

Meeting #4
Governor's Large Conference Room - June 9, 2014

Work Group Members

Pam Roberts (Chair)
Barry Dunn
Tim Kessler
Representative Mary Duvall
Senator Jason Frerichs (via phone)
John Cooper
Steve Halverson
Jan Nicolay
Jeff Zimprich
Doug Deiter
Secretary Jeff Vonk (not present)
Secretary Lucas Lentsch
Nathan Sanderson

guests

Tony Leif
David Nomsen
Tom Kirschenmann
Bill Smith
Angela Ehlers
Rick Vallery

Welcome & Introductions

Chair Roberts began with a brief discussion on how the PHWG is informing the public/media on progress being made. The PHWG also discussed a timeframe for the final report, identifying that no concrete time has been set for completion. Tentatively, a draft document should be ready by August.

Steve Halverson clarified content and points made in an article published by the Argus Leader and that he did not make statements as written.

Pheasants forever - sd future efforts and initiatives

Tim Kessler announced that David Nomsen will move from Minnesota to Brookings, with PF opening its first field office in SD. A formal news release would be coming out today (June 9) providing details of efforts/initiatives. This effort is an approved plan and desire of the PF national board.

Areas of interest/focus

- Farm Bill opportunities
- Buffer and Roadsides
- Increasing quality of habitats (grazing management, partnership programs, acquisition, easements)
- Funding (long-term dedicated funding)
- Broadening support across the state for such activities

One specific area of interest is looking at ways to expand Farm Bill biologists across the state. To position these biologists, PF has partnered with GFP and NRCS. Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologists have been in place since 2004, working with landowners to maximize farm bill conservation programs and provide assistance in enrolling desired acres. Currently there are 7 and the desire would be to double the number of biologists. With this desire, PF plans to look at ways to expand current efforts and relationships with its current partners (GFP, SDSU, NRCS, etc.).

Conservation Certification work group

Lucas Lentsch and Barry Dunn provided an update on the Conservation Certification Program concept. Dunn mentioned that it would be critical for the Association of Conservation Districts to be engaged, as well as other entities such as NGO's.

Rep. Duvall reminded the PHWG that this program is bigger than pheasant habitat and should be mentioned in final report. Jeff Zimprich reiterated that this effort will take a long-term commitment and additional work needs to be completed. Zimprich also noted he is receiving calls with questions on this idea, and pointed out that several producers are already operating at a high level of conservation. This program concept should not only be a means of recognizing folks, but to also find other incentives and bonuses to elevate conservation work.

Action Item: Work Group to draft summary recommendation to include in the final report by July meeting.

rcpp work group

Jeff Zimprich distributed a few pages from the NRCS national website which describes the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) as well as maps illustrating the national Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs) designated by the Secretary of Agriculture. Two of the national CCAs overlap in South Dakota, the Prairie Grasslands Region and the Mississippi River Basin. As a result, the entire state is covered by a CCA, except for the Black Hills.

Zimprich mentioned the opportunity for SD to utilize the RCPP program to address some habitat needs, however the real challenge now is to determine which level to submit a potential proposal as they must be submitted at either the CCA, national, or state level.

John Cooper provided additional information on an "integrated approach" under an umbrella which all available conservation and habitat programs would be available and presented to landowners/producers when they come to an NRCS office. Cooper noted that one of the main problems with current delivery of programs is that most entities take a singular approach when providing conservation programs. All programs available should be presented at the time a landowner comes to an NRCS office as this is their primary destination for assistance.

Halverson suggested it would be good to have a website with all conservation and habitat programs so interested parties do not have to navigate multiple websites. Halverson also suggested that efforts do not focus too heavily on the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) as the study from SDSU shows grassland and wetlands being lost West River as well.

The PHWG agreed that a one-stop website with all available programs would be useful, the question is who would spear-head putting together the suite of programs and provide the host site and updates? Another question that needs answering is whether individual entities are willing to give up control of programs to allow Farm Bill biologists to deliver all programs?

