

Draft Strategic Plan

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program



Revised 2023



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Program Goal	1
Program Overview	1
Purpose of this Strategic Plan	2
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Advisory Council.....	2
Program Benefits	3
Guiding Principles.....	4
<i>Project Types</i>	<i>4</i>
Aspen Regeneration.....	5
Conservation Easements	5
Diverse Food Plots	6
Emergency Supplemental Feeding	6
Grain Food Plots	6
Grazing Systems.....	6
Leases.....	7
UGBEP Sagebrush Initiative.....	8
Nesting Cover/Brood Cover/CRP Seed Cost-share.....	8
Pen-raised Pheasant Releases	8
Shelterbelts and Woody Cover.....	9
Wild Turkey Transplants.....	9
<i>Program Priorities</i>	<i>9</i>
Background -- Upland Game Birds and Hunting in Montana	9
Game Bird Habitats and Resources in Montana.....	9
Landownership Patterns and Public Hunting Opportunities	11

Upland Game Bird Hunting Popularity and Economics.....	12
Upland Game Bird Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days.....	12
Wild Turkey Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days.....	14
Pheasant Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days	15
Statewide Priorities.....	18
Ring-necked Pheasant	18
Sharp-tailed Grouse	19
Greater Sage-Grouse.....	21
Merriam’s Turkey	22
Gray Partridge	23
Chukar Partridge.....	24
Ruffed Grouse.....	25
Dusky Grouse and Spruce Grouse	26
<i>Program Delivery.....</i>	<i>28</i>
Overview.....	28
Establishing UGBEP Projects.....	28
Enhancing Program Capacity.....	28
All Project Types	28
UGBEP Habitat Project Maintenance.....	30
Payments, Reimbursements, and Cost-Share	31
Estimating Costs and Payments.....	31
Cost Share	32
Leveraging Resources.....	33
Contracts	33
Public Access.....	35
Work on Private and Public Lands	36
Pen-raised Pheasant Releases	37
Supplemental Feeding of Pheasant	38
Wild Turkey Transplants.....	39
<i>Funding Allocation</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Statute and Project Definition</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Tracking Projects</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Outreach and Marketing</i>	<i>45</i>

<i>Program Evaluation and Performance Measures</i>	47
Project Monitoring	47
Project Evaluation/Research	48
Performance Measures	49
<i>Regional Strategies</i>	51
Region 1 UGBEP Strategic Plan	52
Background	52
Program Delivery	52
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	53
Focus Areas and Implementation	53
Region 2 UGBEP Strategic Plan	54
Background	54
Program Delivery	54
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	55
Focus Areas and Implementation	55
Region 3 UGBEP Strategic Plan	56
Background	56
Program Delivery	56
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	57
Focus Areas and Implementation	58
Region 4 UGBEP Strategic Plan	61
Background	61
Program Delivery	64
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	64
Focus Areas and Implementation	65
Region 5 UGBEP Strategic Plan	70
Background	70
Program Delivery	70
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	70
Focus Areas and Implementation	71
Region 6 UGBEP Strategic Plan	75
<i>Background</i>	75
<i>Program Delivery</i>	82
<i>Focus Areas, Implementation, and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities</i>	83
Region 7 UGBEP Strategic Plan	90
Background	90

Program Delivery	92
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities	92
Focus Areas and Implementation	93
<i>Council Recommendations for Future Consideration.....</i>	96
<i>Acronyms used in this Plan.....</i>	97
<i>Terms and Definitions.....</i>	98
<i>Literature Cited.....</i>	100

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Average statewide harvest of upland game birds and distribution of harvest by FWP Region, based on harvest survey data, 2013-2022.	11
Table 2. Statewide upland game bird hunter participation summary, 2012-2022.	17
Table 3. 2022: Estimated use-days and expenditures by upland game bird hunters in Montana.....	17
Table 4. Monitoring schedule for contract compliance, UGBEP enhancement projects.....	48

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Cover types across Montana.....	10
Figure 2. Land stewardship in Montana across the seven FWP Regions.	12
Figure 3. Montana resident and nonresident upland game bird hunter numbers and trends (2012 – 2022).	13
Figure 4. Montana resident and nonresident upland game bird hunter-days and trends (2012 – 2022).	13
Figure 5. Montana resident and nonresident wild turkey hunter numbers and trends (2015 – 2022).	14
Figure 6. Montana resident and nonresident wild turkey hunter-days and trends (2015 – 2022).	15
Figure 7. Montana resident and nonresident hunter numbers and trends, 2004 – 2022.....	16
Figure 8. Montana resident and nonresident hunter-days and trends, 2004-2012, 2014 – 2022.	16
Figure 9. Pheasant distribution in Montana.....	19
Figure 10. Sharp-tailed grouse habitat east of the Continental Divide.	20
Figure 11. Sage-grouse habitats in Montana.....	21
Figure 12. Wild turkey distribution in Montana.	23
Figure 13. Gray partridge distribution in Montana.	24
Figure 14. Chukar distribution in Montana.	25
Figure 15. Ruffed grouse distribution in Montana.	26
Figure 16. Dusky grouse distribution in Montana.	27
Figure 17. Spruce grouse distribution in Montana.	27
Figure 18. Sage-grouse distribution in Region 6.	76

Figure 19. Sage-grouse lek surveys of males on Valley County Adaptive Harvest Management leks from 1989 to 2020.	77
Figure 20. Sharp-tailed grouse lek surveys of males in the Roosevelt County survey area, 1986 to 2020.	78
Figure 21. Sharp-tailed grouse lek surveys of males in the Hill County survey area, 1999 to 2020.....	78
Figure 22. Pheasant habitat in Region 6.....	79
Figure 23. The average numbers of crows per two minute stop on pheasant crowing route surveys across Region 6 from 2001 to 2020. Surveys are grouped as east and west of Glasgow.	80
Figure 24. Region 6 public land.	81
Figure 25. Region 6 upland game bird harvest trends from 1980 to 2020.	82
Figure 26. The Sage-grouse Habitat Priority Areas in Region 6, corresponding to their distribution with all areas receiving equal priority status.	87

PREFACE

In July 2011, the first version of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP) strategic plan was prepared with the guidance of the Upland Game Bird Advisory Council (Council). It was endorsed by the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission, becoming a “living document” referenced by the department and the Council to guide and monitor program delivery. The 2011 version of the plan identified strategic goals and objectives for all aspects of program delivery, and the program evolved successfully. A decade later, the program is in a new era, one shaped by increased opportunities to collaborate with the agricultural community; redefined, and larger regional focus areas; elimination of the statute requiring UGBEP-funded pen-raised pheasant releases; and functionally operating within a balanced budget.

The Council, working closely with program staff, provided recommendations to this revised version of the strategic plan and are incorporated herein (MCA, 87-1-251).

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 serves Montana’s residents and visitors by enhancing upland game bird populations and habitats while providing public hunting access opportunities through the use of upland game bird hunting license dollars, Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds, and other federal grants. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) administers the program, guided by rule (ARM 12.9.7). When eligible and meeting program criteria, the program may cost-share pheasant releases.

Principle outcomes of the UGBEP are:

- Establishment or enhancement of upland game bird habitats;
- Conservation of high quality and “at risk” upland game bird habitats;
- Enhanced public upland game bird hunting opportunities; and

- Release or transplant of upland game birds to establish, augment, or expand; populations of upland game birds such as pheasants or Merriam's wild turkeys.

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. The plan will include potential rule changes and other Council recommendations that will help the program operate more effectively and provide 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 or unanticipated. 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 priority areas for UGBEP projects. 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 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 the creation of a citizens advisory council to make recommendations on the creation and maintenance of the strategic plan (87-1-251(1)(2)(3), MCA).

These two legislative audit recommendations were formally enacted during the 61st Legislature through a bill sponsored by Representative Julie French (87-1-251, MCA).

Council members are appointed by the FWP Director and represent each of the seven administrative regions. Memberships also include:

- 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; and
- a senator and a representative from different political parties.

Council members serve 4-year terms but may renew their terms up to two more times (total of 12 years) if continuing on the Council will ensure continuity and cohesiveness as a whole that benefits program implementation and direction. A new Council chairperson is nominated by the outgoing chairperson with approval/motion from the members of the Council.

Since the completion of the 2011 strategic plan, the primary role of the Council has been to monitor program activities in relation to program goal, objectives, administrative rules, statutes, and finances. As outlined in statute (87-1-251(b) MCA), the Council continues to provide ongoing monitoring of UGBEP performance, to include review of an annually-developed activity report.

