

# PHEASANT ACTION PLAN

2025–2030



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Increasing and enhancing grassland habitat are important goals in this plan which will benefit ring-necked pheasant nest success.

# Executive summary

The restoration, protection, and enhancement of pheasant habitat is a vital part of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource's (DNR) mission. ring-necked pheasant (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 for all Minnesotans.

The DNR developed this Pheasant Action Plan (Plan) to prioritize the work done in pursuit of these benefits. This 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.

This document builds upon the 2005 Pheasant Plan, the 2015 Pheasant Summit Action Plan, and the 2020-2023 Pheasant Action Plan as well as the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.



Pheasant habitat protects soil and water quality, provides recreational opportunities, and benefits a variety of wildlife species.

# 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 and people.

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.



High quality remnant and restored prairie are essential habitats for pheasant nesting and brood rearing.

# Introduction

Performance indicators are specific to the strategy they are below. In cases where no performance indicator is listed below a strategy, it was determined that progress would be very difficult to track and report using easily quantifiable measures. For these strategies, qualitative assessments will support evaluation of progress.

## Pheasant management vision for the future

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 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.

This Plan is complementary to other DNR plans (see Appendix A) 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

Recognizing the importance of grassland habitat for pheasants and ducks alike, the DNR developed this Plan in parallel with the 2025-2030 Duck Action Plan. The DNR provided the public with the opportunity to comment on past plans and ideas for the development of the 2025-2030 Pheasant and Duck Action Plans. A summary of the comments received, and the responses provided to these comments, can be found in Appendix B. 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. In addition, the DNR conducted ongoing engagement with the 11 federally recognized Tribes within Minnesota's borders and partner organizations. The DNR also gathered public comment on draft versions of the Plan and analysis from technical experts.



Input was gathered for this plan from conservation partners, Tribes in Minnesota and other members of the public.

# Background and current conditions

Minnesota's populations of pheasants and other grassland wildlife fluctuate over time based on agricultural programs like the United States Department of Agriculture's 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 provides 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 habitats 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:

### Pheasant population management

- Population monitoring and research.
- Disease surveillance and management.
- Surveys of hunters.
- Coordination with Tribes.
- Development of state hunting regulations.

### Habitat management

- 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 pheasant conservation.

### Promotion of recreation and habitat benefits

- Delivering and supporting programs to promote the recruitment, retention and reactivation of pheasant hunters and pheasant-related recreation.
- Promoting grassland habitat management's 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 is 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 to 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

As Minnesota's human population grows, pressures for land use and development increase. 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.

### Changing recreation demands and preferences

Changes in recreational preferences affect 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 firearms, ammunition and archery equipment. The DNR's 4 The Outdoors initiative is working to identify additional mechanisms for stable and sustainable funding sources.

### 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.

# Objectives, strategies and performance indicators

## 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.



Increasing the amount and quality of grasslands is essential to pheasant populations.

DNR staff, along with input from partners, identified the following objectives and outlined supporting strategies to meet the goals on previous page:

## Objective 1

**Acquire additional habitat by maintaining the current pace of 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 Tribes, conservation organizations, and local, state, and federal partners.
- 1.3 Adjust the DNR's WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria within the existing DNR Geographic Information System tool to emphasize acquisitions in the MN Pheasant Range by placing preference on parcels located within priority pheasant areas.
- 1.4 Strengthen the DNR's relationship with counties, including county Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and county governing authorities, on land acquisition, habitat restoration and enhancement activities.  
*Performance indicator:* Meet with each county or SWCD in the pheasant range at least once every year to discuss land acquisitions and/or habitat efforts on DNR and private lands.
- 1.5 Seek long-term and/or new funding to sustain and expand the DNR's Walk-In Access program.  
*Performance indicator:* Obtain permanent funding to annually enroll 35,000 acres into the program.

- 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.



Highly diverse grasslands provide a variety of recreational opportunities to outdoor enthusiasts.

## 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.  
*Performance indicator:* 60,000 grassland acres restored and enhanced annually in the WMA/AMA system.
- 2.2 Within strategy 2.1, expand the use of habitat management techniques such as non-spring burning, brome conversion, conservation grazing and haying, and/or tillage to improve nesting and brood rearing habitat.  
*Performance indicator:* 30,000 acres treated via these techniques annually.

2.3 Enhance and restore wetlands within the pheasant range to provide winter cover with an emphasis on emergent basins larger than 10 acres.