Two recommendations discussed by the PHWG are as follows:

1. Short-term Recommendation: Governor directs GFP to bring all folks together to create a plan to provide the one-stop shopping center with all available habitat programs.
2. Long-term Recommendation: Recommend all relevant players coordinate each year to assure programs and delivery is working and in place.

GFP game production area management opportunities

As requested by the Work Group, Tony Leif, Wildlife Division Director, provided a summary of a "wish list" of Game Production Area (GPA) habitat based projects, access improvements, personnel, and equipment considerations compiled by habitat management staff. Additional financial resources made available to implement "wish list" projects and practices would allow further habitat development and management above and beyond the work currently completed each year on GPAs.

Current habitat development efforts on GPAs consist of establishing nesting cover, winter woody habitat, and food habitat plots. Primary annual management efforts focus on maintenance and operation, such as noxious weed control, fence maintenance work, prescribed burning, managed grazing, and access improvements. These development and management activities are funded through a federal aid grant that matches 75% Pittman-Robertson funds to 25% state license dollars.

GPA Habitat Opportunities Summary

GPA Habitat Development and Management Practices

Habitat development and management opportunities were identified as either on-going or one-time funding needs, as well as funding needs to build the infrastructure to enhance grassland management through livestock grazing. Additional resources obligated to both on-going and one-

time practices and activities would provide additional capacity and flexibility to existing personnel and fiscal resources to annually develop and manage more habitat acres on GPAs than is currently occurring.

On-going habitat development and management opportunities

- Native Grass Plantings: Over the past 5 years, about 900 acres per year of new native grass plantings are established on GPAs. It is estimated that an additional 2,159 acres per year spread across 55 GPAs could be established at a cost of \$647,700 per year. (The unit cost of \$300/acre for a native grass/forb mixture includes ground preparation, seed, herbicides, and other resources. This figure is regularly used when developing the annual federal aid grant for the management and operation of GPAs.)
- Dense Nesting Cover Plantings: On average about 175 acres of new Dense Nesting Cover (DNC) is established on an annual basis. An additional 1,145 acres per year could be added on 9 GPAs at a rate of \$171,750 per year.
- Food Plots: Combined, additional food plot acres (annual food plots and perennial food/brood plots) at a level of 325 per year on 64 GPAs could be completed at a cost of \$54,000 per year. Annual food plots provide winter food and cover while the perennial/brood plots provide essential brood-rearing habitat during the summer.
- Prescribed Fires: To further enhance existing grasslands, an additional 4,590 acres could be treated with prescribed fire on 42 GPAs on an annual basis at a cost of \$42,000. The 5-year average of acres treated with prescribed burns has been approximately 600 acres per year.
- Cedar Removal: To enhance productivity of native grasslands and rangelands by managing encroachment of woody species, an additional 2,110 acres could be treated at a cost of \$1,055,000 per year on 45 GPAs. Current efforts treat about 130 acres per year.
- Total On-going Expenditures for Year 1 = \$1,970,450

One-time habitat development opportunities

- Woody Habitat: To create additional winter woody cover, sites on 34 GPAs were identified that could support an additional 248 acres of woody habitat. Estimated cost is \$496,000.
- Wetland Restoration: One wetland restoration at a cost of \$10,000.
- Wetland Creation: Two wetland creations (embankment ponds) were identified and would require \$25,000 to complete the projects.
- Total One-time Habitat Project Expenditures = \$556,000

Grassland management opportunities through grazing

- Building or replacing fences: Grazing is an important range and grassland management tool on GPAs. To enhance grazing as a management tool, 70 miles of fence on 52 GPAs have been identified to be built. Total cost to construct 70 miles of fence would be \$560,000.

