Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program

Strategic Plan

Photo courtesy of Craig Roberts

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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

Program Goal

The goal of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program is to: *efficiently and responsibly conserve and enhance upland game bird habitats and populations—providing quality public hunting opportunities for present and future generations.*

Program Overview

The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP) serves Montana's residents and visitors by enhancing upland game bird habitats and populations and hunting opportunities through the use of upland game bird hunting license dollars. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) administers the program, which is further organized into two separate parts:

- Upland Game Bird Release Program (UGBRP)
- Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP)

Principle outcomes of the UGBEP are:

- Establishment or enhancement of upland game bird habitat
- Conservation of high quality and "at risk" upland game bird habitats
- Seasonal pheasant release and periodic wild upland game bird transplanting
- Enhanced public upland game bird hunting opportunities

Purpose of this Strategic Plan

This strategic plan provides a common vision of the program's goal and values. The plan is intended to provide a common understanding for how the program will be administered and implemented, covering topics that warrant clearer definition, to include those specifically listed in statute (87-14-251, MCA). The plan describes objectives and strategies to meet those objectives and the overall program goal, as well as identifies specific focus areas for directing program resources. Finally, the plan identifies necessary rule changes that will help the program operate more

effectively and provides performance measures for assessing program success. The plan is intended to provide sufficient detail to guide and direct actions in a manner that is organized and understood by the different audiences interested in the program's success. The plan however is strategic and provides sufficient flexibility to address opportunities likely to come about over its lifespan. While the plan describes real objectives and strategies for implementation of the UGBEP, it is not intended to serve as an upland game bird species/population management plan. The focus of the UGBEP is habitat and population enhancement. A second document, not a part of this strategic plan, is the UGBEP Field Manual, which serves as a daily reference for establishing UGBEP projects.

More detailed annual objectives, which tier from this strategic plan, will be identified in work plans specific to each position funded by the UGBEP. For more detail on work plans, read the introductory paragraphs in the Regional Strategies section.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Advisory Council

In 2009, the UGBEP underwent a legislative performance audit. One of the outcomes identified was the recommendation that FWP develop a long-term strategic management plan with clearly defined management controls. This would be the first such plan since the program's inception in 1987. The legislative audit report also recommended creation of a citizens' advisory council.

These two legislative audit recommendations were formally enacted during the 61st Legislature through a bill sponsored by Representative Julie French (87-1-251, MCA). In June 2009, the 12-members of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Citizens' Advisory Council were appointed by the FWP Director, representing each of the department's seven administrative regions. Council membership also includes:

- upland game bird hunters
- a local chamber of commerce representative
- conservationists
- an upland game bird biologist

- at least two landowners, one of whom is enrolled in the Block Management Program
- a senator and a representative from different political parties

In addition to the 12 members and FWP staff, representatives from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) serve in a technical support capacity. The role of the Council is to advise FWP on the UGBEP strategic plan. As a standing council, it would also serve to monitor program activities in relation to program goal, objectives, administrative rules, statutes, and finances.

The Council generally met every two months at 5 locations across the state to tour UGBEP projects and to receive public input from local communities. Participants from the public have included landowners, hunters, business people, general recreationists, and representatives of conservation organizations. After one and a half years and ten meetings, this strategic plan incorporates the Council's recommendations and has received their endorsement.

Upon completion of this strategic plan, it is the intent of the Council to meet twice annually, during late winter or early spring and again in the fall. As outlined in statute (87-1-251(b) MCA), the Council will provide ongoing monitoring of UGBEP performance, to include review of an annually-developed activity report.

Program Benefits

Upland game bird enhancement projects fulfill the program goal by addressing habitat limitations, promoting conservation and expansion of functional habitats, and providing reasonable public hunting opportunities for present and future generations — on both private and public lands.

In addition to biological and recreational benefits, UGBEP projects are intended to:

- Foster productive and positive relationships between landowners, hunters, and FWP
- Develop relationships with landowners who initially release pheasants but may pursue future habitat enhancement work

- Build partnerships between nongovernmental organizations, State, Federal, and local government agencies
- Stimulate local economies through purchasing supplies, materials, and labor in addition to promoting hunting opportunities and attracting hunters with their associated expenditures

Guiding Principles

The UGBEP and this dynamic strategic plan are administered in consideration of the following guiding principles. The program must:

- Be science-based and habitat focused
- Provide strategic, effective, and efficient long-term returns
- Be effectively/efficiently implemented with accountability and fiduciary prudence
- Emphasize value to partnerships
- Be respectful of private lands
- Recognize social and economic values
- Recognize value of long-term protection of the natural resources and access
- Where possible, implement the program at a landscape scale
- Balance program expenditures across species and habitats, recognizing public demand, species' conservation needs, and habitat priorities at statewide and regional scales, defined within 3-5 year time-frames
- Recognize each administrative region may not participate equally in the program.

PROJECT TYPES

Upland game bird habitat needs vary by species, season, and life stage. The UGBEP funds enhancement and conservation projects geared toward specific habitat requirements of the respective game bird species. The following is a description of common projects and their general purpose that might be considered for enhancing or conserving a particular area or population (alphabetical order).

For more detailed information on habitat requirements of species and habitat enhancement projects, see *the Literature Review of Montana Upland Game Bird Biology and Habitat Relationships as Related to Montana FWP's Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program* (Moynahan and Walker 2004), at:

http://fwpiis.mt.gov/content/getItem.aspx?id=36175

Aspen Regeneration

Ruffed grouse in Montana are closely tied to productive aspen habitats. The quality of ruffed grouse habitat deteriorates where aspen stands become old and unproductive or when tall conifers encroach into aspen communities. Aspen regeneration projects involve small-patch clear-cutting or burning and selective conifer removal, which stimulates aspen root-suckering, thereby improving or expanding ruffed grouse habitat. UGBEP funds have been used in the past to share the costs of completing these treatments, primarily on USFS administered lands.

Brood Strips

Insects are a critical food item for newly hatched pheasant chicks. Montana's arid summers cause soils and vegetation to dry out early in the growing season, which reduces insect availability, affecting chick health and survival. Brood strips are typically established by tilling plots in the spring to expose bare soil and irrigating plots through the summer to maintain moist soils. These treatments result in a flush of green annual vegetation and a diversity of insects. UGBEP funds are typically used to share the cost of tillage and irrigation practices.

Conservation Easements

Productive upland game bird habitats that also provide substantial bird hunting opportunities are the focus of conservation easements funded in part with UGBEP dollars. Under a conservation easement, landowners agree to protect their land in perpetuity against certain land uses incompatible with key habitat values, while retaining the right for other compatible land uses. These projects assure public access and the conservation and enhancement of productive habitats while maintaining traditional uses of the land in perpetuity.

CRP Add-on Rental Payments

Initiated in 2010, these projects provide rental payments to qualified private landowners or operators who have been awarded a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). UGBEP contracts include specific habitat management and public access requirements. UGBEP funds are used for the rental payment and can share the costs of certain cover enhancement practices if needed.

Emergency Supplemental Feeding

When conditions warrant, FWP may enter into agreements to supplemental feed pheasants during extreme winter conditions. Supplemental feeding consists of placing grain-based foods adjacent to effective winter cover during these events. This practice is restricted to pheasant habitats in a 3-county area of northeastern Montana—an area that frequently experiences severe winter conditions with continuous deep snow that remains for long periods of time due to standing arctic air masses. UGBEP funds pay for grain or grain-hay bales and costs for setting up feeding locations and distributing food.

Food Plots

Exotic upland game bird species - pheasants, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and wild turkeys - commonly require a source of cereal grains for winter survival. Harvested grain fields adjacent to winter cover commonly provide this food source. In some

areas, effective food plots (e.g., unharvested grain) can provide important food and cover, particularly where grain fields do not occur. Plots are generally 1 to 10 acres in size. UGBEP funds share the cost of establishing a food plot or can pay a lump sum per acre for unharvested grain.

Grazing Systems

Upland game birds are directly affected by the amount of herbaceous and woody cover available to them for hiding, feeding, and shelter. Livestock grazing can directly affect these habitat features. Rest rotation grazing benefits upland game birds by providing large habitat blocks of undisturbed grass and forb cover, thus maximizing herbaceous cover height. FWP designs the systems to also meet the needs of vegetation for vigorous growth and reproduction. The grazing strategy results in a healthy functioning and sustainable habitat well-suited for upland game birds while also benefiting ranches. UGBEP funds contribute toward materials and labor needed to purchase and install necessary infrastructure for establishing a grazing system.

Leases

Conserving or enhancing productive upland game bird habitats sometimes requires additional management or obligations, secured through a term lease arrangement with the landowner. UGBEP funds are used to make one or more payments to the landowner while acquiring specific management interests for the UGBEP.

Montana Sagebrush Initiative

Sage-grouse require sagebrush habitats for food and cover. In 2005, FWP identified the highest priority, privately owned sage-grouse habitats based on survey information and land use/landownership patterns. The Montana Sagebrush Initiative utilizes UGBEP funds in combination with federal funds to pay landowners a 1-time rental payment for a 30-year agreement on high priority habitats. Under the lease, the landowner commits not to treat sagebrush habitats with herbicides or burn or plow enrolled habitats. The lack of outside federal funding sources has limited new enrollments.

Nesting Cover

Productive nesting and brood cover are commonly in short supply for pheasants and other upland nesting birds. The Conservation Reserve Program has resulted in substantial, undisturbed cover on the landscape, with obvious benefits for pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and gray partridge. Nesting and brood cover projects involve planting cover or enhancing existing stands of vegetation with tillage or inter-seeding grass and forbs, making nesting cover more productive for upland game birds. UGBEP funds help pay for seed and seeding costs.

Pollinator Strips

Establishment of native grasses and forbs that provide a continuous sources of pollen and nectar throughout the duration of the growing season to attract pollinators and insects. Pollinator strips are established adjacent to nesting cover to help provide a steady supply of insects and additional security cover, essential components for chick survival.

Ring-necked Pheasant Releases

Participants in the pheasant release program may either raise or purchase birds for release with the intent of establishing viable pheasant populations while expanding access and public hunting opportunities on private land. Cooperators are reimbursed at a standard rate for each released healthy bird. Statute requires that upland game bird releases, "provide for establishment of a viable upland game bird population." MCA 87-1-248 (1)

Shelterbelts and Woody Cover

Shelterbelts are intended to provide winter hiding/thermal cover and, in some cases, winter food for pheasants, gray partridge, and sharp-tailed grouse. Fabric weed barrier, cultivation, herbicides, and irrigation are used to increase plant survival and growth rates. UGBEP funds are used to share the cost of purchasing and installing shrubs and weed barrier, as well as other materials such as irrigation systems and

fencing. These projects may also include managing and conserving woody cover in strategic locations, including Russian olive on dry sites.

Wetland Enhancements or Restorations

Wetland habitats can provide effective brood habitat and winter cover for pheasants and other upland game birds. These projects typically involve constructing or repairing shallow dams or filling drainage ditches to establish or restore wetland functions. UGBEP funds are used to share the cost of labor and materials associated with these projects.

Turkey Transplants

Merriam's turkeys are trapped from existing wild populations and transplanted to areas with favorable year-round turkey habitat, often with the assistance of National Wild Turkey Federation volunteers. Landowners in the release area are consulted and agree to allow public hunting once a population is established. UGBEP funds are used to cover costs associated with trapping and transplanting turkeys.

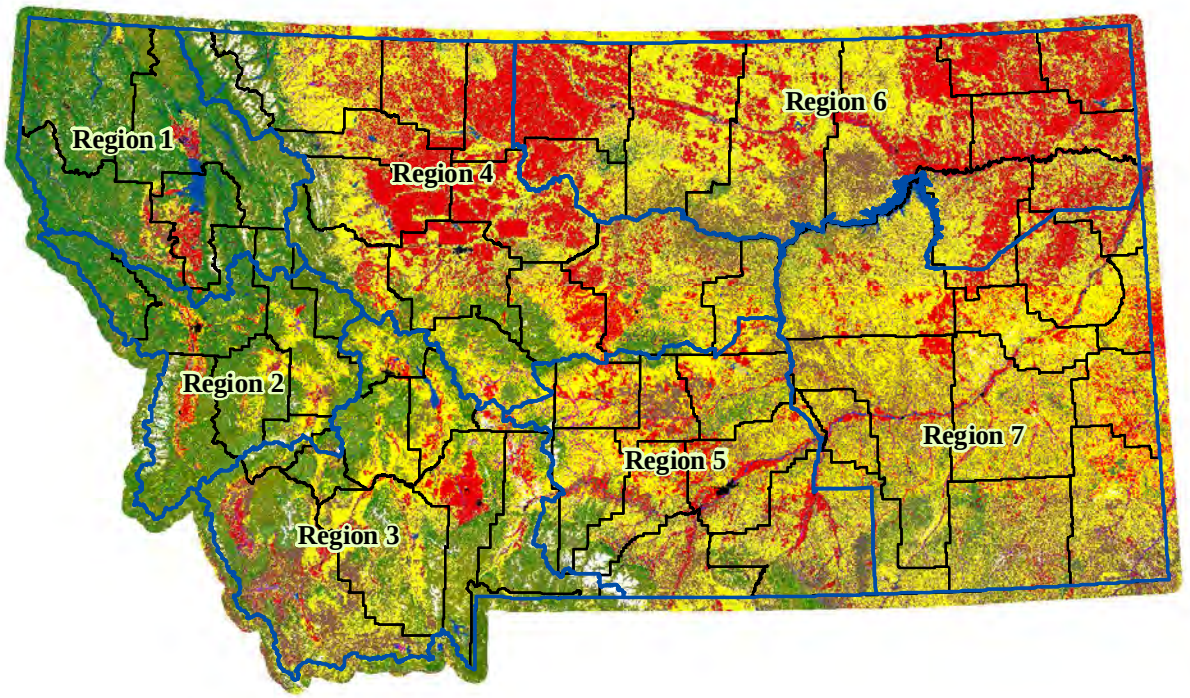
PROGRAM PRIORITIES

Background -- Upland Game Birds and Hunting in Montana

The following is a statewide overview of upland game bird resources, landownership patterns, hunting statistics, and UGBEP priorities. Information in this section serves as a foundation for more detailed Regional Strategic UGBEP Plans that follow.

Game Bird Habitats and Resources in Montana

A diversity of landforms, soils, climates, and resulting habitats are distributed across Montana (Figure 1). In terms of native habitats, the eastern two-thirds of the state is approximately made up primarily of mixed-grass prairie, shrub grasslands, scattered ponderosa pine forest, and isolated mountains with coniferous forests. The western third comprises mountains with both narrow and broad intermountain valleys and subalpine and alpine ridges and peaks. The mountainous habitats are generally drier east of the continental divide, resulting in a continuous mix of coniferous forest and open grasslands. West of the continental divide, mountain forests range from relatively dry ponderosa pine habitats to temperate rainforest with a more diverse mix of coniferous and deciduous trees and shrubs. The intermountain valleys on both sides of the continental divide range from very dry habitats affected by rain shadows to higher precipitation shrublands and moist, lush grasslands. Riparian habitats associated with Montana's streams and rivers provide additional habitat diversity across the state.



Legend

Greens = forests; **Red** = dry and irrigated croplands; **Yellow** = grasslands; **Brown** = shrublands; **White** = alpine; **Black** = urban developments

Figure 1. Cover types across Montana.

Dominant rural land uses also vary by region. The eastern plains provide for a mix of ranching and farming with coal, oil and gas extraction developments in some areas. Mountainous areas support ranching, timber harvest, and mining. Irrigated crops and haying operations are common along perennial flowing streams and rivers over most of the state.

The broad diversity of habitats provide for an array of wildlife, including nine species of upland game birds. Of the nine, five are native to Montana including sharp-tailed grouse, greater sage-grouse, ruffed grouse, dusky (blue) grouse, and spruce (Franklin's) grouse. Table 1 provides average statewide upland game bird harvest by species and how harvest has been distributed by FWP Region. Harvest estimates give a general indication of opportunities provided relative to each region of the state.

Table 1. Average statewide harvest of upland game birds and distribution of harvest by FWP Region, based on harvest survey data, 1999-2009.

Upland Game Bird Species	Average Annual Statewide Harvest	Portion of Harvest by FWP Region						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sharp-tailed Grouse	52,700			2%	25%	14%	38%	21%
Sage-grouse	5,000			15%	21%	14%	25%	20%
Ruffed Grouse	26,500	59%	22%	11%	6%	2%		
Dusky Grouse	18,500	28%	21%	32%	15%	3%		
Spruce Grouse	4,600	46%	29%	16%	7%			
Ring-necked Pheasant	134,000	4%	1%	3%	35%	12%	33%	12%
Gray Partridge	44,400	2%	1%	12%	38%	18%	24%	5%
Wild Turkey	5,700	15%	6%	1%	5%	24%	3%	45%
Chukar Partridge	742					100%		

Landownership Patterns and Public Hunting Opportunities

Along with the diverse habitats of Montana, landownership patterns also vary, which collectively provides for a mix of public hunting opportunities (Figure 2). Predominant public lands in eastern Montana are made up of Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), United States Forest Service (USFS), and United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) administered lands. Mountainous habitats of western Montana are primarily USFS lands. In addition to public lands, substantial hunting opportunities are provided for the general public on private lands, which can vary from region to region, within regions, and between neighboring properties. The majority of these private properties are not enrolled in any formal habitat or access program.

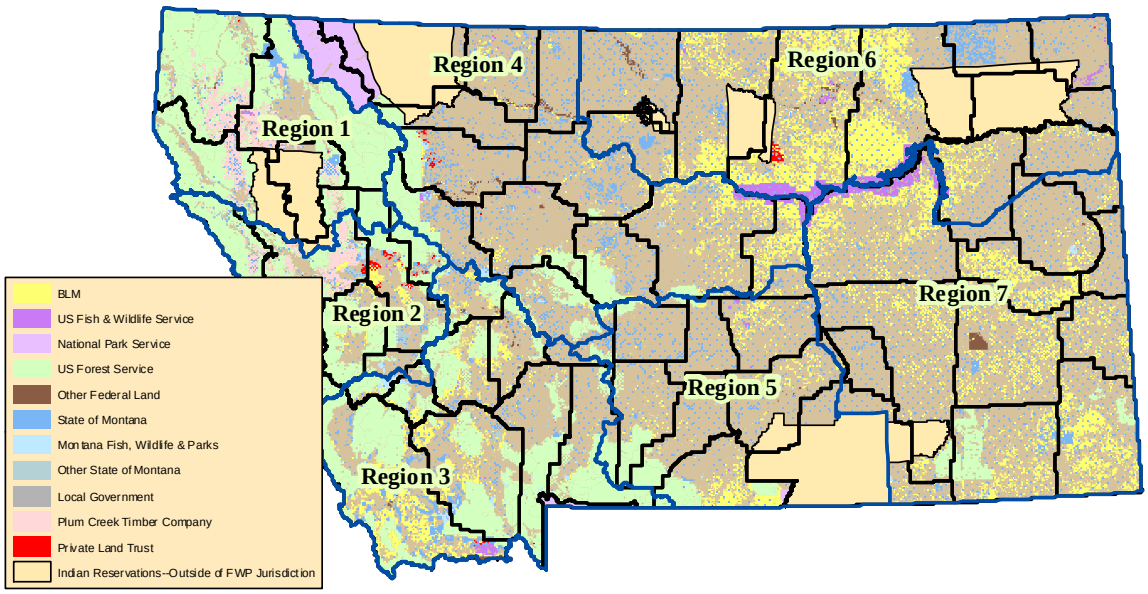


Figure 2. Land stewardship in Montana across the 7 FWP Regions.

Upland Game Bird Hunting Popularity and Economics

Upland game bird hunting is a very popular pursuit in Montana. Since 2000, over 35,000 hunters have annually participated in the activity, of which about 24% travel from out of state. Collectively, upland game bird hunting, including turkey hunting, amounts to over 400,000 hunter-days of hunting recreation annually (Table 2). That scale of participation provides a substantial positive economic impact through expenditures on food, lodging, fuel, repairs and other expenses, particularly for smaller rural communities. An estimate of expenditures by upland game bird hunters, using 2008 hunter survey figure (Brooks and King 2009) is provided in Table 3. This summary does not include expenditures related to turkey hunting.

Table 2. Statewide upland game bird hunter participation summary, 1999-2009. Wild turkey hunting information based on 2004-2009 data.

Upland Game Bird Species	Average Annual Number of Hunters	Average Annual Hunter-Days	Percentage of Total Hunter-Days
Sharp-tailed Grouse	10,496	63,346	15
Sage-grouse	2,425	12,534	3
Ruffed Grouse	7,065	53,095	13
Dusky Grouse	7,187	47,350	11

Upland Game Bird Species	Average Annual Number of Hunters	Average Annual Hunter-Days	Percentage of Total Hunter-Days
Spruce Grouse	2,380	19,724	5
Ring-necked Pheasant	23,862	126,173	30
Gray Partridge	8,659	55,184	13
Wild Turkey	9,740	37,633	9
Chukar Partridge	368	2187	1

Table 3. Estimated use days and expenditures by upland game bird hunters, based on 2008 hunter surveys and a daily expenditure estimate of $63.62 for resident and $376.46 for non-resident hunters (Brooks and King 2009).