**Performance indicator:** 5,000 wetland acres or 500 wetland basins enhanced and/or restored on WMA/AMAs annually.

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

2.5 Where appropriate, maintain diverse wildlife food plots adjacent to secure winter cover. These plots should incorporate soil health principles and practices such as complex crop rotations, minimum tillage, and cover crops.

### 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.

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

3.3 Continue coordinating and sharing resources such as equipment and personnel 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.

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, DNR management, recreational opportunities, and the contribution of this habitat to a vibrant Minnesota.**

#### Strategies

4.1 Annually update and monitor traffic on 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.

4.2 Provide a general wildlife habitat and management field operations outline to Fish and Wildlife Division outreach 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 pictures and stories of the work the Section of Wildlife does.



Research and monitoring provide important information to the public regarding the status of pheasant populations.

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 and science behind habitat enhancement practices such as tree removal, conservation grazing and prescribed fire.

**Performance indicator:** Create a wildlife habitat web section by 2030, 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. Refer readers 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, Tribes, 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 with budgets and project 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 available on the DNR website.

**Performance indicator:** A database of state, federal, and farmland set-aside lands throughout the pheasant range is reviewed and updated on an annual basis by the farmland research group.

# Appendix A

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

**Performance indicator:** Report on funds invested and the number of active research projects on an annual basis.

**Performance indicator:** Share information internally using DNR Wildlife Research Summaries, annual project progress reports, one page Research Information Briefs (RIBs) for completed projects, and presentations at internal meetings.

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



DNR researchers strive to understand habitat requirements and the life history of pheasants to improve management.

## 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.

### DNR PLANS AND PLANS ADOPTED BY CONSERVATION PARTNERS

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.
Minnesota 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 (Minnesota 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.

# Appendix B

## 2025-2030 Pheasant Action Plan Engagement report

### Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) developed the 2020-2023 Duck and Pheasant Action Plans by engaging with Tribes, partner organizations, and the public. In early 2024, the Fish and Wildlife Division began a process to refresh the Duck and Pheasant Action Plans for the next five years (2025-2030). The plan updates were initiated to incorporate new information and knowledge, as well as to revise objectives and strategies as needed in response to current conditions and public priorities. Partner engagement, public input, and the diverse viewpoints of Minnesotans were incorporated throughout the process using a variety of strategies. This document provides an overview of the engagement undertaken as part of these updates.

### Process overview

The DNR began the engagement process in March 2024 with tribal notification. Tribes participated throughout the planning process through staff coordination and leadership consultation, and through involvement in workshops. Tribes were sent the draft plans for review in July and August 2024.

In April 2024, the DNR solicited public input on near-term priorities for pheasant and duck management in Minnesota to inform the plan updates. A questionnaire was posted on the Engage with DNR platform to receive public input.

The DNR held two stakeholder workshops in April and July 2024. The first stakeholder workshop invited partners to review report cards developed for each plan to assess progress, consider recent public input on plan priorities, and identify any gaps in the 2020-2023 plans as well as potential changes to the updated plans. The second stakeholder workshop invited partners to provide feedback on drafts of the updated Duck and Pheasant Action Plans.

In September 2024, the DNR released the draft updated plans for public review. A second questionnaire was posted on the Engage with DNR platform to receive feedback from the public. During the review period, an online webinar was held to provide a platform for stakeholders to respond to the draft plans. Responses were also accepted in the form of phone calls, physical mail, and e-mails.

### Summary of public input

The DNR solicited public input to inform scoping for the Duck and Pheasant Action Plan updates through a questionnaire on the Engage with DNR platform from April 1 to 19, 2024. The questionnaire was advertised with a news release, an e-newsletter and social media. The scoping questionnaire received 332 responses.

Findings emerging from the survey included the following:

1. 61% of respondents were interested in both the duck and pheasant planning efforts, 26% of respondents were only interested in ducks, and 13% of respondents were only interested in pheasants.
2. When asked to rank the goals from the 2020-2023 Pheasant Action Plan, increasing the amount of grassland habitat for pheasants ranked as the most important goal for 68% of respondents.
  - a. Maintaining and enhancing existing grassland habitat for pheasants ranked as the second most important goal for 64% of respondents.
3. When asked what priority the DNR should place on the six objectives from the 2020-2023 Pheasant Action Plan, most respondents said that the DNR should place high priority on the following objectives: increasing the quality and quantity of habitat (72% of respondents) and maintaining the pace of acquisitions (59% of respondents).
  - a. Most respondents said that the DNR should place either moderate or high priority on the remaining objectives: supporting the work of partners (78% of respondents), improve access to land (62% of respondents), develop and deliver messages (50% of respondents), and define research and monitoring priorities (52% of respondents).