Council meetings occur semi-annually during the spring and fall seasons. The spring meeting is held in Helena. Department staff provide an overview of work plans for the upcoming field season. The fall meeting is intended to provide an update on activities accomplished during the field season and to participate in a full or half-day habitat tour. Fall meetings are held in a specific region with the intent to showcase habitat projects developed by regional staff. Both meetings are open to the public. Participation often includes landowners, hunters, business owners, general recreationists, and representatives of conservation organizations.

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;
- Help maintain working agricultural lands;
- Build partnerships between nongovernmental organizations, State, Federal, and local government agencies; and
- 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; and
- 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.

Management of North American upland game bird populations is currently addressed by manipulating habitat, because it is believed to be the most

economical, efficient, and feasible long-term strategy to enhance populations of upland game bird. --Moynahan and Walker, 2004

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:

<https://myfwp.mt.gov/getRepositoryFile?objectID=36175>

Aspen Regeneration

Forest grouse, especially ruffed grouse, are closely tied to productive aspen habitats. The quality of mountain 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.

Conservation Easements

Conservation easements are eligible to receive funds from the UGBEP ([87-1-248 \(2\)](#), MCA) for lands with productive upland game bird habitats that also provide substantial bird hunting opportunities. 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.

Although UGBEP may contribute funds towards eligible conservation easements ([MCA, 87-1-248\(2\)](#)), the program has not contributed funding since 2012 because other FWP conservation programs are more appropriate for funding.

Diverse Food Plots

One of the simplest things Montana landowners can do to help maintain a viable population of game birds is to establish diverse mixes of food and cover. Montana's winters can be harsh for game birds, especially when food and cover sources are limiting. Planting a diverse mix next to a shelterbelt, cattails, or other types of winter cover can help game birds get through a tough winter and even improve the hen's breeding condition. Diverse food plots include species such as sorghum/sudangrass, millet, annual sunflowers, lentils, and peas. UGBEP pays a rental rate plus cost of seeds.

Emergency Supplemental Feeding

When winter weather criteria are met ([12.9.615](#), Administrative Rules Montana), FWP may enter into agreements to provide supplemental feed for 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 Daniels, Sheridan, and Roosevelt counties 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.

Grain Food Plots

Exotic upland game bird species - pheasants, gray partridge, and wild turkeys - commonly require a source of cereal grains for winter survival. Unharvested grain fields adjacent to winter cover commonly provide this food source. In some areas, effective food plots (e.g., unharvested grain adjacent to woody habitat) can provide important food and cover, particularly where grain fields do not occur. Plots are generally 1 to 10 acres in size. UGBEP pays a rental rate 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, shelter, and nest concealment. 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. Opportunities to leverage program funds with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) EQIP are encouraged and preferred when possible.

Leases

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

Habitat Management Leases (HML): Intended for high quality upland game bird habitat that also provide hunting opportunities. HML agreements outline annual payments to the landowner or public land lessee in exchange for resting otherwise productive lands for wildlife habitat. Management Leases are not intended to be expansive projects, but rather focus on smaller, high-value sites.

Open Fields gives landowners the opportunity to manage Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres in a wildlife-friendly way to provide important cover for Montana's game birds. Montana has lost a significant amount of CRP in recent years, and more is scheduled to expire in the near future. Conservation-incentive programs like Open Fields are geared to help landowners keep some land enrolled in CRP and to provide public game bird hunting opportunities. Funding for Open Fields is primarily through the Farm Bill's Voluntary Public Access - Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP), at times with UGBEP match.

Conservation Grassland Leases are intended to conserve large contiguous tracts of existing native rangeland/grasslands or expired CRP on private lands for 30 years. Landowners can continue to graze livestock but agree not to remove native grasslands or sagebrush and agree to not drain wetlands. Private lands are open to public access for hunting or wildlife viewing once permission from the landowner has been obtained. Funding is primarily through Pittman-Robertson funds or private wildlife grants. When possible, UGBEP may provide match.

Wildlife Friendly Practices incentivize landowners to incorporate soil and water conservation activities in their agricultural practices that also have a benefit to

upland game birds. Practices include biennial food plots, cover crops, light disking and interseeding forbs and legumes, and stubble height management. The program pays a habitat lease to maintain these types of covers.

UGBEP Sagebrush Initiative

Greater sage-grouse (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 UGBEP Sagebrush Initiative utilized UGBEP funds in combination with U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) federal funds (LIP – Landowner Incentive Program) 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. UGBEP monitors over 30 active enrollments.

Nesting Cover/Brood Cover/CRP Seed Cost-share

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, herbicide, and seeding costs.

Pen-raised Pheasant Releases

Participants in the pheasant release program may either raise or purchase pen-raised birds for release with the intent of establishing viable pheasant populations while expanding access and public hunting opportunities on private land. Releases generally consist of 10-week old pheasants allowing for up to 40% roosters. Releases take place in late summer. 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).” Since 2020, UGBEP receives an average of 2 applications per year.

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, fencing, 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 through management leases, including Russian olive on dry sites and riparian vegetation along waterways.

Wild Turkey Transplants

Proposed translocations of wild turkeys are a public process that includes department analysis and public input. The Fish & Wildlife Commission reviews the analysis and input and must approve the proposed release.

Upon approval, wild 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 UGBEP strategic 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 is

comprised of 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.

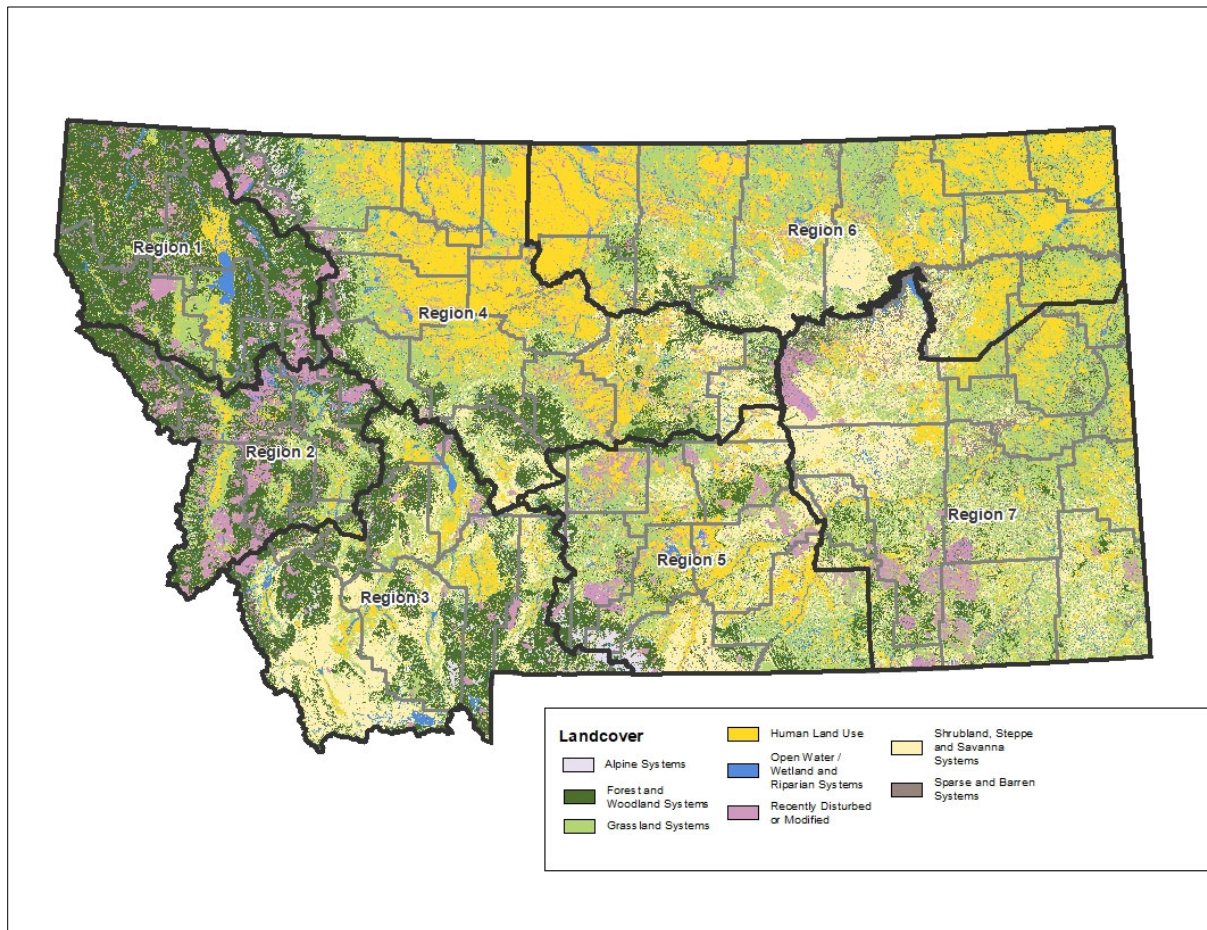


Figure 1. Cover types across Montana.