Hunting Data	FWP Region						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Resident Days	59,215	29,039	37,020	78,700	29,838	53,827	19,916
Resident Expenditures	$4M	$1.8M	$2.4M	$5M	$2M	$3.4M	$1.3M
Non-resident Days	2,434	1,359	5,175	14,850	3,969	30,272	8,650
Non-resident Expenditures	$916,000	$512,000	$1.9M	$5.6M	$1.5M	$11M	$3.3M

Statewide Priorities

The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program has the potential to benefit the full spectrum of upland game bird species and habitats in Montana. However, maximizing program benefits, in terms of game bird response and public hunting opportunities, requires a more strategic approach. The program's Guiding Principles (Page 11) recognize the need to balance public demand with other values when establishing program priorities. For instance, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and turkeys are among the most popular of hunted game birds in Montana (Table 2), but public hunting access on private lands—particularly related to pheasants—is challenging over a large portion of their range. Sage-grouse, on the other hand, are only lightly hunted but are recognized for their ecological value and for ongoing

concerns over the possibility of federal listing and the considerable economic ramifications if that were to occur. Because of their life history and habitat requirements, some upland game bird species' habitats are not readily enhanced by the UGBEP. A statewide perspective on priorities needs to weigh all of these values, recognizing also the unique opportunities and constraints that occur in different parts of Montana.

The following is a summary of opportunities and priorities by game bird species at a statewide scale, which also serves as a preface to the Regional Strategic UGBEP Plans.

Ring-necked Pheasant

The pheasant is an icon of hunting recreation and is the most popular game bird in terms of hunter numbers and days hunted (Table 2). Arguably, the rooster's gaudy appearance also adds to its distinction among wildlife watchers. The pheasant prefers idle grasslands predominantly associated with cereal crops and effective winter cover, such as shelterbelts or cattail marshes (Figure 3). Pheasants readily respond to well-established habitat enhancements, which typically involve shelterbelts, nesting cover, and/or food plots. CRP is an excellent example of this illustration. Pheasant harvest in Montana and other states increased dramatically with the establishment of CRP in the mid 1980's (Figure 19). As a result, maintaining productive CRP stands for pheasants is an important role of the UGBEP.

Public hunting access is particularly difficult in intermountain valleys and along the major river systems extending into eastern Montana, which also represent some of the most productive of pheasant habitats. FWP Regions 4, 6, and 7 provide the majority of large-scale pheasant hunting opportunities. These Regions include both floodplains, which are generally the most productive and the most difficult for acquiring hunting access, and uplands, which are more expansive and provide substantial hunting opportunities. In contrast, pheasant hunters in Regions 1, 3, and 5 rely heavily on limited public lands. Hunters may often encounter inadequate pheasant habitats, resulting in poor hunting experiences. These areas are intensively hunted and are therefore priorities for habitat enhancement work.

Volunteers from Pheasants Forever worked with NRCS and FWP to develop a geographic information system (GIS) based model highlighting public lands that potentially support pheasant habitat. This tool will be useful to all partners who intend to focus habitat enhancement efforts on public lands or who intend to achieve a more strategic landscape approach to establish pheasant habitat projects.

The UGBEP also supports pheasant releases, which are intended to enhance pheasant populations while opening up private lands for public hunting. Areas where substantial intact pheasant habitats occur, that also provide high quality hunting opportunities, are a priority for this part of the program.

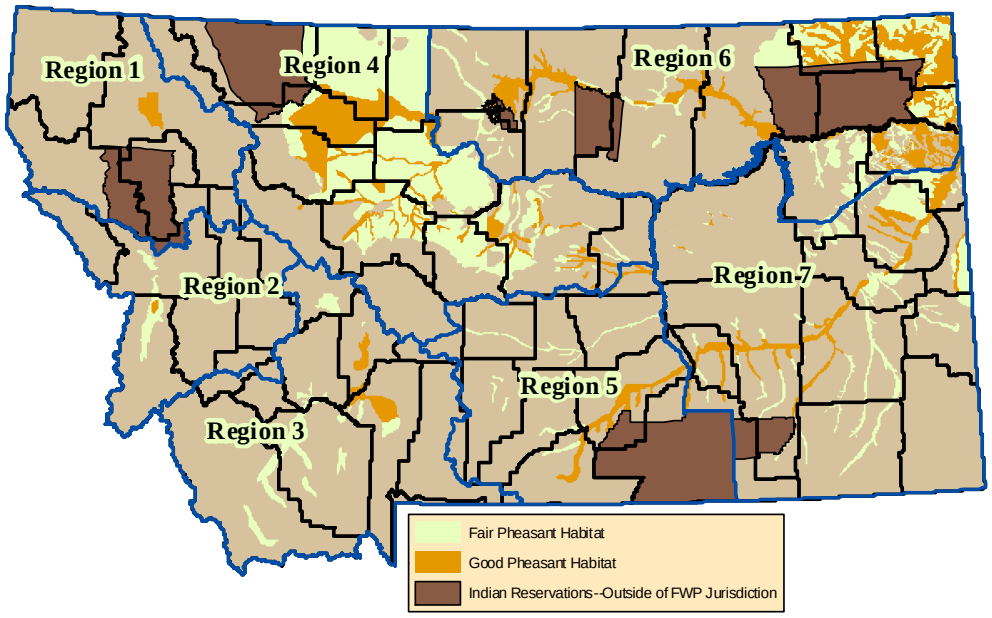


Figure 3. Ring-necked pheasant distribution in Montana.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

As a popular native game bird, sharp-tailed grouse are among the highest priority species for conserving and enhancing habitats through the UGBEP. Sharp-tailed grouse are suited to native mixed-grass habitats that include a deciduous shrub component. These habitats are scattered over the eastern two-thirds of Montana

where topography and soils support deciduous shrubs, including foothills, breaks, and undulating topography (e.g., prairie pothole and sand hill landforms) (Figure 4). Extensive prime habitats occur in Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. As conversion of grasslands to croplands exceeds 50%, habitat suitability is substantially reduced for sharp-tailed grouse (Flake et al. 2010). The predominant means for conserving and enhancing sharp-tailed grouse habitats at a landscape scale is conserving productive native mixed grasslands from conversion. Establishing grazing management that: 1) sustains these habitats, 2) provides tall herbaceous cover for hiding nests and broods from predation, and 3) provides productive feeding habitat, is an effective role of the UGBEP—particularly when partnered with other funding sources.

Plains sharp-tailed grouse historically occurred in intermountain valleys west of the Continental Divide in Montana. Remnant flocks remain in one or two areas at very low densities. Various publics have expressed interest in restoring sharp-tailed grouse to some of their historic range west of the divide, where habitats are of sufficient quality and extent to possibly support birds. The UGBEP may play a role in the future to support restoration (i.e., trapping and transplanting) activities, with the intent of expanding limited hunting opportunities into these areas.

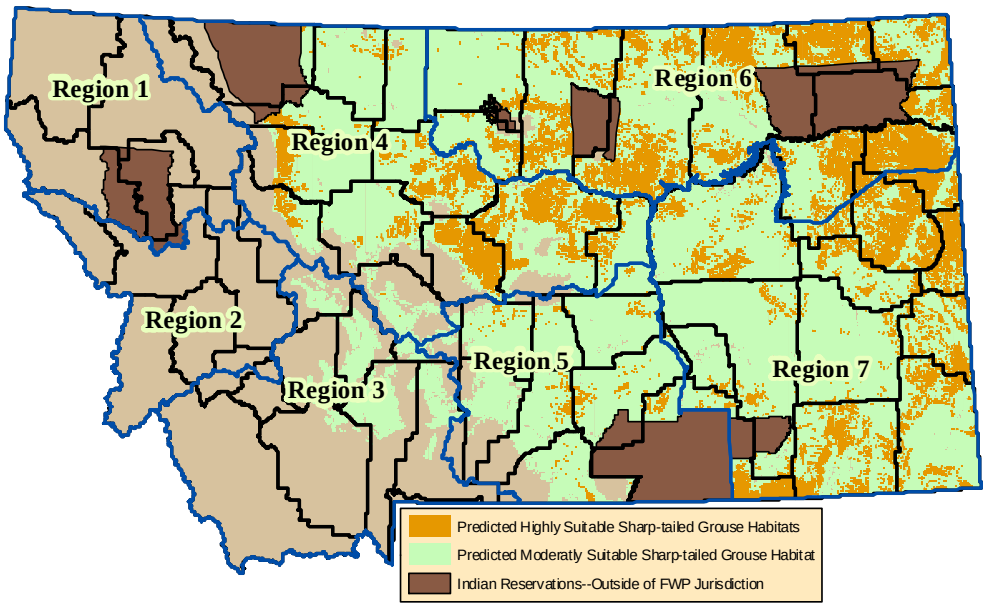


Figure 4. Sharp-tailed grouse habitat east of the Continental Divide.

Greater Sage-grouse

From an ecological and economic standpoint, sage-grouse occupy a unique position among Montana's game birds. Sage-grouse have become well known as a classic umbrella species through which, if successfully conserved, many other native sagebrush associated species also benefit. Population declines and extirpations across their historic range have underscored the need to conserve large blocks of sagebrush grasslands from fragmentation, degradation, conversion, and certain types of disturbance. In addition to keeping these landscapes "whole," sage-grouse benefit from grazing management that provides sufficient herbaceous cover to conceal nests and broods from predation and to provide abundant food for growing chicks.

Designated sage-grouse core areas in Montana provide a strategic approach for focusing conservation efforts, including expenditure of UGBEP funds directed toward sage-grouse habitats (Figure 5). These core areas are made up of habitats supporting the highest densities of sage-grouse, as well as areas important for maintaining sage-grouse distribution and connectivity beyond Montana's borders.

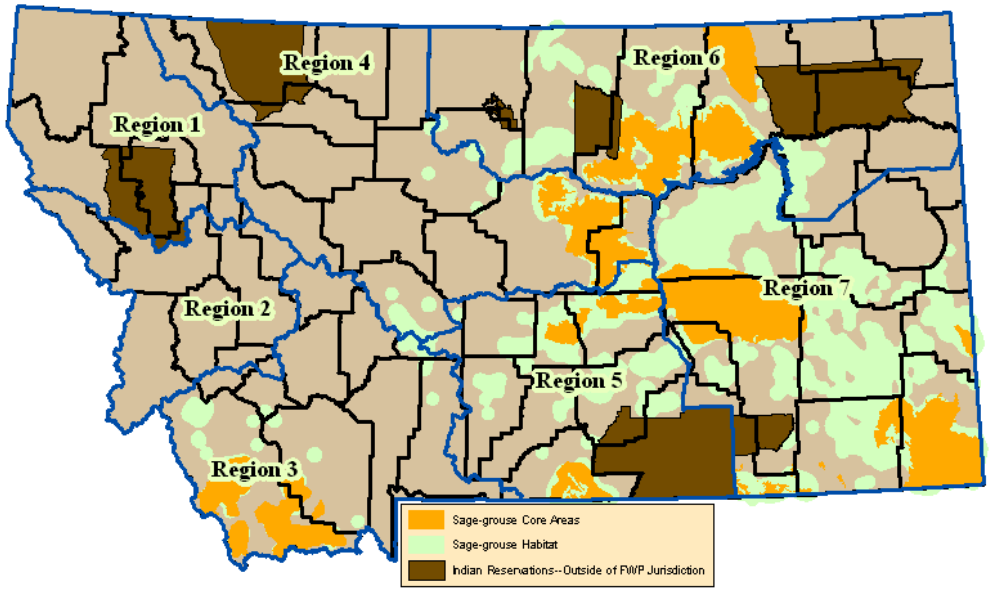


Figure 5. Sage-grouse habitats are represented as a modified four-mile buffer around lek locations (green) and core areas (gold). Four-mile buffers encompass the majority of nesting, brood, and winter habitats.

Wild Turkey

Wild turkey are among the most popular of game birds in North America. In Montana, turkeys are between second and third in popularity based on number of hunters who pursue the birds. In addition to fall hunting, the more popular spring gobbler season provides considerable expanded hunting opportunities, which has amounted to over 20,000 hunter-days of spring hunting in recent years (Table 2). A 2001 inventory of occupied and potential habitat is shown in Figure 6. Most of the habitats that were designated as having potential for expansion now support varying densities of turkeys as do other areas that were never formally identified. Although turkeys are native to North America, they are not believed to be native to Montana. The current distribution of turkeys in the state is the result of numerous transplanting projects initiated in the mid-1950s and conducted as recently as 2009. FWP and volunteers from the National Wild Turkey Federation played a large role establishing huntable populations of wild Merriam's turkeys.

Two distinct habitats support turkeys in Montana: 1) riparian areas dominated by mature cottonwoods and 2) ponderosa pine forests. Roost trees with stocky horizontal branches are a necessary year-round habitat feature. Adjacent meadows with undisturbed herbaceous cover and patches of shrubs are important for nesting and rearing broods. As with pheasants, turkeys generally require domestic grains to survive average or more severe winters in Montana. Even native ponderosa pine habitats, known for their mast (seed) production, appear to produce intermittently in Montana and with deep snows tend to be an unreliable winter food source. Wintering turkeys, therefore, commonly use waste grain in fields and livestock feedlots.

Montana's turkey habitats comprise predominantly a mix of private, BLM and USFS lands. Blocks of public habitat occur on Custer National Forest and BLM lands in southeast Montana along with more scattered tracts of BLM and USFS lands in central and northwestern Montana. Public turkey hunting on private lands varies widely.

UGBEP funds can be used to successfully enhance and conserve habitats for turkeys. Food plots, grazing management, and riparian conservation projects are well-suited

for enhancing turkey survival and reproduction. The UGBEP also provides a source of funding for trapping and transplanting turkeys into vacant habitats. Although transplanting turkeys has been a priority for many years, given the success of these efforts and the relatively broad distribution of turkeys in Montana, habitat enhancement and public access projects will be the primary focus of turkey conservation projects in the future.

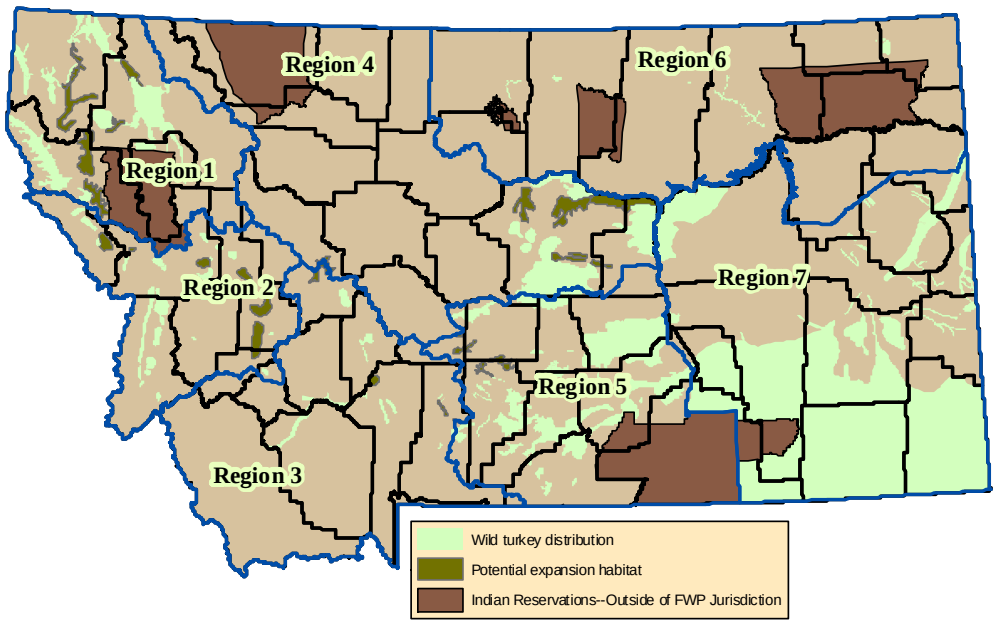


Figure 6. Wild turkey distribution in Montana based on a 2001 inventory.

Gray Partridge

The favorite game bird among many bird hunters, gray partridge provide the third highest amount of hunting recreation (Table 2). In spite of gray partridge not being native to North America, this game bird has an extensive range across most of Montana (Figure 7). Gray partridge are a grassland species that feed on grass, forb seeds and leaves, and cereal grains, where available. As with other game birds, insects are a critical food item for young chicks. Idle ground associated with croplands and woody hedgerows are typical settings for supporting one or more gray partridge coveys; but they may occur in almost any grassland environment. Relative to other prairie upland game birds, the proportion of grasslands to

croplands tend to be less important for gray partridge. The species can sustain populations where croplands make up 90% or more of the landscape and can also thrive in the absence of cereal crops. Although adaptable, the species' abundance varies widely—largely a function of annual weather patterns, particularly during nest and brood periods and during severe winter events with prolonged snow cover.

Given its ubiquitous nature and its seeming lack of key habitat bottlenecks, gray partridge are considered a secondary priority for UGBEP expenditures. Gray partridge habitats do overlap with pheasants and prairie grouse and therefore benefit from habitat enhancements directed toward other species.

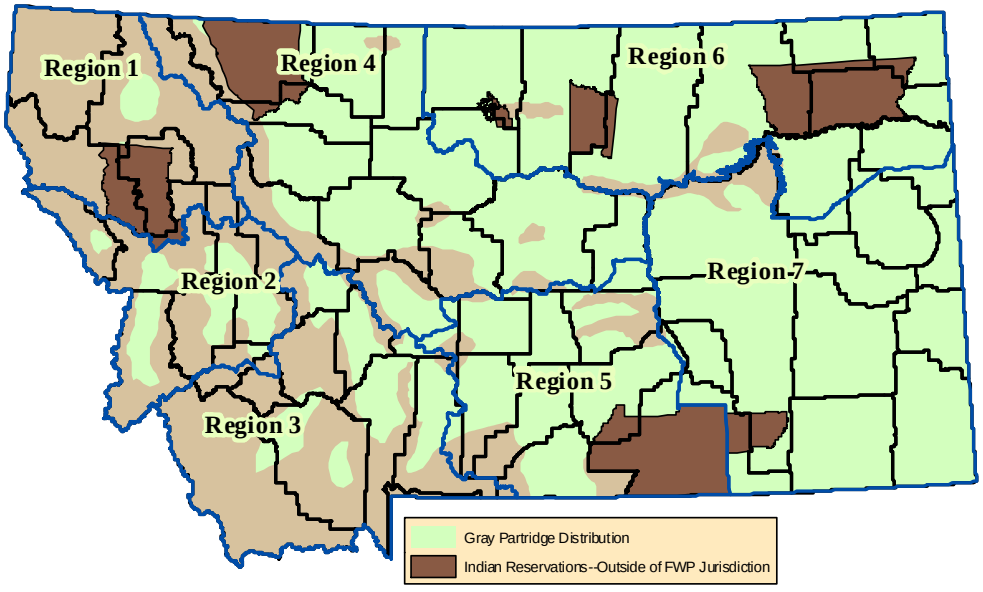


Figure 7. Gray partridge distribution in Montana.

Chukar Partridge

Similar to gray partridge, chukar are an exotic (non-native) partridge. Their habitats differ, however, as the species prefers semi-arid climates with rocky, steep slopes typically dominated by cheatgrass and interspersed with low-growing shrubs such as sagebrush or juniper. Chukars will also make use of adjacent harvested grain fields for an additional source of food. In Montana, their occurrence is restricted to a

portion of Carbon County, southwest of Billings (Figure 8). The precipitation shadow extending east from the Beartooth Mountains, in association with topographic and vegetation features of the area, define the extent of this game bird's occurrence in the state. Given its limited distribution, chukar provide very localized hunting opportunity.

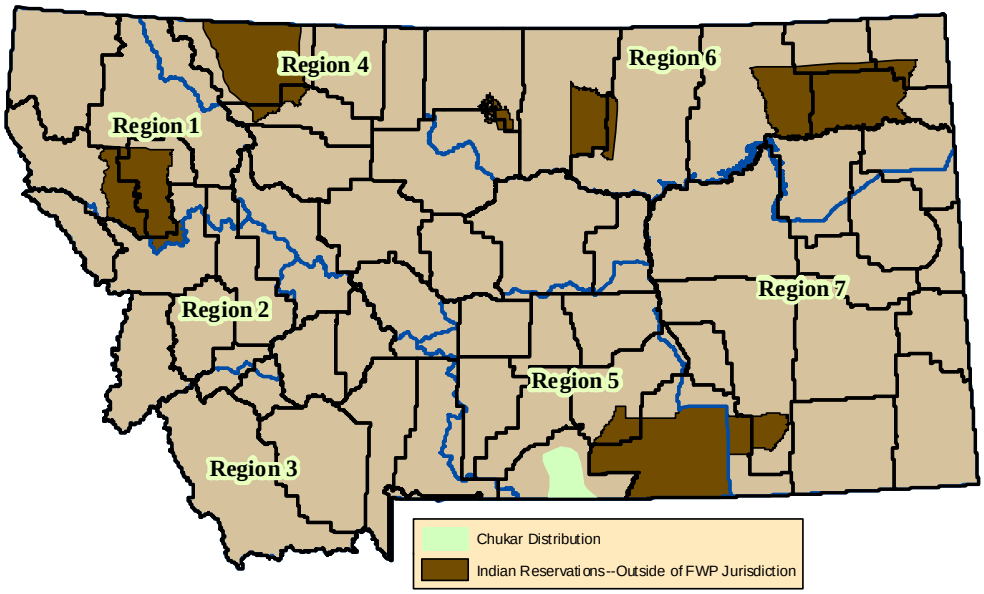


Figure 8. Chukar distribution in Montana.

Ruffed Grouse

Because of its habitat preferences, ruffed grouse are the only forest grouse in Montana whose habitat can readily be enhanced through use of UGBEP funds. Ruffed grouse are primarily associated with aspen or mixed coniferous/deciduous forests occurring intermittently in south-central and southwestern Montana and more extensively further north and west into Region 1 (Figure 9). Aspen habitats are subject to a variety of potential risks including decadence and a lack of regeneration, encroachment and eventual shading out by taller coniferous forests, over browsing by ungulates, and grazing impacts. Aspen restoration projects, which directly benefit ruffed grouse, involve cutting, prescribed fire, and/or fencing from ungulates. A priority area for this work occurs along the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains and the Pryor Mountains, both in Region 5. Additional opportunities are

likely to exist where aspen occurrence can be a habitat bottleneck for ruffed grouse, including Regions 2, 3, and 4.

