

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

# Pheasant Action Plan

2025–2030

## **Executive Summary**

The restoration, protection, and enhancement of pheasant habitat is a vital part of the Minnesota DNR's mission. Pheasant populations provide recreational opportunities for hunters and birdwatchers, and the participants in these activities help bolster rural economies. Participating in hunting and bird watching can also help bring families together and connect people to the land. In addition, pheasant habitat supports many other grassland dependent species and provides floodwater storage, groundwater recharge, and carbon and sediment filtration that improve the quality of life of all Minnesotans.

The DNR developed this Pheasant Action Plan (Plan) to prioritize the work done in pursuit of these benefits. The Plan will guide the DNR's focus on funding and conservation efforts, enhancing and developing partnerships, improving communication about pheasants and their habitat, and conducting research and monitoring that foster Minnesotans' stewardship of pheasant populations and habitat. The Plan identifies the goals, objectives, and strategies the DNR will implement during the next five years. Additionally, the Plan identifies strategic issues that influence pheasant conservation.

### **The DNR's Role**

The DNR is a leader in pheasant habitat and population management in Minnesota. Implementing this Plan will involve dedication to collaborative work with conservation partners, both on public and private lands. The DNR commits to management, research, and monitoring in accordance with the department's mission.

The DNR's 2025-2030 Pheasant Action Plan goals are to:

1. Increase the amount of protected grassland habitat for pheasants.
2. Maintain, enhance, and restore grassland habitat for pheasants.
3. Increase opportunities for and participation in outdoor recreation related to pheasants and their habitat.
4. Increase public awareness and appreciation of grassland conservation for pheasants.

In addition to working closely with partners to implement this Plan, the DNR will annually report progress and successes using specific performance indicators identified in the Plan.

## **Introduction**

### **Pheasant Management Vision**

Abundant and quality grassland habitat provides the foundation for strong Minnesota pheasant populations, which results in excellent pheasant hunting and wildlife viewing. Other wildlife and pollinator species also benefit from diverse and productive grasslands. Beyond wildlife habitat, grasslands help secure societal benefits, including water storage, groundwater recharge, sediment and pollutant filtration and carbon sequestration. Minnesotans recognize the breadth of benefits from pheasant habitat conservation and support actions that benefit pheasant management.

### **Purpose of Plan**

This five-year Pheasant Action Plan will help the DNR focus funding and conservation efforts, enhance existing and develop new partnerships, and conduct research and monitoring that improves our collective understanding and stewardship of pheasants and their habitat.

The 2025–2030 Pheasant Action Plan builds upon the 2005 pheasant plan, the 2015 Pheasant Summit Action Plan, and the 2020-2023 Pheasant Action Plan. This Pheasant Action Plan is complementary to other DNR plans and identifies issues influencing pheasant habitat and populations. It helps agency staff coordinate with conservation partners and informs the public and those who fund conservation work by identifying the DNR’s goals, objectives, and strategies over the next five years.

### **Plan Development**

The DNR provided the public with the opportunity to comment on the past plan and ideas for the development of the 2025-2030 Pheasant and Duck Action Plans. The DNR also hosted two scoping workshops in the spring and summer of 2024 to collect input from conservation partners for both the Pheasant and Duck Action Plans. The ideas collected at these meetings, input gathered from the public, as well as the Plans mentioned above are the basis for the 2025-2030 Pheasant and Duck Action Plans. The DNR conducted ongoing engagement with Tribal Nations and partner organizations and gathered public comment on draft versions of the Plan and analysis from technical experts. The DNR developed the 2025-2030 Pheasant and Duck Action Plans in parallel, recognizing the importance of grassland habitat for pheasants and ducks alike.