- Water developments for grazing: To better distribute grazing and create additional managed grazing opportunities, additional water developments need to occur. Twenty three GPAs would need 29 structures at a cost of \$14,500.
- Total Grazing Management Expenditures = \$574,500

Total Habitat Development and Management Practices = \$3,100,950

GPA Access Improvement Opportunities

Providing hunter access to specific habitats such as wetlands or more "remote" locations of a GPA is a priority of the department. Needed improvements related to access include developing new or improving existing trails and parking areas.

- New access developments: Providing hunter access to specific sections of a GPA is an important part of managing GPAs. Ten GPAs were determined in need of additional access opportunities of 9.6 miles trails/roads, with an estimated total cost of \$86,400.
- Improvements to existing access trails: Annual maintenance of existing access facilities on GPAs is needed to assure trails and roads are suitable for safe travel, and when necessary to make modifications that improve overall public access. Twenty-three GPAs have access trails in need of additional improvements for a total of 51.3 miles at an estimated cost of \$25,650.

Total Access Improvement Opportunities = \$112,050

Personnel Considerations

Efficiently and effectively managing over 270,000 acres of GPA requires work by both GFP staff (permanent and seasonal) and outside contractors. To accomplish habitat developments and projects over and above those currently being conducted annually on GPAs, additional human resources are required.

- Personnel Consideration A (additional FTEs): To develop, enhance, and manage additional habitat above and beyond current efforts, additional GFP staff would need to be added to habitat crews. Currently there are 40 permanent and 27 seasonal/temporary staff working to manage GPAs. A need for an additional 8 FTEs was identified in order to provide the necessary capacity and flexibility to accomplish the habitat developments identified under the GPA Habitat Development and Management Practices section, while also maintaining the current level of operation and maintenance activities. The additional FTEs would not necessarily equate to 8 individuals, rather a make-up of full time staff and additional seasonal staff. Estimated annual cost of these additional staff would be \$376,000.
- Personnel Consideration B (additional Habitat Forever teams): GFP has partnered with Habitat Forever, a subsidiary of Pheasants Forever, to position 4 habitat teams across the state to work solely on GPA habitat development, maintenance, and other associated management activities. Similar to Consideration A, the addition of more habitat teams would provide the necessary capacity and flexibility to complete additional habitat developments while still maintaining current levels of GPA operation and maintenance activities. Five additional locations were identified (Aberdeen, Brookings, Sioux Falls,

Mitchell, Mobridge) for the placement of habitat teams at an estimated annual expenditure for 5 teams being \$800,000.

GPA Habitat Development and Management Equipment

Several equipment and implement needs were identified as necessary for existing habitat management and development efforts, as well as for completing new habitat projects. Equipment wish list examples include items such as mowing and spraying equipment, discs and other ground preparation implements, drills for seeding native grasses, various sized row planters, ATVs, equipment trailers, skid steers with tree removal/shearer attachments, and tractors.

Total Equipment Identified = \$885,200

Total GPA Habitat Opportunities = \$4,474,200 - \$4,898,200

(Low end includes estimated expenditures with Personnel Consideration A included and the high end includes expenditures with Personnel Consideration B.)

discussion of "top ideas"

(ideas are not listed in order of priority or preference)

The PHWG generated and began discussing a list of "top ideas" at the May meeting to formulate approaches and recommendations to address or implement habitat solutions. At the June meeting, discussions continued and updates were provided on some of the ideas.

Idea #1 - Conservation Certification Proposal

Update and action item are described in the Conservation Certification Work Group section located earlier in the June meeting notes.

Idea #2 - Leverage/Maximize Farm Bill Opportunities

Update and action item are described in the RCPP Work Group section located earlier in the June meeting notes.

Idea #3 - Wildlife habitat development related to Game Production Areas (GPAs)

Update and action item are described in the GFP Game Production Area Management Opportunities section located earlier in the June meeting notes.