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, and more recently wind 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 provides for an array of wildlife, including nine species of upland game birds. Of the nine, five are native to Montana including sharp-tailed grouse, 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. The blue cells indicated the top three regions where game birds are harvested on average from 2013-2022.

Table 1. Average statewide harvest of upland game birds and distribution of harvest by FWP Region, based on harvest survey data, 2013-2022.

Upland Game Bird Species	Annual Statewide Harvest (AVG)	Portion of Harvest by FWP Region						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Pheasant	89,261	3%	1%	6%	26%	10%	39%	16%
Sharp-tailed Grouse	42,083	--	--	<1%	25%	9%	43%	21%
Ruffed Grouse	23,956	46%	24%	20%	8%	2%	--	--
Gray Partridge	22,861	2%	1%	12%	33%	10%	33%	8%
Dusky Grouse	15,779	27%	26%	32%	12%	3%	--	--
¹ Wild Turkey	6,263	25%	16%	7%	7%	17%	4%	23%
Spruce Grouse	5,249	49%	26%	21%	5%	--	--	--
Sage-grouse	2,148	--	--	33%	20%	9%	21%	16%
Chukar Partridge	306	--	--	--	--	100%	--	--

¹Wild Turkey harvest statistics 2019 – 2022 and includes fall and spring licenses for resident and nonresident hunters.

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 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.

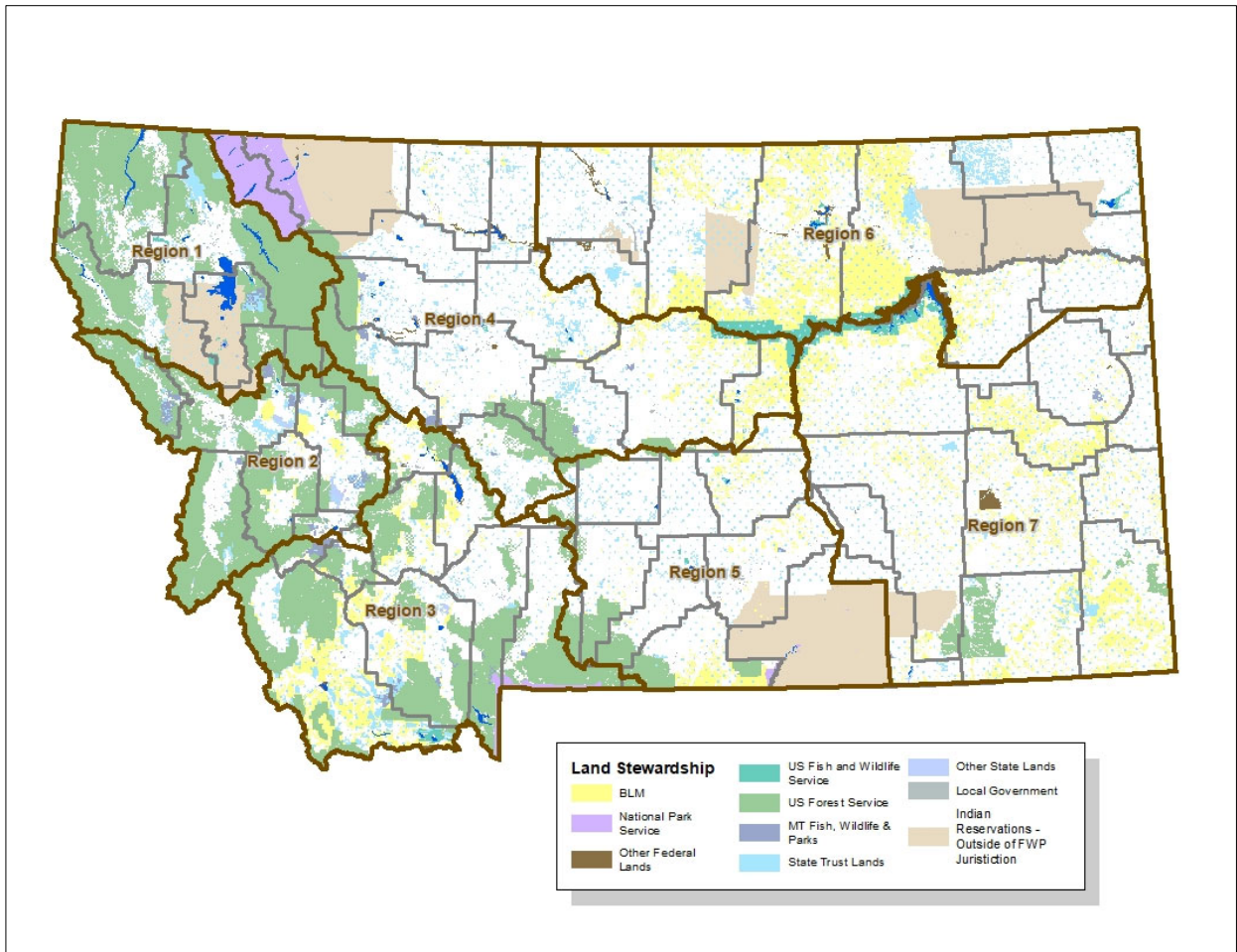


Figure 2. Land stewardship in Montana across the seven FWP Regions.

Upland Game Bird Hunting Popularity and Economics

Upland game bird hunting is a very popular pursuit in Montana. FWP offers a liberal fall hunting season for upland game birds, with a shorter hunting season on sage-grouse. An additional spring hunting season is offered for wild turkeys.

Upland Game Bird Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days

Since 2012, nearly 350,000 resident and nonresident upland game bird hunters have participated in the activity, of which about 29% are nonresident hunters. Figure 3 describes trends in resident and nonresident upland game bird hunters, not including wild turkey, since 2012. Overall, trends remain relatively stable for both resident and nonresident upland game bird hunters. During this time, the highest number of resident upland game bird hunters was documented in 2016 ($n = 28,099$) while nonresident hunters peaked in

2015 at 9,234. Similarly, resident and nonresident upland game bird hunter-days have remained relatively stable since 2012 (Figure 4).

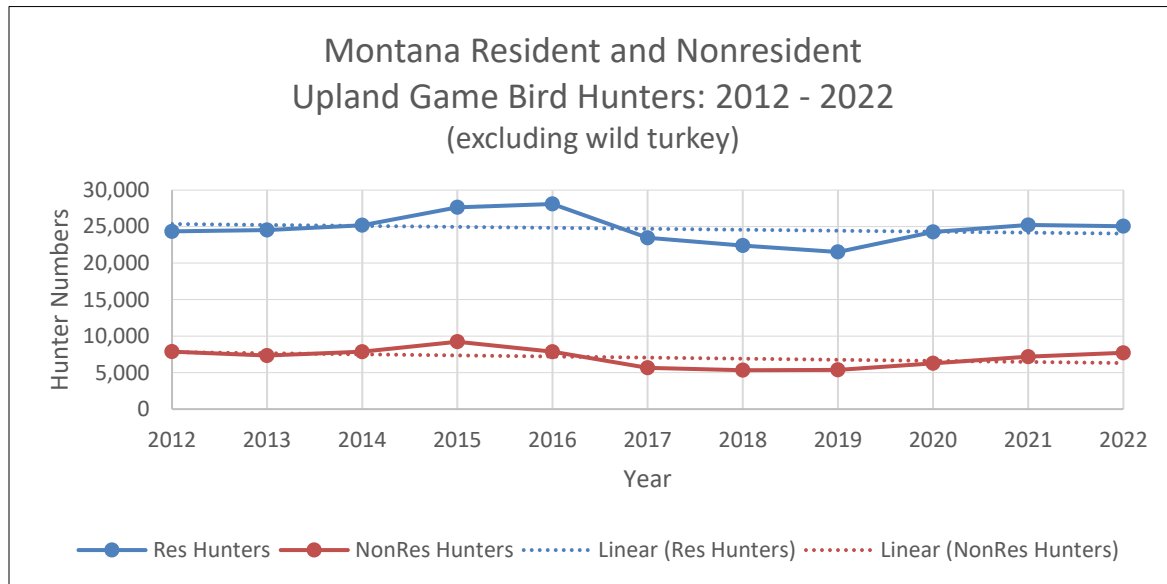


Figure 3. Montana resident and nonresident upland game bird hunter numbers and trends (2012 – 2022).

