this report to the USDA-NRCS State Technical Committee, along with a letter urging them to explore greater opportunities to utilize all acres, particularly marginal acres. While additional efforts can be undertaken on public land, private lands provide the greatest opportunity for implementing additional conservation efforts that will improve pheasant habitat.

In the end, the responsibility for maintaining and improving the conservation practices that benefit habitat for all species, including pheasants, falls to all South Dakotans. No single entity or individual can take sole responsibility because the benefits of conservation – increased wildlife habitat, improved water quality, better soil health, greater and more diverse economic activity – benefit the entire state. For these recommendations to truly succeed, the citizens of South Dakota need to make conservation a priority.

All Pheasant Habitat Work Group members have contributed to this report, reviewed its contents, and support its recommendations, which appear in no particular order.

**Recommendation #1:** Facilitate greater collaboration among conservation partners to better utilize available resources for improving habitat management.

**Recommendation #2:** Establish a long-term, dedicated conservation fund and appropriate \$1 million in one-time funds to bolster private fundraising efforts.

- Recommendation #3: Develop and implement the South Dakota Conservation Certification Program.
- Recommendation #4: Create a multi-part “Habitat Pays” education and promotion series for inclusion in a variety of existing publications.
- Recommendation #5: Revisit the current practices pertaining to mowing public rights-of-way.
- Recommendation #6: Petition the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency (USDA-RMA) to include all South Dakota counties as eligible for crop insurance coverage on winter wheat.
- Recommendation #7: Encourage the South Dakota Office of School and Public Lands to include a land management plan as a condition for securing a lease.
- Recommendation #8: Support Congressional efforts to raise the federal Duck Stamp from \$15 to \$25.

## **II. Background, Members, Purpose**

With its abundant birds and attractive landscape, South Dakota has long been recognized as the world’s premier pheasant hunting destination. The state’s strong pheasant populations are due to many factors, including ample grasslands, wetlands, and fertile croplands. This productive landscape makes agriculture South Dakota’s No. 1 industry. In recent years the expansion of row crops such as corn and soybeans has led to record productivity in these commodities even as the conversion from grass to cropland has created new and significant pressures on soil health, water quality, and wildlife production, including pheasants.

A study conducted by a collection of seven South Dakota State University (SDSU) researchers suggests that between 2006 and 2012, more than 1.8 million acres of grassland were converted to cropland, inundated by water, or lost to urban development. Many factors drove this conversion, including higher commodity prices, improved wetland drainage techniques, and advanced crop varieties, which resulted in more acres suitable for corn and soybean production.

In addition, South Dakota is scheduled to see significant reductions in the acres enrolled in the popular Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) over the next few years. Contract expirations will reach 69,700 acres in September 2014; 45,000 more in 2015; and an additional 56,500 in 2016. The return to row crop production for many of these acres seems likely and may have an impact on future pheasant populations. For these reasons, focus on conservation practices by all South Dakotans will be an important factor in ensuring the success of any efforts to improve and maintain pheasant habitat.

Fortunately, South Dakota has a long history of landowners participating in wildlife and agriculture conservation programs aimed at providing a balanced approach - raising commodities while implementing conservation benefits to the land and water. Many of these conservation programs originated in Farm Bills passed by the U.S. Congress and implemented through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency.

Farm Bill conservation programs have been supported and enhanced in South Dakota by government agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Dakota Department of Agriculture, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks (GFP), and the South Dakota Conservation Districts. A suite of non-governmental organizations have also contributed, including Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, National Wild Turkey Federation, The Nature Conservancy, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Conservation Fund, and others.

Even with a number of entities dedicated to conservation efforts, pheasant habitat remains a concern to many South Dakotans. In August 2013, GFP conducted its annual roadside pheasant brood route survey and found the statewide pheasant per mile index was 64 percent lower than the 2012 survey. Although 2013 pheasant hunter success suggests the decline was less severe than the survey estimated, the reports of lower pheasant numbers stirred concerns from hunters, businesses, conservationists, and agriculture interests.

On December 6, 2013, South Dakota Governor Dennis Daugaard hosted the Governor's Pheasant Habitat Summit in Huron to help identify causes for the decline and discuss potential solutions. More than 400 people attended and offered hundreds of suggestions for addressing pheasant habitat. An additional 1,000 people from around the country participated in the live video webcast.

Following the Summit, on January 7, 2014, Governor Daugaard announced the formation of the Pheasant Habitat Work Group (PHWG). PHWG members included:

**Pam Roberts**, Pierre (Chair) - retired Secretary of Department of Labor and Regulation

**Barry Dunn**, Brookings - dean, College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences, SDSU

**Tim Kessler**, Aberdeen – Pheasants Forever National Board Vice Chair

**Mary Duvall**, Pierre - District 24 state representative

**Jason Frerichs**, Wilmot - farmer, Senate Minority Leader, District 1 state senator

**John Cooper**, Pierre - GFP commission chair, former GFP Secretary

**Steve Halverson**, Kennebec - farmer, owner of Halverson Hunts

**Jan Nicolay**, Chester - former state representative, conservation advocate

**Jeff Zimprich**, Huron - USDA-NRCS state conservationist

**Doug Deiter**, Faulkton - farmer

**Jeff Vonk**, Pierre - GFP Secretary

**Lucas Lentsch**, Pierre - SD Secretary of Agriculture

**Nathan Sanderson**, Pierre - Governor's policy advisor for Agriculture and GFP

The Governor charged PHWG members with developing recommendations that “focus on practical solutions for maintaining and improving pheasant habitat.” The PHWG met eight times from February to August; reviewed hundreds of comments, suggestions, letters, survey results, and scientific data; and developed this report of its activities.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **RECOMMENDATION # 1: Facilitate greater collaboration among conservation partners to better utilize available resources for improving habitat management.**

There are many conservation partners operating programs that benefit wildlife habitat. However, based on feedback received from the public before, during, and after the Pheasant Habitat Summit, these varying entities have efforts that are not coordinated. As a result, implementation of current programs is inconsistent and inefficient.