### **Background and Current Conditions**

Minnesota’s populations of pheasants and other grassland wildlife fluctuate over time based on agricultural programs like the USDA Soil Bank Program in the 1956 Farm Bill and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the 1985 Farm Bill, the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), and the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program. CRP acres have ebbed and flowed over time, but recently have seen significant declines. From 2007-2022, Minnesota lost 833,000 acres of CRP. The recent declines in pheasant numbers over that time parallels the loss of CRP. The number of Minnesota pheasant hunters has declined from roughly 118,000 hunters in 2007 to roughly 50,000 hunters in 2022 and continues to decline, in line with national trends. Despite the declines in hunter numbers, management for pheasants and their habitat provide significant benefits to hunters and many species of wildlife.

### **DNR Pheasant Management**

Minnesota pheasant management promotes abundant pheasant populations, the high-quality habitat they need, clean water and soil conservation benefits, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Many other species of grassland dependent wildlife benefit from pheasant habitat management.

Pheasants require a variety of habitat components in a small geographic range (typically less than one square mile) over the course of a year. This includes nesting cover, brood habitat, winter cover and food sources in grassland habitat. Pheasant populations increase when more habitat complexes are available on the landscape. The DNR manages grassland habitat within an extensive state Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Aquatic Management Area (AMA) system. Pheasant habitat management includes prescribed fire, tree removal, haying,

and conservation grazing. These practices mimic historic habitat disturbances and benefit all grassland wildlife. The DNR also restores habitat on degraded sites and acquires new parcels for the WMA/AMA system.

The DNR participates in technical committees with biologists from Minnesota and other states to stay up to date on current pheasant management programs and collaborate on research.

Work by the DNR to benefit pheasants and their habitat supports the DNR's mission "to work with Minnesotans to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life."

This work is enabled by statute 97A.045, which states,

"The commissioner shall do all things the commissioner determines are necessary to preserve, protect, and propagate desirable species of wild animals. The commissioner shall make special provisions for the management of fish and wildlife to ensure recreational opportunities for anglers and hunters."

In brief, work done by the DNR to benefit pheasant populations falls within the following three broad categories:

- 1) **Pheasant population management**, which includes:
  - Population monitoring and research
  - Disease surveillance and management
  - Surveys of hunters
  - Coordination with Tribal Nations
  - Development of state hunting regulations
  
- 2) **Habitat management**, which includes:
  - Long-term habitat protection through fee-title acquisition and conservation easement programs
  - Restoration of new pheasant habitat
  - Enhancement and maintenance of existing pheasant habitat
  - Research and monitoring to inform grassland habitat management decisions
  - Financial support of Farm Bill Assistance Partnership staff to deliver voluntary private lands conservation
  - Continuing and strengthening partnerships with non-government organizations that promote waterfowl conservation
  
- 3) **Promotion of pheasant related recreation and benefits of grassland habitat**, which includes:
  - Delivering and supporting programs to promote the recruitment, retention, and reactivation of pheasant hunters
  - Promoting grassland habitat management benefits to ecosystems and society

## Strategic Considerations

The DNR identified several important considerations that will influence the success of the 2025–2030 Pheasant Action Plan.