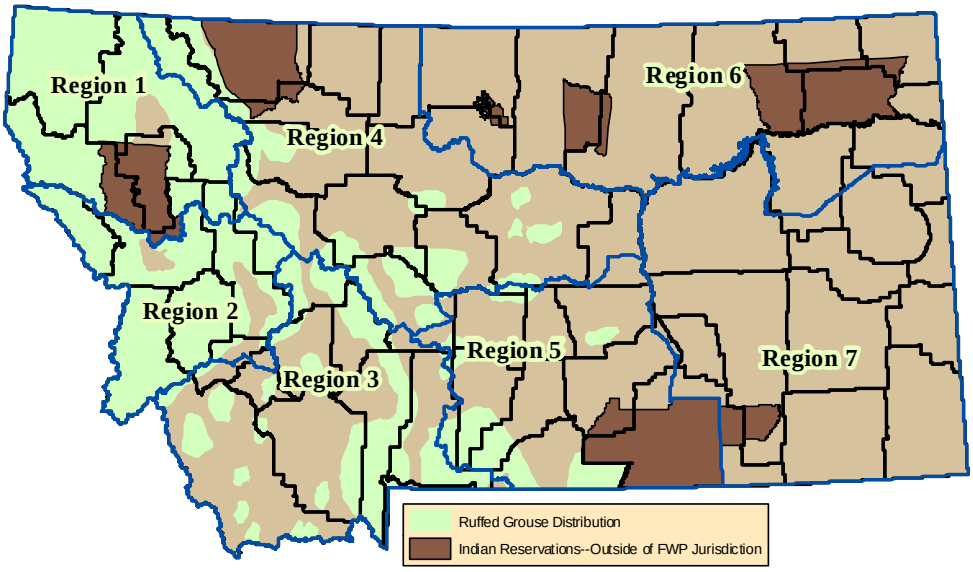


Figure 9. Ruffed grouse distribution in Montana.

Dusky Grouse and Spruce Grouse

Dusky and spruce grouse are important game birds in Montana, providing over 47,000 and 19,000 hunter-days of recreation, respectively (Table 2). Resident hunters make up the overwhelming majority of hunting activities involving these two species as well as ruffed grouse, which are collectively known as Montana's "mountain grouse." Dusky and spruce grouse range widely over mountainous terrain dominated by coniferous forests (Figures 10 and 11). Whereas dusky grouse prefer open canopies with interspersed grasslands, spruce grouse occur in more dense and contiguous coniferous forests particularly prevalent west of the Continental Divide. For the most part, habitat for these two grouse species occurs on public lands administered by the USFS. Timber, fire, and grazing management policies and practices are of key importance to these species. Research is needed to better understand influences of these policies on productivity of mountain grouse habitats. Opportunities to effectively enhance habitats for dusky and spruce

grouse—through the use of UGBEP funds—are more limited relative to other upland game birds in Montana and will remain a lower program priority.

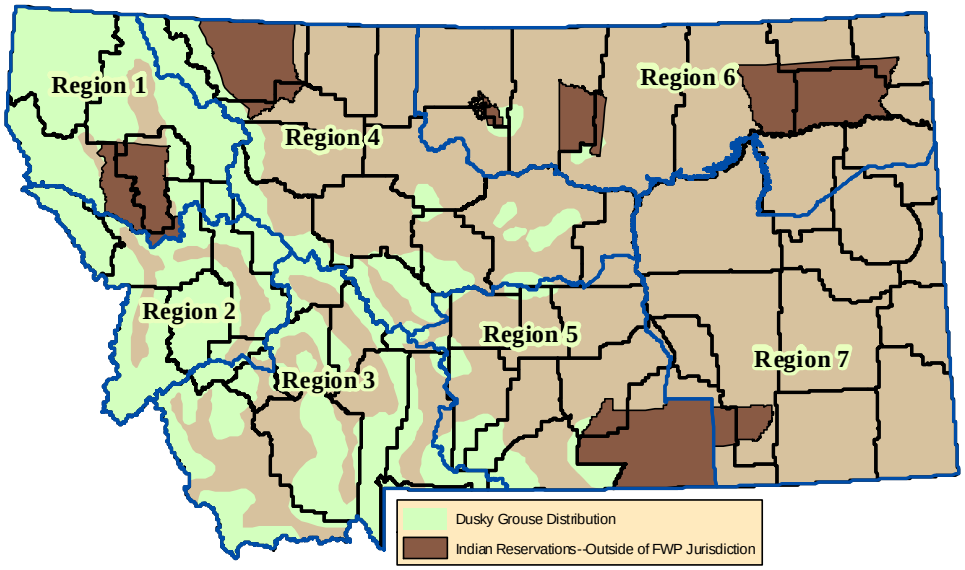


Figure 10. Dusky grouse distribution in Montana.

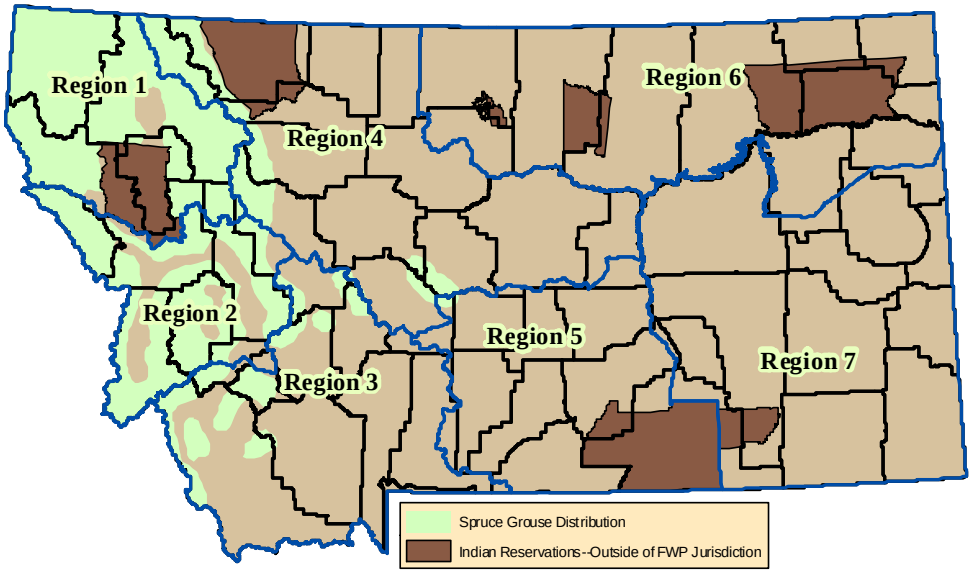


Figure 11. Spruce grouse distribution in Montana.

Regional Strategies

Regional wildlife staff play the key role of identifying, negotiating, and implementing UGBEP projects in cooperation with landowners. Program delivery, therefore, is largely a responsibility of wildlife field staff located throughout Montana. The following Regional Strategic Plans were written by regional staff in recognition of their program delivery role and program opportunities and limitations varying from region to region.

Tiered from these Regional Strategies, field staff will develop annual work plans specifying objectives and responsibilities. Individual work plans provide a common understanding for expected accomplishments and performance between supervisors and their staff. Similar to other FWP work plans, these plans will be fitted to current or anticipated opportunities and program needs. Factors to consider when developing work plans for staff dedicated to the UGBEP include landowner or partner involvement, habitat and landownership layouts, potential habitat complexes and needs, emerging funding sources or opportunities, program needs, and ongoing project developments, among others.

In particular, UGBEP work plans are pertinent in Regions 4, 6, 7, and the Helena headquarters office, which support full time UGBEP biologists and the program coordinator. In addition to biologist work plans, Regions 4 and 5 support ongoing farming activities in established focus areas that also utilize annual work plans. The UGBEP Council has expressed an interest in reviewing draft work plans for an annual look at anticipated work with a follow-up review of actual accomplishments.

In the near term, within the first two years of this implemented strategy, regions with UGBEP biologists will incorporate the following items into their work plans: 1) identify and implement landscape level habitat enhancement complexes within focus areas, associated with public and accessible private lands; and 2) where appropriate and feasible, establish or maintain community-based partner farming or other assistance operations, similar to the model developed in Sheridan County.

Region 1 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

Northwest Montana features two popular pheasant and gray (Hungarian) partridge areas. First, the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area and local environs represent a complex of state, tribal, and federal properties with high quality pheasant habitat and substantial hunting days afield. FWP manages the upland bird hunting jointly with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). Second, FWP has a WMA on the north shore of Flathead Lake that provides quality pheasant habitat and popular hunting opportunities.

Northwest Montana also features some of Montana's best mountain grouse habitat and hunting opportunities, particularly for ruffed and spruce grouse. To date Region 1 has not used UGBEP funds on mountain grouse habitats as there are no obvious habitat bottlenecks the program could effectively address.

Program Delivery

The Ninepipe WMA area manager oversees all UGBEP contracts at Ninepipe, in the lower Mission Valley, and in Region One, which amounts to about 12 contracts on public and private lands. The Flathead Valley wildlife biologist may consider habitat projects on the new North Shore WMA in the near future.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

The primary UGBEP opportunities in northwest Montana are at the two WMAs described above. The ongoing trend of converting agricultural lands to residential developments makes habitat conservation crucial. As well, trends away from diversified agriculture on private lands toward beef cattle production, and away from flood irrigation to sprinklers, has marginalized pheasant habitat on once prime areas. As a result, intensive management of WMAs by FWP in Region 1 is paramount for maintaining robust pheasant populations and effectively addressing public expectations for quality pheasant hunting. In the past, UGBEP funds have been used primarily to buy seed for planting quality upland game bird habitat.

Equipment purchases are an additional potential need for habitat enhancement and management. In the future, with interagency cooperation, work may be undertaken on sharp-tailed grouse conservation.

Focus Areas and Implementation

The grassland/farmland/wetland complex of the Ninepipe area was identified some 70 years ago as worthy of conservation and management for game bird production and corresponding public hunting opportunities. It has much community support based on near unanimous support for recent additions to the WMA. Conservation of historic pheasant habitat in the surroundings points to the wisdom of our predecessors in the agency for protecting its wildlife values and integrity. North Shore WMA provides similar opportunities but on a much smaller scale. The goal for both focus areas is to maintain quality hunting opportunities for an expanding human population base and shrinking area available to pheasant hunters. This can be achieved by establishing and maintaining vigorous stands of nesting cover, providing dispersed brood rearing sites, and continuing to expand and manage wetlands for winter cover and well-distributed small grain as a source of winter food.

Region 2 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

Region 2 comprises an intermountain environment. Mountain grouse (dusky, ruffed, and spruce) are widespread across the predominantly forested landscape. Dusky grouse breed and nest on native rangelands in mountain foothill ecotones and migrate upward in elevation to winter in mature Douglas-fir stands on the higher ridges. Spruce grouse generally occupy lodgepole pine forest types, and ruffed grouse cross most elevational zones and forested habitat types along watercourses. Hunting for mountain grouse in Region 2 is widely available, but generally offers relatively few flushes per hunter day in most years; participation and interest are strong within a relatively small and dedicated hunting population.

Intermountain valleys are relatively small in Region 2. Subdivision and residential development is prevalent, especially in the Missoula and Bitterroot valleys, which has contributed to the apparent extirpation of an isolated native population of sharp-tailed grouse. Pheasant and turkey occur in the more highly developed valleys and persist in elevated numbers on parcels of 1-20 acres where the birds take advantage of hobby crops, bird seed or other feeds, and security. Upland bird hunting opportunities have been proven to be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain for the public in these circumstances, and turkeys have become a nuisance in many cases. Native rangeland and forest ecotones in the intermountain valleys in Region 2 generally are unsuitable habitat for pheasant and turkey.

Program Delivery

Public access to private lands supporting upland game bird hunting is very limited in Region 2. As well, the region's ability to deliver UGBEP on private lands is more limited. Opportunities to affect populations of upland birds in a meaningful way to measurably improve upland bird hunting in Region 2 potentially exist through forest management planning on public lands, which is accomplished through the work of area biologists when providing input on Forest Service and other public timber sales or other land management activities.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

The major limiting factors for upland game birds in Region 2 are habitat fragmentation and losses of native rangeland to residential subdivision and development in the intermountain valleys and mountain foothills, and the lack of management of forest succession and composition across millions of mountainous acres on public lands. In the future, with interagency cooperation, work may be undertaken on sharp-tailed grouse conservation.

Focus Areas and Implementation

Region 2 does not provide habitat capability and suitability sufficient to deliver meaningful upland bird and hunting enhancements within focus areas. Instead, Region 2 intends to utilize the UGBEP within existing habitat conservation efforts as a supplement, where fitting, for upland game birds to expand conservation accomplishments. This would include areas of Region 2, such as the Blackfoot River, where FWP and partners continue to work on a variety of restoration and conservation projects on private and public lands. There may be opportunities to incorporate UGBEP funds or other assistance as part of larger conservation incentives to perpetually protect connected native rangelands and a diversity of wildlife from further subdivision and development. Similarly, there may be opportunities to apply UGBEP incentives toward forest management projects on public lands or intermingled private lands to broadly affect upland bird distribution and abundance across thousands of forested acres over time. In both situations, the major FWP inputs would be expertise and advisement in partnership with governmental agencies and non-profit organizations to influence landscapes broadly for multiple habitat benefits, of which upland birds would represent a resource of increased consideration at the planning table.

Region 3 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

Region 3, Southwest Montana, has a unique dispersion of upland game bird habitats. In the southwest portion (Beaverhead, Silver Bow and Madison counties) there is a significant area of connected sagebrush/grassland community types, i.e. excellent sage-grouse habitat. In addition, the Shields Valley has a large area of sagebrush/grassland that has been significantly disrupted by sagebrush conversion through cultivation (plowing). In the latter, area sage-grouse declines, as reflected in lek counts, have been attributed to agricultural conversion. The Region also has numerous mountain ranges (at least 14) containing important and significant habitat for all 3 species of mountain grouse.

The intermountain valleys and associated riverine complexes (with 7 major rivers) of the Region provide a diversity of habitats for species such a pheasants, gray partridge, and turkeys. The upper Missouri and headwaters area provide, via CRP, regionally important sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

The combination of forested habitats with diverse elevational gradients, large areas of intact sagebrush/grassland communities, numerous planted agricultural valley bottoms and associated riparian and riverine systems, and large areas of CRP provide significant and diverse upland game bird hunting opportunity. Because of a lack of hunting access and the difficulty to carry pheasants through some severe winter events in SW Montana, opportunity to hunt the species is most limited relative to the other species found in the Region.

In order of importance for hunting, the Region has dusky grouse, ruffed grouse, Franklin's (spruce) grouse, sage-grouse, gray partridge, sharp-tailed grouse, turkey, and pheasant.

Program Delivery

FWP supports some technician staffing at Canyon Ferry WMA to help continue with habitat enhancement activities on the WMA. Substantial implementation of the UGBEP in Region 3 is limited because of a lack of staff dedicated to the program in

combination with many competing priorities. Pheasants Forever and the National Wild Turkey Federation chapters in the Region have expressed interest in doing more work. This effort requires considerable regional staff time that can be difficult to dedicate.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

Publicly accessible pheasant and turkey hunting is very limited and a premium. Region 3 has some good but small-scale pheasant hunting opportunities in some of the river valleys where riparian bottoms mix with grain fields. Turkey hunting occurs primarily along riparian corridors, adjacent to grain. With the ever increasing changes in landownership in Region 3, these kinds of habitats are generally difficult for the public access. Canyon Ferry WMA and some fishing access sites along riparian corridors represent the greatest opportunities.

Gray partridge occur over much of the Region and sharp-tailed grouse occur in limited parts of the Region. Enhancement work targeting these species would probably need to involve grazing lands with a high quality mix of habitats or CRP.

Sage-grouse occur in a mix of habitats in Beaverhead, Park, and Madison counties. All of these areas are a mix of BLM, USFS, DNRC, FWP, and private lands. There are opportunities in these areas for enhancing habitat, primarily via grazing management.

Ruffed and dusky grouse would benefit from grazing management improvements and aspen regeneration projects on some areas—mostly involving USFS lands. The beetle epidemic affecting forests in southwestern Montana is likely to have detrimental effects on dusky and spruce grouse but has yet to be fully understood.

- **Sagebrush/grasslands of the southwest portion of Region 3**

  Background:

  Sage-grouse face a warranted but precluded candidate status for Endangered Species Act listing. There are opportunities to collaborate with federal and private partners for enhancing grazing management and conserving the southwest Montana sagebrush/grassland community types.

  Goal:

  Conserve the integrity and connectivity of southwest Montana sagebrush/grassland community types.

  Approach:

  a. Continue to work with federal and state land management agencies on grazing system enhancements, emphasizing use of true rest-rotation systems. UGBEP funds likely will be needed to offset costs for improvements where needed.
  b. Continue to work with the above agencies and utilities companies to assure transmission lines and other infrastructure have minimal impacts on sage-grouse.
  c. Continue to work with Region 3 partners on long term conservation measures such as sagebrush leasing programs to assure conservation of this habitat.
  d. There may be opportunities to work with mitigation dollars associated with energy development, focusing on upland game bird habitats that involve grazing and conservation easements.
  e. Three regional biologists are extensively involved with sage-grouse conservation efforts through the sage-grouse local working group.

- **Mountainous Coniferous Forests**

  Background:

  The coniferous forests of Southwest Montana are currently experiencing expansive areas of beetle kill.

Goal:
To gain a better understanding of the impacts associated with beetle kill and how it may impact dusky, spruce, and ruffed grouse.

Approach:
Assist/review research to understand the magnitude of the kill and how food sources and security requirements are being impacted prior to initiating or using UGHEP funds for forested species.

- **Riverine Habitats**
  Background:
  Southwest Montana has seven major rivers with existing and potentially suitable turkey habitat.

  Goal:
  The Region 3 goal for turkeys is to have connected populations along the Missouri River from the headwaters of the Missouri downstream to Canyon Ferry WMA where riparian habitats and adjacent grain fields will support them.

  Approach:
  Habitat and access work for turkeys could involve NWTF volunteers and private landowners. Much of this work will be focused on obtaining private landowner turkey release sites with associated hunting opportunity agreements.

- **Agricultural Areas with associated riverine habitats:**
  Background:
  These areas contain high quality habitat, but are small and limited due to difficulty in obtaining public hunting opportunities compared to other regions of the State.

  Goal:
  Improve winter and nesting cover and food availability for pheasants along the upper Missouri and tributaries while attempting to secure public hunting opportunities.

Approach:
Canyon Ferry WMA and some fishing access sites along riparian corridors represent the greatest pheasant habitat opportunities because of their public accessibility and farming history (in some cases). The primary opportunities for partnering are with organizations like NWTF and PF on mixed public and private ownership.

- **Focus Area: CRP Lands in the upper Missouri and Shields Valley:**
  Background:
  Large blocks of CRP are crucial habitat components for sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge. In Region 3, high-value areas with large blocks of CRP include south Broadwater County and northeast Madison County. The Shields Valley is also comprised of important lands enrolled in CRP as well as significant amounts of sage-grouse habitat.

  Goal:
  Enhance the restoration of habitat for both sharp-tailed and sage-grouse and enhance gray partridge habitat.

  Approach:
  Identify areas with productive CRP plantings and market UGBEP add-on rental payments as an incentive for re-enrollment. In addition, work to secure additional CRP lands open to sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge hunting.

Region 4 UGBEP Strategic Plan

The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program in north-central Montana can play a key role in positively affecting upland game bird habitat and populations. This plan describes Region 4 implementation of the UGBEP. Primary management considerations include:

- upland game bird species population levels and distribution
- opportunities for enhancing upland game bird habitat
- free public hunting opportunities
- partnering opportunities with public agencies, private organizations, and landowners
- maintenance of existing quality habitat and enhancement and restoration of degraded upland game bird habitat

Background

1. Overview of Game Bird Species and Their Habitat Resources

Region 4 contains topographically and ecologically diverse habitats, ranging from the Continental Divide east to native prairie/plains, including all Montana species of game birds (with the exception of chukar partridge). This species richness provides excellent hunting opportunities for upland game birds in a spectacular landscape, with opportunities to view and harvest big game species as well.

Focus species for the UGBEP include sustainable populations of native sharp-tailed grouse and sage-grouse, and non-native ring-necked pheasants, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and Merriam's turkey. Additionally, ruffed, spruce and dusky grouse are found in timbered habitat types, particularly on national forest land in the Region. However, mountain grouse are not currently focal species of the UGBEP but habitat projects will be considered opportunistically.

Agriculture is one of the primary economic drivers in Region 4. Recreational activities including hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing are other major sources of income for landowners and communities. Enhancement of hunted

upland game bird populations and their habitat could benefit many smaller communities.

a) Sharp-tailed Grouse: This native upland game bird is widely distributed throughout most of Region 4 east of the Rocky Mountain Front where there are native grasslands and adequate woody winter cover. Their wide range is primarily due to the wide distribution of suitable native grasslands with residual cover including native range and CRP. Improving nesting cover, as well as woody cover for winter use continues to be the primary mechanisms for improving sharp-tailed grouse populations. Conversion of native grasslands to crop production loom as the greatest long term threat to these populations.

b) Ring-necked Pheasant: Pheasants are closely associated with riparian/river bottom habitats and mixed agriculture (cropland, CRP, pasture) in Region 4. Habitats with sufficient food sources, ample nesting cover, and winter cover (i.e., woody vegetation, cattails, etc.) are preferred. The primary pheasant distribution in Region 4 lies in Toole and Liberty counties, the eastern half of Pondera and Teton counties, the northern half of Cascade and Judith Basin counties, the western two-thirds of Chouteau county, and Fergus and Petroleum counties. The advent of CRP in the 1980s enhanced pheasant populations throughout the Region. Loss of these same CRP acres as a result of Farm Bill changes will result in notable population changes and declines.

c) Gray Partridge: Gray partridge are widely distributed across Region 4, paralleling sharp-tailed grouse distribution, due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats and high reproductive capacity. Gray partridge can survive where pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse cannot. Their preferred habitats are grasslands with adequate food resources, nesting cover, and winter shelter, including field borders adjacent to dryland or irrigated grain and hay. Based on hunter harvest trends, gray partridge populations have been stable since 1980, subject to wide, normally occurring fluctuations.

d) Sage-grouse: Sage-grouse are distributed primarily in the eastern third of Region 4 in big sagebrush habitat. Fragmented populations of sage-grouse

occur in Liberty, Chouteau, Judith Basin, and Meagher counties, with the most viable populations in Fergus and Petroleum counties. Historical distribution was more wide spread in the Region, but loss of their required sagebrush habitat has restricted their range.