In order to improve visibility of the available programs and make it easier for landowners to understand the full suite of available options, we recommend that GFP host a meeting of the various conservation partners to establish a statewide action plan for coordinated implementation of existing programs. The initial meeting should be followed by annual meetings to facilitate a long-term shift toward better coordination and delivery of conservation efforts on public and private lands. This collaboration should improve efficiency and result in more marginal acres put into existing habitat programs.

One key outcome of this collaboration should be the development of a “Habitat Central” website that includes a complete summary of available programs. This website should be a standalone entity similar to boards and commissions, not a subset of any state department’s website. It could feature information on practical measures landowners can implement – planting cover crops, utilizing flush bars for mowers and stripper heads for combines, integrating winter wheat into crop rotations, and others – as well as contact information for Farm Bill biologists, conservation districts, and other resources for actually implementing those measures on the land. The website may also feature success stories and testimonials from landowners who have applied these measures and participated in the various programs.

A second outcome could be the development of a digital mapping tool, similar to the one created by the South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources as part of its Oil & Gas Initiative (<http://www.sdgs.usd.edu/sdoil/>). This digital mapping tool would show landowners which acres on their farms would be best-suited for habitat development. The goal of the tool would be to help farmers examine their farm's topography and geography, while incorporating production history and input costs to determine the net financial outcomes for each acre.

Pheasant habitat would be better served if each producer had access to a tool allowing them to analyze farm-specific data that clearly demonstrated the financial implications of implementing conservation practices on marginal acres, which exist on almost all farms. This "farm the best, conserve the rest" principle can best be implemented when producers have information on all the options, and the financial implications of those options, readily available.

During the PHWG's discussions, many noted the need to update and modernize the delivery of habitat programs so they are financially competitive, voluntary, and easy for the public and landowners to understand. One initial way to begin this collaboration is through the newly established USDA-NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program in the Prairie Grasslands Region "Critical Conservation Area."

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes regional coordination among NRCS and its partners to deliver targeted conservation assistance to landowners. In April, the PHWG recommended that Governor Daugaard submit a letter to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, requesting that the Prairie Pothole Region be designated as a "Critical Conservation Area." He did so and Secretary Vilsack made the requested designation. <http://gfp.sd.gov/pheasantsummit>

As a result, additional funding opportunities become available through the RCPP. In mid-July, a collaborative group of conservation partners submitted an application for a landscape-scale "Critical Conservation Area" habitat program to benefit pheasants and a variety of other prairie wildlife. Opportunities to utilize RCPP should be available in future years as well. We encourage the groups collaborating on RCPP to focus additional funding requests on Farm Bill biologists, conservation district technical assistance, the one-stop-shop website, the digital mapping tool, and innovative financial assistance programs – all of which provide direct assistance to implementing conservation practices on the ground.

The RCPP holds great promise for delivering a wide array of incentive-based conservation programs to private landowners and public land managers. These types of efforts provide a mechanism for bringing all entities together to achieve common habitat goals and we strongly encourage further collaboration in this area.



**RECOMMENDATION #2: Establish a long-term, dedicated conservation fund and appropriate \$1 million in one-time funds to bolster private fundraising efforts.**

Perhaps the most common recommendation from the public has been to increase dedicated funding for conservation. It's an obvious suggestion and one the PHWG discussed at every meeting. It is also the simplest; many would contend that the most effective way to improve pheasant habitat would be to expand the suite of current conservation programs with an ongoing funding source. This approach has merit because there is, and likely will always be, far more demand for conservation programs than available funding.

The difficulty lies in the obvious: where does the money come from? The public offered numerous suggestions and PHWG members debated them at length. Some of the options included: sales tax increases, additional support by agricultural commodity checkoff organizations, expanding the tourism tax and dedicating a portion to habitat, creating a specialty license plate for conservation, removing current agricultural sales tax exemptions, increasing hunting license fees, changing the way property taxes are assessed on grasslands and shelterbelts, and many others.

Overall, additional funding will likely be the main driver for improved conservation efforts. Because most conservation activities are readily scalable, a broad range of funding amounts could be utilized effectively. We encourage the Governor and the Legislature to evaluate these and other suggestions during the 2015 Legislative Session to explore the potential for establishing an ongoing, dedicated funding source targeted at wildlife conservation and pheasant habitat on public and private lands.

In the interim, we recommend establishing a dedicated conservation fund that can be a repository for financial contributions from all sources, public and private, while also overseeing the distribution of funds solely for conservation purposes. The fund must be independent of other funds and able to accept tax-deductible contributions from any and all willing entities. In addition, the fund should focus on enhancing existing conservation programs on public and private lands, not purchasing land.

One option could be to coordinate with the South Dakota Community Foundation to establish the "South Dakota Conservation Fund," dedicated to providing financial resources directly to conservation efforts, including pheasant habitat. The South Dakota Conservation Fund should be managed by an executive director charged with leading the fundraising efforts and overseen by a board of directors tasked with distributing the funds to conservation activities.

With the exception of the Coordinated Natural Resources Conservation Fund, which offers competitive grants to conservation districts, there is no dedicated fund providing broad support to conservation efforts in South Dakota. While many conservation partners have their own funding sources, it seems clear that individuals, agriculture organizations, companies, main street businesses, and others do not have a single



entity to which they could provide funding support to directly benefit broad-ranging conservation efforts.

To launch the fund and bolster related private-sector fundraising efforts, we further recommend that the Governor and Legislature appropriate at least \$1 million in one-time funds to conservation in 2015. Additional one-time funds could also be added in future years, as available. This appropriation could be used to match private donations collected through an aggressive private-sector fundraising campaign. Private-sector funding could come from a variety of sources, including agricultural seed, chemical, and manufacturing companies; sporting goods stores; ammunition and arms manufacturers; hunting preserves; tourism businesses; and others.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3: Develop and implement the South Dakota Conservation Certification Program.**

Conservation practices benefit soil health, improve and protect water quality, and provide habitat for all species of wildlife, including pheasants. Conservation practices can also provide economic benefits for farmers and ranchers by reducing inputs on marginally productive cropland and managing livestock use on grazing land.