- *Legacy amendment funding.* The Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, which Minnesota voters passed in 2008, designates a portion of sales tax to be allocated toward various conservation and arts initiatives through 2034. Thirty-three percent of these revenues go to the Outdoor Heritage Fund, OHF. The OHF specifically supports habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. OHF provides over \$175 million annually in legislative appropriations for critical habitat work. These funds are often leveraged by the DNR for federal aid match and by partners through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, as well as other one-time state and federal appropriations. This funding is vital for habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement throughout the pheasant range. This is a key time in Minnesota to implement priority conservation actions.
- *Private lands and the need for partnerships.* Most of the land in Minnesota's pheasant range are privately owned. These private lands sustain a large percentage of the pheasant population. The main driver of declines in pheasant numbers between 2007 and 2022 was the loss of 833,000 acres of CRP in Minnesota. Therefore, private land stewardship is critical conserving pheasants and their habitat. Although local DNR staff engage with private landowners in the course of our work, other agencies and organizations are better positioned to influence conservation on private lands. The DNR will enhance its partnerships and coordination to support private lands work.
- *Continued loss and degradation of habitat.* Grasslands and wetlands have declined more than 95% in western and southern Minnesota since the mid-1800s. Minnesota continues to lose native prairie every year. When grasslands are not managed, trees and invasive species encroach and reduce the benefits for pheasants and other wildlife. Activities on the surrounding landscape, such as energy and residential development, agricultural drainage, and pesticide usage, degrade the remaining pheasant habitat.
- *Recreation demands and preferences are changing, which affects funding for state pheasant management activities.* Between 2007 and 2022, pheasant stamp sales declined 40 percent from 129,000 to 77,000. Social, economic and resource trends are expected to continue influencing changes in the public's recreational preferences and participation. Despite opportunities from dedicated funding, such as the OHF, the decline in hunting license sales presents a significant challenge. Hunting license revenues fund many DNR wildlife management activities. The DNR also matches these license sales to federal Pittman-Robertson funds from an excise tax on shooting and archery equipment. There is no mechanism identified yet to adequately replace or supplement the declines in this funding, but there is active work underway through DNR's 4 The Outdoors initiative.
- *Climate change.* Global and regional climate patterns are changing, and climate change has both known and unanticipated effects on habitat and wildlife populations throughout Minnesota. For example, increasing frequency and intensity of storms may impact pheasants directly if they occur during the nesting and brood rearing seasons. Climate change may complicate habitat management efforts by impacting prescribed burn season and encouraging the spread of invasive and woody species.

## Goals

1. Increase the amount of protected grassland habitat for pheasants.
2. Maintain, enhance, and restore grassland habitat for pheasants.

3. Increase opportunities for and participation in outdoor recreation related to pheasants and their habitat.
4. Increase public awareness and appreciation of grassland conservation for pheasants.

## Objectives, Strategies and Performance Indicators

DNR staff, along with input from partners, identified the following objectives and outlined supporting strategies<sup>1</sup> to meet the goals listed above:

**Objective 1: Acquire additional habitat by maintaining the current pace of Wildlife Management Area (WMA) acquisitions overall while increasing the proportion within priority areas. Additionally, improve access to private land for outdoor recreation by increasing acres enrolled in the DNR's Walk-In Access Program.**

### Strategies:

- 1.1 Focus WMA acquisitions primarily in the Minnesota Pheasant Range.

*Performance indicator:* Maintain an average rate of 4,000 acres per year of WMA acquisitions in Minnesota pheasant range including acquisitions initiated by partners.

- 1.2 Work with partners to identify and acquire priority grassland wildlife habitat through local technical teams or other county level meetings with tribal, local, state, and federal partners.

- 1.3 Adjust the DNR's WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria to place preference on parcels located within priority pheasant priority areas.

*Performance indicator:* Improve the existing DNR GIS tool to allow the Strategic WMA/AMA Acquisition Team (SWAAT) to emphasize acquisitions in the MN Pheasant Range to better evaluate and identify future WMA acquisitions focused on pheasants.

- 1.4 Strengthen the DNR's relationship with counties on land acquisition, habitat restoration, and enhancement activities.

*Performance indicator:* Meet with each county in the pheasant range at least once every year to discuss land acquisitions and/or habitat efforts on DNR lands.

- 1.5 Seek long-term and/or new funding to sustain and expand the DNR's Walk-In Access program.

*Performance indicator:* Long-term and/or new funding obtained for the WIA program through state, federal, or partner funds.

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<sup>1</sup> Performance indicators are specific to the strategy they are below. In cases where no performance indicator is listed for a strategy it was determined that it would be very difficult to track the efforts involved in pursuing the strategy.

- 1.6 Explore opportunities and select WMA sites located with a focus on enhanced facilities, wildlife, and habitat education, and connecting new users with information about the broader WMA system and associated recreational opportunities.

**Objective 2: Increase the quality and quantity of pheasant habitat through restoration and enhancement on WMA/AMAs in the pheasant range.**

**Strategies:**

- 2.1 Increase the amount and quality of grassland habitat through restoration and enhancement on WMA/AMAs within the pheasant range, with emphasis on WMA/AMAs in pheasant priority areas.

