

PHEASANT ACTION PLAN

2020–2023



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Increasing and enhancing grassland habitat are important goals in the next four years.

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Executive Summary

Conservation of pheasants and the habitat they need is important for many reasons. Pheasant populations provide recreational opportunities for hunters and birdwatchers. Pheasant habitat supports many other species and provides floodwater storage, groundwater recharge, carbon storage and sediment filtration that improve the quality of life of all Minnesotans.

To achieve these benefits, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has developed this Pheasant Action Plan. The plan will help the DNR focus strategic funding and conservation efforts, enhance and develop partnerships, and foster Minnesotans' stewardship of pheasant populations and habitats. It identifies the DNR's goals, objectives and strategies to implement during the next four years, and identifies strategic issues that influence pheasant conservation.

The DNR's Role

The DNR strives to be a forward thinking leader for pheasant management in Minnesota. Implementing this plan will involve dedication and commitments to collaborative work with conservation partners, including support for their work with landowners because private land stewardship is critical for the conservation of pheasants and their habitat. The DNR also will continue to commit to management, research and monitoring in accordance with the department's mission.

The DNR's 2020–2023 Pheasant Action Plan goals are to:

1. Increase the amount of grassland habitat for pheasants.
2. Maintain and enhance 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 report progress and successes using specific performance measures identified in the plan.



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

Introduction

Pheasant Management Vision for the Future

Abundant and high 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. Grasslands and wetlands embedded within them help secure other societal benefits—such as floodwater storage, groundwater recharge, sediment and chemical filtration and carbon storage—that sustain a high quality of life for all Minnesotans. Minnesotans recognize the breadth of benefits from pheasant habitat conservation and support actions that benefit pheasant management.

Purpose of Plan

This four-year Pheasant Action Plan will help the DNR focus strategic funding and conservation efforts, enhance and develop partnerships, and foster Minnesotans' stewardship of pheasant populations and habitats.

This plan is part of the DNR's process to improve pheasant management and builds upon the 2015 Pheasant Summit Action Plan. The DNR plans to update the Pheasant Action Plan every four years to be flexible, incorporate new information and knowledge, and adapt to an ever-changing social and ecological landscape.

This 2020–2023 Pheasant Action Plan identifies strategic issues influencing pheasants and grassland habitat. It also 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 to implement during the next four years.

Plan Development

The plan was created with input from conservation partners during a DNR scoping workshop in spring of 2019. The DNR conducted ongoing engagement with tribal partners and partner organizations, in addition to gathering public comment on draft versions of the plan and analysis from technical experts.



Conservation partners gathered for a scoping workshop to kick-off the planning process (spring 2019).

Background and Current Conditions

Minnesota's populations of pheasants and other grassland wildlife have fluctuated over time with farming practices and agricultural programs like the Soil Bank in the 1956 Farm Bill and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the 1985 Farm Bill. Minnesota has lost nearly one million acres of grassland since 2007, and pheasant populations have declined significantly over the same time. The number of Minnesota pheasant hunters has declined by half in that time and continues to decline, in line with national trends.

DNR Pheasant Management

Minnesota pheasant management actively promotes abundant pheasant populations, the high-quality habitats they need, clean water and soil conservation benefits, and opportunities for outdoor recreation.

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

The DNR participates in technical committees of biologists from Minnesota and other states to stay up-to-date on current pheasant management programs in other state agencies and collaborate on research when appropriate.

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:

1. **Pheasant population management**, which includes population monitoring, population research, surveys of hunters, and development of state hunting regulations.
2. **Habitat management**, which includes:
 - Long-term habitat protection through land acquisition programs
 - Maintenance of existing grassland habitat with prescribed fire, woody plant and tree removal, and conservation haying and grazing
 - Enhancement of existing habitat to improve its value for wildlife
 - Financial support of Farm Bill Assistance Partnership biologists to deliver voluntary private lands conservation through Federal, State and local programs, working directly with landowners and partners to identify programs (e.g., RIM, CREP, CRP, EQIP) that fit their operation and to provide technical assistance for conservation on private lands.
3. **Promotion of pheasant related recreation and benefits of grassland habitats**, which includes delivering and supporting programs to promote the recruitment, retention and reactivation of pheasant hunters and promoting how pheasant management actions benefit ecological systems and social communities.

Strategic Issues

The DNR has identified several issues that affect its work and will influence the success of the 2020–2023 Pheasant Action Plan.