We recommend that the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with South Dakota State University and NRCS, establish the Conservation Certification Program to reward producers who maintain a certain base-line level of conservation. The certification could also recognize individuals, businesses, and other conservation champions using the Nebraska Master Conservationist program as a model.  
<http://owh.com/community/master-conservationist-awards/>

The program must be voluntary and designed in a manner that respects producer property rights. The program should also be created in close collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders, including conservation partners and landowners, who would provide direct input into the guidelines, criteria, and scope of the program. This greater level of grassroots input should lead to more ownership by producers and thus, a higher level of adoption.

The program would “certify” that a producer is operating in such a manner that provides certain public environmental benefits and may be used to provide pre-defined benefits for producers enrolling in conservation programs. For example, producers could earn pre-qualification in specific programs if certain existing conservation practices are met, ideally in programs developed through the conservation partners’ statewide action plan.

In developing this program, SDSU and SDDA should collaborate with the NRCS State Technical Committee to establish the means for Conservation Certified farmers and ranchers to receive priority ranking points for USDA conservation programs. Farmers and ranchers receiving Conservation Certified status could receive a preferred position when applying for conservation incentives through programs like the Environmental

Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In addition to demonstrating real value to producers who participate, the Conservation Certified program could result in more habitat on all acres, stemming the conversion of grasslands to other uses.

One of the best ways to promote conservation practices is to provide real life examples. South Dakota has several individual award programs that recognize good land stewardship; however, these award programs often only recognize the “winners,” not all who should be acknowledged for their efforts. Additionally, the recognition is often a one-time event with no future follow-ups. The South Dakota Conservation Certification program could change that approach.

**RECOMMENDATION #4: Create a multi-part “Habitat Pays” education and promotion series for inclusion in a variety of existing publications.**

Many of the comments submitted to the PHWG refer to the economic benefits of pheasant hunting, particularly in rural areas. While agricultural production remains the key economic driver in many South Dakota communities, pheasant hunting plays an important role in the economic health of small-town businesses, especially motels, convenience stores, and cafes.

While many South Dakotans appreciate the social, cultural, and economic benefits of pheasant hunting, the importance of high quality habitat for pheasant production and the associated impact its loss has on all citizens is much less understood. As a result, many individuals and entities that directly benefit from pheasant habitat are not actively engaged in ensuring its long-term viability.

To educate all South Dakotans about the benefits of pheasant habitat and begin to generate additional financial resources to support it, we recommend that the South Dakota departments of Game, Fish and Parks; Tourism; Agriculture; Education; and the Governor’s Office of Economic Development collaborate with SDSU Extension, Ag in the Classroom, and others to produce a multi-part “Habitat Pays” educational and promotional media series.

This series should be designed for insertion into existing publications—newspapers, magazines, trade publications, agriculture commodity newsletters, industry member-outreach letters, and others—to educate and advocate the various ways (economic, social, and cultural) wildlife habitat benefits all South Dakotans.

The “Habitat Pays” series could also be targeted at farmers, agriculture lenders, and out-of-state landowners whose production and management decisions directly impact pheasant habitat. It could be utilized in print and digital media with the goal of communicating the benefits a conservation ethic provides for our state.

One further option could be to implement informational materials from the “Habitat Pays” series into curriculum for K-12 students. The series could be incorporated into handouts for every South Dakota student to build grassroots support; the South Dakota Department of Education could assist by ensuring materials fit into existing content standards and through promotional efforts to teachers and administrators.

**RECOMMENDATION #5: Revisit the current practices pertaining to mowing public rights-of-way.**

Just over 80 percent of South Dakota’s land is privately owned. More than 17 percent is owned by the federal government and tribes, and less than 3 percent is owned by the state. As a result, the vast majority of efforts to improve pheasant habitat must be connected to private land. However, public land offers a variety of possibilities; one area that may be available for improved pheasant habitat is public road rights-of-way.

The timeframe and frequency with which road ditches are mowed for public safety and haying purposes can have an impact on pheasant production. Public suggestions for ways to enhance the ability of ditches to produce higher pheasant populations abound and are summarized near the end of this report.

One factor to consider for “road ditch habitat” is the length and distribution of our public highway system. The state-owned highway system includes about 7,800 miles, while the county and township road system encompasses 22,000 miles. Currently, the state Department of Transportation (DOT) mows an approximately 15-foot buffer area along state roadways to improve visibility and reduce wildlife bedding adjacent to moving traffic. This buffer is an important safety feature for motorists and should be maintained.

The start date for mowing state highway rights-of-way for the West River counties of Tripp, Lyman, and Gregory is June 15. No other West River counties have a mowing start date. The June 15 date was implemented in 2004 because mowing impacts pheasant production in these three important pheasant-producing areas. For all East River counties, the mowing start date is July 10. A violation is a Class II misdemeanor and local law enforcement has jurisdiction. DOT crews can mow medians and other areas for noxious weed control and public safety purposes prior to July 10.

The administrative rule outlining this process, ARSD 70:04:06:06, is the result of a compromise between farmers and ranchers who desire access to the high quality forage in many road ditches and the habitat needs of pheasants and other ground-nesting birds. The compromise is not perfect for pheasant habitat, but represents a compromise between varying interests.

These administrative rules govern the state highway system only, so the date restrictions for mowing and haying do not apply to public rights-of-way on county or township roads. The differences between units of government, the variation in mowing

start dates for producers East River and West River, inconsistent safety buffer widths, and other discrepancies has led to much confusion.

To address this, the PHWG recommends that the state Transportation Commission revisit the current practices pertaining to mowing public rights of way. This action could include a discussion of the current mowing start dates, including scientific data related to pheasant nesting in road ditches; the counties included in the mowing start dates and the difference in timing between East River and West River; the establishment of consistent widths for safety buffer strips and communication of those recommendations to counties and townships to encourage uniformity; the consideration of pheasant nesting schedules and weather cycles in determining highway mowing schedules; a meeting with state, county, and township governments, as well as other entities, to determine the value of uniformity in mowing start dates; the types of grass seeded in public rights of way; and other topics.

The PHWG recognizes the value landowners derive from haying and grazing public rights-of-way. Through greater uniformity in mowing implementation, better education, and greater awareness of pheasant nesting timing, this resource may be more effectively utilized to the benefit of landowners and pheasants.