*Performance indicator:* Number of grassland acres restored and enhanced in the WMA/AMA system with emphasis on pheasant priority areas.

- 2.2 Expand the use of habitat management techniques such as fall burning, brome conversion, conservation grazing and haying, and/or tillage to improve nesting and brood rearing habitat.

*Performance indicator:* Treatment types, number of acres treated, and success or failure of the technique.

- 2.3 Restore wetlands within the pheasant range to provide winter cover, with emphasis on pheasant priority areas.

*Performance indicator:* Number of wetland acres restored on WMA/AMAs within pheasant priority areas.

- 2.4 Update cover types in the Wildlife and Aquatic Habitat Management Application to accurately reflect current habitat conditions.

- 2.5 Where appropriate, maintain well designed and diverse wildlife food plots adjacent to secure winter cover.

**Objective 3: Support the work of partners to protect, restore and enhance pheasant habitat throughout the pheasant range.**

**Strategies:**

- 3.1 Support and encourage partner-led habitat enhancement activities and acquisition work on state lands through local, state, and federal funding including the Conservation Partners Legacy program, traditional OHF grants, and Adopt-A-WMA agreements.

*Performance indicator:* Acres of partner-led enhancements and acquisitions.

- 3.2 Continue to support the Farm Bill Assistance Partnership, which funds staff in partner agencies to assist private landowners.

*Performance indicator:* Annual contribution made to Farm Bill Assistance Partnership.

- 3.3 Continue coordinating and sharing resources with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, and other partners on habitat restoration and enhancement activities.
- 3.4 Facilitate a discussion between partners regarding additional ways to improve pheasant habitat management. Explore and develop new partnership opportunities, including with non-traditional stakeholder or interest groups.  
*Performance indicator:* Host an annual habitat management meeting.
- 3.5 Create a coordinated fire exchange program (across DNR divisions and other public agencies).
- 3.6 Explore opportunities to expand the local prairie seed consortia.
- 3.7 Expand the Adopt-A-WMA program to every county within Minnesota’s Pheasant Range

**Objective 4: Develop and deliver messages on grassland habitat, highlighting private land stewardship, recreational opportunities, and the contribution of this habitat to a vibrant Minnesota.**

**Strategies:**

- 4.1 Annually update the DNR [private lands web pages](#) to provide current information for landowners to learn about conservation programs, how they can protect and improve habitat for pheasants, and where to go for assistance and more information.

*Performance indicator:* Monitor traffic from DNR-provided links to partners and partner-developed web resources.

- 4.2 Provide a general wildlife habitat and management field operations outline to Division of Fish and Wildlife communications staff to assist them in researching and capturing the “boots-on-the-ground” work of area wildlife staff.

*Performance indicator:* Communicate at least one story/post monthly focused on pheasants and their habitat.

*Performance indicator:* Create and display short web vignettes that highlight how this work benefits pheasants, monitor web traffic, and promote vignette availability. Track related references/referrals from other communications channels.

- 4.3 Pitch “boots-on-the-ground” work story opportunities to area, regional and statewide media, tying in broader habitat and conservation themes when possible and resulting in big-to-small, top-down pictures of the work wildlife does.

*Performance indicator:* Media impressions from pheasant-related articles.

- 4.4 Enhance messaging about wildlife habitat within the Section of Wildlife’s web pages so visitors see an integrated, informative, and interpretive approach to habitat conservation, enhancement, and acquisition. Tie in the benefits of and science behind habitat enhancement practices such as tree removal, conservation grazing, and prescribed fire.



*Performance indicator:* Creation of a wildlife habitat web microsite, promote its availability, and monitor traffic and use with an eye toward continuous improvement.