The primary mechanisms for retaining and improving sage-grouse populations are to maintain and expand sagebrush habitat and to improve grazing management practices to emphasize residual native plant cover and long term plant community health.

e) Merriam's turkey: Wild turkeys have been introduced to numerous locations in Region 4 and reintroductions/augmentations are an ongoing part of the UGBEP. Hunted populations occur in Fergus and Petroleum counties. Small, isolated populations of turkeys also occur along the main stem of the Missouri River and its tributaries.

f) Mountain grouse: Ruffed, dusky, and spruce grouse exist in viable populations in the forested mountains and foothills of Region 4.

2. Public Hunting Opportunities

Access for upland game bird hunting varies across Region 4 by species and location. Hunters and wildlife managers are facing growing challenges with the increased leasing of private lands for hunting and diminishing free public access. Public hunting opportunities exist across much of the Region via BLM, Wildlife Management Areas, DNRC School Trust lands, USFWS Refuges/Waterfowl Production Areas, and National Forests. Additionally, private land open to free public hunting is available through the FWP Block Management program, FWP conservation easements, UGBEP agreements, Migratory Bird Stamp agreements, and through private landowner permission. FWP offers a liberal fall hunting season for upland game birds, with a reduced hunting season on sage-grouse. An additional spring hunt is offered for turkeys.

Habitat enhancements can improve conditions for upland game birds, thus creating more opportunity for hunter success, as well as securing future access

for continued hunting. The recognition of the benefits from participation in the UGBEP may spur increased community involvement and promotion of the program through local businesses, landowners, and partnering agencies. Each year the money spent by upland game bird hunters stimulates the economy of communities across Montana. These economic benefits are vital to all, but are particularly important to small rural communities.

Program Delivery

The key to effective delivery of the upland game bird program is having local field personnel working directly with landowners, agency and private partners such as NRCS, FSA, USFWS, Pheasants Forever, and Habitat Forever. Region 4 is fortunate to have an UGBEP biologist stationed in Conrad as well as five area biologists and a non-game biologist shared with Region 5. Habitat Forever and FWP have partnered to support a habitat technician position in the Lewistown area to focus on habitat enhancement projects on existing public and accessible private lands. FWP field staff continually make contact with NRCS and FSA staff across Region 4. Informational handouts have been distributed to NRCS and FSA offices to give to landowners who may be interested in UGBEP opportunities. Other outreach efforts about the UGBEP include the FWP website, radio and press releases, and presentations given to community organizations and working groups. One of the most important avenues of communication is through landowner references as UGBEP projects are developed.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

Enhancing upland game bird habitat has been, and will continue to be, the basis for improving upland game bird populations and insuring the long-term viability and hunting of upland game birds in Region 4. Partnerships with federal and state agencies and private organizations will be sought to cost-share UGBEP dollars. The UGBEP traditionally has employed shelterbelts, food plots, dense nesting cover, grazing management plans, wetland and riparian area protection and enhancement, conservation easements and sagebrush leases to enhance and secure upland game bird habitat and populations. Other types of leases may be pursued as funding permits.

Hundreds of thousands of CRP acres in Region 4 may be coming out of the CRP program and converted to cropland in 2011, 2012, and 2013. These expiring CRP contracts represent a significant loss of important upland game bird habitat. The UGBEP will be utilized to encourage continuation of CRP re-enrollments and new enrollments through the UGBEP CRP Add-on program and seed mix cost-share. Additional creative UGBEP opportunities may be pursued to perpetuate CRP.

Focus Areas and Implementation

For the purpose of this upland game bird strategic plan, Region 4 has identified six main ecological, habitat and/or jurisdictional types for upland bird habitat projects: A) core public lands, B) foothill grassland native habitats, C) sagebrush grasslands, D) riparian-agricultural, E) prairie-agricultural, and F) forested mountains. For all of these ecological types, the existing habitats, public accessibility, economic factors and community interest play an important role in identifying and prioritizing UGBEP projects. FWP considers two focal approaches—by geographic habitat type and by strategy.

By Geographic Habitat Type in Region 4 (in order of priority):

1. **Priority Public Lands** (including but not limited to Freezout, Beckman and Marias WMAs, Coffee Creek/Wolf Creek, and DNRC state lands)

Background: Private land access is diminishing in varying degrees across Region 4, with the rate of leasing of private lands proving especially challenging in the Lewistown area. Additionally, high-value upland bird habitat is shrinking as CRP contracts expire and as private land ownership changes. The combination of these factors may have long-term negative consequences for upland bird populations and public access for hunting. Thus, it is important to continue pursuing opportunities that ensure permanent public access. One of the best tools to accomplish this is to protect and enhance large blocks of publicly owned land.

Goals:

a) Protect public lands and adjoining private lands from development and loss of upland game bird habitat

b) Maintain and improve public access and hunting opportunities for all upland game bird species
c) Increase pheasant hunting opportunity through habitat enhancement projects

Approach:

a) Work with DNRC, BLM, FWP WMA's, and other public agencies and private organizations such as Pheasants Forever to promote appropriate UGBEP projects on public lands
b) Develop and implement upland game bird winter habitat projects strategically located to enhance upland game bird winter survival on public lands and adjoining private lands
c) Provide incentives to encourage CRP enrollment and reenrollment on DNRC lands
d) Collaborate on improved grazing management on public lands
e) Collaborate on the DNRC/Debruycker land (5,500 acres of farmed land and hills with native grasslands) to maximize upland game bird production.

2. Foothill grassland native habitats (including but not limited to Sweet Grass Hills, Highwood/Judith/Snowy Mountain foothills, Eden, Cascade, and Adel)

Background: The UGBEP was originally founded on the desire to improve pheasant hunting in agricultural areas. Although the program has significantly expanded to include all upland species and a more habitat-oriented approach, some potentially excellent sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge and ruffed grouse enhancement opportunities have not been addressed in our foothill grassland native habitats.

Goals:

a) Maintain and enhance native vegetation in foothill habitat primarily to encourage viable populations of sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge
b) Enhance winter cover and nesting cover. Improve sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge hunting opportunities

Approach:

a) Manage for "grass blowing in the wind" on these foothill grasslands

b) Encourage shrub and tree survival in coulees for winter thermal cover and winter food resources through plantings and improved grazing management strategies.
c) Enhance grassland nesting cover through improved grazing management and improved livestock watering systems.
d) Increase shrubby/woody winter cover through protection of coulees with appropriate grazing management strategies.
e) Increase hunting opportunities through increased public access and increasing sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge numbers.

3. Sagebrush grasslands (including but not limited to the south side of the Missouri River in HD 410 and parts of HDs 411 and 417)

Background: Destruction of sagebrush habitat has been a primary factor in the decrease of sage-grouse numbers and isolation of sage-grouse populations, leading to their imperiled status.

Goals:
a) Maintain and restore big sagebrush habitat and improve grazing management projects to enhance sage-grouse populations and connectivity.
b) Minimize disturbance impacts on sage-grouse by management of human activities
c) Increase sage-grouse numbers and connectivity between populations

Approach:
a) Collaborate on sagebrush leases and improved grazing management projects
b) Implement science-based noxious weed management to increase forbs important to sage-grouse during brood rearing
c) Encourage research partnerships to collect information valuable to manage sage-grouse populations, and implement strategies that benefit sage-grouse

4. Riparian-agricultural (including but not limited to Smith, Sun, Teton, Marias and Judith Rivers, main stem of the Missouri River, Greenfields and Brady

Irrigation Districts, Pondera Canal and Reservoir Company, Loma/Ft Benton, Cascade/Ulm)

Background: The farm lands lying along the major river corridors and their tributaries are potentially ecologically high value areas for pheasant and turkey populations, and secondarily for sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge. The primary crops include cereal grains, hay, and some legumes. Some of the area is nearly a monoculture of crops without adequate dense nesting cover or winter cover to maintain upland game bird populations. This area has been a recipient of UGBEP efforts but there is much untapped potential for UGBEP habitat improvement and increasing public hunting opportunities. Public accessibility is generally good.

Goals:

a) Provide critical winter habitat for pheasants and turkeys
b) Maintain productive nesting cover primarily for pheasants
c) Increase public hunting opportunities

Approach:

a) Encourage new CRP enrollments and re-enrollments through UGBEP incentives and collaboration with FSA partners
b) Seek out willing landowners for winter cover enhancement
c) Develop and establish food plots and shelterbelts, strategically connecting upland game bird habitat patches over a larger scale
d) Encourage development of more Block Management areas for upland game bird hunting
e) Implement turkey augmentation and restoration efforts to increase turkey numbers along the cottonwood galleries on the major rivers
f) Develop an access management plan with the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company (PCCRC) to facilitate access around Lake Frances
g) Collaborate with landowners adjoining PCCRC lands to create a larger landscape scale upland game bird project to include leaving standing strips of grain for food plots and planting cover.

5. **Prairie-agricultural** (including but not limited to the Judith Basin, Lewistown-Denton area, Sand Coulee-Eden area)

   Background: The ranches located along the prairie-agriculture interface are primarily used for grazing livestock, interspersed with areas of crop production. These dryland open landscapes can be excellent sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge habitat as well as home to many other prairie species of interest. Although much of this region is grasslands, the portions that are mostly crop land could benefit from the addition of dense nesting cover and winter cover.

Goals:

a) Provide critical winter habitat and maintain productive nesting cover for sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge, and secondarily for pheasants
b) Monitor and increase upland game bird populations and hunting when possible
c) Raise the profile for hunting of sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge through visibility of implemented UGBEP projects and community involvement

Approach:

a) Develop and implement grazing management plans that maintain and promote upland game bird habitat
b) Enhance grazing management systems in these areas, including water management systems
c) Manage range lands to maintain residual grass for sharp-tailed grouse
d) Implement critical winter habitat projects.

6. **Forested mountains** (including but not limited to Rocky Mountain Front, Little and Big Belt Mountains, Castle Mountains, Judith Mountains, Little and Big Snowy Mountains, Crazy Mountains, and the Highwood Mountains)

Background: Mountain grouse enhancement projects have historically received little support through the UGBEP.

Goal:

a) Maintain and restore habitat to benefit mountain grouse

Approach:

a) If appropriate opportunities to partner on habitat enhancement efforts arise, they will be seriously considered as potential UGBEP projects.
b) Work with the Forest Service with aspen management efforts to enhance ruffed grouse habitat in the Little Belts
c) Develop and implement dusky grouse projects opportunistically

By Strategy in Region 4:

- Maintain and enhance native grassland and native shrub habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, and gray partridge; strive to keep "grass blowing in the wind" through grazing management
- Enhance quantity and quality of diverse cover crop types for pheasants (discourage sterile clean farming)
- Continue to build and maintain strong relationships with landowners through UGBEP projects and outreach
- Prioritize habitat projects on permanently protected lands (protected w/ conservation easements, public lands) above private lands with shorter-term options
- Promote opportunities to hire permanent technician(s) within local communities to implement UGBEP projects
- Work with public land management agencies to improve the quality of upland game bird habitat to effect long-term enhancement and opportunity for public hunting
- Seek funding to procure a grant writer for UGBEP dollars to secure additional funding for long-term habitat projects and conservation easements
- Plan and emphasize monitoring and follow-up on established and new UGBEP projects

Region 5 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

Region 5 in south-central Montana contains huntable numbers of the following upland game bird species: sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, ruffed grouse, dusky grouse, pheasant, gray partridge, chukar partridge, and wild turkey. Relative to the other 6 Regions, harvest in Region 5 during 2009 ranked 4th for pheasants (13,341 pheasants harvested in R5), 3rd for gray partridge (7,979), 4th for sharp-tailed grouse (6,116), 2nd for wild turkey (1,241), 5th for dusky grouse (823), 5th for ruffed grouse (578), 4th for sage-grouse (344), and 1st for chukar partridge (449).

Program Delivery

Region 5 has 3 field biologists and one resource specialist who work with the UGBEP. In addition to FWP staff, the department has partnered with Habitat Forever and BLM to support an upland game bird habitat technician to conduct habitat enhancement work on public lands along the Yellowstone River in the Billings vicinity. Due to many demands, it is difficult for Region 5 staff to develop and implement many UGBEP projects outside of work on public lands along the Yellowstone. Private landowners have also been very hesitant to utilize UGBEP funding because of the public access requirements.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

Upland game birds species priorities are ranked as follows. The ranking considers both regional importance of the species and the ability of the UGBEP to affect that species.

- Sage-grouse – candidate species, habitat conservation measures vital to maintaining viable populations and continuing state management
- Ring-necked Pheasants – high sportsman demand, habitat improvement measures very effective in producing more pheasants
- Sharp-tailed Grouse – native species, habitat conservation measures benefit all prairie wildlife

- Ruffed Grouse – native species, aspen habitat also important for many other species, habitat can be easily improved, fair amount of the habitat is found on USFS lands

- Wild Turkey – introduced species, high sportsman demand, habitat improvement measures may be somewhat successful in increasing numbers

- Chukar Partridge – introduced species, very limited range in Montana, low-density populations, some opportunity to influence populations through habitat measures, occur mostly on BLM lands

- Dusky Grouse – native species, fairly limited distribution, limited ability to influence populations through habitat measures, occur mostly on USFS lands

- Gray Partridge – abundant introduced species, uses a wide variety of habitats, because habitat needs are so variable there is limited opportunity to directly improve habitat

Focus Areas and Implementation

- **Sage-grouse**

Sage-grouse numbers have exhibited long-term declines, and many hunters no longer hunt this species. In Region 5, these declines can be attributed to habitat loss including conversion of sagebrush-grassland to small grains. A more recent threat, identified in portions of Region 5, is West Nile virus. In the short-term, this disease is probably negatively affecting sage-grouse abundance.

In Region 5 there are 3 sage-grouse core areas, one north of Lavina, one northeast of Roundup, and one east of Red Lodge. Core areas serve as focus areas for this species. Because there is much more public land with good hunter access in the Red Lodge area, this is the primary focus area. Emphasis in this focus area will be on proper grazing management.

The second priority focus area is northeast of Roundup. More emphasis in this area will be placed on long term conservation of sagebrush grasslands. The UGBEP's Sagebrush Intiative, which paid landowners $12.00 per acre for a 30-year lease on

sagebrush grassland habitats, should be a continuing part of the UGBEP. Similar efforts will be made in the Lavina area, the third priority focus area.

FWP is currently embarking on a long-term study with NRCS and the University of Montana to assess the effects of various grazing treatments on sage-grouse habitat and sage-grouse populations. This will provide us with much needed information for future design of grazing systems that will be economically attractive to landowners while also benefitting sage-grouse.

- **Ring-necked Pheasant**

The greatest limitation to pheasant harvest in Region 5 is the majority of the land base is privately owned, and many landowners no longer allow public hunting. There are limited opportunties to implement UGBEP projects on private land with good pheasant habitat potential because most landowners are unwilling to allow public hunting. As such, we will continue to emphasize habitat enhancement work on public lands where habitat potential is high and where access is already guaranteed.

Region 5 is currently focusing on three areas along the Yellowstone River: Sundance BLM lands near Laurel, Pompey's Pillar BLM lands, and Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area (WMA) FWP lands. All three sites have irrigated lands with high potential to develop excellent pheasant habitat. A habitat technician jointly funded by FWP, BLM, and Habitat Forever has been hired and is implementing intensive habitat projects on these three sites – food plots, nesting cover, and winter cover. Once these sites are converted to semi-permanent cover, excepting the food plots, the work demand should diminish to the point where we can move onto other public lands along the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers.

Pheasant stocking will be conducted on an as-requested basis. As of 2010, there is one current stocking contract in the Region.

- **Sharp-tailed Grouse**

In Region 5 habitat losses are also affecting populations of sharp-tailed grouse. The conversion of sagebrush grassland to small grains, the conversion of CRP back to small grains, and the decadence of existing CRP stands have all had a negative impact on sharp-tailed grouse populations.

The Big Lake/Rapelje/Molt area is the Region's sharp-tailed grouse focus area. There may be some opportunties on Block Management properties to improve CRP for nesting cover and planting shelterbelts for winter cover. Region 5 has already completed several projects in this focus area and will continue to seek new projects.

- **Ruffed Grouse**

Young, vigorous aspen stands are critical for ruffed grouse and many other species, and such stands are in limited supply and are decreasing in the Region. Fire suppression, maturation of aspen clones, conifer encroachment, and overgrazing of aspen clones by cattle and elk have contributed to the decline. Our focus areas are along the Beartooth Face and the north end of the Pryor Mountains, where aspen habitats are available for improvement.

FWP is working closely with the Custer National Forest (and in the past have worked with the Ruffed Grouse Society and Safari Club) to regenerate decadent stands of aspen by clearcutting clones. Clearcutting has proven to be the most effective way to regenerate decandent stands and produce dense, young stands of aspen vital to ruffed grouse.

FWP is currently working with the Gallatin National Forest on a project to fence off aspen clones burned in the Derby Fire. These clones are growing at a rapid rate and are highly attractive to cattle. Protecting aspen clones from grazing will ensure clone survival and a better growth. In the future Region 5 may apply for UGBEP funds to expand fencing opportunities.

- **Wild Turkey**

Wild turkey are abundant and widespread in Region 5 and occur mostly on private land in wooded habitats. Most of the suitable habitat in the Region is already occupied, so turkey releases are not necessary. Region 5 has been and will continue to be a source of birds for transplants to other Regions.

The requirement to allow public hunting in order to participate in the UGBEP substantially limits the particpation of private landowners. Therefore, Region 5 is focusing efforts on public lands, where food plots planted primarily for pheasants will also be designed to benefit wild turkeys. Preserving Russian olive stands at strategic locations is important to maintain wild turkey populations at current levels.

- **Chukar Partridge**

Huntable populations of chukar in Montana are found only in Region 5. Hunter interest is high for a species that is unavailable in the rest of the state. Our focus area is south of Bridger to the Wyoming border, bounded on the east by Highway 310 and on the west by Highway 72 (Figure 8). Because a large portion of chukar habitat is found on BLM land, hunter access is not a problem. Since chukar are mostly found in native rangeland habitat, the primary factor influencing their abundance is livestock grazing. FWP works closely with BLM to provide assistance and technical advice to implement grazing systems that will benefit chukar and other wildlife.

- **Dusky Grouse**

Dusky grouse are a native species that, in Region 5, occurs mostly on USFS lands in the Beartooth, Pryor, Crazy, Big Snowy, and Little Belt mountains. Numbers appear to be stable, but hunter harvests in the last several years have declined from the past. Region 5 has limited ability to influence dusky grouse habitat through the UGBEP.

- **Gray Partridge**

Gray partridge are abundant and widespread throughout Region 5. They occur in a wide variety of habitats, from cropland to rangeland and everything in-between,

except for forested habitats. As such, explicit habitat practices that directly benefit gray partridge are somewhat questionable, and thus Region 5 will not focus UGBEP efforts specifically for this species. Gray Paetridge may benefit from habitat projects designed to benefit other species such as shelterbelts, food plots, and grazing systems.

Background

1. **Upland Game Bird Population Status:**
   Region 6 supports sustainable, huntable populations of native sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse, and non-native ring-necked pheasant, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and wild Merriam's turkey.

   Sage-grouse: Sage-grouse are distributed primarily in the center of the Region in big sagebrush habitats south of Highway 2 and silver sagebrush habitats north of Highway 2. Historical distribution places them much more widely, but loss of their required sagebrush habitat has restricted their range (Figure 12). The primary mechanism for retaining and improving sage-grouse populations is maintaining and expanding sagebrush habitat.

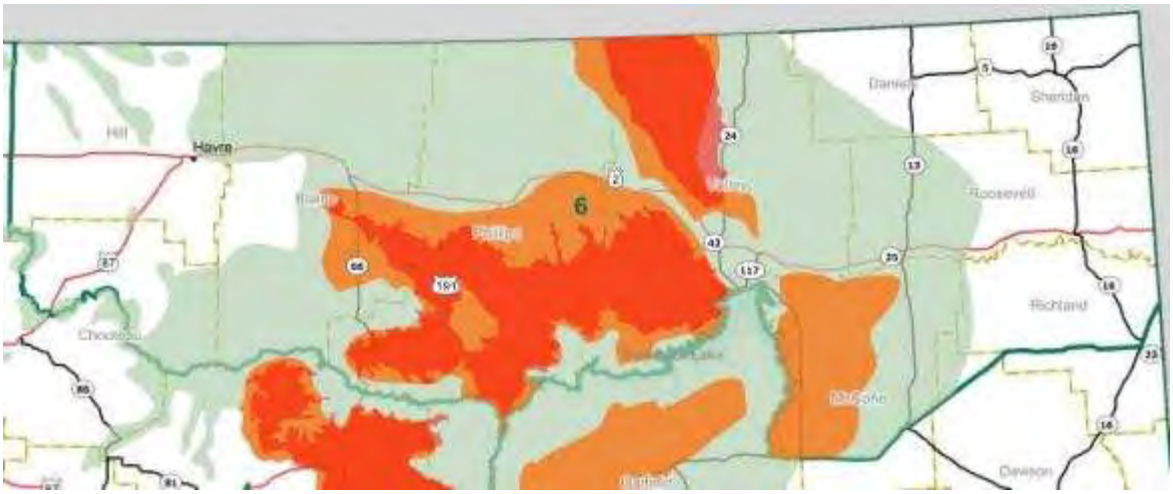


Figure 12. The Sage-grouse Habitat priority areas in Region 6, corresponding to their distribution (Green=historical, Red= core habitat, Orange=nesting/brooding).