**Recommendation #6: Petition the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency (USDA-RMA) to include all South Dakota counties as eligible for crop insurance coverage on winter wheat.**

Wheat is one of South Dakota’s most common crops. In 2013, South Dakota farmers ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the nation in total wheat production, raising more than 77.5 million bushels. Because wheat is a grass, during its growing season it provides habitat for a variety of upland birds, including pheasants. While pheasants prefer native grass prairie, among field crops wheat – particularly winter wheat because it is more developed during the nesting season – provides the best habitat.

Wheat has two distinct growing seasons. Winter wheat is planted in the fall and harvested the following summer; spring wheat is planted in the spring and harvested later that same year. In South Dakota, farmers plant spring wheat on approximately 1.1 million acres and winter wheat on about 1.3 million acres each year. Winter wheat is often used as a cover crop following corn or soybean harvest because it can reduce soil erosion while providing a saleable cash crop the following year.

In recent years wheat production has fallen as many acres have been replaced with corn, due to high prices for that commodity. One further limitation to wheat plantings is the inability for South Dakota farmers in 24 East River counties to get crop insurance on winter wheat guaranteed through USDA-RMA, even though it is available in many other counties in the region, including all but two counties in Montana.

South Dakota farmers purchase crop insurance through private agents and have their policies backed by USDA-RMA. Currently, those 24 counties are not eligible for crop insurance on winter wheat due to insurance guidelines established decades ago when winter wheat varieties were more susceptible to winterkill. With advances in seed technology and agronomy practices, however, many winter wheat varieties consistently produce a viable crop in counties where coverage is currently unavailable.

The PHWG recommends that Governor Daugaard write to USDA-RMA, requesting a reevaluation to determine if all South Dakota counties may be eligible for winter wheat insurance. In spring 2015 all Montana counties will be winter wheat insurance eligible, demonstrating that sufficient cold tolerant varieties exist. By expanding winter wheat insurance in South Dakota, farmers will have greater incentive to plant a crop that provides valuable nesting habitat for pheasants.

**Recommendation #7: Encourage the South Dakota Office of School and Public Lands to include a land management plan as a condition for securing a lease.**

The South Dakota Office of School and Public Lands (SPL) manages 760,000 acres of state-owned land. SPL once managed more than two million acres, but many of these lands have been sold and the funds placed into trust. SPL manages its lands primarily for grazing and farming leases and mineral production. While much SPL-managed land lies West River outside of South Dakota's primary pheasant production range, opportunities exist to improve pheasant habitat.

The South Dakota Constitution requires SPL to manage its lands to "benefit the public schools of the state," so revenue generation is the primary goal. As a result, management decisions are up to the lessee, though public recreation, including hunting, is an allowable secondary use of these lands. The leases are sold at public auction, at a rate set in a formula that considers many factors, including livestock and land prices. The lessee pays all local property taxes; as a result, very little land is left "vacant" because SPL would be required to pay the property taxes.

The PHWG received many comments on ways to improve habitat on the public lands managed by SPL, which are summarized at the end of this report. Based on these suggestions, we recommend that SPL include a land management plan document as a condition for securing a lease.

Currently, all leased lands have an established stocking rate, though rotations and other management decisions are up to the lessee. At times, this autonomy can lead to overgrazing and less-than-ideal stewardship of state-owned lands. Because SPL has limited staff to physically check each of its parcels every year, requiring a lessee to submit a management plan will provide a valuable reference, should issues arise. Because good land management can improve long-term revenue generation, in addition to leading landowners to be more diligent stewards of lands that can provide valuable pheasant habitat, utilizing management plans may increase revenues as well.

The PHWG also recommends that SPL maintain its current no-sale land policy. After the legislature discontinued its former practice of requiring SPL to sell a set number of parcels per year, SPL established an internal land sale moratorium. Because state-owned lands offer a variety of options for conservation practices and recreation, retaining SPL management of its current acreage should benefit pheasant habitat.

The current SPL policy of not allowing lessees to convert grassland acres to cropland should continue as well. In the past seven years, SPL has begun converting tilled land back to grass, where applicable, a practice that benefits pheasant habitat, reduces soil erosion, and improves water quality.

**Recommendation #8: Support Congressional efforts to raise the federal Duck Stamp from \$15 to \$25.**

The Duck Stamp is a federal license required for sportsmen over age 16 who hunt migratory waterfowl. Since Congress passed the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (the “Duck Stamp”) in 1934 in an attempt to offset the habitat damage created during the Dust Bowl, the Duck Stamp program has proven one of the nation’s greatest conservation success stories.

Since its enactment, the Duck stamp program has generated more than \$800 million to conserve nearly 6 million acres of wetland and wetland associated grassland in all 50 states. A model of conservation efficiency, 98 cents of every dollar goes directly to acquire or lease lands.

In South Dakota, this program is a key component for long-term conservation of our best pheasant and waterfowl habitats. More than 165,000 acres of National Wildlife Refuge and Waterfowl Production Areas have been purchased through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which is supported primarily by the Duck Stamp. In addition, Duck Stamp funds have been used to secure 1.34 million acres of conservation easements in South Dakota.

The price of the Duck Stamp has been \$15 since 1991. This 23-year span is the longest the Duck Stamp has gone without an increase to keep pace with inflation. When combined with much higher land values, the federal Duck Stamp has fallen behind in its ability to provide resources for wetlands conservation. The PHWG recommends that Governor Daugaard support efforts to raise the federal Duck Stamp from \$15 to \$25. We further recommend that the South Dakota Legislature pass a resolution during the 2015 legislative session supporting Congressional action on the federal Duck Stamp.

## **IV. Ideas for Further Consideration**

### **1. Continue efforts to enhance management of public land.**

GFP and the Office of School & Public Lands currently have management plans in place on the public lands they manage. Though there are management objectives for each parcel, establishing a comprehensive conservation plan for all state-owned land, as has been suggested, is not likely to be successful because different lands have different public objectives. For instance, while Game Production Areas are often managed by GFP for habitat development, grasslands managed by the Office of School & Public Lands are constitutionally dedicated to generating revenue for public schools.

Despite these different management objectives, opportunities exist to increase conservation practices on public lands. Many of these efforts are underway and should be continued and enhanced. One area ripe for improving public land management would be greater collaboration with landowners adjacent to current Game Production Areas. By establishing food plots, planting trees, and implementing other habitat-creation activities on adjacent private lands, the value of public lands can be improved.

