

**TESTIMONY OF
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PHEASANTS FOREVER, INC.**

**BEFORE THE:
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

**REGARDING:
THE NEXT FARM BILL: CONSERVATION POLICY**

**FEBRUARY 28, 2017
LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC**

Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Fudge, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Dave Nomsen and I am the Vice-president of Governmental Affairs with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever based out of St. Paul, Minnesota. I am a wildlife biologist by education, served on the Wildlife Department faculty at South Dakota State University, and have since then worked on conservation policy and programs for non-profit wildlife conservation organizations, growing up in north-central Iowa and currently living in west-central Minnesota.

I am here today representing our 735 community based Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever chapters; and 142,000 members and volunteers that work every day to promote and implement conservation programs. Each year our chapters complete more than 30,000 individual projects with farmers, ranchers and forest owners. To complement the work of our dedicated volunteers, we have a team of 125 Farm Bill Biologists that work as natural resource professionals with expertise in fields such as wildlife biology, forestry, range management and precision agriculture. They work with landowners every day to find the best voluntary based, conservation solutions that fit producers' needs as part of their agriculture operations and personal goals.

Since 2003, these Farm Bill Biologists have worked on over 148,000 projects with landowners covering over 5.1 million acres. These projects involve the establishment of quality habitat that meet the life cycle needs of a wide variety of wildlife, not only pheasants and quail, but other species such as Golden-winged warbler in Pennsylvania, Lesser Prairie Chickens in the Southern Great Plains and the iconic Elk and Sage Grouse in the West, and enhancing habitat for pollinators, like honey bees and Monarch butterflies throughout the country. In addition to wildlife benefits, all Americans benefit from improved soil health and water quality improvements related to wildlife conservation projects.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about important conservation policies and program need as part of the next Farm Bill. My comments will focus on the program that is routinely referred to as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's most successful conservation program – The Conservation Reserve Program and I will briefly address other important priorities that we have for the next Farm Bill.

Conservation Reserve Program

Originally established in 1985, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Conservation Reserve program (CRP) enables farmers and landowners to voluntarily enroll environmentally sensitive croplands and grasslands and plant it to grasses, shrubs, and trees in return for 10 to 15 year contracts with annual rental payments. Originally designed for both soil erosion and commodity supply control, the original CRP proved a great boon for wildlife. In fact, CRP's wildlife benefits were instrumental in the programs reauthorization in 1996. That year, the CRP was reconfigured as a true resource conservation program benefitting soil, water, and wildlife resources while continuing to provide economic security to farmers and landowners, and supporting rural economies and communities. Other significant changes in 1996 strengthened CRP by allowing for mandatory funding and creating the CRP buffer initiative. Today's generations of sportsmen and sportswomen will view CRP's wildlife legacy as the "good old

days” just as previous generations thought of the “Soil Bank era” of the late 50’s and 60’s. No other private lands conservation program has benefitted hunters more than the successful CRP.

During the 20 year period from 1990-2010 CRP enrollment averaged approximately 32-33 million acres per year with an historical peak of 36.7 million acres in 2007. During this period hunters experienced strong levels of bird hunting across many states. Below is the lead paragraph from our 2007 forecast that turned out to be an accurate prediction of times to come.

Pheasants Forever's 2007 Pheasant Hunting Forecast

With potential habitat losses...is 2007 the boom before the bust?



Overview: All across the Midwest and Upper Midwest, signs are pointing to an excellent pheasant hunting season. The typical pheasant powerhouses – South and North Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska – will again top the list. Unfortunately, because of the potential for massive habitat losses this year and next, namely Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres under soon-to-expire contracts, we may soon be referring to 2007 as "the good old days."