Sharp-tailed Grouse: This native upland game bird is widely distributed across much of eastern Montana, including Region 6. Their wide range is primarily due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats, including native range, CRP, and cropland. Sharp-tailed grouse populations have increased since the mid-1980s, presumably a result of increased grassland cover through CRP and properly managed grazing lands. Improving nesting cover, as well as woody cover for

winter use, continues to be the primary mechanisms for improving Sharp-tailed grouse populations. Conservation of Russian olive stands at strategic upland locations is important for maintaining effective winter habitat for sharp-tailed grouse.

Ring-necked Pheasant: This non-native upland game bird is closely associated with riparian/river bottom habitats and mixed agriculture (cropland, CRP, pasture) in Region 6. Good habitats offer sufficient food sources, ample nesting cover, and winter cover (woody vegetation or cattails). Spring crowing counts in the western part of the Region (west of Glasgow) generally indicate pheasant populations have increased since 1986, a likely reflection of expanded habitats due to extensive CRP enrollments. Ring-necked pheasant habitat west of Glasgow is mostly along the Milk River. Spring crowing counts east of Glasgow consisting of river bottom and mixed agriculture populations indicate a stable population since 1986. Conservation of Russian olive stands at strategic upland locations is important for maintaining effective winter habitat for pheasants.

Gray Partridge: Gray partridge are widely distributed across Region 6, due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats. Gray partridge are found from sagebrush habitat to cropped areas. Populations are variable from year to year due to their ability to be highly productive during favorable weather patterns yet susceptible to winter mortality and cold wet springs during the hatch and early brood period. Their populations have been stable since 1980, with some improvement seen following the start of CRP and the UGBEP in the late 1980's.

2. Public Hunting:

Free Public Hunting Access: Access to upland game bird hunting is generally good in Region 6. Public land hunting opportunities exist across much of the center of the Region via BLM land, as well as State land scattered throughout the Region, and USFWS Refuges. Approximately 1.25 million acres of private land are enrolled in the Block Management Program, allowing public hunting for the duration of the upland game bird season. Additional private land open to free public hunting is available through FWP's conservation easements, UGBEP

agreements, and Migratory Bird Stamp agreements. Many private landowners outside of FWP agreements also provide substantial public access for hunting upland game birds in Region 6.

Economics of upland game bird hunting: Many rural communities in Region 6 recognize the economic value of upland game bird hunting and have worked in a number of ways to encourage public hunting. In addition to conventional advertising and marketing, chambers of commerce and local businesses have sponsored special welcoming events to encourage participation by visiting hunters.

Program Delivery

The key to effective delivery of the UGBEP is having local field personnel working directly with landowners and partners. Region 6 is fortunate to have an upland game bird program biologist stationed in Plentywood, as well as four area biologists actively managing upland game birds. Informational pamphlets are being developed as a tool for distribution to landowners who are interested in program opportunities. Pamphlets will outline how the UGBEP can work with NRCS programs, as well as with other programs. Other communication tools and means to disseminate information include: the FWP website, radio and press releases, through partnering agencies and, most importantly, through landowner references. A temporary information sheet on the UGBEP has been compiled for current use and dissemination.

Focus Areas and Implementation

The following are Region 6 priority areas for upland game bird habitat work. Although the identified geographic areas will receive greater consideration, valid projects benefiting upland game birds in other portions of the Region will still be considered. Specific habitat types and implementation techniques are also considered as priorities within some geographic areas.

- **Milk River Valley- Milk River Initiative- Valley, Phillips, Blaine, Hill counties**
  Havre Area, Nelson Reservoir Area, Hinsdale Area, and the Glasgow – Tampico Area

  Background:
  The inherent productivity of existing habitats, the public accessibility, and the community interest all make the Milk River Valley an area of conservation priority.

  Goal:
  Achieve long-term conservation, habitat enhancement, and restoration in focus areas along the Milk River.

  Approach:
  1. Improve habitat on existing publicly accessible wildlife areas and utilize these areas as cornerstones for expansion of habitat influences on adjacent private and public lands.
  2. Work with all interested agencies and organizations to achieve habitat improvement goals.
  3. Utilize existing conservation easements as opportunities for long-lasting habitat improvements.

- **Northeastern Region 6- Daniels, Roosevelt, and Sheridan counties**
  Big Muddy Creek and Tributaries, CRP, Expired Contracts

  Background:
  The existing habitats, high community interest, high public accessibility, and possibilities for significant habitat improvements make the northeastern corner of Region 6 an area of conservation priority.

  Goals:
  1. Work on cooperative habitat enhancement projects in Sheridan, Daniels, and Roosevelt counties to improve upland game bird habitat and subsequent upland game bird populations

2. Increase emphasis on establishing and enhancing upland game bird habitat
3. Pheasant habitat work, especially effective winter cover, will be the priority to increase pheasant populations (Figure 13)

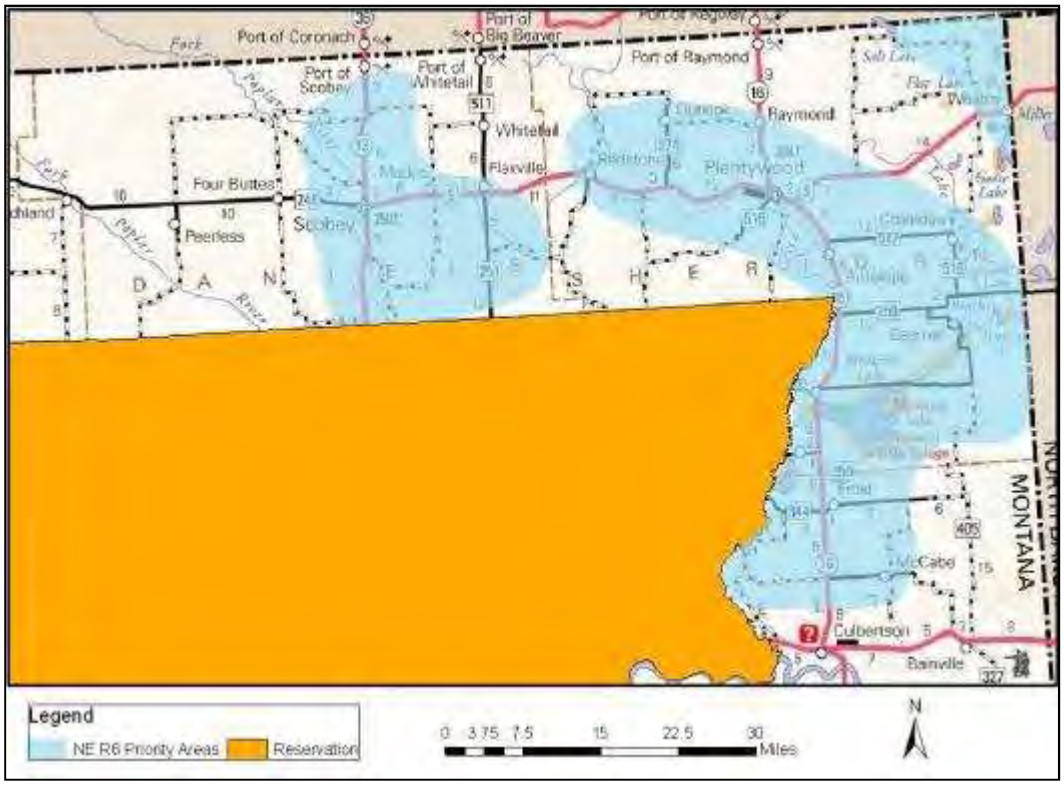


Figure 13. Ring-necked pheasant habitat priority areas for Sheridan, Roosevelt, and Daniels counties.

Approach:

1. Focus on existing Block Management areas and/or the distribution of CRP to identify platforms for habitat improvements.
2. Identify singular limiting factors in areas with some habitat components already in place. An example is an area with adequate nesting cover and food sources, but limited winter cover. Generally speaking for this part of Region 6, the primary factor limiting pheasant populations are old nesting cover/CRP stands lacking plant diversity, making them less suitable for hiding, nesting, feeding, and rearing broods. The secondary limiting factor is lack of suitable winter habitat, important for over-winter survival of pheasants (e.g., blocks of tall dense vegetation and adjacent food plots).

3. Utilize Sheridan County MOU and landowner partnerships to make habitat improvements
4. Foster relationships with landowners formed through Block Management, pheasant release agreements, and prior UGBEP projects to further improve upland game bird habitat and hunting opportunities
5. Take advantage of cost sharing opportunities during CRP sign-ups
6. Increase the amount and distribution of standing food plots to provide winter food sources, primarily for pheasants, to decrease the use of emergency supplemental feeding
7. Re-contract expired shelterbelts for improvements, and improve upon existing marginal winter cover that attracts game birds during winter.

- **Sage-grouse Habitat Priority- Blaine, McCone, Phillips, and Valley counties (Figure 12)**
  Canadian Connectivity Areas, Phillips County, Valley County Winter Habitat

  Background:
  The strategic need to halt the decline of sagebrush habitats due to degradation and fragmentation for the benefit of sage-grouse make these areas a conservation priority.

  Goal:
  Work on cooperative sagebrush habitat protection, enhancement and restoration programs that improve and expand sage-grouse habitat.

  Approach:
  1. Focus on the silver sagebrush habitats north of the Milk River that serve as corridors for sage-grouse populations in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Other key corridors include Rock and Frenchman creeks in Valley County as well as Lodge, Battle, and Sage creeks in Hill and Blaine counties.
  2. Work with funding partners to improve and protect sage-grouse habitat in priority areas (Figure 12), particularly federal programs with a focus on sage-grouse and conserving sagebrush grassland habitats.

3. Focus on Antelope, Brazil, and Larb creeks of Valley County to improve sagebrush habitat.
4. Promote the use and benefits of grazing systems.

- **Habitat Enhancement Project Renewal and Monitoring Priority-** ***Region wide (Figure 14)***

Background:
Montana FWP has invested significant resources into projects such as grazing systems, shelterbelts, and nesting cover. Many contracts are near or at the end of their term and upland bird habitat quality is at a high level. Contract requirements for habitat work and public access may not be fulfilled unless proper monitoring is conducted.

Goals:
MFWP will work with landowners to renew contracts to maintain and/or enhance habitat for another contract term.

1. Work to renew contracts for McCone and Richland county grazing systems and all successful shelterbelts and nesting cover projects
2. Build upon existing projects to form complexes of enhanced habitats, rather than isolated projects

Approach

1. Make landowner contacts to inquire about possible contract renewals. Any renewal should be based on the habitat, to avoid the impression FWP is purchasing the access/hunting rights for additional years. The focus should be on shelterbelts and grazing systems to extend the contract another 15 years.
2. Utilize all funding opportunities in an effort to make the contract renewal more appealing and beneficial to landowners.

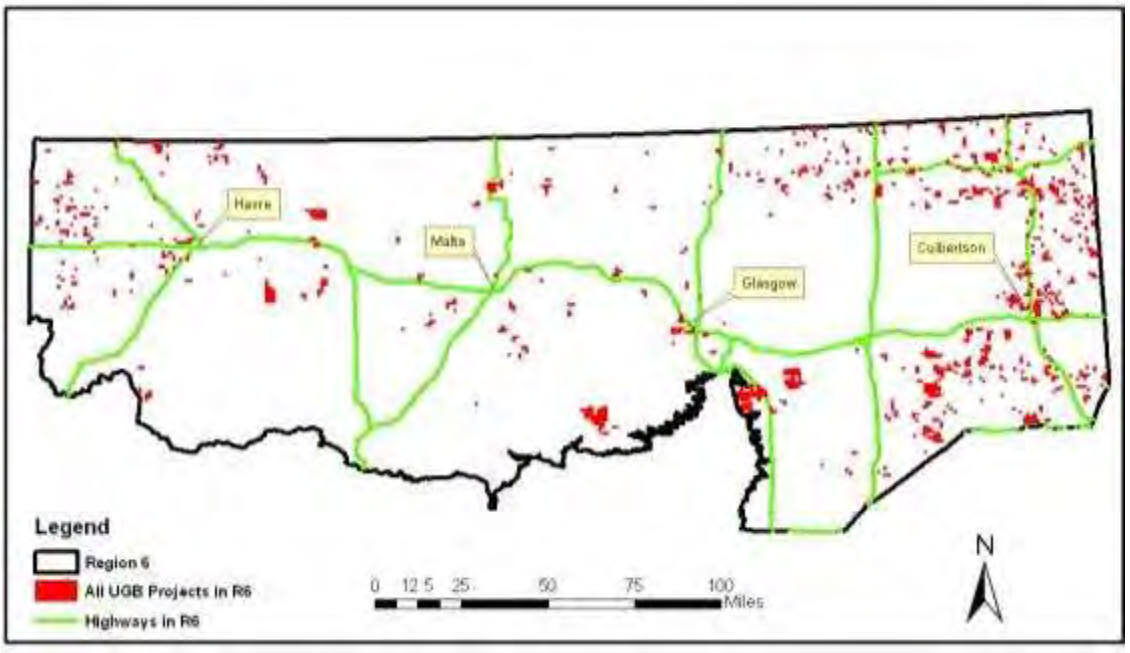


Figure 14. Locations of all existing Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Projects, expired and current, Region 6.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

1. **Habitat Enhancement Opportunities**
   Enhancing upland game bird habitat has been and will continue to be the basis for improving upland game bird populations and ensuring the long-term viability of upland game bird populations in Region 6.

   a) Shelterbelt and woody cover establishment to improve over-winter survival of upland game birds. Designed to provide thermal cover, security cover, and some food sources typically in the form of berry producing shrubs. Primarily benefits ring-necked pheasant, gray partridge, and sharp-tailed grouse.
   b) Nesting cover establishment to improve annual upland game bird production. Typically involves federal programs such as CRP, CSP, and grassland easements. Primarily benefits ring-necked pheasant, gray partridge, sharp-tailed grouse, and Merriam's turkey.

c) Nesting cover rejuvenation to improve the quality of existing nesting cover stands that have lost plant and structural diversity important to nesting and brood rearing.
d) Food plots to improve over-winter survival of upland game birds. Requires strategic placement and/or a seed plant of sufficient height to avoid being completely covered with snow. Preferable to emergency supplemental feeding during winter. Primarily benefits ring-necked pheasant, gray partridge, and Merriam's turkey.
e) Grazing systems to establish rotational grazing (typically rest-rotation) that provides ungrazed nesting and brood rearing cover, maintains or improves woody cover, and improves overall range condition. Secondarily, maintains native and/or non-native grass stands and reduces likelihood of conversion to cropland. Primarily benefits sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse.
f) Wetland enhancement/restoration to establish wetland habitat and associated vegetation that provides thermal winter cover (cattails), security cover, some food sources and nesting cover. Primarily benefits ring-necked pheasant.
g) Sagebrush leases to protect sagebrush, providing year-round sage-grouse habitat.

2. Protecting Habitat Enhancements

a) Conservation easements represent the best opportunity to conserve upland game bird habitat and public hunting access in perpetuity, while maintaining agricultural values. Easements can involve a large initial investment, but the long-term benefits can be great as well.
b) Term contracts of 1-20 years to conserve habitat enhancements and ensure public hunting access for the term.

3. Partnerships

Partnerships can create opportunities for additional habitat work and improvement of hunter access while leveraging funds and other resources.

Although the following is a list of primary partners, all opportunities to partner will be considered.

a) FWP- other programs include Block Management, Migratory Bird Stamp, and Habitat Montana
b) NRCS/FSA programs: EQIP, WHIP, WRP, CSP, CRP, WREP, VPA-HIP, Sage-grouse Initiative, etc.- opportunities for upland game bird dollars to cost-share on the portions these programs do not cover. FWP involvement in these programs requires reasonable public access, whereas access is not required with only federal NRCS dollars. Great opportunities exist with CSP participants who are required to conduct specific improvements using funding other than federal NRCS dollars.
c) USFWS- Wetland and grassland easements, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, wetland restoration projects
d) Pheasants Forever- partnerships with local chapters to implement habitat projects
e) National Wild Turkey Federation-Northern Great Plains Riparian Restoration Initiative
f) Local government and county departments (e.g., the Sheridan Co. MOU), and other MOU possibilities
g) BLM

4. Turkey Transplants

Region 6 will look for opportunities to transplant wild turkeys from existing wild source populations to appropriate unoccupied habitat. Transplants will be completed as an effort to establish new populations in suitable habitat where public hunting can occur and in the rare case, supplement existing populations if it appears to be biologically justified.

5. Emergency Supplemental Feeding

In an effort to avoid near complete loss of pheasant populations at a county level, rather than an effort to over-winter a higher population than the habitat can support, Region 6 will continue pheasant feeding operations in accordance with ARM rule criteria when initiated by extreme winter

conditions and public desire to undertake feeding activities. This practice is restricted to Sheridan, Daniels, and Roosevelt counties (See Establishing UGBEP Projects for more information). The use of a newly designed emergency supplemental pheasant feeding plan will help to create an efficient and easy to implement feeding program.

Emergency Supplemental Pheasant Feeding Plan

1. Monitoring Routes and Survey Locations

   These routes will be used to aid field biologists and managers with the task of determining when the criteria for emergency feeding of pheasants have been met.

   - One monitoring route has been created in each of Daniels (Figure 15), Sheridan (Figure 16) and Roosevelt (Figure 17) counties. Each route consists of at least 10 defined survey locations. Routes and survey locations have been placed in areas meant to encompass a representative sample of pheasant winter cover within the county.
   - During early winter when conditions are mild, the routes and survey locations will be monitored to verify pheasants are actively wintering and feeding in the defined areas.
     a) If necessary, routes and/or survey locations may be added, removed, or modified to include areas being actively used by pheasants as winter cover.
   - The first major winter event (severe storm) accumulating at least 6 inches of snow with a consistent crusting layer will trigger active monitoring.
   - Once triggered, and the initial monitoring is completed, monitoring will re-occur when the winter conditions have clearly worsened due to snow accumulation or snow crusting or on a monthly basis; whichever comes first.
   - Emergency supplemental feeding of pheasants will be recommended when:
     1. At least 90% of survey locations show evidence of pheasants being unable to obtain food.
        a) Pheasants documented obtaining food naturally in areas along the monitoring route that are not "pre-defined" survey locations should be taken into account when recommending emergency feeding.
        b) Supplemental feeding will not be authorized during the upland game bird hunting season.

2. Implementation Strategy

   This strategy will be used to aid field biologists to efficiently implement the emergency feeding program within predefined focal areas.

   - Once feeding has been approved, a press release will be distributed. The press release should state emergency supplemental feeding of pheasants has been authorized and it should contain some pertinent details (why, where, when, how etc), dependent upon the implementation strategy chosen.
     a) Interested individuals will be able to contact the Upland Game Bird Habitat Biologist to receive necessary information.
   - Three options have been identified for emergency feeding implementation based on current ARM: 12.9.615 (1)" *the department may enter into agreements with individuals, organizations, or other agencies to provide supplemental feeding for upland birds during extreme weather events."*
     a) Use of volunteers
        1. Volunteers contact the Upland Game Bird Biologist
        2. Volunteers receive and sign the appropriate paperwork
        3. Volunteers are reimbursed for purchasing feed and for their mileage
     b) Enter into a contractual agreement with individuals, detailing feeding activities through a modified UGBEP Project contract
        1. Individuals contact the Upland Game Bird Biologist.
        2. Individuals sign a contract, similar to an UGBEP Project contract, with all cost details defined.
        3. The legal description of the "project area" (area open to public hunting) is defined on the contract.
           - ARM 12.9.615 (3) - "The department shall not enter into agreements for supplemental feeding on lands leased or closed for hunting, on shooting preserves, or during open pheasant season."
           - May be possible to publish in the following year's Access Guide as "hunting with permission"
        4. Individuals are reimbursed up to the contracted amount for necessary and approved expenses.

c) Enter into a contractual agreement with a local group, such as Pheasants Unlimited, detailing the feeding through a modified UBGEP Project contract.
    1. Group contacts the Upland Game Bird Biologist
    2. Group signs a contract, similar to an UGBEP Project contract, with all cost details defined.
    3. The legal description of the project area is defined on the contract.
        - ARM 12.9.615 (3) - "The department shall not enter into agreements for supplemental feeding on lands leased or closed for hunting, on shooting preserves, or during open pheasant season."
        - May be possible to publish in the following year's Access guide as "hunting with permission."
    4. Groups are reimbursed up to the contracted amount for necessary approved expenses.
- Feeding materials will be made available for volunteers to pick up at readily accessible locations.
- Emergency feeding activities supported with UGBEP funds will be allowed only within the mapped focal areas (Figure 18).
- Detailed notes and photographs during monitoring will be used to document the effect of winter severity on the ability of pheasants to locate food.

Figure 15. The Daniels County emergency pheasant feeding monitoring route and associated pre-defined survey locations.