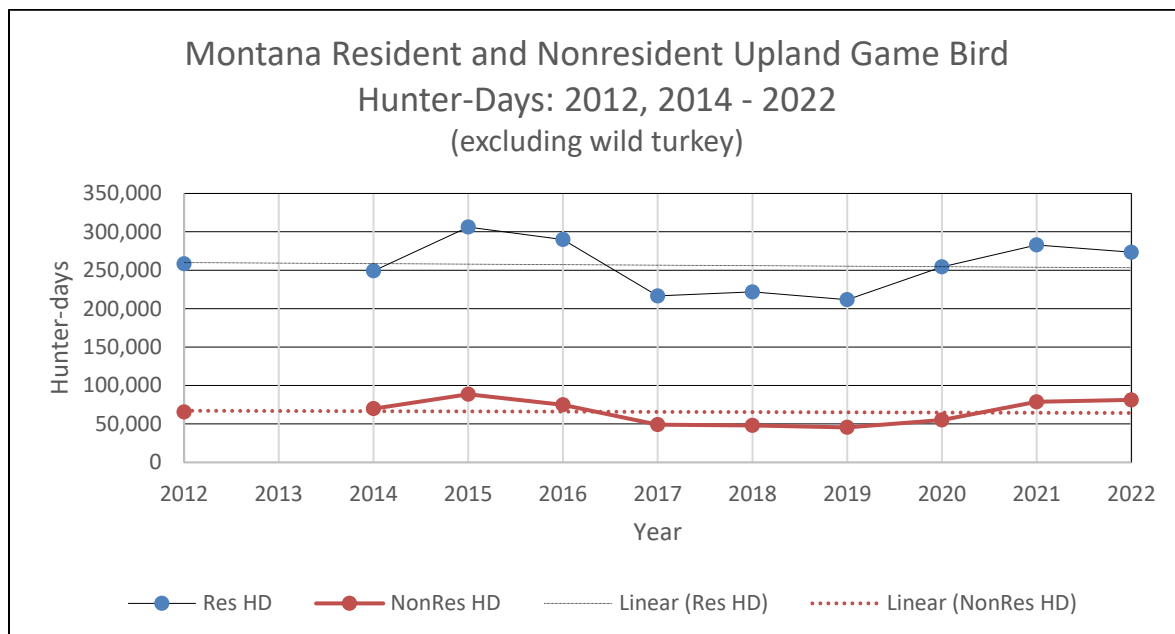


Figure 4. Montana resident and nonresident upland game bird hunter-days and trends (2012 – 2022).

Wild Turkey Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days

Since 2017, nearly 290,000 resident and nonresident wild turkey hunters took to the field to hunt wild turkeys, of which about 8% (n = 23,968) were nonresident hunters. Resident hunters spent a total of 265,742 hunter-days during this period while nonresident hunters invested 23,968 hunter-days. Resident and nonresident wild turkey hunters and hunter-days show a positive trend from 2017-2022 (Figures 5 and 6).

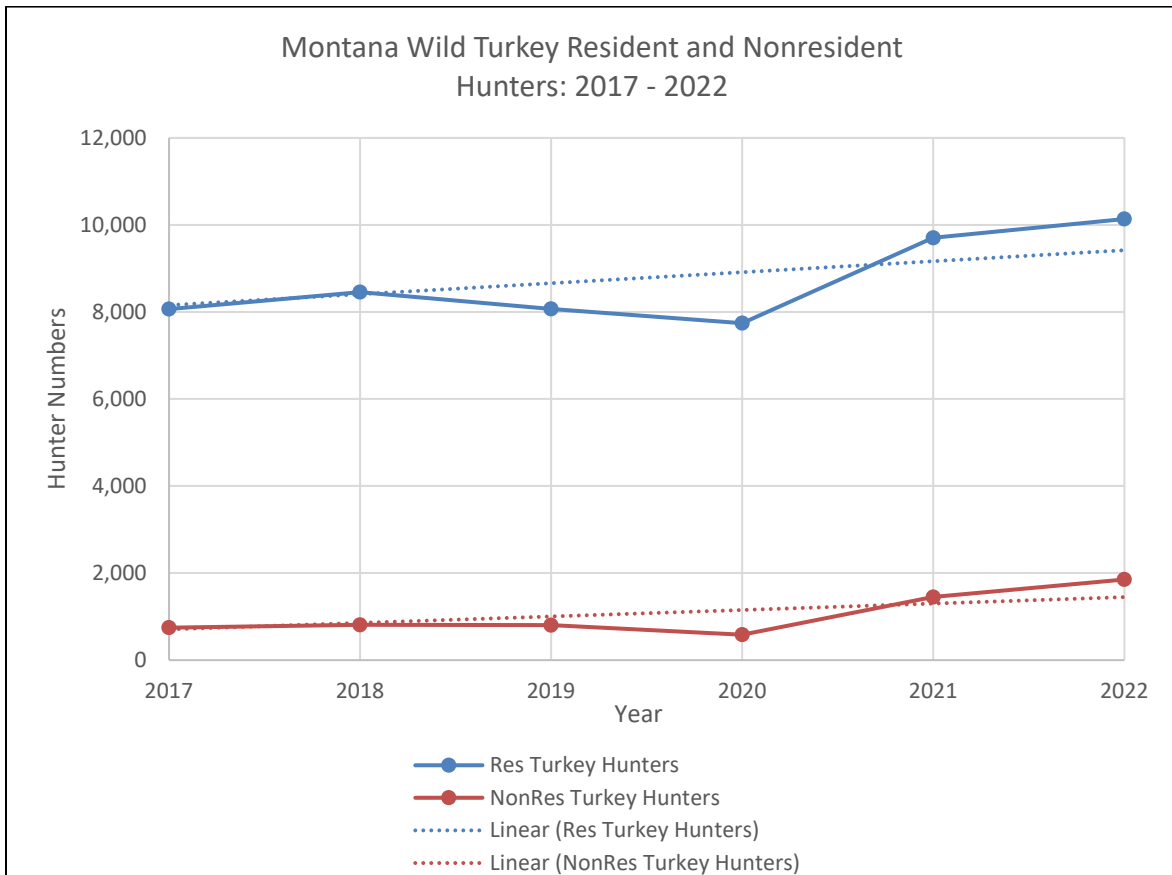


Figure 5. Montana resident and nonresident wild turkey hunter numbers and trends (2015 – 2022).

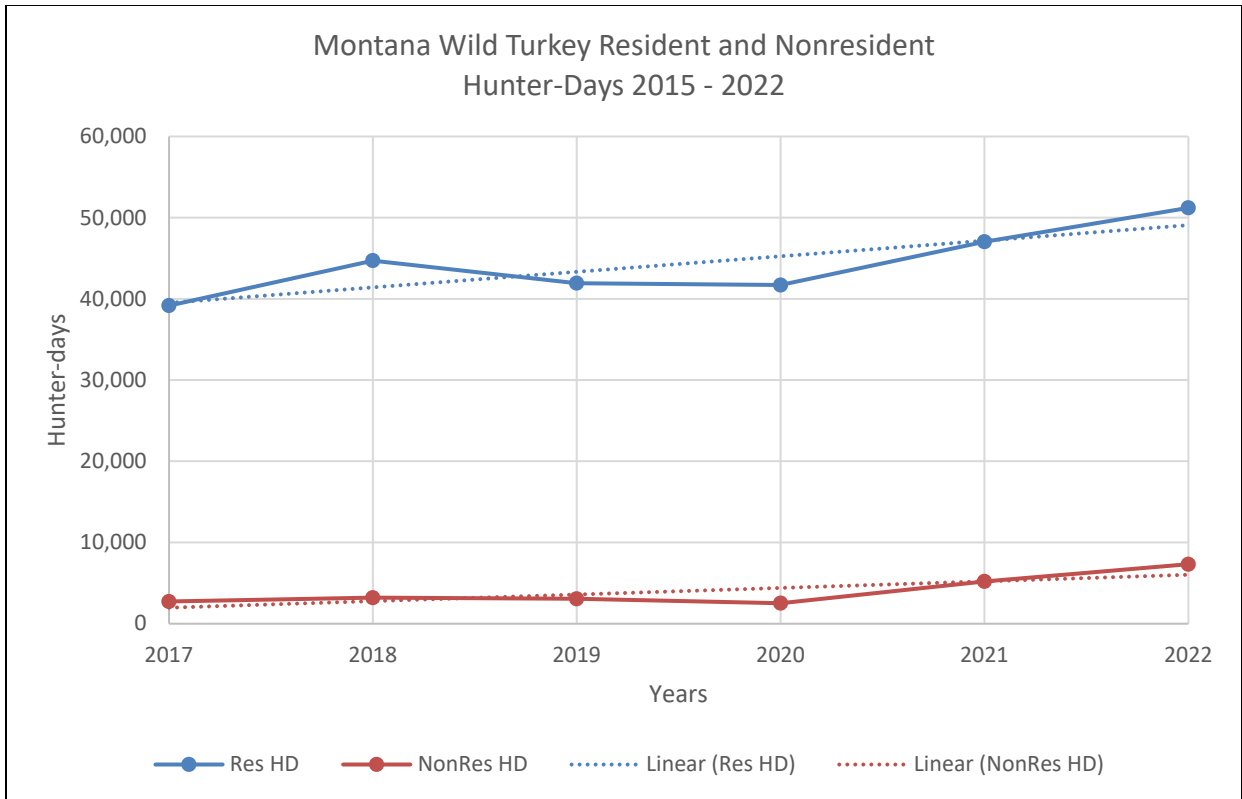


Figure 6. Montana resident and nonresident wild turkey hunter-days and trends (2015 – 2022).