- **Legacy amendment funding.** This is a key time in Minnesota to implement priority conservation actions due to the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, which Minnesota voters passed in 2008. It designates portions of sales tax to be allocated toward various conservation initiatives through 2034. Part of the Legacy Amendment, the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF), specifically supports habitat (prairies, forests and wetlands) protection, restoration and enhancement. The OHF alone provides approximately \$100 million annually in legislative appropriations for critical habitat work. This funding has fostered new partnerships among agencies and conservation partners that leverage Pheasant Action Plan implementation.

OHF has fostered new partnerships among agencies and conservation partners.

- **Private lands and the need for partnerships.** The majority of land in Minnesota’s pheasant range is privately owned. These lands sustain a large percentage of the pheasant population. The main driver of declines in pheasant numbers between 2007 and 2018 was the loss of 700,000 acres of Conservation Reserve Program in Minnesota. Therefore, private land stewardship is critical for the conservation of 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. We need to maintain and enhance our partnerships to support their 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, and we continue to lose more native prairie every year. When grassland is not managed, trees and invasive species encroach and lower the benefits for pheasants and other wildlife. Remaining grasslands can be degraded by activities on the surrounding landscape.
- **Recreation demands and preferences have changed, which affects funding for state pheasant management activities.** Since 2007 the number of pheasant hunters in Minnesota has declined 53% to 56,000. Although hunting recently declined nationally by 16% in just five years, wildlife watching increased by 20%. Social, economic and resource trends are expected to continue influencing changes in the public’s recreational preferences and participation. Despite opportunities from dedicated funding, the decline in hunting license sales presents a significant challenge because DNR wildlife management activities are funded largely by hunting license revenues and associated federal Wildlife Restoration Grants 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.
- **Climate change.** Global and regional climate patterns are changing. This has both known and unanticipated effects on ecosystems and communities throughout Minnesota. For example, increasing frequency and intensity of storms may impact pheasants directly. Climate-related changes also complicate habitat management efforts.

Goals

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



Prescribed burning is an important management tool for maintaining grassland habitat for pheasants and other wildlife.

Objectives, Strategies and Performance Measures

The DNR has identified the following objectives and outlined supporting strategies to meet these goals:

Objective 1. Maintain the current pace of Wildlife Management Area (WMA) acquisitions overall while increasing the proportion of acquisitions within priority areas.

STRATEGIES

- 1.1 Focus WMA acquisitions primarily in the southern Minnesota pheasant range.

Performance measure: Maintain an average rate of 4,000 acres per year of WMA acquisitions in the areas mentioned above, including WMA acquisitions initiated by partners.

- 1.2 Work with partners, especially the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Habitat and Population Evaluation Team, to identify grassland bird habitat complexes in which to focus protection of habitat for pheasants and other grassland wildlife and, where possible, other environmental benefits like protecting sources of drinking water.

- 1.3 Adjust the DNR's WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria and regional ranking to place highest priority on parcels located within the boundaries of a grassland bird habitat complex.

Performance measure: Increase the number of approved WMA acquisition projects in grassland bird habitat complexes each year.

- 1.4 Adjust WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria and regional ranking to place higher priority on parcels located within the boundaries of a Prairie Plan Complex (i.e., core areas, corridors).

Performance measure: Increase the number of approved WMA acquisition projects in Prairie Plan Complexes each year.

- 1.5 Continue to coordinate with partners on land acquisition activities.

- 1.6 Strengthen the DNR's relationships with counties on land acquisition and management activities.

Objective 2. Increase the quality and quantity of pheasant habitat management on WMAs in the pheasant range.

STRATEGIES

- 2.1 Work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners to adopt a version of its GIS-based scoring tool to prioritize geographic areas for management activities.

- 2.2 Standardize land cover type categories to improve tracking of habitat enhancements.

- 2.3 Increase the diversity of grassland management techniques beyond burning during spring (e.g., haying, conservation grazing, burning during fall, inter-seeding or re-seeding).

Performance measure: Document the acres treated with a management technique other than spring burning each year.

- 2.4 During habitat restoration projects, use diverse seed mixes, increase use of precision planting or sculpted planting that fine tunes seed mixes during reconstructions, and increase use of snow seeding.

Performance measure: Improved plant diversity within reconstruction project areas.

Objective 3. Support the work of partners to protect and enhance pheasant habitat on private and federal lands.

STRATEGIES

- 3.1 Continue financial contributions to the Farm Bill Assistance Partnership, which funds staff to assist private landowners.

- 3.2 Continue sharing funding and resources with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service for prescribed burning.

- 3.3 Bring partners together to facilitate a discussion about additional ways to improve pheasant habitat management on private lands.

Performance measures address the overall objective and are included below the strategy most closely related to the described metric.



Grasslands provide a variety of recreational opportunities for outdoors enthusiasts.

Objective 4. Improve access to land for outdoor recreation and grassland appreciation.