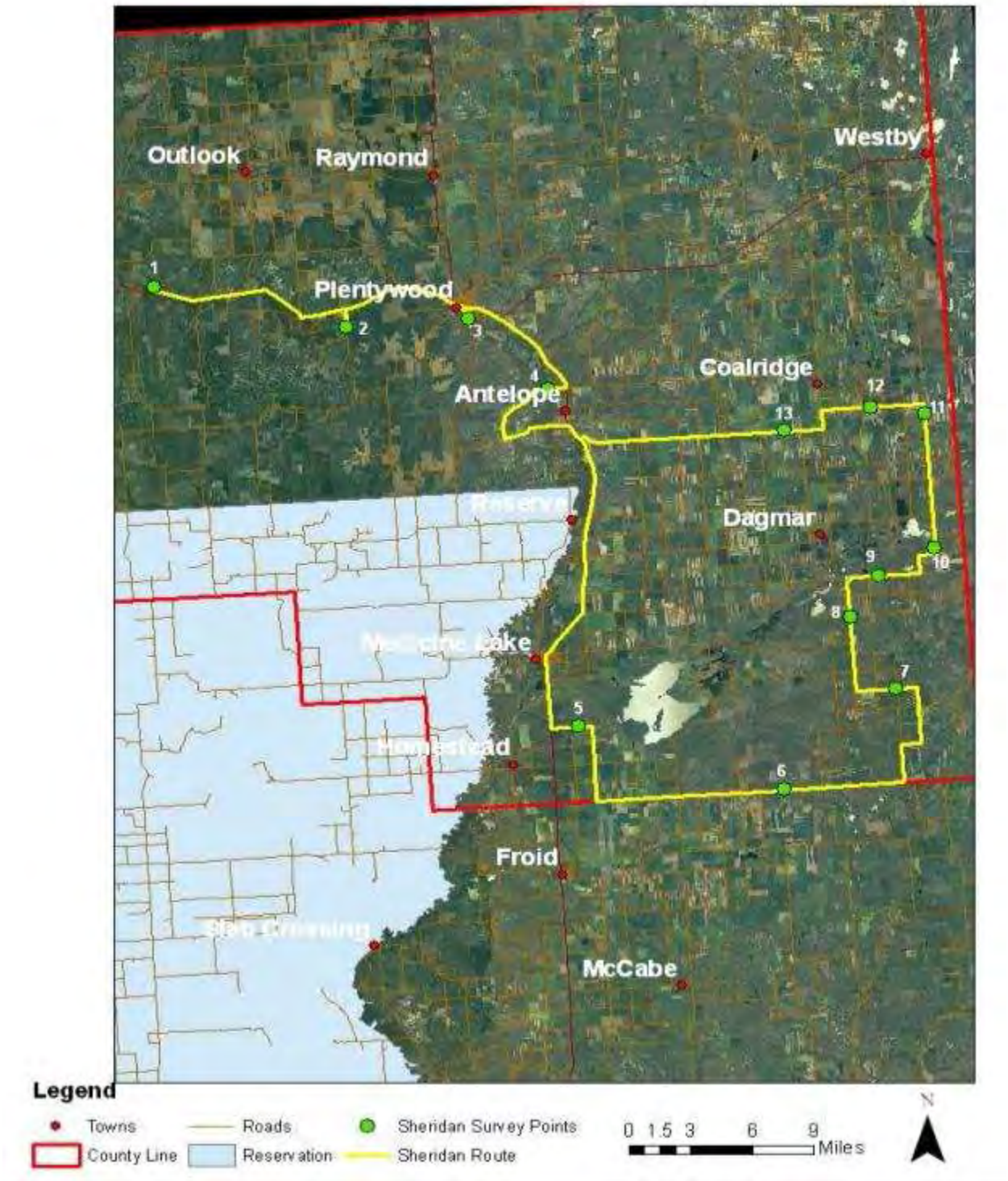


Figure 16. The Sheridan County emergency pheasant feeding monitoring route and associated pre-defined survey locations.

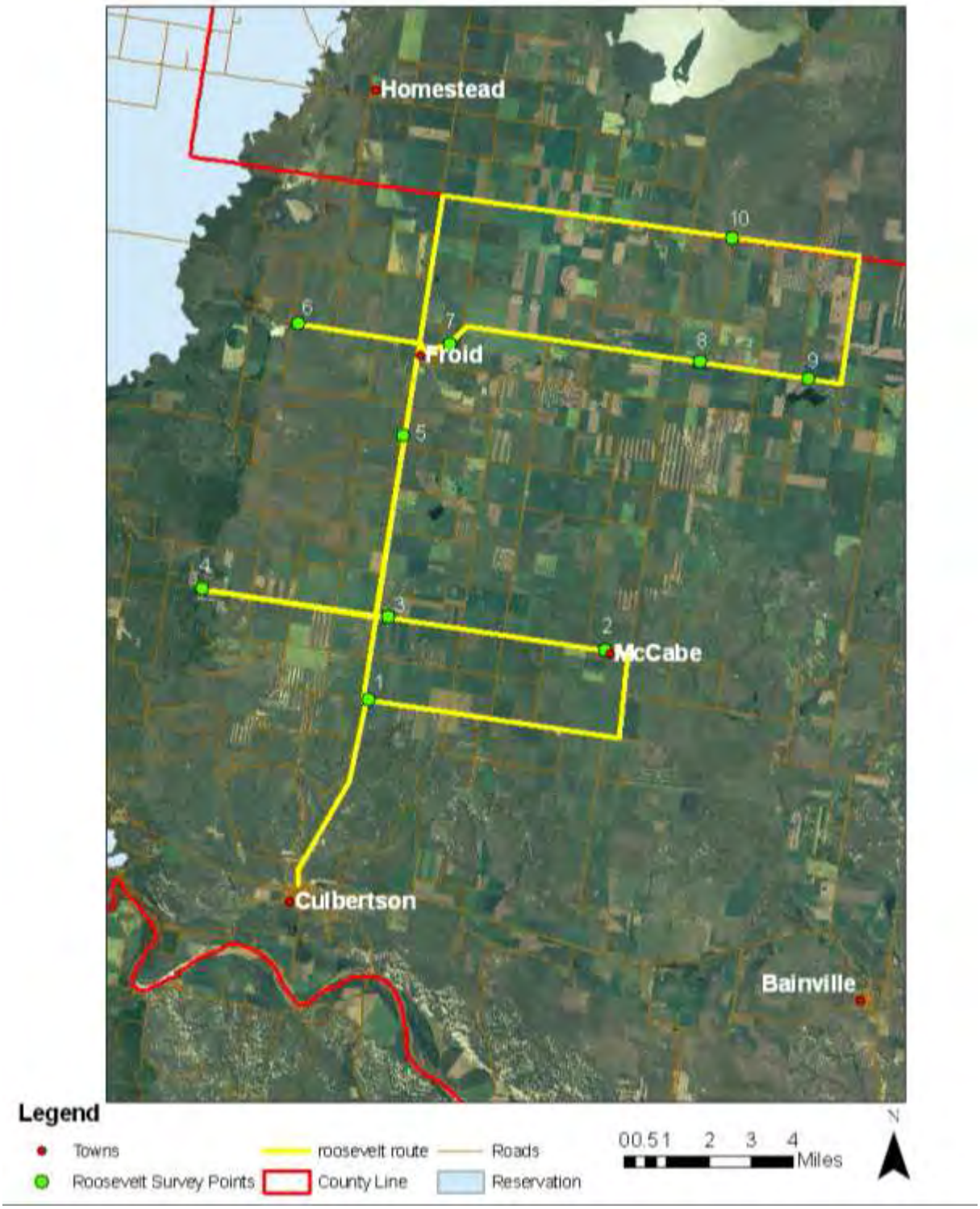


Figure 17. The Roosevelt County emergency pheasant feeding monitoring route and associated pre-defined survey locations.

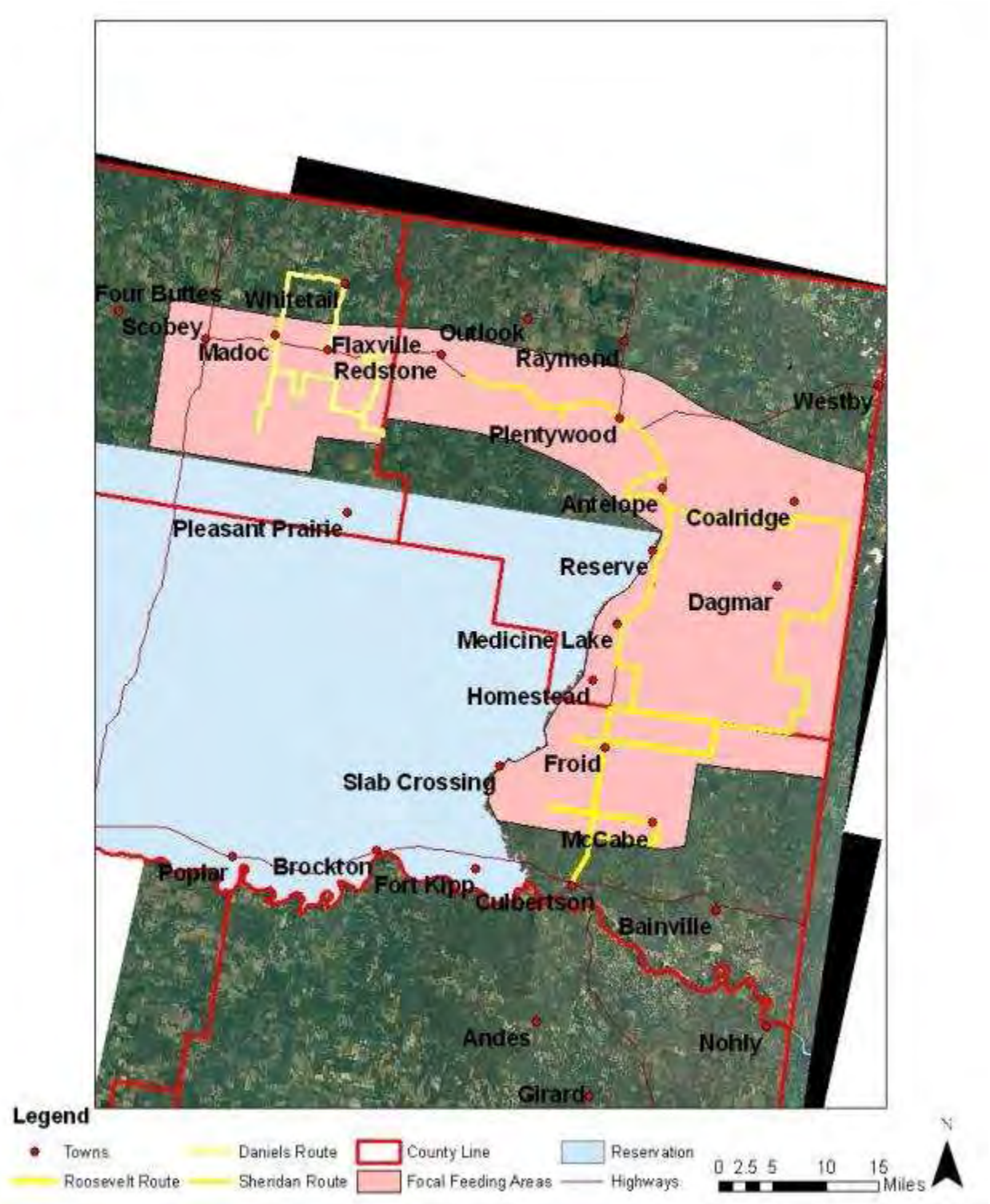


Figure 18. The pre-defined emergency pheasant feeding focus areas.

6. Ring-necked Pheasant Releasing

Releasing pen-reared ring-necked pheasants has been a large part of the upland game bird program in Region 6. Since 1987, approximately 158,000 pheasants have been released in Region 6, costing the program approximately $594,000. Additionally, landowners receiving pheasants to be released and therefore open to upland game bird hunting on an average of 87,000 acres annually between 2005-2009 (range= 70,000-127,000 acres). Some of those acres are open to free public hunting already through accessible public land or the Block Management Program.

The majority of annual pheasant releases in Montana have occurred in Sheridan and Daniels counties. An examination of pheasant harvest in release vs. non release counties does not support the notion that pheasant releasing increases pheasant harvest (Figure 19). There is no apparent relationship between number of pheasants released and number of pheasants harvested in the same year or subsequent years. Furthermore, pheasant harvest in non-release counties (Richland and Roosevelt) has surpassed release counties (Daniels and Sheridan) in most years.

Objective:

Region 6 will continue pheasant releasing as required by statute and ARM rule, recognizing political and social interest will continue to play a large role in demand for pheasant releasing. Furthermore, Region 6 recognizes the access gains and landowner relationships formed by releasing pheasants. However, Region 6 cannot ignore the lack of biological justification for releasing pheasants nor the apparent lack of a relationship of harvested pheasants in release counties relative to adjacent non-release counties.

Focus:

- Minimize public desire to release pen-reared pheasants by concentrating on improving pheasant habitat and educating the public on the pros and cons of releasing
- Focus on improving pheasant habitat on a broad scale as a means to improve and stabilize pheasant populations

- Utilize existing habitat evaluations and landowner relationships from past pheasant releases to identify and improve habitat components
- Inform and educate release applicants and pheasant raisers of the requirements of the pheasant release program

Tools:

- Pheasant Release Evaluations, Nesting Cover, Shelterbelts, Food Plots, Public Education
- Produce quality habitat projects in areas of past pheasant releases to serve as an example of improving pheasant numbers by improving habitat.

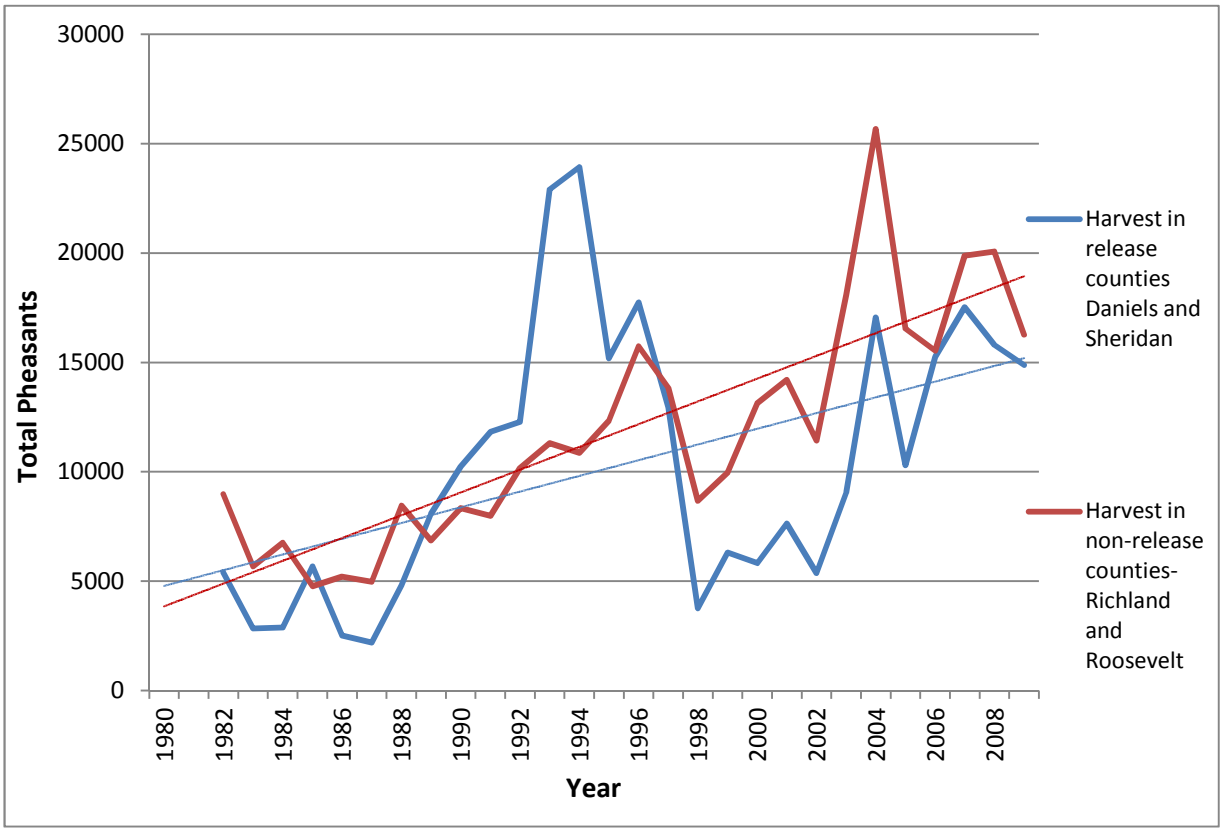


Figure 19. Ring-necked pheasant harvest estimates in release and non-release counties in NE Montana from 1980 to 2008.

NOTE: FWP harvest survey data are estimates with inherent variability and should be viewed as a trend, not exact point data. This is especially true for county estimates.

Region 7 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

1. **Upland Game Bird Populations**

Region 7 supports robust, huntable populations of sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, ring-necked pheasant, gray (Hungarian) partridge, and Merriam's turkey. Survey data indicate a general increase in upland game bird populations since the early 1990's. These survey data span a wide variety of environmental conditions, habitat changes, and weather patterns. The single most common factor across the range of years (1980-2010) is the advent of an expansive CRP program in the mid 1980's and the start of the UGBEP in 1987.

Sage-grouse: Sage-grouse were once widely distributed across eastern Montana, but conversion and fragmentation of sagebrush grassland habitat has constricted sage-grouse distribution.

Using spring lek survey data, FWP has delineated sage-grouse core complexes throughout their range in Montana. Two sage-grouse core complexes are located in Region 7. Large tracts of relatively undisturbed sagebrush habitats remain in the core areas, which contributes to the high density of sage-grouse found in these areas. In addition to the two core areas, vital sage-grouse habitat exists outside the core areas and provides connectivity for sage-grouse between core areas. Viable sage-grouse habitat exists across 60% of the approximately 30,000 square miles comprising Region 7. The primary mechanism for retaining and improving sage-grouse populations is maintaining, enhancing, and expanding sagebrush habitat.

Sharp-tailed Grouse: This native upland game bird is widely distributed across much of eastern Montana, including Region 7. Their wide range is primarily due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats, including native range, introduced, and native CRP. The increased availability of nesting cover through CRP and properly managed grazing lands benefits sharp-tailed grouse. The primary mechanisms for improving sharp-tailed grouse

populations include: improving nesting cover, maintaining existing deciduous shrub cover, and establishing new woody cover for winter use. Ring-necked Pheasant: Pheasants are closely associated with riparian/river bottom habitats and mixed agriculture (cropland, CRP, pasture). The majority of pheasant habitat in Region 7 is along the Yellowstone River and in Richland, Dawson, McCone, Wibaux, and Fallon counties. The most productive habitats comprise a combination of sufficient winter food sources associated with winter cover (woody vegetation or cattails) and ample residual nesting cover.

Gray Partridge: Gray partridge are widely distributed across Region 7, due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats. Gray partridge are found in habitats ranging from sagebrush grasslands to agriculture areas. Populations can show extreme annual variation from year to year due to their highly productive potential during favorable weather patterns and susceptibility to high winter mortality

Merriam's Turkey: Turkeys are widely distributed across Region 7. They are found from ponderosa pine dominated forest habitats in the southern portions of the Region to plains cottonwood and green ash dominated riparian areas, characterized by the Yellowstone River and other major drainages, to breaks habitats along the Missouri River. Maintenance of mature gallery forests, whether evergreen or deciduous, is critical for the continued existence of turkeys in southeastern Montana. The availability of winter food sources is also crucial for overwinter survival of turkeys. Bi-products of winter livestock feeding operations such as small grains, grain hay, or corn generally provide turkeys with adequate winter food. The reliance of turkeys on these winter food sources can result in agricultural damage issues.

2. Public Hunting Opportunities

Free Public Hunting Access: Access is generally good in Region 7 for upland game bird hunting. Public land hunting opportunities exist across much of the center of the Region via BLM land, as well as State land scattered

throughout the Region. Additionally, approximately 2.16 million acres of private land are enrolled in the Block Management Program. Additional private land open to free public hunting is available through FWP conservation easements, UGBEP agreements, and Migratory Bird Stamp agreements as well as private lands currently not associated with any FWP programs.

Economics of Upland Game Bird Hunting: Each year money spent by thousands of upland game bird hunters stimulates local economies across central and eastern Montana. These economic benefits are vital to all, but are particularly important to small rural communities. Habitat improvements in these areas can improve conditions for upland game birds, thus creating more hunter opportunity as well as securing free public access. Recognition of the benefits from participation in UGBEP may spur increased community involvement and increased promotion of the program through local businesses, landowners, and partnering agencies.

Program Delivery

The key to effective delivery of the upland game bird program is having local field personnel working directly with landowners and partners. Region 7 has an upland game bird program biologist stationed in Miles City, as well as five area biologists located in Miles City, Forsyth, Glendive, and Broadus and a Miles City based non-game biologist. Informational pamphlets are being put together as a tool for distribution to landowners interested in program opportunities. The pamphlets will outline the role the UGBEP can play in concert with NRCS programs, as well as with other agencies. Other communication tools and means to disseminate information include: the FWP website, radio and press releases, through partnering agencies, and most importantly, through landowner references. A temporary information sheet on the UGBEP has been compiled for current use and dissemination.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

1. **Habitat enhancement activities**
   a) Shelterbelt and woody cover establishment to improve over-winter survival of upland game birds. Designed to provide thermal cover, security cover, and some food sources typically in the form of buds for sharp-tailed grouse and berry producing shrubs.
   b) Nesting cover establishment to improve upland game bird production. Typically involves federal programs such as CRP, CSP, and grassland easements.
   c) Nesting cover rejuvenation to improve the quality of existing stands of planted grass that have lost plant and structural diversity, important for nesting and rearing broods.
   d) Food plot development to improve upland game bird over-winter survival. Requires strategic placement to avoid being completely covered with snow.
   e) Grazing systems to provide idle nesting and brood rearing cover, maintain or improve woody cover, and improve overall range condition. Secondarily, maintains native and/or non-native grass stands and reduces likelihood of conversion to cropland.
   f) Wetland enhancement/restoration to establish wetland habitat and associated vegetation, providing thermal winter cover (cattails), security cover, some food sources, and nesting cover.
   g) Sagebrush lease to prevent loss or conversion of sagebrush grasslands, providing year-round sage-grouse habitat.