Pheasant Hunter Numbers and Hunter-days

Montana remains a destination to hunt pheasants, but like most western states, Montana has witnessed a decline in both pheasant numbers and pheasant hunters. Reasons for this decline likely include changes in land use and farming practices; extreme weather fluctuations, in particular compounding effects of contiguous years of drouth; and loss of an estimated 3 million acres of CRP since the program began.

Resident and nonresident pheasant hunter numbers have declined over the years. Between 2004 and 2022, Montana resident pheasant hunter numbers peaked at 19,856 in 2006 while nonresident hunter numbers peaked at 6,672 in 2008. Most notable is the downward trend in resident pheasant hunter numbers (Figure 7). Consistent with hunter numbers, hunter-days also show a downward trend (Figure 8).

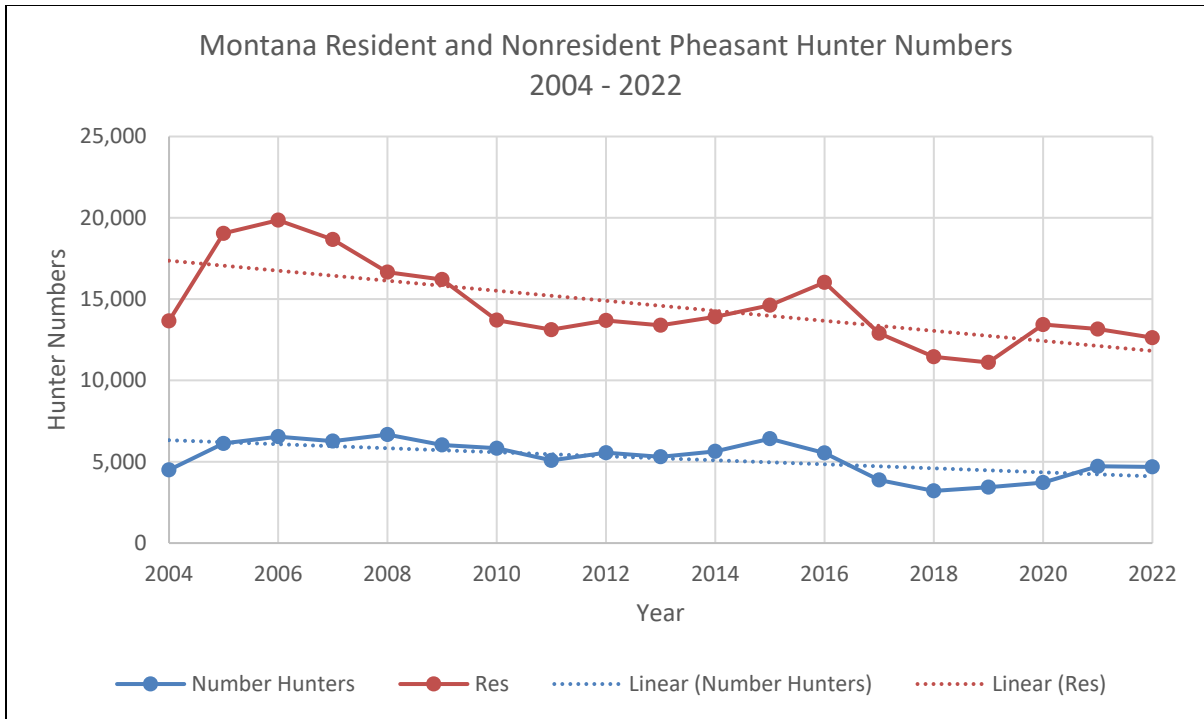


Figure 7. Montana resident and nonresident hunter numbers and trends, 2004 – 2022.

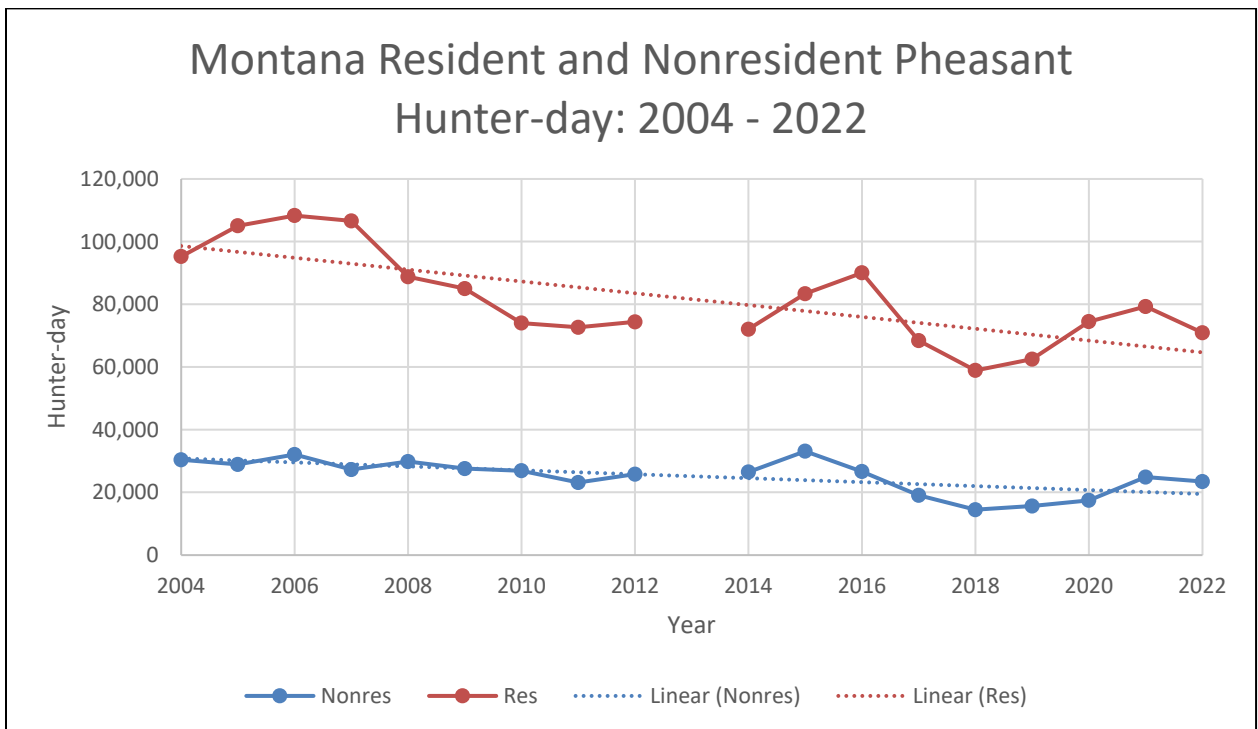


Figure 8. Montana resident and nonresident hunter-days and trends, 2004-2012, 2014 – 2022.

Collectively, upland game bird hunting, including wild turkey hunting, amounted to an average of nearly 366,000 hunter-days of hunting recreation annually between 2012 – 2022 (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 2022 hunter harvest survey data and based on December 2022 dollars is provided in Table 3.

The average daily expenditure estimates for resident and nonresident pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and gray partridge in 2022 was \$105.77 and \$455.89, respectively.

Table 2. Statewide upland game bird hunter participation summary, 2012-2022.

Upland Game Bird Species	Average Annual Number of Hunters	Average Annual Hunter-Days	Percentage of Average Hunter-Days
Pheasant	17,918	95,650	26%
*Wild Turkey	9,734	48,285	13%
Sharp-tailed Grouse	8,867	56,459	15%
Ruffed Grouse	7,478	53,749	15%
Dusky Grouse	6,380	44,184	12%
Gray Partridge	5,690	40,684	11%
Spruce Grouse	2,543	19,228	5%
Sage-grouse	1,218	6,083	2%
Chukar Partridge	240	1,476	0.40%
Average Total	60,068	365,798	

* Wild Turkey harvest statistics 2019 – 2022 and includes fall and spring licenses for resident and nonresident hunters.