Idea #4 - Conservation Education

As discussed at the May PHWG meeting, conservation education is a priority and the importance of creating mechanisms to better inform or assist landowners with conservation decisions has been identified. Nathan Sanderson will work with Jan Nicolay and Barry Dunn to draft an approach and recommendation for July meeting.

Idea #5 - Need for permanent grassland cover and increasing winter wheat acres

Further discussion of the PHWG on this topic resulted in two considerations. First, this concept can be incorporated into the education/outreach section of the final report, especially results from a GFP/SDSU study which evaluated the importance of winter wheat for pheasant production.

Second, the consideration of including some type of increased benefits or "scorability" should be incorporated into the Conservation Certification program discussed. As a result of these two considerations, this top idea would be eliminated from the list.

Idea #6 - Finding a home for marginal acres

Discussion by the group determined that this concept will be incorporated into several items addressed with the final report, thus it is not deemed necessary to have as a stand-alone idea. In particular, it fits within the management tool concept suggested by Doug Dieter. The group agreed that some ideas need to be shared with the State Technical Committee and opened for discussion.

- **Action Item: Work Group to write a letter to the state technical committee about the desire to address marginal acres and how they can assist with those efforts.**

Idea #7 - On-going funding source for habitat and conservation

Work group members developed a short list of one-time and on-going funding needs. Additional funding ideas are to be provided prior to the July meeting.

Short list of ideas generated during the June meeting that need funding.

- Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologists
- GFP habitat work on GPAs
- Website to house all programs
- Grant programs (RCPP and need for match funds)
- Dieter Tool (tool to demonstrate to landowners the fiscal results of farming certain acres while leaving other acres for habitat)
- How does FWS needs fit into this discussion?
- Education/Outreach
- CREP

- **Action Item: Work group members are to provide a list of additional funding needs as on-going and one-time by the July meeting.**

Idea #8 - Public Road Rights of Way

Brief discussion revolved around existing state rules that apply to the state highway system and the start dates which allowing haying and mowing activities (do not apply to county and township roads). It was also clarified that these existing rules are found with the Department of Transportation, not Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

- **Action Item: Jeff Zimprich will look into another state example that used an integrated road management plan and share with the PHWG.**

Idea #9 - Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

No further discussion occurred over the James River CREP, however it will be part of the discussion at the July PHWG meeting as related to funding items as either a one-time or on-going funding need.

Idea #10 - State Lands Management Plans

At the May PHWG meeting, the recommendation was brought forward that each parcel of state owned land should have a management plan in place, including road rights-of-way. Further discussion at the June meeting led to the decision that road rights-of-way need to be removed from any such discussion/consideration. The other key element discussed was the need for the report to point out that management plans must fit within the mission and objectives of each agency responsible for managing those respective lands.

other suggestions from phwg members

Barry Dunn suggested that all recommendations need to include a tie back to answering ideas and suggestions from those attending the Summit.

Dieter stated the final report should include what the state plans to do on state owned properties.

Included in the final report should be a summary of new federal Farm Bill programs as comments received at the Summit were prior to the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill.

The final report needs to acknowledge producers/landowners already doing a great job developing and enhancing habitat on their properties.

Action Item: Prior to July meeting, Nathan will have a working draft of all the PHWG's recommendations for the group's review.

AGENDA ITEMS FOR JULY MEETING

- Review format and content of final report.
 - Executive Summary will include bulleted list of recommendations with a brief synopsis providing background.
 - Document will include all specific recommendations and then information providing background and justification for recommendation.
- Discuss GFP's GPA wish list of one-time and on-going projects and required resources.
- School and Public Lands (SPL) discussion should occur to determine what habitat opportunities may exist on these properties given the charge and mission of SPL.
- Integrated road management plan discussion (Jeff Zimprich volunteered to provide management approach from another state)
- Action Item: Nathan and GFP to visit with Bob Wilcox from SDACO.
- Funding priorities/needs
- Outreach and education

next meeting

- July 11, 2014
9:00 a.m.
Pierre, SD