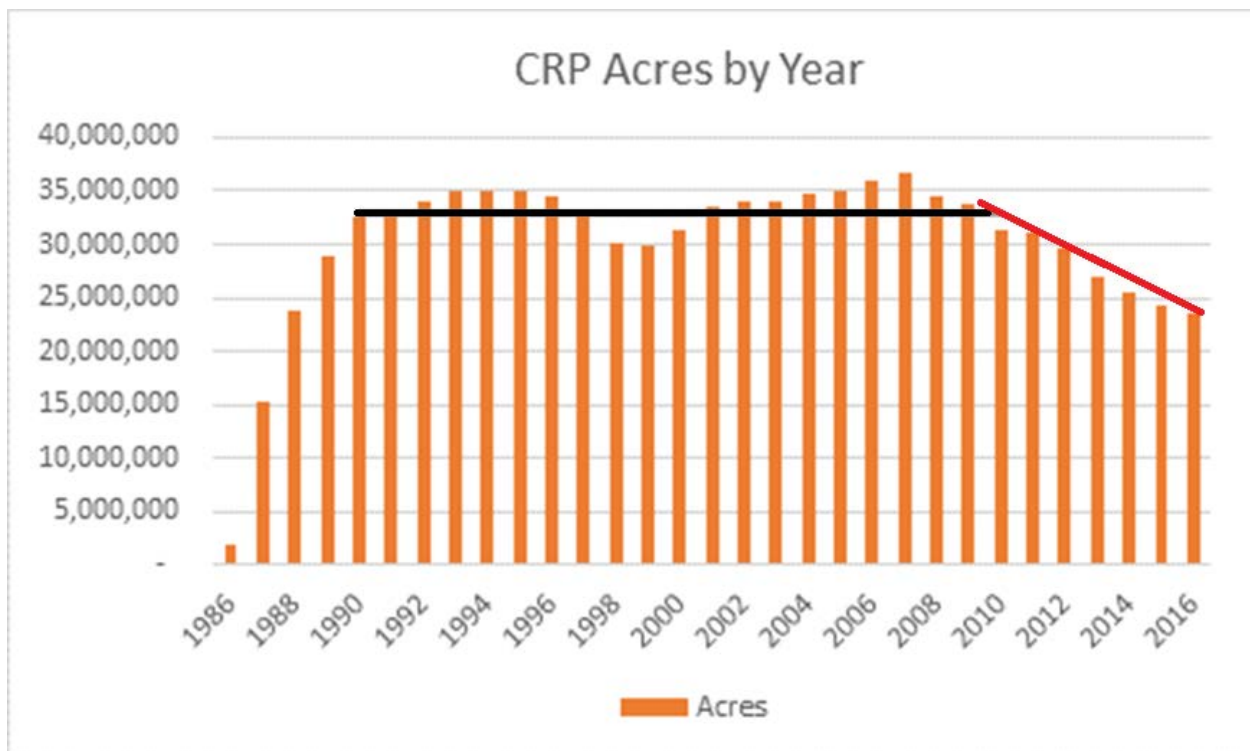


Fig 1. Historical CRP acreage enrollment 1986-2016.

Landscape level forces after 2010 including record high commodity and land prices coupled with budget reductions led to a 2014 Farm Bill CRP authorization of 24 million acres and today's total enrollments hover just below the 24 million acre cap. Unfortunately, very dramatic changes resulting in loss of grasslands habitats have occurred over much of the country a problem that has been exacerbated by significant increases in cropland acreages. Additionally, the results of the 49th general CRP signup conducted from Dec 1st, 2015 – Feb 26th, 2016 have led to what we characterize as a current “grassland conservation crisis”.