4. Most respondents said it was moderately or very important to them that pheasant and duck habitat work also provide the following benefits:
  - a. Conserve open space (77% of respondents).
  - b. Maintain Minnesota's natural systems (78% of respondents).
  - c. Provide ecosystem services (64% of respondents).
  - d. Protect and enhance native plant communities (66% of respondents).
  - e. Provide recreational opportunities (62% of respondents).
  - f. Enhance non-target species populations (62% of respondents).
5. Most respondents expressed support for DNR acquiring land (89% of respondents), partners acquiring land (83% of respondents), and private land easements (82% of respondents) as methods for protecting pheasant and duck habitat in Minnesota.
  - a. 85% of respondents also expressed support for increasing funding to expand the Walk-In Access program.
6. Most respondents reported that they have used hunting season harvest reports (72% of respondents), August roadside survey reports (62% of respondents), the Wildlife Management Area search tool on the DNR website (57% of respondents), and weekly waterfowl reports (50% of respondents) to inform viewing and/or hunting efforts for pheasants or ducks.
7. When asked what kind of information regarding pheasants and ducks do they want the DNR to provide, responses included:
  - a. Roadside counts.
  - b. Migration reports.
  - c. Reproduction monitoring.
  - d. Winter mortality.
  - e. Flock health.
  - f. Management activities on state-owned lands.
  - g. Condition of breeding grounds and wetlands.

- h. Regular updates on habitat expansion and loss through acquisition and restoration of DNR-owned lands, lands owned by partners, and lands enrolled in CRP.
- i. Science-based research backing up management actions.
- j. Accessible and up-to-date information on public hunting locations – both on WMAs and other public lands – and where public access points are located.
- k. How to access hunting areas within WMAs.
- l. General information on species biology/management.
- m. Access to management plans and data.
- n. Progress on plan goals.
- o. Funding transparency.
- p. Season setting.
- q. R3 plans/results.

8. When asked if they had any other comments regarding pheasant or duck management in Minnesota, respondents mentioned the following themes:
  - a. Increase the quality and quantity of food plots.
  - b. Establish more incentives for private landowners to protect duck and pheasant habitat on their lands.
  - c. Increase quality nesting habitat.
  - d. Remove and control invasive plants and plants that are detrimental to habitat quality.
  - e. Create wildlife corridors to provide connectivity among public lands.
  - f. Increase winter cover for pheasants in grasslands.
  - g. Tighten pheasant season regulations.
  - h. More land acquisitions for public hunting.
  - i. Increase public access to private land.
  - j. Predator control.
  - k. Farm-raised birds.
  - l. Increase communication between the DNR and hunters, farmers, and the public on management issues and priorities.

- m. Work collaboratively with other governmental organizations and non-profits on species management.
- n. Utilize volunteer groups for WMA management activities.

#### **Summary of public review**

On September 12, 2024, the DNR published a news release that invited members of the public to review the draft updated Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. Comments were accepted via mail, email, and an online questionnaire on the Engage with DNR platform. This questionnaire queried public support for the updates and provided an opportunity for respondents to share their opinions in open-ended responses. Comments were accepted through October 11, 2024.

The DNR held a webinar on October 1, 2024, to give members of the public an opportunity to learn about, ask questions about, and comment on the DNR's draft Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. There were seven non-DNR-staff attendees during the Pheasant Action Plan portion of the webinar. DNR staff gave a presentation outlining the draft Pheasant Action Plan: its goals, objectives, and strategies, and the planning process to-date. Subsequently, a panel of DNR staff replied to questions submitted by attendees. No questions or feedback were received on the Pheasant Action Plan during the webinar.

Satisfaction with the Pheasant Action Plan overall was mixed. About half (51%) of respondents who shared their overall level of satisfaction were either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the Pheasant Action Plan. About one-third (33%) of respondents were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the Plan, and the remaining respondents (16%) who shared their overall level of satisfaction were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the Pheasant Action Plan.

The Pheasant Action Plan received 62 comments from 32 respondents. Comments were generally supportive of the Plan's focus on increasing, maintaining, enhancing, and restoring pheasant habitat; however, many comments asked for more detail or additional considerations. The open-ended comments are categorized and summarized below.