2. **Protecting Habitat Enhancements:**
   a) Conservation easements provide a means for conserving high quality upland game bird habitats (as well as other wildlife habitat) and maintaining public hunting access perpetually, while also maintaining agricultural values. Easements can involve a large initial investment, but the long-term benefits can be great as well.
   b) Term contracts of 1-20 years conserve habitat enhancements and ensure public hunting access for the term.

3. **Partnering Programs, Agencies, and Organizations:**
   Partnerships can create opportunities for additional habitat work and improvement of hunter access while leveraging funds and other resources. Region 7 will continue to market the program with other organizations while maintaining and improving partner relationships.

Focus Areas and Implementation

The following are Region 7 priority areas for upland game bird habitat work. Although these areas will receive greater consideration, valid projects benefiting upland game birds in other portions of the Region will still be considered.

Sage-grouse Core Areas

Background:

Designated core areas contain a large portion of the sage-grouse population and are deemed vitally important to their long term conservation, sustainability, and management. Two of these core areas are located in Region 7. The majority of Sagebrush Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) leases were completed in the core areas in Region 7. These 30-year leases protect the sagebrush from being plowed, burned, or otherwise manipulated.

Goal:

Work on cooperative sagebrush habitat protection, enhancement, and restoration programs that maintain, improve, and/or expand sage-grouse habitat.

Approach:

1. Maintain or improve sagebrush habitat through sagebrush leases or grazing systems.
2. Continue working with Sagebrush LIP landowners to conserve or improve sagebrush habitat.
3. Work with partners to improve and protect sage-grouse habitat through grazing management and other habitat restoration techniques.

Grasslands and Sagebrush Grasslands

Background:

Region 7 is primarily noted for native prairie grouse populations. The large tracts of relatively undisturbed native grasslands and sagebrush grasslands are the main reason large, sustainable populations of native grouse species exist in the Region.

Goal:

Develop and maintain grazing management projects to improve and/or maintain productive nesting and brood rearing cover. Enhance or provide critical winter habitat.

Approach:

1. Work with landowners and partner agencies to develop grazing systems acceptable to the landowner that improve nesting cover and winter habitat for upland birds.
2. In areas where winter cover is a limiting factor, develop shelterbelts with species providing effective cover as well as berries or edible buds (sharp-tailed grouse).

Richland, Dawson, Wibaux, Fallon, and Prairie Counties

Background:

These counties encompass the most ideal pheasant habitat in Region 7. Primary factors limiting pheasant populations are old nesting cover/CRP stands that lack productivity and food sources. Secondary limiting factor is lack of suitable winter habitat important in carrying over pheasants.

Goal:

Maintain productive nesting cover while also providing critical winter habitat and expanded hunting opportunities. Where appropriate, improve winter food source availability.

Approach:

1. Identify areas with productive CRP plantings and market add-on rental payments as incentive for re-enrollment.

2. Identify potential sites for critical winter cover plantings such as abandoned homesteads, old shelterbelts, or idle ground, and work with landowners to determine interest and negotiate projects.

Habitat Enhancement Project Renewal

Background:

Montana FWP has invested significant funding in projects such as grazing systems, shelterbelts, and nesting cover. Many contracts are at the end of their term and upland bird habitat quality is at a high level. Region 7 will work with landowners to renew contracts to maintain habitat for another contract term. Any renewal should be based on the habitat quality and potential, so as not to give the impression that FWP is simply purchasing the access/hunting rights for additional years.

Goal:

Maintain productive upland bird habitats and expanded hunting opportunity.

Approach:

Contact landowners with expired or soon to expire contracts to negotiate more habitat enhancement projects.

Turkey Transplants

Background:

Turkeys are widely distributed across Region 7 and have been the primary source of turkeys for transplants across the state.

Goal:

Encourage maintenance of productive turkey habitat while expanding existing hunting opportunities. Continue to transplant turkeys from Region 7 to other areas in the state as needed.

Approach:

Capture and transplant turkeys, focusing on areas where populations are causing game damage, and moving them to areas across the state with suitable vacant habitat.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Overview

Successful delivery of the UGBEP requires close coordination between regional staff, landowners, and program administrators to ensure goals and objectives of the program are met, as well as landowner needs. This includes development of projects, including budgets and contracts; communication between landowners and FWP, communication between field staff and program administration staff, and successful implementation of approved projects.

Establishing UGBEP Projects

UGBEP projects are established through a proposal – contract – implementation – maintenance process. Once project goals and objectives are identified, program implementation over the course of the contract term is distinguished 2 ways. Steps leading up to and including implementation define the project. After project installation, habitat manipulations and other activities conducted to ensure project success are defined as habitat maintenance activities (See Terms and Definition section for definitions of "project" and "maintenance"). This section focuses on strategies related to developing effective projects efficiently. Developing projects within the Upland Game Bird Release Program, including Pheasant Release, Turkey Transplant, and Supplemental Feeding, with their unique characteristics dealt with separately in this section.

All Project Types

Objective: Establish UGBEP projects in a manner that is efficient, effective, and consistent with program rules and statute.

Strategy: Refine and keep the program field manual up-to-date with current rules, laws, and program guidelines.

Strategy: Establish and maintain an up-to-date standard cost list for commonly purchased items and services, to be used for developing project proposals and determining standard payments. This would be developed by

the program coordinator using NRCS standard costs and other sources of information.

Strategy: Streamline project proposal and review processes.

Strategy: Complete a programmatic environmental assessment (EA) to provide MEPA compliance for commonly funded projects. This would reduce paperwork redundancy for field staff involving projects that do not require additional environmental analysis.

Objective: UGBEP projects will be developed between cooperators/landowners and FWP staff in a manner that fulfills priority needs in strategic areas.

Strategy: Placement of UGBEP projects should be a culmination of opportunity (i.e., a willing landowner) and strategy.

Strategy: Identify areas to focus program resources to assure a basic level of strategic placement. The following considerations should be given to identifying prospective focus areas:

- Priorities for area-specific, locally important species of game birds with a high potential to benefit from UGBEP projects
- Opportunities for partnerships with government and non-government organizations
- Areas with strong community support
- Areas with limiting habitat components with substantial potential for program delivery
- Economic benefits to local communities
- Opportunities to maximize hunter-days of recreation

Strategy: Projects placed within a focus area should complement each other to increase cumulative benefits. That is, individual projects benefit from a cumulative effect of a collection of projects. This makes sense biologically and also from a hunting destination standpoint.

Strategy: Ensure projects are evaluated in the context of the broader landscape.

An evaluation of a project's merit needs to consider not only how it functions on the landowner's property but how it fits into the broader landscape. Evaluations need to be biologically based, considering the project's function both in the immediate surroundings and within the broader landscape, as fitting with bird movements and habitat extents. This concept is coined "project area of influence." As an example, an effective winter cover planting for pheasants may benefit birds populating an area much larger than the cooperator's land. Similarly, a cooperator's land may lack a food source, but surrounding properties may make up for the absence. In this case, emphasizing winter or nesting cover may be a more sound approach.

> Strategy: The evaluation also needs to consider the landowner's short and long range plans. Maintaining project integrity is affected in large part by how the project site and its surroundings are managed. Knowing the landowner's goals and plans for his or her property is essential to determining the merits of a particular project.
>
> Strategy: Greater consideration should be given to landowners enrolled in access programs and in areas where there are adjacent accessible private and public lands.
>
> Strategy: Modify project application form(s) to more effectively address strategies under this objective.

As defined by ARM 12.9.702(1)(b), projects - to include habitat site and public access area – must be located within a suitably sized area, normally a minimum of 100 contiguous acres. However, opportunities for substantial habitat improvements and access opportunities may be lost on lands less than 100 acres.

> Strategy: Projects may be considered on private lands less than 100 contiguous acres if more than 100 contiguous acres of public access is adjacent and guaranteed.

Ring-necked Pheasant Releases

A component of the UGBEP is the pheasant release program. The intent of the pheasant release program is to establish and enhance pheasant populations in habitats where they are lacking or at reduced numbers (see Terms and Definitions

for statutory language related to release of upland game birds). Pheasant releases are not intended to be "put and take." The basic approach of the UGBEP for pheasant releases is to pay landowners for releasing healthy 10-week old pheasants between August 1 and September 15 into habitat that has been evaluated by a biologist to determine suitability and pheasant capacity (12.9.602, ARM).

Objective: Establish pheasant release projects that will provide the greatest public benefit.

> Strategy: When determining priorities for pheasant releases, consider habitat quality at the release site and in the project access area, hunting accessibility, size of area open to hunting, and overall benefit to hunters.

Objective: Release healthy pheasants—enhancing survival and minimizing risk of disease .

> Strategy: Continue to monitor releases, including condition of released birds.
>
> Strategy: Work with Department of Livestock and other appropriate entities to develop facility standards for commercial pheasant raising operations that provide birds for the UGBEP. Continue to require minimum health standards and work with commercial raisers to rectify observed problems.

Objective: Conduct pheasant releases in a manner that is efficient, functional for pheasant raisers, and minimizes use of staff resources.

> Strategy: Current rules call for a random drawing when suitable pheasant release applications exceed available funding (12.9.602(1), ARM). Replace current ARM to allow reduction in pheasant release numbers across all suitable applications—keeping expenditures in balance with funding while retaining acres open to hunting.
>
> Strategy: Develop minimal requirements for reimbursing landowners for released pheasants. Landowners who raise their own pheasants for releasing will be reimbursed according to established rules. [Note: To characterize this further, after consideration of other purchasing methods, including a bidding process, the UGBEP Council concluded the current method provides the most suitable approach.]

Strategy: Continue to use current rules pertaining to timing of release, age, and sex ratios of released pheasants.

Strategy: Develop up to 3-year pheasant release contracts as an optional alternative to annual contracts.

Strategy: Establish a new timeline for applications better fitting with commercial raiser's schedules and achievable by FWP staff. Adjust ARM as needed.

Supplemental Feeding of Ring-necked Pheasant

Emergency supplemental pheasant feeding is intended to enhance winter survival and body condition during extreme weather conditions in advance of spring breeding/nesting activities. These emergency activities, such as placing barley bales or setting up enclosed feeders, are not considered habitat enhancements, but instead supplemental feeding. There are potential drawbacks of supplemental feeding including artificially crowding birds, making them more vulnerable to disease, stress, and predation. This practice is reserved for a small portion of Montana when exceptional conditions occur possibly resulting in a total loss of pheasants on a county-wide scale.

Emergency supplemental pheasant feeding is confined to Daniels, Sheridan, and Roosevelt counties. These counties are most susceptible to periodic, extreme, and prolonged deep-snow conditions. Arctic air masses commonly enter Montana over this part of the state, with the greatest prolonged extremes occurring over the three-county area.

Objective: Conduct supplemental feeding in a manner that is measured and fitting with actual habitat conditions.

Strategy: Modify current rules to be more clear regarding effective winter cover.

Specifically, in 12.9.615(2), ARM, remove items a, b, c, d, and e because they specify some types of winter cover that are likely ineffective and emphasize the lack of grazing, which may have nothing to do with winter cover effectiveness. What will

remain of section 2 follows: "Supplemental feeding will be done only within areas 1/4 mile or closer to effective winter cover."

Strategy: Use a standard approach for monitoring winter habitat conditions (See Region 6 strategy).

Strategy: Specify an annual allocation of funding set aside for supplemental feeding, if needed (see Funding Allocation).

Objective: Minimize reliance on supplemental feeding.

Strategy: Where supplemental feeding is most likely to occur, substitute with annual food plots in association with effective winter cover.

Wild Turkey Transplants

Turkeys are not native to Montana. Established populations are the result of trapping wild Merriam's turkeys in areas of abundance and releasing them in suitable habitats. FWP has been conducting these projects according to program rules (12.9.611, ARM). Most suitable vacant habitats are now occupied with wild turkeys.

Objective: Establish turkey transplant projects based on biological factors and the potential for hunting opportunity.

Strategy: Utilize a formal review process for each proposed turkey release site evaluating year-round habitat suitability and extent and potential for public hunting if a viable population is established. Supplemental releases or augmentations may be needed in order to establish a viable population.

UGBEP Habitat Project Maintenance

Once habitat enhancement projects are completed – usually within the first year of the contract term – habitat maintenance becomes the primary focus for UGBEP implementation. Consequently, "project" and "maintenance" are 2 distinct components of program delivery (see Terms and Definition section). In addition to

assuring project success and functionality, maintenance activities also foster a sense of ownership among partners and promote ongoing monitoring of projects.

Objective: Maintenance activities are regularly scheduled as routine management activities to ensure the habitat project reaches its full potential.

Strategy: The following activities are considered habitat maintenance activities when the definition terms are met during the life of a contract.

- Weed control – conducted after project is installed, includes mechanical or chemical treatments
- Tree and shrub replacement – conducted after shelterbelt is installed
- Cover crop rotation – after initial site prep/infrastructure installation (e.g., irrigation set up). As an example, a crop and herbaceous cover rotation for maintaining high quality habitat could include nesting/brood cover followed by a series of cropping years and back into nesting cover. A rotation cycle may span 15 years or more and would serve the purpose of providing food and productive early seral cover, particularly important to broods.
- Brood strip maintenance – after initial construction with water delivery, etc., this maintenance would involve annual site preparation and water management.
- Equipment maintenance
- Infrastructure maintenance (e.g., annual maintenance of irrigation ditches, fences)

Strategy: Maintenance activity types, dates of implementation, duration, and partners responsible for maintenance activities are identified in the UGBEP contract, work plans, agreements, or MOU.

Payments, Reimbursements, and Cost Share

The intent of the UGBEP is delivery of projects in an efficient, cost-effective, and accountable manner, which recognizes contributions of landowners and cooperators.

The FWP area field biologist serves a key role in establishing a project contract, which includes confirming project costs and negotiating or seeking additional contributions toward the project. This section provides an alternate approach to estimate costs, clarifies forms of cost share, and includes steps FWP should take to provide more flexibility when negotiating contracts and landowner contributions.

Estimating Costs and Payments

Objective: UGBEP projects will be cost-effective and will leverage available funds through cost-share, in-kind services, donations, and other funding mechanisms.

> Strategy: Include in the program field manual an up-to-date cost list for standard project components.
>
> Strategy: Incorporate flexibility into project proposals to accommodate variation in costs for different parts of the state.

Estimating costs for projects can be time consuming and repetitious. The program field manual will include an up-to-date cost list which will improve efficiency for field biologists. For some practices, the cost share list could also provide an alternative means for setting up a payment structure. Following the payment system currently used by NRCS, certain common practices would have a standard cost that can simply be quoted to the landowner as a payment level, based on a standard metric such as linear feet or acres accomplished. The established cost figure may already include a percentage cost share to be contributed by the landowner, as appropriate. Based on experience and endorsement by NRCS employees, this could improve efficiency and would make *program* contributions toward a project more clear to landowners, improving communication. Regardless of payment approach, assembling receipts and making payments based on documented work completed remains an essential part of the program.

Cost Share

As currently structured under administrative rules, habitat enhancement projects require a minimum of 25% cost share (12.9.705, ARM) either from non-program

funding or in-kind services. As well, 50% funding contribution is required for wells, pipelines, and roads (87-1-248(2), MCA), typically associated with grazing systems.

Most projects do not involve payments to the landowner other than reimbursement—with the expectation the landowner will in turn open their property to public hunting access. The required combination of mandatory cost share and public access may be an impediment to getting more projects completed. A fixed cost-share should not be required in all circumstances. In particular, work on public lands should not have a cost share requirement.

Objective: Utilize cost share on projects to the maximum extent practicable, consistent with benefits gained.

> Strategy: Retain the statutory requirement of 50% cost share for improvements needed to implement grazing management, consistent with current statute.
>
> Strategy: Fully recognize in-kind contributions (e.g., donated labor, equipment time), which are legitimate forms of cost share, often exceeding program cost share requirements. Land taken out of production is also a legitimate in-kind contribution.
>
> Strategy: Develop additional no or low cost share criteria to encourage landowner participation while assuring consistency across projects. At a minimum, contract length, level of public accessibility, project quality, landowner benefit, and outside funding sources should be included in these criteria.
>
> Strategy: Projects with greater landowner participation should receive greater consideration for funding.

Leveraging Resources

The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program is not the only source of support for enhancing upland game bird habitats or that values hunting and the associated economic benefits. In addition to stretching dollars and staff resources, these

partnerships gain recognition and support for the UGBEP. Partner projects do add a level of complexity because of additional expectations, protocols, staff involvement, and often formalized working agreements.

Objective: Leverage UGBEP funds with other complimentary programs.

> Strategy: Seek opportunities to leverage UGBEP dollars used for both program administration and habitat enhancement.
>
> Strategy: The USDA Farm Bill conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), provide substantial resources to Montana's producers, including funding and staff support.
>
> Strategy: BLM and USFS have funding and staff resources in association with the extensive lands they administer in Montana. Although federal lands primarily comprise native habitats, BLM and others do also administer retired and even active farm land. For pheasants in particular, these areas provide excellent opportunities for emphasizing pheasant hunting.
>
> Strategy: Sporting clubs, national organizations and their local chapters, conservation districts, and local governments or chambers of commerce, among others, provide partnering opportunities. Funding, volunteer support, administrative support, and equipment are among the resources that can be leveraged with UGBEP funding.
>
> Strategy: Develop Memoranda of Understanding or similar agreements to clarify work arrangement and funding details. This is a responsibility of the program coordinator and appropriate regional staff.

Leveraging resources among different partners often requires establishing a formal agreement clarifying roles, responsibilities, contributions, project scope, and longevity, among other features. In addition to diverse work arrangements, federal land management agencies are unable to sign standard UGBEP contracts and require different agreement formats. Examples of other agreements include memoranda of understanding (MOU), memoranda of agreement, contribution

agreements, cooperative agreements, and others, depending on the partners and circumstances.

Strategy: Develop rules pertaining to MOUs and similar types of agreements.

Contracts

A contract may consist of any one or a combination of different project types. The contract summarizes work to be completed, a work schedule, location, term, and terms of hunting access. The contract further provides a breakdown of costs and identifies who is responsible for each expense. There is also a provision for ending the contract and language for liquidated damages resulting from early termination.

Objective: Ensure contracts are clear, enforceable, encourage compliance, are correctly administered, and are implemented in an effective and timely manner; recognizing contract requirements must be balanced with landowner willingness to enroll.

Strategy: Review contract template and modify as necessary to achieve objective.

Strategy: Record all contracts greater than one year in length and do not involve annual payments, as appropriate.

All habitat contracts longer than one year will be recorded at the county recorder's office with the deed of the property where the habitat site occurs, with one exception. For those projects where UGBEP expenses are *solely* in the form of annual payments, a sale of property would simply result in stopping payments. However, for those contracts involving upfront payments and a term exceeding 1 year, recording will alert potential buyers of the property that an active UGBEP project occurs on the property. In the past, this has resulted in the buyer contacting FWP to find out more information, providing an opportunity to work out a new arrangement, or to seek liquidated damages from the cooperator for the remaining term on the contract.

Strategy: Monitor contract compliance and enforce contract provisions.

Contracts are monitored for compliance with contract provisions according to the standard schedule (see Monitoring Compliance and Program Success). If it appears a project is out of compliance, the UGBEP coordinator and regional staff will work with the landowner to rectify the issue. In circumstances involving legal matters, the FWP legal unit will be consulted to determine appropriate measures to be taken.

One type of noncompliance occurs when the landowner sells or otherwise removes part of the Project Area or Habitat Site from public accessibility or benefit. Administrative rules require the area open to hunting, collectively referred to in this plan as the Project Area, be a minimum of 100 contiguous acres. Aside from grazing systems, if a Project Area were to be reduced to less than 100 contiguous acres, the contract is considered breached, and a prorated sum of FWP's costs will be required from the cooperator as damages. For grazing systems, sufficient land will need to be retained to maintain the grazing rotation.

For all habitat projects, any improvements purchased by the UGBEP and removed from the Project Area, either through redefining the geographic area open to hunting or through removal of materials, will constitute a breach of contract and will require reimbursement to the program as described in the contract.

> Strategy: Consider addition of an attorney fee provision to standard UGBEP contracts, which would allow the prevailing party to recoup legal costs from the non-prevailing party. In addition to offsetting losses, these contract language changes will encourage cooperators to fulfill their contract obligations. This provision may, however, appear overly burdensome or legalistic, scaring away legitimate program applicants.
>
> Strategy: For those situations involving a change of ownership or operator, payment of damages may be avoided if a new arrangement can be made with the new operator, involving a new contract.
>
> Strategy: Modify standard contract language to require liquidated damages that more accurately reflect losses, including FWP expenditures, and provide incentive for compliance.

Specifically, a significant breach of contract—such as transferring the project area in whole to a new owner—would require both 1) reimbursement based on UGBEP

expenses prorated over the remainder of the contract (i.e., number of years remaining in the contract period divided by the total contract life, multiplied by total UGBEP funds expended toward the project) combined with 2) a standard damage of 25% of UGBEP expenses toward the project. The 25% minimum realizes the added value mature projects have during the latter part of the agreement period and the amount of staff time and other resources (e.g., mileage, lodging, per diem, etc.) spent establishing the project.

Public Access

Each UGBEP project requires a "reasonable" level of public upland game bird hunting access during the upland game bird season. Regardless of project type, the landowner retains the right to control access. When a project is being developed, the field biologist and landowner define/negotiate three aspects related to upland game bird hunting access. First is the project access area encompassing the area open to public hunting. In general, the larger the area of habitat open to hunting access the better. Second is the amount of hunting, which is measured in hunter-days (i.e., a hunter spending any amount of time hunting on the property within 1 day equals 1 hunter-day). The appropriate number of hunter-days is based on quality and extent of habitat, capacity to hold game birds, cost of project, contract length, landowner concerns, and other factors unique to each project and site. Third, the landowner's preferences for granting hunting access. That is, how the landowner wishes to convey permission to hunters. This third item is the basis for what is published in the annual UGBEP Access Guide (See Outreach and Marketing – Hunters). An UGBEP project proposal with more liberal public hunting access is generally more competitive for receiving funding. All three of the access components are described in the project contract.