- 4.5 Utilize and integrate existing resources (e.g., online WMA finder, Walk-In Access maps) into the [learn to pheasant hunt web pages](#). Craft a marketing approach/plan that features pheasant hunting and drives traffic to the web page(s).
- 4.6 Enhance the farmland wildlife research page(s) to better tell the story of research and monitoring of pheasants and their habitat.
- 4.7 Use the Wildlife e-newsletter to promote new and updated web content produced as part of strategies 4.1-4.6. Link to that information so it always is available to all rather than recasting it in a stand-alone, subscriber-only format of a newsletter.
- 4.8 Seek out additional ways to promote pheasants and their habitat to local stakeholders, elected officials, and partners to highlight our work; attend local and statewide events to discuss grassland habitat; expand conservation partnerships within diverse communities.
- 4.9 Distribute the Plan and communicate key messages to area and program staff and include Plan priorities in the annual work plans.

**Objective 5: Refine research and monitoring priorities for pheasants and their habitat and implement and continue research and monitoring work to address these priorities.**

**Strategies:**

- 5.1 Continue efforts to identify and prioritize research and monitoring needs related to pheasants and their habitat through engagement with wildlife staff from within DNR and partner organizations, including Tribal Nations, federal agencies, conservation organizations, and academic institutions.

*Performance indicator:* The Upland Game Bird Committee and Habitat Programs review the priority research and monitoring project list annually. Research staff will create proposals, timelines, enlist collaborators, and identify potential funding resources for projects.

- 5.2 Monitor the status of Minnesota's pheasant population, grassland habitat acres, pheasant hunters, and pheasant harvest. Evaluate and adapt existing monitoring programs to achieve these goals. Utilize existing habitat data from all available sources.

*Performance indicator:* The August Roadside Survey, Pheasant Hunting Prospects Map and Small Game Hunter Survey Reports are updated annually and provided to outreach for publishing.

*Performance indicator:* Upland Game Research Scientist maintains the database of state, federal, and farmland set-aside lands throughout the pheasant range.

- 5.3 Conduct research and monitoring projects that inform management of pheasants and their habitat.

*Performance indicator:* Document the investment in research as well as the number of research projects.

*Performance indicator:* Share information internally using DNR Wildlife Research Summaries, annual project progress reports, research information briefs, and presentations at internal meetings.

*Performance indicator:* Share findings of research and monitoring projects externally via use of peer-reviewed publications, professional presentations, and public interest articles.

## Appendix

### Relationship to other plans

The DNR will implement this Plan in conjunction with existing DNR plans and plans adopted by conservation partners. This table highlights some of those plans along with their purposes and connections to overlapping work within the Pheasant Action Plan.

Plan Name	Year	Purpose	Connection to this Pheasant Action Plan
DNR Duck Action Plan	2025-2030	Improve wetland and grassland habitat in Minnesota to benefit ducks and other species	Coordinate strategies for acquisition, work with partners, and habitat enhancement
Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan	2018	Focuses efforts of conservation community into priority areas, uses a working lands approach to conservation	Coordinate efforts among partners for protection, restoration, and enhancement in areas that overlap with priority pheasant habitat
MN DNR State Wildlife Action Plans	2015-2025 2025-2035	Focuses efforts of conservation community into specific areas, focuses on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)	Conservation focus areas, many SGCN have similar habitat requirements as pheasants
National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan	2021	Focuses efforts on pheasant habitat creation and restoration through policy, partnerships, education, and research at state, regional, and national levels	Describes how Minnesota's efforts integrate with surrounding states
One Watershed, One Plan (MN Board of Water and Soil Resources)	Multiple	Comprehensive watershed management plans	Informs a strategic landscape-level approach to watershed management in areas that overlap with pheasant range.
Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency)	Multiple	Identify ways to restore and protect waterways	Informs a strategic watershed-level approach to restoration and protection
Lac qui Parle WMA Master Plan	2024-2034	Guide major unit habitat management	Guides habitat management of a WMA important to pheasants
WMA/AMA Strategic Plan	2018	Focuses acquisition priorities in Minnesota	Geographic priority areas and existing WMA/AMAs inform priority grassland acquisition