### **2. Continue Legislative efforts to investigate realistic opportunities pertaining to agricultural land taxation.**

In 2008, the South Dakota Legislature created the Agricultural Land Assessment Implementation and Oversight Advisory Task Force to oversee the implementation of the productivity methodology (which focuses on "highest and best" use) of assessing agricultural land and make recommendations to the legislature regarding any changes that should be made. The task force continues to meet and, among other topics, is reviewing the potential to shift the agricultural land tax assessment from a "highest and best" use valuation to an actual use valuation.

Many public comments suggested that agricultural land tax assessments should be based on actual use, as a way to reduce land conversions from grassland to cropland. Under the current system, agricultural land is valued on its "highest and best use" as indicated by soil survey maps. Some believe that an "actual use" valuation would minimize tax disincentives for landowners who choose to keep land with cropped soils in grass, rather than breaking it up.

The PHWG discussed the issue at length. In addition to a briefing from the Department of Revenue, several members attended an Agricultural Land Assessment Task Force meeting, while others met with organizations and individuals working on this issue, including landowners and businesses. This emotional and complex situation requires more study by the legislative task force. Should the legislative task force desire further information or perspective from the PHWG, its members are willing to provide it. In the end, South Dakota will be best served by a comprehensive agricultural land taxation methodology that is fair and equitable. Ideally, it would also consider the statewide economic benefits inherent in responsible conservation practices.



### **3. Suggestions for spending additional one-time and ongoing funds.**

- Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists (ongoing)
- GFP habitat work on GPAs (one-time & ongoing)
- Comprehensive one-stop-shop website (one-time startup costs, then ongoing)
- Matching funds for grant programs, such as RCPP (one-time)
- Creation of Digital Mapping Tool for producers (one-time)
- Acquiring more public lands dedicated to pheasant habitat (one-time)
- Provide cost-share to small acreage owners for habitat development (one-time)
- Complete the full allocation of CREP acreage (ongoing)
- Provide “stripper headers” for wheat harvest at a discounted cost (one-time)
- Equipment purchases for conservation districts (one-time)
- Conservation district technical assistance outreach efforts (ongoing)
- Executive Director for South Dakota Conservation Fund (ongoing)

## **V. Public Comments and Suggestions**

Before, during, and after the Governor’s Pheasant Habitat Summit, GFP and the Governor’s Office received hundreds of ideas and suggestions pertaining to pheasant habitat. A complete list of the ideas submitted during the Summit is available at: <http://gfp.sd.gov/pheasantsummit/IdeasByCategory.pdf> .

The PHWG reviewed, organized, and summarized the various comments received into two main categories: private lands and public lands. These comments were discussed thoroughly at PHWG meetings and helped inform the recommendations in this report. They are listed below for information purposes only, not as PHWG recommendations.

### **PRIVATE LANDS IDEAS (SUMMARIZED)**

#### **Farm Bill**

1. Increase enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)
  - a. Work with Farm Service Agency (FSA) to make CRP easier and more desirable to participate in.
    - i. Allow the use or sale of residue (hay) created from required mid-term management.
    - ii. Allow prescribed grazing and prescribed fire to be utilized during the primary nesting season.
    - iii. Allow wetland practices to be eligible for managed haying and grazing.
  - b. Increase the number of Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists (FBB) across the state to help promote CRP and assist producers with enrollments.
  - c. Enroll the remaining 18,000 acres of James River Watershed Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
  - d. Create a Big Sioux River or Vermillion River Watershed CREP with similar capabilities to the James River Watershed CREP.
  - e. Create a shorter term CRP contract (e.g. 2-5 years).

- f. Identify a funding source to bridge the gap between current year cash rents and CRP rental rates.
  - g. Allow reenrollment of CRP tree belts.
2. Link conservation compliance to federal crop insurance premium subsidy eligibility. (\*Included in 2014 Farm Bill)
3. Develop and implement Sodsaver. (\*Included in 2014 Farm Bill)

### **Taxes**

1. Amend state laws so property taxes are assessed on actual agricultural use.
2. Develop statewide standards for assessing taxes on conservation lands.
3. Repeal property taxes on road rights-of-way and section lines.
4. Provide a property tax reduction or credit on lands devoted to conservation purposes (e.g. wetlands, idled grasslands, conservation easements, trees, food plots, etc.).
5. Utilize a tourism tax to fund wildlife habitat conservation efforts.
6. Create a dedicated conservation funding source.
7. Create a tax on drainage tile to fund wildlife habitat conservation efforts.
8. Create a tax on ethanol to fund wildlife habitat conservation efforts.

### **Outreach**

1. Develop an advertising campaign to build awareness for conservation, including available conservation programs and practices, conservation benefits of wetlands and grasslands, and benefits of conservation easements.
2. Develop ways to inform producers about the economic and societal benefits of incorporating conservation practices in their agricultural operations.
3. Promote holistic farming and ranching.
4. Promote existing technical assistance available via state and federal private lands wildlife habitat biologists and Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists.
5. Develop an education campaign promoting the benefits of wetland and grassland conservation in South Dakota, with efforts targeted at communities that rely on the Missouri and Mississippi river for drinking water.

### **New Habitat Programs**

1. Provide cost-share for small acreage owners to develop habitat on their property.

2. Develop a program similar to the Alternative Land Use Services program used in Canada where farmers decide the conservation program that will work for them.
3. Recreate the Pheasants for Everyone program that featured 20-40 acre plots of DNC (Alfalfa, Tall Wheatgrass, & Sweet Clover). This would be similar to the suggestion of creating a SD CRP-like program.
4. Create a shelterbelt easement program.
5. Create a non-cropland conservation program.
6. Create an incentive to grow native prairie mixes with forbs for cellulosic ethanol.
7. Create an incentive to use stripper heads to harvest wheat.
8. Create a state wetland protection law.
9. Create a state waterway buffer law.
10. Create a round-up ready alfalfa nesting habitat program with a delayed haying date.
11. Create conservation cooperatives to leverage state, federal, and local organization funds to offer programs that fill the gaps the Farm Bill programs don't cover.
12. Create an incentive program to raise winter cereal crops.
13. Create a program to renovate tree shelterbelts and expand existing programs.
14. Incentive program to square off sloughs.