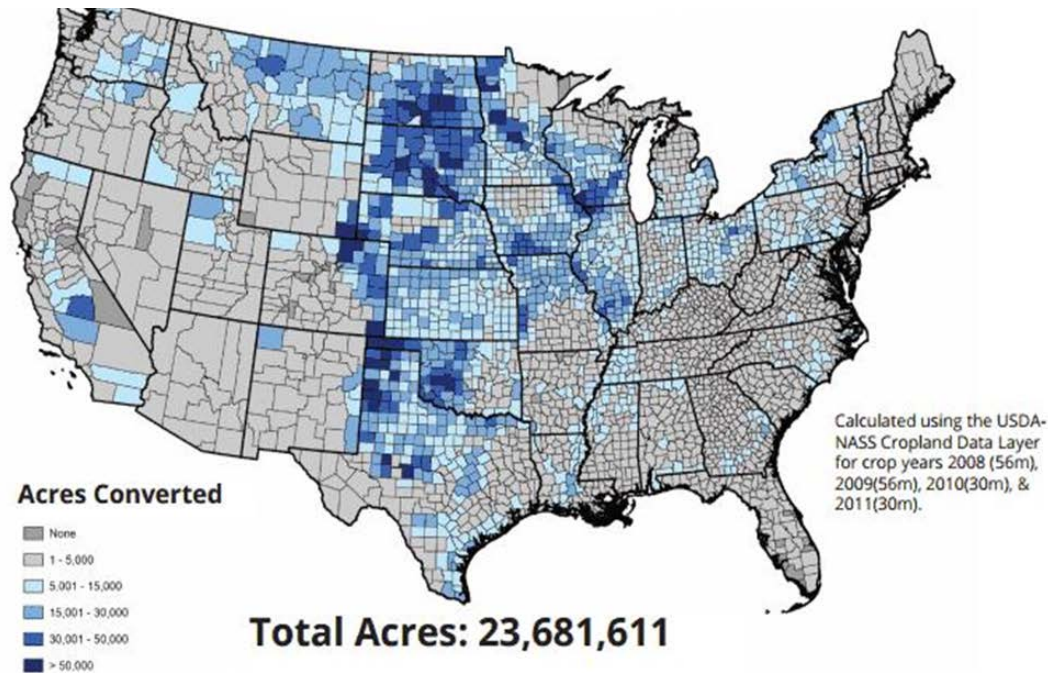


Fig. 1– Acres of grassland/wetlands/shrub land converted crop production by county, 2008-2011. http://static.ewg.org/pdf/plowed_under.pdf

In 2007, seven key upland bird hunting states (MT,ND,SD,NE,KS,MN and IA) had 16.4 million acres of CRP. By the end of 2016, this region contained 9.3 million acres of CRP – a loss 7.1 million acres or 43%.

49th General Signup

During CRP Signup #49 1.8 million acres in 26,000+ offers were submitted. Of these 4,857 offers (18%) for 410,773 acres (22%) were accepted nationwide. In the core northern and central plains states renowned for upland bird hunting (MT, ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, and IA) 701,060 acres in 10,983 offers were submitted. Of these 1545 offers (14%) for 105,745 acres (15%) were accepted. In South Dakota, the pheasant capitol of the world, only 2 offers on 101 acres were accepted (.0275%). These acceptance rates are by far the lowest ever throughout the entire history of CRP. As a result, more than 21,000 individual offers for enrollment in CRP were denied enrollment nationwide with nearly 9,500 of these offers from the above key upland bird hunting states.

During the first Grassland CRP sign up that took place during the same timeframe as CRP signup #49, farmers and ranchers offered over 1 million acres, and USDA only allowed 101,000 acres to enter the program (10%). During the latest sign up, 986,000 acres were offered and 316,000 acres were accepted (32%). Currently there are about 800,000 acres of enrollment, with most of those contracts having delayed start date of Oct 1st, 2017 due to current CRP cap of 24M acres.

We have seen strong demand from landowners when acres are put out there on a more target approach. For example just last month, IA State Acres For Wildlife (SAFE) 50,000 acres were allocated in a little more than a week due to high landowner demand. In SD, allocations for pheasant focused SAFE projects typically last for short times as demand remains high.