#### **HABITAT**

Some comments asked for an increased emphasis on wintering and nesting habitat. A few comments expressed concern that tree removal is reducing winter cover for pheasants.

- **DNR response:** Not all trees removed constitute winter cover. In fact, the majority of the removal work by the DNR is scattered trees across grasslands. These projects are completed for a couple of reasons. The first goal would be to interrupt succession. If these areas are left unchecked, quality prairie / grasslands will be lost to woody cover that will eventually succeed into forest if not disturbed. Pheasants rely on this habitat for nesting, foraging and brooding habitat. Additionally, the limiting factor for pheasant populations is grassland habitat. The second goal is to improve nesting success. Study after study have illustrated that prairie landscapes that contain scattered trees have reduced nesting success, increased predation, and outright avoidance of these areas. Area managers work to retain short, brushy habitat that is blocky in nature to help improve winter cover. Additionally winter habitat has been identified as a priority in the Plan under 2.3.

A few comments wanted to see more food plots in pheasant habitat.

- **DNR response:** Food plots have been identified as a priority in the Plan under strategy 2.5. A new performance indicator reflects the DNR desire to maintain establishment of at least 5,000 acres of food plots annually.

Some comments asked for a greater focus on improving existing habitat instead of acquiring new habitat.

- **DNR response:** This Plan highlights both habitat management and acquisition as priorities in Objectives 1 and 2. The DNR believes both objectives can be pursued simultaneously to maximize the benefits to the resource.

A few comments expressed disapproval with specific habitat management activities (e.g., burning, grazing, haying). Other comments were supportive of more prescribed burning.

- **DNR response:** The DNR uses a wide variety of techniques to manage habitat. While at times these techniques can reduce available lands for hunting or pheasant nesting/brood rearing, the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term losses.

#### **OUTREACH**

Comments recommended spending resources on habitat acquisition and improvement instead of public awareness.

- **DNR response:** A key part to being able to continue the work we do is educating the public on what we are doing and why. The resources that contribute to public awareness have no impact on the DNR's ability to acquire land.



Well managed private land habitat is essential for sustaining pheasant populations.

## PARTNERSHIPS AND PRIVATE LANDS

Comments that referenced CRP were mixed; some comments wanted more specifics on how to enhance CRP participation, while others wanted to focus instead on improving habitat.

- **DNR response:** The DNR does participate in high level coordination with state and federal agencies and partners to provide input on CRP enrollment and implementation. On the local level, area wildlife managers work with neighbors and local partners to enhance private lands, such as through encouraging enrollment of CRP in and around public lands. DNR is also engaged in fee title purchase of lands enrolled in CRP which could eventually save those properties from future cropland conversion.

Some comments expressed skepticism that private land partnerships could be successful by promoting positive benefits of conservation.

- **DNR response:** At this time, DNR Wildlife supports private lands work via the Farm Bill Partnership program and coordinates with partners such as SWCD's, DNR Scientific and Natural Area program, and the USFWS who have staff and programs devoted to private lands conservation. This work is highlighted in Objective 3.

Some comments asked for more coordination with local governments and partners.

- **DNR response:** This has been identified as a priority in the Plan under strategy 1.4.

## GOAL METRICS

Many comments asked for more specific metrics to measure Plan success; comments ranged from asking for more details in general to requesting specific numbers (e.g., number of WMA acres burned per year).

- **DNR response:** We have worked to make more measurable performance indicators throughout the Plan, particularly in Objective 2.



DNR strives to connect hunters with the resource.

## POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Some comments expressed disapproval with current pheasant population numbers and wanted to see more emphasis on populating WMAs with pen-reared pheasants.

- **DNR response:** Research has shown that pen-reared pheasants have very low survival and are not effective at increasing populations.

Several comments also critiqued current pheasant hunting regulations. Opinions were mixed; some comments expressed support for increased regulations to help pheasant populations, others wanted to see regulations loosened to increase hunter numbers.

- **DNR response:** Annual hunting regulations are outside of the scope of this Plan. These comments will be considered by staff responsible for monitoring populations and recommending hunting regulations. Members of the public interested in discussing hunting regulations are encouraged to contact relevant staff in the section of wildlife or the DNR Information Center.

A few comments suggested predator control as a means for increasing pheasant populations.

- **DNR response:** Research has shown that predator management is not an effective tool for increasing pheasant populations at large scales. Instead, increasing the amount and quality of habitat is the most effective way to increase pheasant populations, which is the focus of this Plan.



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