Table 3. 2022: Estimated use-days and expenditures by upland game bird hunters in Montana.

Hunting Data	Annual Hunter Days		
	Resident	Nonresident	Total
Pheasant Hunters	79,268	24,847	104,115
Sharp-tailed Grouse Hunters	45,503	23,926	69,429
Gray Partridge Hunters	30,225	16,125	46,350
2022 Expenditures	Estimated Total Expenditures (in \$millions)		
	Resident	Nonresident	Total
Pheasant Hunters	8.4	11.3	19.7
Sharp-tailed Grouse Hunters	4.8	10.9	15.7
Gray Partridge Hunters	3.2	7.4	10.5

Lewis, Michael S., 2022. Statewide Estimates of Resident and Nonresident Hunter & Angler Trip Related Expenditures in Montana (2022), HD Program Research Summary No. 52.

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 4) recognize the need to balance public demand with other values when establishing program priorities. For instance, pheasants, wild turkey, and sharp-tailed grouse are among the most popular 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. With respect to these examples, there may be occasions where game bird species habitats are not readily enhanced by the UGBEP. A statewide perspective on priorities needs to weigh all of these values, also recognizing 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.

The associated map data in this section are intended to provide a broad landscape perspective of upland game bird distribution in Montana. FWP maps with species distributions are not mapped on Indian Reservations because consistent, structured survey data are lacking.

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 9). 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. 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.

The UGBEP provides compensation for pen-raised pheasant releases, which are intended to enhance pheasant populations (87-1-246, MCA), but may also assist to open 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.

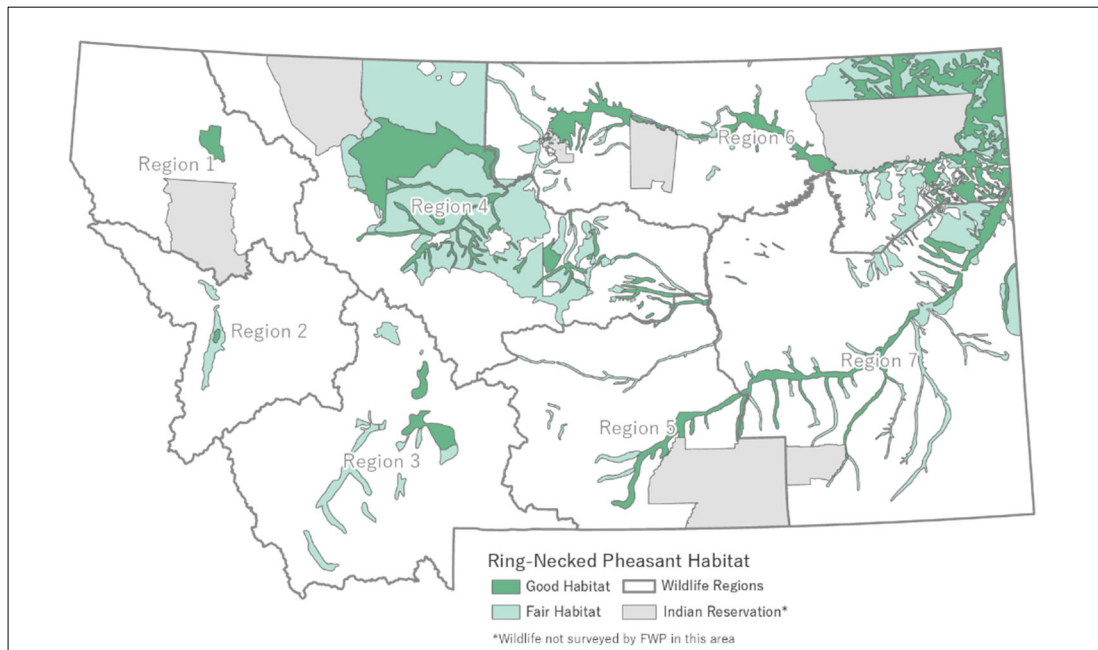


Figure 9. Pheasant distribution in Montana.

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 sandhill landforms) (Figure 10). Extensive prime habitats occur in Regions 3, 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. Restoration efforts are currently underway at three locations in Region 2 – in the Blackfoot Valley near Ovando and near Helmville, and the MPG Ranch in the upper Bitterroot Valley.

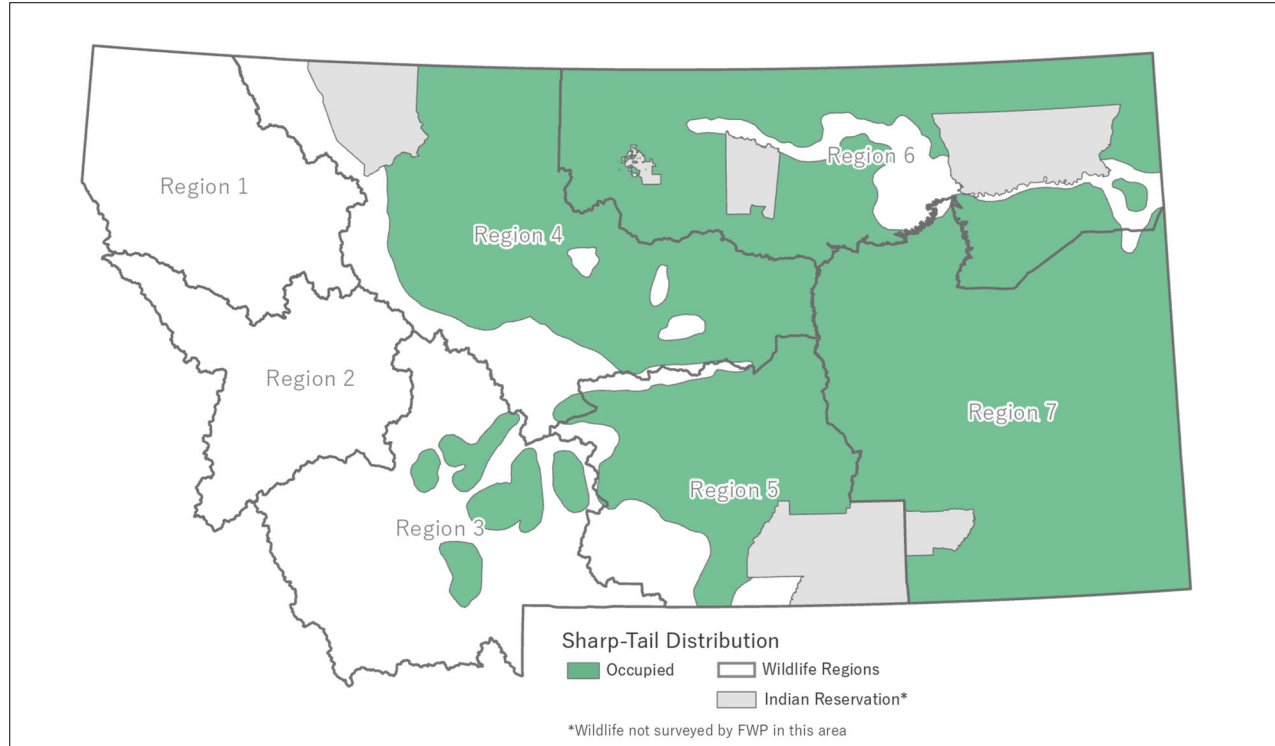


Figure 10. Sharp-tailed grouse habitat east of the Continental Divide.

Greater Sage-Grouse

From an ecological and economic standpoint, greater sage-grouse (“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 11). 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.