STRATEGIES

4.1 Seek federal funding to sustain and expand the DNR's Walk-In Access program.

Performance measure: Increase the number of acres enrolled in the Walk-In Access program.

4.2 Adjust the DNR's WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria and regional ranking to place higher priority on parcels located within 30 miles of a population center of at least 15,000 to 20,000 people to provide "close to home" recreation opportunities.

Performance measure: Increase the number of approved WMA acquisition projects within 30 miles of a population center of at least 15,000 to 20,000 people.

4.3 Develop and pilot a new model at select WMA sites located near population centers, 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.

Performance measure options:

- The new model is defined, developed, and operationalized.
- Number of identified opportunities to apply the new model to existing WMAs.

- Amount of grant funding secured for WMA acquisitions using the new model, including associated development and operational costs.

Objective 5. Develop and deliver messages on grassland habitats, highlighting private land stewardship, recreational opportunities and the contribution of these habitats to a vibrant Minnesota.

STRATEGIES

5.1 Update the DNR private land website to better inform landowners about conservation programs, how they can improve habitat for pheasants (e.g., cover crops, Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification), and where to go for assistance and more information.

Performance measure: Increase in number of referrals from the DNR website to partners and partner-developed resources each year. Monitor website use and effectiveness.

5.2 Promote hunting seasons through digital advertisements and direct email reminders.

5.3 Promote and enhance existing resources for connecting people with the outdoors by helping them decide where to go and what to do (e.g., online WMA finder, Walk-In Access maps).

5.4 Increase efforts to connect new users with WMA information, and make pheasant habitat and wildlife viewing more approachable.

5.5 Develop and deliver issue briefs about local pheasant habitat to community groups and elected officials.

Performance measure: Increase number of public interactions to discuss topics in the plan.

5.6 Host or co-host an annual workshop or tour with local stakeholders, elected officials and partners to highlight our work, build awareness, discuss progress on implementation, and incorporate the plan into non-governmental organization work plans; attend local community events to discuss grassland and wetland habitats; expand conservation partnerships within diverse communities.

Performance measures: Document the number of local community events and other interactions. Record the estimated number of participants and number of new projects and partnerships as a result of these conversations.

- 5.7 Distribute the plan and communicate its key messages to internal leadership and staff, and annually provide area staff with an updated list of resources that includes partners' existing interpretive materials, initiatives, and educational materials on habitat issues.

Performance measure: Evaluate increased staff use and effectiveness of these materials and resources.

- 5.8 On an annual editorial calendar, include regular communications and media articles that highlight grassland and wetland habitat work and conservation values. Update messages annually.

Performance measure: Annual summary of media coverage.

- 5.9 Communicate the results of research on and monitoring of pheasants and their habitats to diverse audiences, including scientists, natural resource managers, the media, pheasant hunters, birdwatchers, and the general public. In addition, actively seek reciprocal communication and input from these groups back to the DNR.

Performance measure options:

- Create a communication plan outlining how information will be shared both within and beyond the DNR.
- Create a periodical that highlights the hunting heritage, regulations, research, monitoring and public interest topics related to migratory and upland gamebirds.

- 5.10 Continue efforts to explain the benefits of and science behind habitat enhancement practices such as conservation grazing, tree removal, and prescribed fire.



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

Objective 6. Define research and monitoring priorities for pheasants and their habitats, and work with partners to address these priorities.

STRATEGIES

- 6.1 Lead efforts to identify and prioritize research and monitoring needs related to pheasants and their habitats through engagement with biologists from within DNR as well as with tribal nations and partner organizations, including federal agencies, conservation organizations, multi-state technical committees and academic institutions.

Performance measure: Create a list of priority research and monitoring projects including a list of collaborators, funding and timelines for planned research and monitoring projects.

- 6.2 Annually monitor the status of Minnesota's pheasant population, grassland habitat acres, pheasant hunters, and pheasant harvest.

Performance measure: Create a list of ongoing or new monitoring and survey programs, describing their purposes and value.

- 6.3 Conduct research that informs the management of pheasants and their habitats.

Performance measure: Document the investment in research as well as the number of research projects, DNR Wildlife Research Summaries, 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.

DNR PLANS AND PLANS ADOPTED BY CONSERVATION PARTNERS

Plan Name	Year	Purpose	Connection to this Pheasant Action Plan
DNR Duck Action Plan	2020–2023	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 the same areas
Minnesota DNR State Wildlife Action Plan	2015–2025	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	2013	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
WMA/AMA (Aquatic Management Area) Strategic Plan	2018	Focus acquisition priorities in Minnesota	Geographic priority areas and existing WMA/AMAs inform priority grassland acquisition.=



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