## **PUBLIC LANDS IDEAS (SUMMARIZED)**

### **General Comments and Suggestions**

1. Encourage state and federal land managers to develop, improve, and maintain high quality pheasant habitat on existing public lands.
2. Encourage state and federal land managers to cooperate and coordinate for a more consistent and holistic habitat development and management approach across adjoining public lands.
3. Develop and implement a statewide pheasant habitat program that includes uniform and measurable habitat metrics for all public lands.

4. Establish pheasant habitat management zones in specific areas of the state, with public land “pheasant factories” at the core of these zones.
5. Utilize the financial and technical resources available through non-Governmental Organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever to develop and improve public land habitat and management efforts.
6. Utilize managed grazing more often as a habitat management tool on public lands – particularly in place of prescribed fire.
7. Develop private land-public land grass bank programs with area livestock producers.
8. Develop partnerships with landowners neighboring existing public lands to establish food plots and trees on their lands.
9. Promote the use of a more diverse species mixes in food plots on public lands, including the use of perennial food plots and brood plots containing native grasses, forbs, and flowers.
10. Engage local communities, service organizations, and conservation clubs in “local ownership” of public lands by utilizing their assistance with habitat developments such as planting food plots or trees; or public land maintenance such as litter control, fence repairs (e.g. Adopt-A-GPA Program)

#### **Federal Lands – Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA)**

1. Maintain existing trees and woody habitat on WPAs.
2. Manage WPAs specifically for pheasants.

#### **State Lands – Game Production Areas (GPA)**

1. Simplify the process for GPA purchases.
2. Maintain the existing budget for habitat management needs on GPAs.
3. Utilize tenants to establish food plots on GPAs in return for haying or grazing use.
4. Eliminate haying on GPAs.
5. Acquire more public lands dedicated to providing pheasant habitat.

#### **State Lands – School Trust Lands (SPL)**

1. Develop management plans for SPL lands that include a wildlife habitat component.
2. Ensure all SPL leases include grazing management plans – stocking rates, dates, and rotations.

3. Maintain the current moratorium on the sale of SPL lands.
4. Ensure that SPL lands currently in native grass stay as native grasslands.
5. Have SD Game, Fish & Parks assume management of school and public lands.

#### **Public Road Ditches & Highway Rights-of-Way**

1. Enforce existing laws regarding mowing dates on state highway rights-of-way.
2. Establish rules whereby road rights-of-way are allowed to be hayed on alternating schedules (e.g. north and east sides in even years, south and west sides in odd years).
3. Establish habitat in road rights-of-way using perennial native grasses, forbs, and flowers.
4. Prohibit broadcast spraying in road rights-of-ways and ditches.
5. Prohibit farming in road ditches and across open section lines.
6. Repeal property taxes on road rights-of-way and section lines.
7. Reduce mowing in railroad rights-of-way to protect existing habitat.

## **VI. NON-HABITAT CONSIDERATIONS**

The PHWG received a variety of comments and suggestions related to pheasant production and hunting that did not directly pertain to habitat. While the PHWG members understand and acknowledge that a variety of factors contribute to pheasant numbers (including weather and predation), the primary, long-term, controllable factor influencing South Dakota's pheasant population is adequate habitat. For that reason, the Governor's Pheasant Habitat Summit and PHWG focused its recommendations in that area. Nonetheless, the PHWG offers brief considerations on the most commonly expressed non-habitat suggestions.

### **Pheasant Stocking**

Stocking hen pheasants in the spring in hopes of supplementing production from wild birds often occurs. Research by GFP found that for every 100 hens released, 3 broods were produced. Hen and nest survival rates were extremely poor. Production from wild birds in similar habitat was ten times higher. Stocking hen pheasants is not a cost-effective way to increase pheasant populations. Stocking adult roosters in the fall is an effective method to increase harvest of roosters from a parcel of land; however, it is incompatible with many hunters who prefer hunting wild pheasants and does not contribute directly to increasing brood numbers the following spring.

### **Predator Control**

Predation is the primary cause of pheasant mortality and nest failure. However, when suitable habitat is available and weather conditions warrant, pheasant populations flourish without direct predator control. Research has found that very intense and concentrated predator removal efforts can have limited positive effects on pheasant production, but at high financial costs over a small geographic area. Because predator removal must be very targeted and intense to be marginally effective, there is substantial doubt that a bounty program would result in higher statewide pheasant populations. Providing blocks of nesting habitat provides broad and long lasting benefits to pheasant populations.

A bounty or reward system to encourage predator control would probably not have a measureable effect on pheasant populations. Predator control must be very intense to result in a marginal benefit to upland nesting birds. Under a bounty system, predator control would not be targeted enough to be effective. Additionally, bounty systems in other states have been ineffective because the origin of the predators cannot be verified. Predators from other states could easily be imported for a bounty, which would be counterproductive.

### **Impacts of Turkeys on Pheasant Reproduction**

There is no evidence that turkeys have any impact on pheasant production. Nesting habitats of these two species may overlap in small portions of South Dakota. Both species will utilize CRP grasslands for nesting, but there is no known negative interaction between these two species that would limit reproduction or brood survival.

### **Season Structure**

South Dakota's pheasant hunting season has varied in season length, rooster limit, hen limit, and shooting hours since the first season was established in 1919. Hen pheasants have not been legal to harvest since 1946. Because hen pheasants are no longer harvested, hunting has very little, if any, impact on long term pheasant populations. Some hen pheasants are incidentally harvested, but the effect is assumed negligible. Because pheasants are naturally short lived, adjustments of season structure to reduce harvest and "save" more roosters for the following season is a poor management strategy. Post-season sex ratio counts indicate, on average, only 50% of available roosters are harvested. This is more than a sufficient number of roosters for breeding purposes during the following nesting season.

### **Winter Feeding**

Waste grain from harvested crop fields is the primary food source for pheasants during winter. Pheasants can struggle to find waste grain when snow depths become deep. This can cause increased exposure to predators in open fields which can reduce winter survival rates. Pheasants rarely starve to death, but body condition can sharply decline in response to limited food intake during very harsh winters. Food plots of unharvested crops such as corn, milo, or sorghum provide a consistent winter food source for pheasants while concurrently providing concealment from predators. Directly feeding pheasants is a costly and labor-intensive alternative which may have unintended

consequences. Feeding pheasants in otherwise poor winter habitat could result in very low pheasant survival during harsh winter storms. Providing strategically placed food plots near winter cover is a preferred alternative.