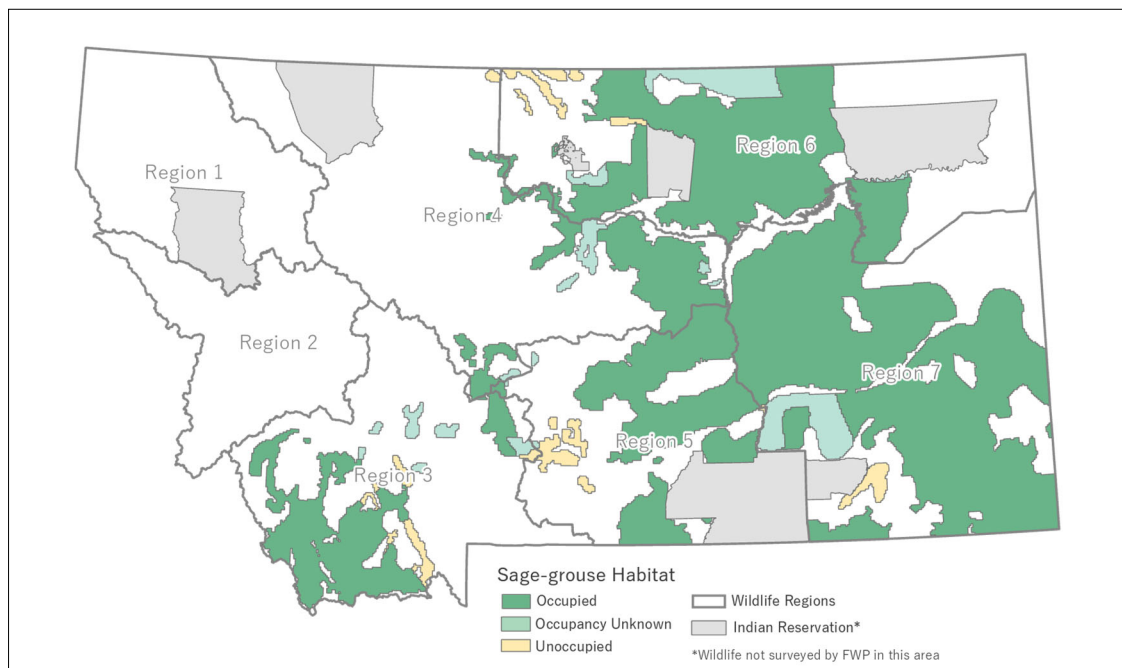


Figure 11. Sage-grouse habitats in Montana.

Merriam's Turkey

Merriam's turkey ("wild turkey") are among the most popular of game birds in North America. In Montana, wild turkeys are second in popularity based on number of hunters who pursue the birds. Spring and fall hunting provide considerable expanded hunting opportunities, which has amounted to over 43,000 hunter-days in recent years (Table 2). A 2001 inventory of occupied and potential habitat is shown in Figure 12. Most of the habitats that were designated as having potential for expansion now support varying densities of wild turkeys as do other areas that were never formally identified. Although wild turkeys are native to North America, they are not believed to be native to Montana. The current distribution of wild turkeys in the state is the result of numerous transplanting projects initiated in the mid-1950s and continues when opportunities exist. FWP and volunteers from the National Wild Turkey Federation played a large role establishing huntable populations of wild turkey.

Two distinct habitats support wild 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, wild 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 wild turkeys, therefore, commonly use waste grain in fields and livestock feedlots.

Montana's wild turkey habitats are comprised of 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 wild turkey hunting on private lands varies widely.

UGBEP funds can be used to successfully enhance and conserve habitats for wild turkeys. Food plots, grazing management, and riparian conservation projects are well-suited for enhancing wild turkey survival and reproduction. The UGBEP also provides a source of funding for trapping and transplanting wild turkeys into vacant habitats. Although transplanting wild turkeys has been a priority for many years, given the success of these efforts and the relatively broad distribution of wild turkeys in Montana, habitat enhancement and public access projects will be the primary focus of wild turkey conservation projects in the future.

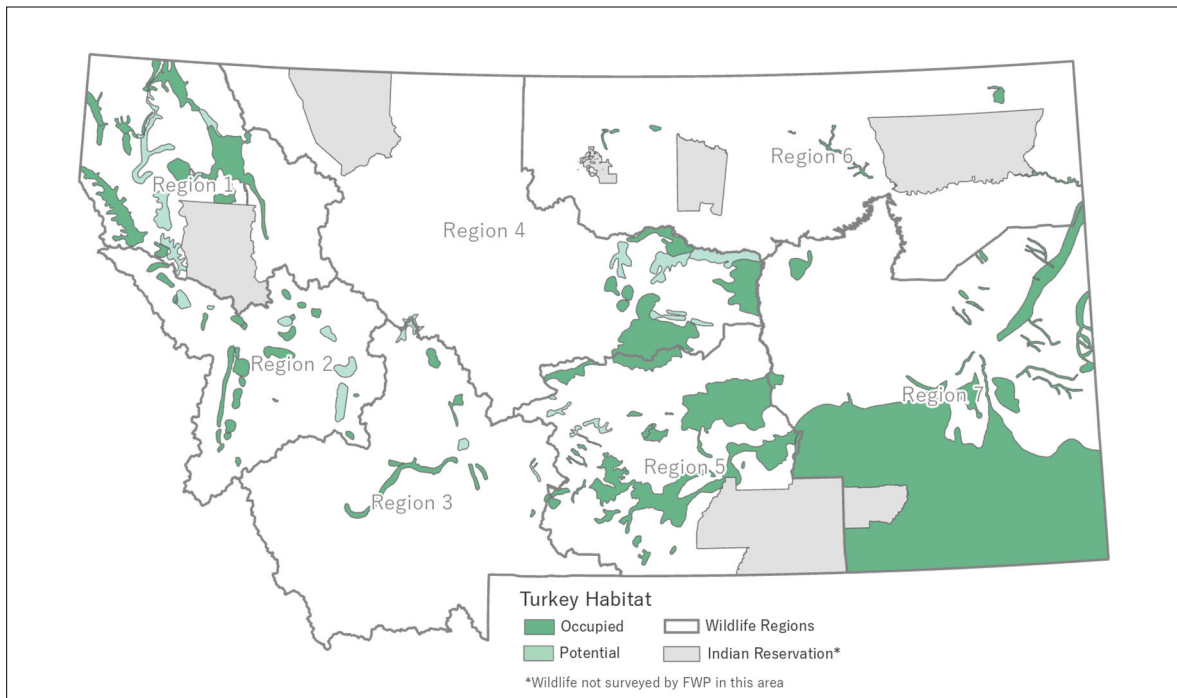


Figure 12. Wild turkey distribution in Montana.

Gray Partridge

The favorite game bird among many bird hunters, gray partridge provide the sixth 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 13). 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.

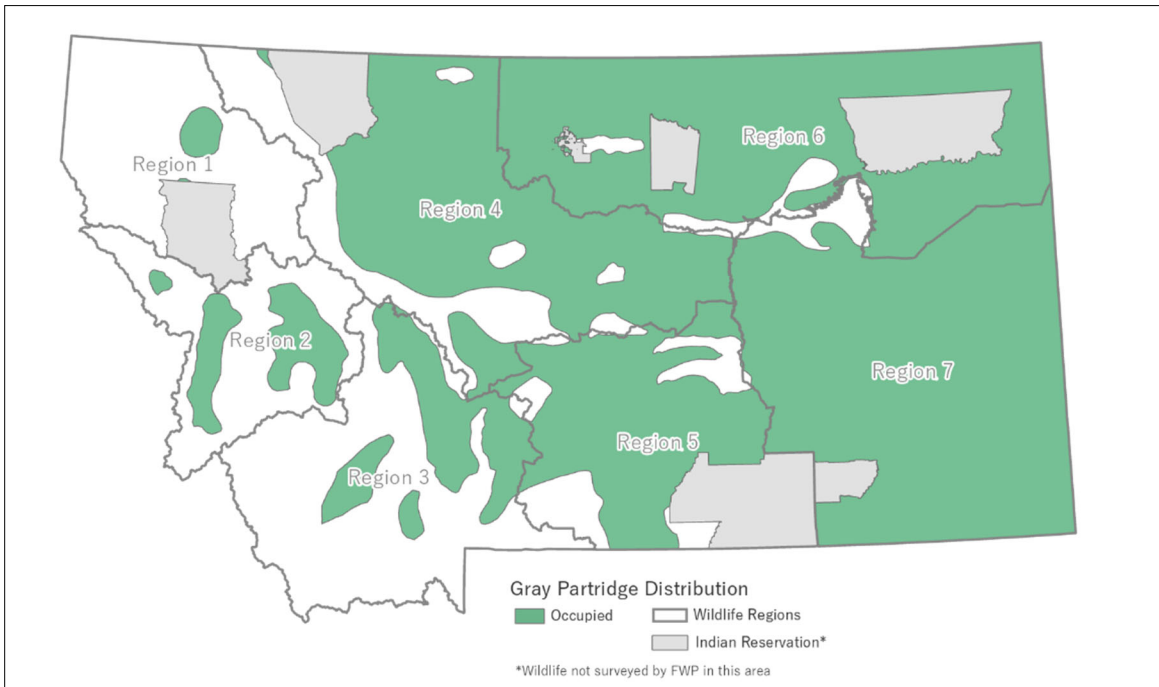


Figure 13. Gray partridge distribution in Montana.

Chukar Partridge

Similar to gray partridge, chukar partridge “chukars” are an exotic (non-native) game bird. 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 14). 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.