Objective: Secure effective public access on all UGBEP projects

> Strategy: Determine appropriate level of public access based on size of project, quality of habitat, hunting quality, and other relevant factors.

Strategy: Annually contact cooperators to confirm access provisions, including contact information, preferences for hunter contact, acres open for hunting, and reasonable access.

Strategy: Assist landowner with hunter management (e.g., through Hunter Access Enhancement Program) if requested to minimize impacts to landowner.

Strategy: Utilize access strategies that help assure "quality hunting."

Access strategies that help ensure quality hunting could include but are not limited to hunting allowed during certain days of the week, maximum number of parties per day or week, reservations, and limited space parking lots.

Strategy: Emphasize UGBEP projects on lands enrolled in Block Management.

Work on Private and Public Lands

Both private and public lands are eligible for UGBEP enrollment. An advantage of public lands is projects completed on public lands aren't generally subject to contract expiration, and therefore accessible public lands typically provide unlimited public access during the agreement period and beyond. However, current rules (12.9.703(3), ARM) emphasize expenditures on private lands over public lands.

Private lands make up a considerable amount of opportunity for working on productive upland game bird habitats. An advantage of completing projects on private lands is the expansion of accessible lands that may not otherwise be open to public hunting. With pheasant habitats in particular, the overwhelming majority of habitat is privately-owned. [Note: Council recommended ARM be revised to give private and public lands an equal footing, with an understanding there is not an expectation UGBEP funds are to be expended equally on private and public lands.]

Objective: Seek a balance of public and private lands on which to complete UGBEP projects.

Strategy: Work with public land managers to develop and implement habitat enhancement projects on priority public lands.

Formal agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding are often required to help facilitate habitat work on public lands (see Partnership Agreements for more information).

Notably, FWP and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation are working to renew an outdated MOU to facilitate UGBEP work on state School Trust lands. At a minimum, the MOU will help define how habitat projects are protected in case the lessee of a tract of DNRC land changes. The agreement will also define how land taken out of production for an UGBEP project might require compensation to the School Trust, depending on circumstances. Numerous projects have been completed in the past on DNRC lands and considerable interest exists to continue these types of projects.

Strategy: Develop a new MOU with DNRC by the end of June 2011.

Strategy: Work with private landowners and cooperators to develop and implement habitat enhancement projects on priority private lands.

FUNDING ALLOCATION

Program priorities are directly linked to funding allocation. UGBEP funds are allocated by statute and by FWP policy. Current statute requires at least 15% of funds collected for the UGBEP (87-1-246, MCA) to be set aside each fiscal year for expenditures related to upland game bird releases (87-1-247(2)(a)). And, of those set aside funds, at least 25% must be spent annually on upland game bird releases (87-1-247(2)(b)). Eliminated during the 2009 legislative session, statute also required a 15% cap on administration costs. Dropping the cap allowed for expanding staff dedicated to delivering the UGBEP.

Objective: Within the confines of statute, allocate UGBEP funding to balance program demands and delivery.

Strategy: Implement the following allocation as recommended by the UGBEP Council.

1) Allocate sufficient funds to support the program coordinator and 3 program field biologists who are dedicated to UGBEP delivery.
2) Cap the Upland Game Bird Release Program at 15% of annual program income. Of the 15%, set aside:
    a. 87% for pheasant releases
    b. 10% for emergency feeding
    c. 3% for upland game bird relocation projects (e.g., turkey transplants)
    d. Unspent funds are to be carried forward to the next fiscal year and may be shifted between the 3 categories (a-c above) within the Upland Game Bird Release Program.
3) Remaining 85% of program funds will be dedicated to habitat enhancement and conservation work.

STATUTE AND PROJECT DEFINITION

Montana statute limits "project" expenditures from the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. MCA 87-1-248(5)(a) states "Except when a greater amount, up to $200,000, is authorized by the commission, a project may not receive more than $100,000 in funds collected under 87-1-246."

Objective: Clarify (1) project and (2) maintenance definitions through ARM and implement accordingly and consistently.

> Strategy: Based on the definition of "project"(see Terms and Definitions section)—Project expenditures run with the land, not the landowner. $100,000 is a cap for a project. Any new projects established on the Project Area cannot exceed a cumulative value of $100,000 unless FWP commission approval is obtained.
>
> Strategy: Based on the definition of "habitat maintenance" (see Terms and Definitions section) – Habitat maintenance expenditures are not considered projects nor subject to the statutory project cap. Rather, maintenance activities include those activities necessary for the upkeep of a productive habitat component. Maintenance activities occur over periodic, cyclical intervals equal to or greater than one year.
>
> Strategy: The Council recognizes the need for ongoing funding for enhancing public lands and conservation easement lands, which provide quality perpetual public hunting access. These project areas need to rely on 1) diverse contributions and 2) consideration of ongoing public benefits when expenditure of UGBEP funds are considered into the future.

Objective: Clarify expenditures for maintenance activities, which as defined, are viewed separately from expenditures for projects

> Strategy: Costs associated with the maintenance activities also account for fuel, labor, chemicals, and material. Upfront costs for equipment leases/purchases are not considered "maintenance."

TRACKING PROJECTS

A basic program function is the ability to store project data, track expenditures and project status, and extract summary information, all via a well-designed database system. Over the past 20 years, the UGBEP has transitioned through 3 unique databases, which has itself created challenges for summarizing accomplishments of the program's history. The first two databases lacked certain data entry fields that occur in the current system, which was put into use in 2007. These new fields show up as blanks with no data for more than 900 contracts. As well, inconsistent data entry, particularly when payments were made, resulted in a near impossibility for accurately summarizing certain data types, such as landowner cost share or even actual project costs. The 2009 program legislative audit confirmed these deficiencies.

The new database has additional functionality helping assure proper tracking including the ability to make payments, web viewing by field staff, store project field monitoring results, and a comprehensive query page. Ultimately, the UGBEP coordinator is responsible for entering data into the system. Field staff can enter monitoring data through a web-based application.

Objective: Store UGBEP project data in a manner that is accurate, up-to-date, accessible, and convenient for tracking.

> Strategy: Utilizing data from paper files, enter historic information into the UGBEP database to reduce or eliminate key deficiencies, starting with active contracts and then recent to historic inactive contracts.
>
> Strategy: Enter UGBEP project data as it becomes available. Modify database to enable regional input.
>
> Strategy: Use paper files to ensure information for all active contracts is accurate. (See also Program Evaluation and Performance Measures).

OUTREACH AND MARKETING

Support for the UGBEP and participation, both by landowners and hunters—the two key constituents—requires effective outreach and marketing. Information about the UGBEP and related opportunities are currently conveyed to the public through FWP staff, the FWP website, news releases announcing relevant program opportunities, and through biennial reports to the legislature. Commercial pheasant raisers have also helped market the pheasant releasing program to private landowners.

In an effort to benefit hunters, all current UGBEP projects are posted with UGBEP signs and listed in an annually-published hunting access guide assisting hunters in finding projects and acquiring permission for access. Early in the UGBEP's history, there was no annually published list of projects. Over time and through a series of iterations, the program now has a guide with a tabular list of projects and fold out maps showing the approximate location of each habitat enhancement and pheasant release project. Each listing includes the type of project, the number of acres open to hunting, and instructions for acquiring permission to hunt. The information is also available online. A relevant concern is how much information the access guide and other sources might provide before cooperators are over run with hunters trying to contact them.

Objective: Provide sufficient information to hunters to allow reasonable opportunity to access projects that is in balance with the needs of landowners (see also Public Access).

> Strategy: Continue to annually design and print the UGBEP Access Guide. Work to develop improvements in quality of maps and location data to assist hunters with finding project locations.

An access guide is published each year that includes location information of projects and contact information of landowners that hunters can use to obtain access.

> Strategy: Continue to provide and expand the variety of options to landowners for effectively providing permission to hunt.

Strategy: Erect and maintain program signs for all active UGBEP projects.

Each UGBEP contract requires project signs be erected at conspicuous locations and key entry points around the project access area. A department employee or the landowner is responsible for erecting project signs. In addition to identifying the project, each sign has landowner contact information or, alternatively, the sign may state "walk in hunting with no further permission required." Habitat project signs were revised in 2008 to be more visible. In some areas, erected signs disappear, requiring periodic replacement.

Objective: Improve outreach and marketing to gain interest in and support for the UGBEP.

Strategy: Work with the FWP's communication specialists to develop and implement a communications strategy, utilizing the UGBEP Council's media recommendations.

Strategy: Work with partners to help market projects or focus areas as fitting with expanded opportunity.

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Project Monitoring

In general, project monitoring is the final responsibility of FWP for seeing a project through to the end of contract period. The first monitoring tasks, however, occur while the project is being installed or planted, which is necessary to confirm completion before payments are made to the cooperator. Once the project is completely delivered, monitoring serves two primary purposes. First, FWP monitors projects to determine if requirements of the agreement are being complied with or practiced. And second, FWP gains considerable information as to level of success by looking at installed components and anticipated versus actual responses in vegetation or other components.

Objective: Monitor projects to determine contract compliance and project success.

> Strategy: Visit projects at a defined frequency based on the type of project (Table 4).
>
> Strategy: Where needed, utilize contracted services to fulfill monitoring obligations.
>
> Strategy: Consider a variety of project components unique to project types and other available information when evaluating project success. The program currently utilizes a standard monitoring form with a variety of attributes for evaluating project success.

Monitoring has been conducted in the past both by field biologists and contract biologists. FWP will continue monitoring, making monitoring a part of the program biologists' responsibilities, with the particular benefit of learning "what works and what doesn't." In addition to this approach, FWP may continue to use contracted help to assure monitoring is completed as scheduled. Table 4 provides a summary of how frequently monitoring is scheduled for different types of UGBEP projects.

Recording wildlife observations and or signs of use are a part of the monitoring visit, but cannot be considered a comprehensive inventory or evaluation of wildlife use or wildlife benefits/response. [Note: The Council discussed the ability of FWP to

accurately measure wildlife responses to UGBEP enhancement projects and concluded there are issues of scale and too much annual variability in conditions including weather, insect abundance, predator abundance, land use changes, and others, to reasonably measure wildlife responses without a substantial and costly multi-year dedicated research project.]

Table 4. Monitoring schedule for contract compliance, UGBEP enhancement projects.

Project Type	Frequency of Monitoring	Monitoring Considerations
Nesting Cover	1st fall and every 3 years thereafter	Check project completion and subsequent checks for haying or grazing outside of contract compliance
Food Plot	Annually, prior to payment	Determine crop is established, provides a source of food, and remains unharvested
Shelterbelt	First year of planting and years 2, 5, 10, and 15	Check completion, maintenance activities and survival
Grazing System	During construction and every year thereafter	Check project completion, compliance with scheduled rotation
Leases	Annually or up to every 5 years, depending on project details	Sagebrush leases are monitored every 5 years to determine compliance with sagebrush protection. If annual payments, compliance checks precede payment.
Wetland Restoration	During construction and years 4, 7, 11, and 15	Check project completion, compliance with management prescription
Conservation Easements	Annually	Check compliance of easement terms

Project Evaluation/Research

Over the UGBEP's history, periodic concerns have been raised as to the effectiveness of different types of projects or their design. Occasionally, opportunities arise to evaluate and inform the effectiveness of enhancement strategies employed by the UGBEP.

Objective: Support upland game bird enhancement evaluations that will directly inform effective application of program enhancements, consistent with 87-1-247(d) MCA.

Strategy: Look for opportunities with universities and other partners, such as NRCS, USFS, BLM, and conservation organizations to evaluate enhancements of mutual concern and of direct application to the UGBEP.

Strategy: When evaluating projects located on public land, look to involve the public land manager in the evaluation.

Strategy: Be measured as to the use of program funds for conducting evaluations, leveraging funding when possible. Limit expenditures on evaluations to less than 2% of annual revenue.

Performance Measures

This section details how FWP will establish measurable work objectives and report program status and progress. Annual progress reporting is intended for the UGBEP Council, legislators, and interested organizations and citizens.

Objective: Establish measurable objectives compatible with current opportunities and program resources.

Strategy: Establish work plans for each UGBEP biologist detailing specific measurable objectives for the upcoming fiscal year.

Strategy: Program biologists, coordinator, and wildlife managers should communicate regularly to identify upcoming opportunities, funding needs, and expectations for incorporating into annual work plans.

Objective: Report program performance—contracts.

Strategy: Annually summarize and report on the following attributes:

- Number of new contracts (including renewals) during the past year, total acres, total cost, total anticipated hunter-days (habitat and pheasant release)

- Number of active contracts as of beginning of past hunting season, total acres open to hunting, total anticipated hunter-days (habitat and pheasant release)
- Number of expired contracts during the past year, including type and total acres open to hunting
- Spatial representation of new and active projects
- Supplemental feeding activities if any (description, including cost)
- Average number of active contracts compared over a long-term trend
- Total acres enrolled as of beginning of past hunting season (pheasant release and habitat)
- Cooperating partners (including any new MOU's)
- Other upland game bird (wild stock) releases/augmentations during the year

Objective: Report program performance—funding

Strategy: Annually summarize and report on the following attributes:

- Fund balance, obligated funds, unobligated funds—habitat side of program
- Fund balance, obligated funds, unobligated funds—upland game bird release side of program
- Types of administration costs for previous year and at some point, 5-year average
- Habitat projects monitored, including summary of compliance actions taken
- Summary of database activities (changes to structure or user functions, status of concerns, contract/database reviews and corrections)

Objective: Report program performance—outreach and marketing

Strategy: Annually summarize and report on the following attributes:

- Access guides printed and distributed
- Internet requests for Access Guide
- Summary of outreach activities (news releases, presentations, letters)
- Summary of comment card responses (total, percent positive, negative, neutral, general observations)

Objective: Report anticipated work

Strategy: As part of the annual report, include the following features:

- Summary of anticipated opportunities (large projects underway, upcoming farm bill activities, coordinated programs, among others).
- Anticipated program changes, MOU renewal, rulemaking, programmatic EA, among others

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

The following recommendations listed below may be considered at a later date:

- FWP should remove the requirement that shelterbelts cannot be located within 400 feet of occupied buildings or outbuildings used by livestock (87-1-248(5)(e), MCA).
- While recognizing social and economic values, it is the recommendation of this Council to gradually eliminate investment in pheasant releases and transfer those funds to habitat enhancement. Three members of the Council opposed this motion, which received majority support.
- Council recognizes the value of Russian olive as an effective source of food and woody cover outside riparian areas and subirrigated habitats. The Council further encourages FWP to conserve Russian olive on strategically located dryland sites for food and winter cover.
- The Council recognizes there is potential for expanding practices funded by the UGBEP. At a later date, the Council will explore options to address expanding needs for funding and program expenditure caps.

ACRONYMS USED IN THIS PLAN

BLM – US Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management

CRP – Conservation Reserve Program

DNRC – Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

EA – Environmental Assessment

FWP – Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

GIS – Geographic Information System

LIP – Landowner Incentive Program

MCA – Montana Code Annotated

MOU – Memorandum of Understanding

NRCS – United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources and Conservation Service

PU – Pheasants Unlimited

UGBEP – Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program

UGBRP – Upland Game Bird Release Program

USFS – United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service

VPA-HIP – Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program

WHIP – Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Administrative Costs – Expenses associated with record keeping, oversight, coordination, supervision, evaluation, and reporting. This also includes costs associated with program biologists.

Cooperator – The individual or entity who signs an UGBEP agreement and is responsible for agreement provisions.

Effective Winter Cover – Dense woody or herbaceous vegetative component on the landscape that provides upland game birds with thermal and protective cover in proximity to a nearby food source. During abnormally severe winter weather, this cover may be very limited in its availability.

Habitat Site – The area where actual habitat work will be accomplished, conserved, and maintained; defined and stipulated in the contract or agency agreement.

Limiting Factor – A habitat factor (e.g., food, nesting, security, and/or thermal cover) that limits the abundance or distribution of upland game bird populations.

Maintenance - A temporary activity (e.g., ground cover, disturbance, or application) necessary for the upkeep, repair, or enhancement of an existing or intended long-term habitat component as identified in the UGBEP contract. Maintenance shall not include the installation of newly identified fences or water structures unless it is determined these structures are necessary to adequately maintain the project. By definition, expenditures related to maintenance activities are separate from project costs and are not administered or capped under the project funding statute (87-1-248(5)(a-c)).

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) – One of a number of possible types of overarching agreements that allows for or streamlines completing multiple UGBEP projects. These may be developed between FWP and other agencies, organizations, or local governments. Work conducted through these types of agreements will be charged to specific UGBEP projects.

Program Focus Area – A prioritized and defined geographic area targeted for upland game bird enhancement activities; used to achieve or realize cumulative landscape-level benefits to upland game bird populations through strategic placement of multiple UGBEP projects. Prioritization based upon existing habitat conditions, upland game bird populations, and hunting opportunities.

Project – A specific activity on a particular project area over a specified period of time that intends to enhance or conserve upland game bird habitats or populations.

Project Access Area – The legally defined area open to some level of public hunting as defined in a contract.

Project Area – The acres identified in the contract including both the Habitat Site and Project Access Area. Several projects may occur on a single project area.

Project Area of Influence – The biologically defined area benefiting from the habitat project—based on surroundings (regardless of landownership), biology of targeted species, and habitat project type. Defined in the project proposal but not necessarily ensured by the project contract and potentially different from Project Access Area.

Project Types – Refers to the actual activities conducted to enhance upland game bird populations (e.g., shelterbelt, grazing system, food plot, nesting cover, upland game bird releases, etc.)

Public Land – Any lands managed by local, state, and federal governmental entities and available to free hunting.

Work Plan – An annual document that identifies specific work objectives for the upcoming 12 months.

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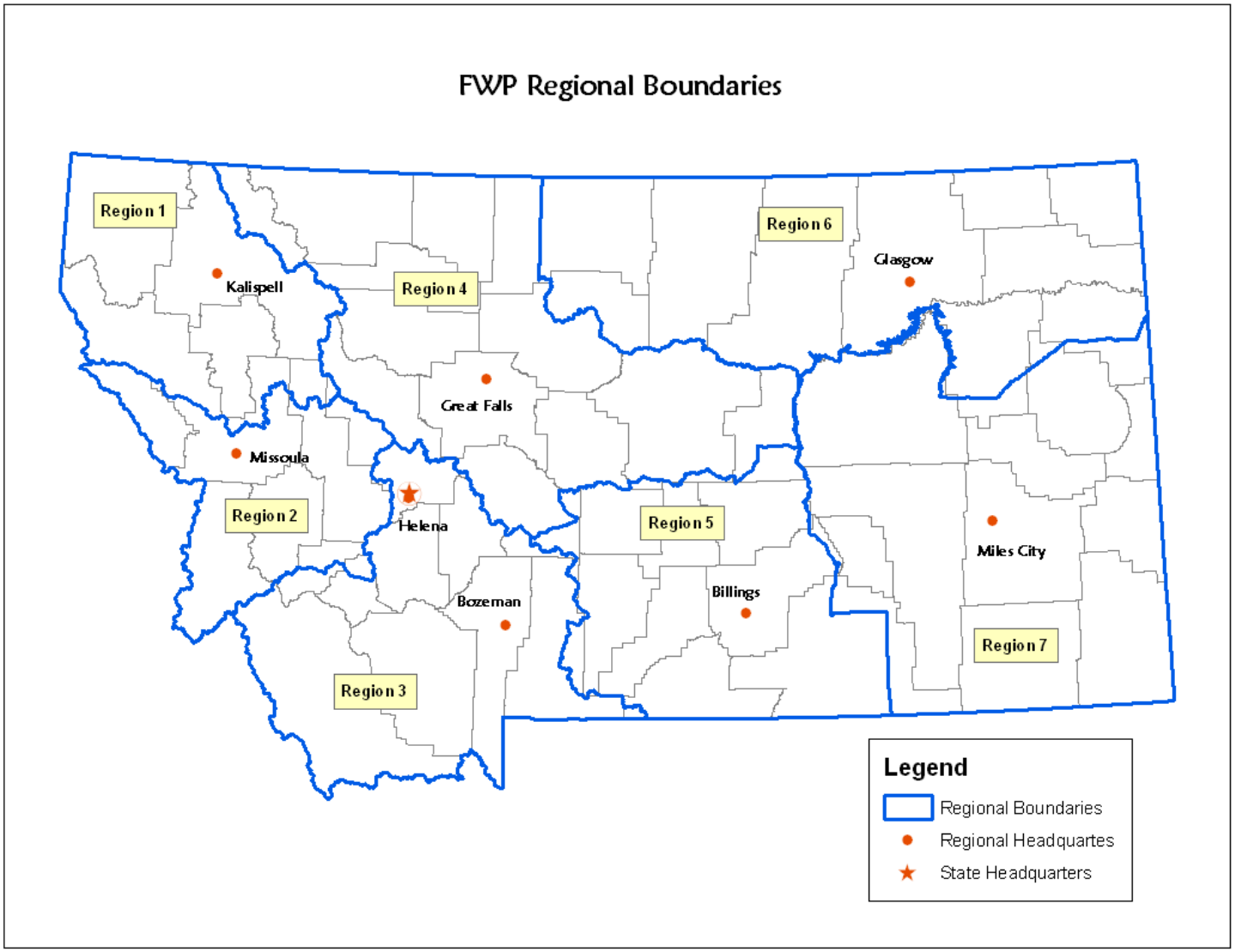

Figure 20. Map showing FWP Regional boundaries.

Electronic copies of the *Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Strategic Plan* may be downloaded at fwp.mt.gov. Search "UGBEP Strategic Plan."