### **Weather**

Weather can substantially influence inter-annual variation in pheasant abundance, primarily by affecting winter survival and reproductive success. Pheasant populations typically increase after mild winters in response to increased winter survival. Populations also benefit from warm and dry (but not drought) conditions during the nesting season. High quality habitat can moderate the effects of severe winter weather on pheasant survival.

### **Disease**

Disease has not been found to be a significant source of mortality in wild pheasants.

### **Water Availability**

The need for an open water source for pheasants is poorly understood, but not thought to be a limiting factor for pheasant populations in SD. Given the abundance of prairie pothole wetlands and artificial stock dams and ponds, open water is readily available except during very intense drought conditions. We are unaware of any studies linking artificial water sources such as Guzzlers™ to an increase in upland game populations.

### **Brood Survey Timing**

GFP has conducted August roadside pheasant surveys since 1949. The objective of the survey is to determine an annual population index prior to the fall hunting season. The number of broods observed has a large influence over the population index. The timing of the survey during the first half of August coincides with when the most broods are expected to be encountered. Broods start to break up at around 12 weeks of age, or shortly after the survey is complete. A later survey may detect some late-hatched broods, but many more would go undetected due to brood breakup as well as high grass regimes and maturing agricultural crops, which make sighting broods difficult.

### **Research**

Results from pheasant research projects guide pheasant habitat management on public and private lands. Pheasant research has also been important in tailoring conservation programs such as CRP. Recently, the GFP and SDSU completed research investigating the use of winter wheat for nesting. GFP will continue to pursue pheasant research as opportunities or data needs arise.

### **Refuges**

Upland game bird refuges prohibit pheasant hunting and offer limited benefits to increasing pheasant populations. Pheasant home ranges are comparatively small, reducing the possibility that they will migrate from refuges to adjacent lands. Conversely, waterfowl refuges may increase hunting opportunity by offering a rest area



for migrating birds. Once they leave to feed in adjacent fields, waterfowl are often available for hunters to harvest.

### **Pesticides**

The effects of pesticides on pheasants are largely unknown. The largest impact is likely from reduced insect abundance which could reduce chick survival. Pheasant chicks eat insects almost exclusively during their first 8 weeks of age. The high protein diet is needed to grow body tissue and feathers during this period of rapid growth.

### **Loss of hunters**

The continued decline in pheasant hunters is an indirect threat to pheasant habitat. Loss of license sales revenue reduces the amount of money available for habitat projects on both public and private lands. Hunters are also the primary advocates for conservation policy and this voice is shrinking.

## **VII. CONSERVATION PARTNERS**

Numerous conservation partners operate land management programs in South Dakota. Below is a brief snapshot of these entities, including their program goals, expertise, and activities, which have a direct impact on pheasant habitat.

### **U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**

[www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)

NRCS is the principle agency delivering federal Farm Bill conservation programs in South Dakota. Over the next five years, NRCS will provide billions of dollars to help landowners protect the grasslands and wetlands in the Prairie Grasslands Region.

The stated goals of NRCS's Grassland Region efforts are:

- Reduce conversion of expired and expiring CRP acres and existing prairie grasslands into crop production.
- Restore marginally productive croplands into grasslands and wetlands.
- Improve management of working lands (wetlands, grasslands, pasture/range, and cropland) through conservation management systems, which minimize adverse impacts to wildlife and improve and protect soil and water values.
- Develop increased transparency, consistency, and greater producer acceptance to protect wetlands by improving NRCS delivery of Wetlands Conservation Compliance provisions of the new Farm Bill.
- In general, restore and protect native prairie grasslands and wetlands, promote sustainable use of soil and water resources to mitigate flooding, drought and overdraft of the Ogallala Aquifer.

**Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):** NRCS will provide targeted EQIP funds to assist producers with expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage.

This targeted program goes beyond general EQIP funding by offering payments beyond the three year limit for prescribed grazing and other management practices. The 2014 Farm Bill rolled the former Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) into EQIP.

Water Bank Program: With a \$4 million appropriation in the 2014 budget, NRCS has funding to offer landowners enrollment opportunities in the Water Bank Program. Enrolled landowners can receive annual payments through a ten-year rental agreement for conserving and protecting wetlands and adjacent lands that may otherwise be converted, used for crop production, or other activities that require or promote drainage.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): The 2014 Farm Bill established this new program to replace existing easement programs for the Wetland Reserve Program and Grasslands Reserve Program. Through ACEP, NRCS can continue work with partner groups to enroll wetlands and grasslands under easement. All easements are voluntary and the new program depends heavily on partnership funding.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): As enrollment in CRP wanes, new enrollments in CSP are increasing. Aimed at conserving “marginal lands” formally identified using an “environmental benefits index,” CSP provides an opportunity to work with landowners to implement conservation practices on “working lands.” It provides for reenrollment of CRP, targeting precision conservation practices on smaller parcels as well, and larger cover crop projects. The 2014 Farm Bill increased funding levels for CSP and it will likely continue to grow in popularity.

These NRCS programs provide the main conservation opportunities for landowners and managers in South Dakota. There are others that address hardwood trees, shelterbelts, windbreaks, and wildlife corridors, as well as the new Sodsaver program.

### **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)**

[www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

USFWS offers payments for wetland and grassland easements to landowners seeking to protect their grasslands and wetlands. The easements are designed to allow landowners to maintain farming and ranching. In 2011, USFWS established the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area (DGCA) to protect almost two million acres of grassland and wetland east of the Missouri River by working with landowners to establish conservation easements. Many partners are collaborating on the DGCA, and this effort provides nesting and rearing benefits for all ground nesting birds, including pheasants.

### **South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks (GFP)**

<http://gfp.sd.gov>

GFP is charged with managing South Dakota’s wildlife for the public’s use, benefit, and enjoyment. GFP offers numerous programs and initiatives, including the Walk-In Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), to assist landowners with integrating wildlife habitat conservation into their farm and ranch operations. In 2013, GFP worked with over 3,400 cooperating farmers, ranchers and

other landowners to affect wildlife habitat on 17,697 acres, and to provide hunting access to 1.4 million acres, with \$6.27 million paid to these cooperators.