Changing Times

Today we're at substantially reduced commodity prices, near or record level commodity stocks, diminishing land values, cash rents, and growing concerns about low farm incomes. Some of these reasons have contributed to the substantial demand that we've seen for both continuous CRP (CCRP) and general CRP signup 49. As of the end of December 2016 CRP enrollment is at 23.49 million acres with a 24 million acre cap. Upcoming expirations are minimal with 2.5 million acres expiring this coming September 30, 2017 and another 1.49 million acres on September 30, 2018.

In our view, we're at a tipping point once again for CRP. Clearly, we have strong demand to call for a substantial increase in the acreage authorization and we recommend returning CRP to at least 40 million acres as part of the 2018 Farm Bill. We need CRP now to address the substantial demand to complete voluntary soil, water, and wildlife habitat improvement projects. In addition, CRP does offer substantial economic and income stability benefits while providing commodity price support benefits.

Additionally, we recommend a complete review and overall of the CRP application/signup processes. The program needs to continue to evolve to continue as a robust and dynamic landscape level program on working farms and ranches. Future signups should target larger blocks of habitat important for wildlife production and hunting. It is the combination of both the general signups larger tracts of CRP and the corridors/buffers and targeted specialty tracts that are available through the CCRP that result in the "habitat mosaic" most beneficial to soil, water, and wildlife resources AND supports outdoor recreational opportunities including hunting. Small, rural communities benefit as do all residents that enjoy a high quality of life in rural areas.

Future CRP should contain additional provisions to maximize benefits to quail. Encouraging use of early successional native covers in shorter-term rotations within contracts could be very beneficial.

We need to address provisions for soon to expire CRP as well. As CRP contracts near expiration, we should support provisions encouraging longer term resource protection including permanent options for selected tracts. Congress should support pathways to "move" CRP lands into working farms and ranching that continue CRP's resource benefits. CRP can support

grazing programs and wildlife with through comprehensive conservation management plans that provide high quality forage, and quality wildlife habitats.

We also believe USDA should utilize CCRP initiatives to cover areas with high contract expiration rates. As these acres come out of a general contract and are not extended/re-enrolled, we would ask USDA to promote keeping field borders and environmentally sensitive/important lands in CCRP practices. The trend has been that when a general CRP contract expires, the entire field is brought back into production.

Other Conservation Program Priorities

In addition to maintaining a strong and robust CRP as the flagship conservation program we support a strong Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) as well as the successful Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP in particular has played an important role in our western states where we work with ranchers and other partners to enhance rangelands for both livestock operations and to benefit wildlife species like sage grouse and mule deer.

Through EQIP and Partnerships, we are addressing some of the resource concerns in forested ecosystems; however another priority is providing wildlife benefits in CRP tree plantings, especially managing pine stands for quality timber production in the Southeast while benefiting Bobwhite Quail. We are encouraged that USDA implemented the \$10M in cost share assistance that was introduced in the 2014 Farm Bill. We hope that these successes demonstrate additional resources for management. We also continue to support the linkage between conservation compliance and crop insurance. Sodsaver provisions play an important role in addressing native prairie conversion and should be continued as well.

Lastly, The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) plays a vital role in supporting recreational access for hunters while supporting enhancement of wildlife habitats. We support reauthorization of VPA-HIP at \$150 million over 5 years.

Mr. Chairman, we look forward to providing more detailed program by program recommendations to the Committee in the near future. We look forward to participating in upcoming dialogues focused on reviewing existing programs and procedures and to look for new efficiencies and saving wherever possible. We pride ourselves as part of incredible partnerships that work day to day to deliver important voluntary incentive-based conservation programs to America's farmers and ranchers. Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I would be pleased to take your questions.

Additional Resources

2013 Multi-State Land Use Study: Prepared by Decision Innovation for MN, SD, IA, IL, NE, IN, and MI Farm Bureau. July, 2013. <http://www.decision-innovation.com/webres/File/docs/130715%20Multi-State%20Land%20Use%20Report.pdf>

Conversion of 398,223 acres of non-cropland to cropland during 2012 crop year USDA- FSA. June 26, 2013 www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/cropland_noncropland.pdf