GFP is also in numerous partnerships aimed at delivering a wide variety of habitat programs in South Dakota. Known as the “Cooperative Habitat Biologists Program,” this project provides nearly \$350,000 in matching cost-share to fund thirteen cooperative biologist positions throughout South Dakota. These biologists help deliver hunting access, habitat, and range conservation measures to landowners. Often located in USDA offices across South Dakota, these biologists are often employed through cooperative agreements with NRCS, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

### **South Dakota Department of Agriculture (SDDA)**

<http://sdda.sd.gov>

SDDA has several programs designed to conserve, protect, improve, and develop the natural resources of South Dakota for all citizens. SDDA manages the South Dakota Coordinated Plan for Natural Resources Conservation on behalf of the state and the Conservation Commission. The goals of the coordinated plan are to reduce soil erosion, improve rangelands, enhance water quality, and other natural resources efforts through grants provided to conservation districts. Other programs include a revolving loan fund, public outreach efforts, conservation district programs, forestry and agroforestry assistance to private landowners, and special projects.

### **Conservation Districts**

[www.sdconservation.org](http://www.sdconservation.org)

South Dakota’s 69 conservation districts are organized as subdivisions of state government and are generally organized along county boundaries. Originally organized as “soil conservation districts,” the 1968 legislature changed their name to “conservation districts” in recognition their mission involves all natural resources. The five members of each board of supervisors are elected to four year terms on a nonpartisan ballot. Each board must contain three landowners/occupiers, one taxpayer of real property and one urban member. Because conservation districts have no taxing authority, they depend heavily on enterprise operations and contributions from public and private partners.

Some of the activities undertaken by conservation districts include tree sales, planting and care; land preparation and weed control; grass seed sales and planting; equipment rentals; landowner management services; education and outreach, including technical workshops and student activities; water quality assessments; and many others. Conservation districts are often an important information resource for landowners.

### **South Dakota Office of School and Public Lands (SPL)**

[www.sdpubliclands.com](http://www.sdpubliclands.com)

SPL manages 760,000 acres of state-owned land in South Dakota, utilized by about 2,800 lessees. At one point SPL managed more than two million acres, but much has been sold off over time (with the proceeds going into a trust fund to support schools).

The purpose of SPL-managed lands is to generate revenue to support schools, primarily through grazing, farming, and mineral leases. While much SPL-managed land is West River – 260,000 acres in Harding County alone – these lands provide valuable hunting access for many sportsmen and in many cases, benefit pheasant habitat.

### **Ducks Unlimited (DU)**

[www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)

DU is the largest non-government conservation partner operating in South Dakota. Founded in 1937, DU has sixteen regional initiatives that focus on fund raising and waterfowl conservation. In South Dakota, DU partners with NRCS and GFP to deliver the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). In 2012 and 2013, DU assisted with more than 160 WRP contracts to restore 12,000 acres of wetland habitat and 8,000 acres of adjacent upland cover in eighteen eastern and central South Dakota counties.

DU provides funding to: support the acquisition of grasslands and wetlands easements from willing landowners; employ conservation specialists working in key focus areas in coordination with NRCS offices; and provide cost-share assistance with USFWS to develop wetlands that provide benefits for livestock and waterfowl. DU recently undertook the new “Preserve Our Prairies” initiative in South Dakota. This new program involves working with landowners to protect and restore wetlands and grasslands through voluntary, incentive-based programs.

### **National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF)**

[www.nwtf.org](http://www.nwtf.org)

NWTF has initiated a new campaign called “Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt.” This initiative broadens NWTF’s scope to include habitat programs for a variety of upland species, in addition to turkeys. NWTF works to improve habitat in core turkey locations and enlarge public hunting access areas, with public access tied to private lands habitat enhancement projects of particular focus.

NWTF has two “focal landscapes” ripe for increased habitat improvement partnerships: 1) the Central Missouri River and 2) the Minnesota River Valley. The Missouri River focal landscape includes public and private lands in the river breaks, riparian, and upland corridors in south-central South Dakota. In addition to strong wild turkey populations, this landscape provides great opportunity for pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and prairie chicken management by using prescribed fire and thinning to remove red cedar, open pine stands, and place riparian management in key creeks and streams. The Minnesota River Valley focal area includes locations in Marshall, Roberts, Grant, Deuel and Brookings counties. NWTF has identified significant edge habitat, forested draws, and riparian habitat near grasslands as its program targets.

### **Pheasants Forever (PF)**

[www.pheasantsforever.org](http://www.pheasantsforever.org)

Founded in 1982, PF has more than 745 Chapters across the U.S. and Canada with 140,000 members. PF’s mission is directly tied to a strong framework of federal conservation programs contained mostly within the Farm Bill. This non-profit organization is dedicated to wildlife habitat improvements and advocates for public

awareness, education, and conservation policy. PF offers a variety of habitat management programs on both private and public lands—including nesting cover mixes, shelterbelts, windbreaks, food plots, watering considerations, and wintering habitat recommendations—that benefit pheasants and other ground nesting birds.

In South Dakota, PF has 32 chapters with 6,000 members. Since 1985, these chapters have raised \$4.8 million to complete 24,000 habitat projects covering 360,000 acres. PF recently announced the establishment of its first regional headquarters in Brookings. In addition, PR has eight “Farm Bill Biologist” positions located in NRCS offices throughout South Dakota, operating on a cost-share agreement with NRCS and GFP.

### **Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV)**

<http://ppjv.org/>

The PPJV was established by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in 1986. It is one of 24 joint ventures working in the United States, Canada, and Mexico to address the habitat needs of all bird species. The PPJV is a cooperative regional partnership of federal agencies, state agencies, local cooperatives and a wide variety of NGOs, all working on delivery of wetland and upland bird habitats. Their primary efforts are aimed at successful delivery of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act projects in the upper Great Plains area. PPJV projects are often large in scale, leverage considerable match dollars for every dollar of federal funds received, and have enjoyed a high success rate of habitats both restored and enhanced in South Dakota.