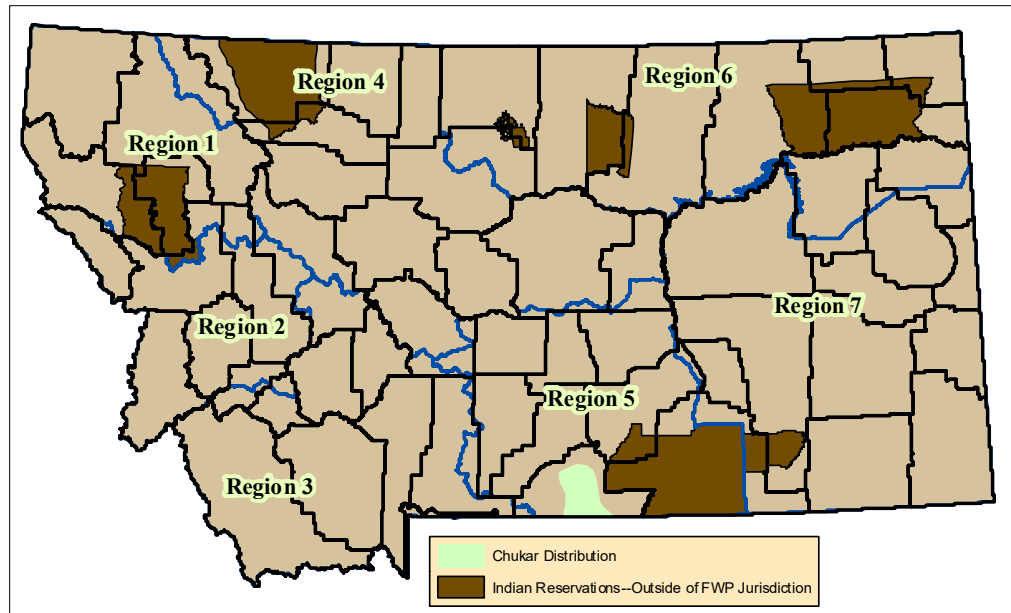


Figure 14. Chukar distribution in Montana.

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 Regions 1 and 2 (Figure 15). 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 Lolo and Bitterroot National Forests (Region 2) and along the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains and the Pryor Mountains (Region 5). Additional opportunities are likely to exist where aspen occurrence can be a habitat bottleneck for ruffed grouse, including Regions 3, and 4.

Popularity of hunting ruffed grouse has grown in the past 10 years, bumping ruffed grouse hunting to the third most popular bird to hunt in Montana.

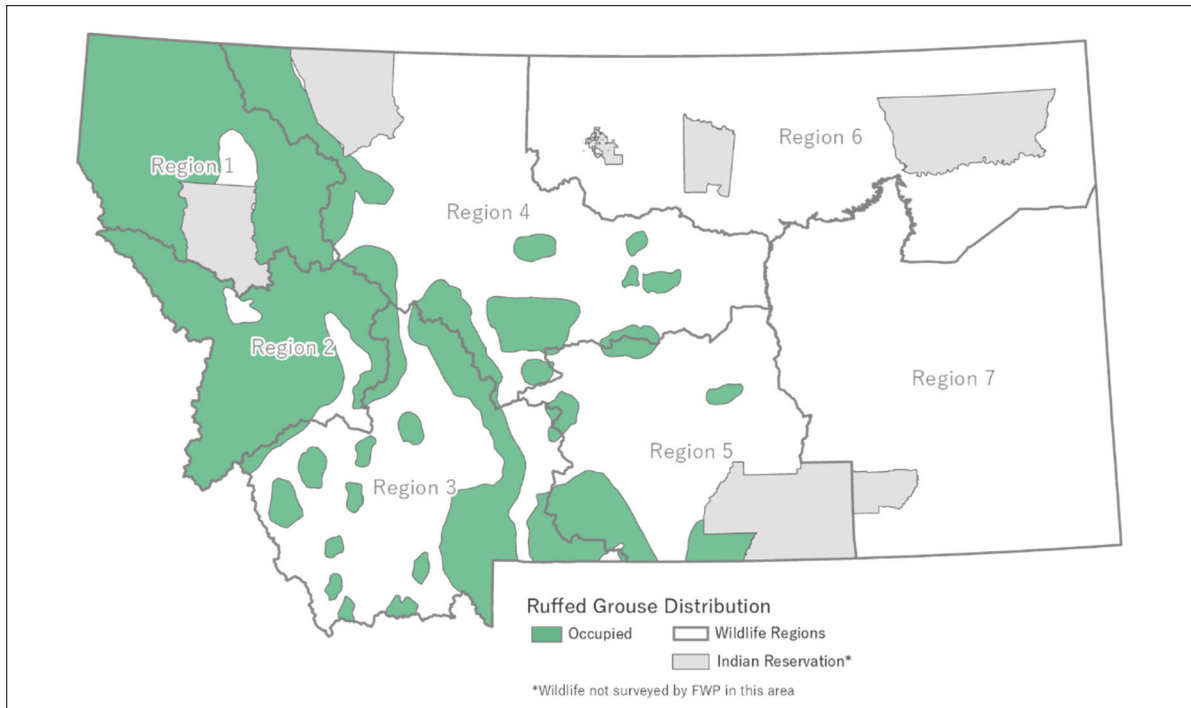


Figure 15. Ruffed grouse distribution in Montana.

Dusky Grouse and Spruce Grouse

Dusky and spruce grouse are important game birds in Montana, providing over 43,000 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 16 and 17). 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.

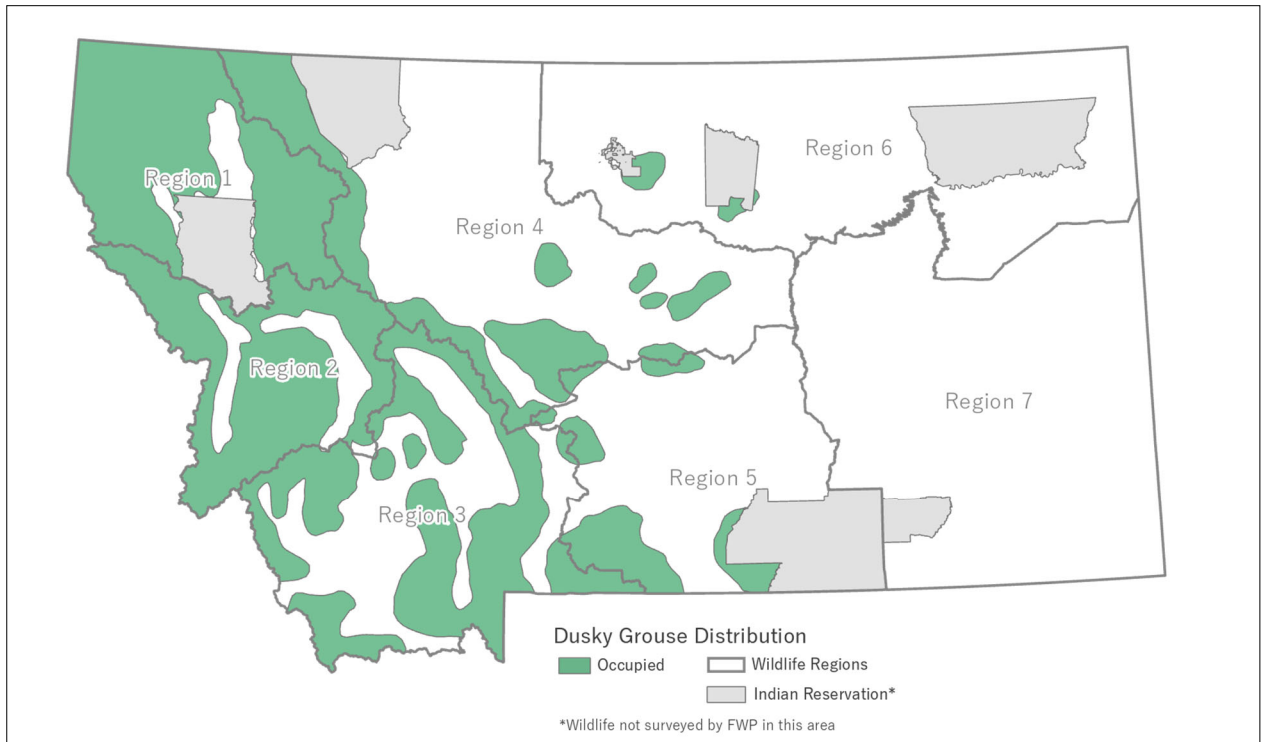


Figure 16. Dusky grouse distribution in Montana.

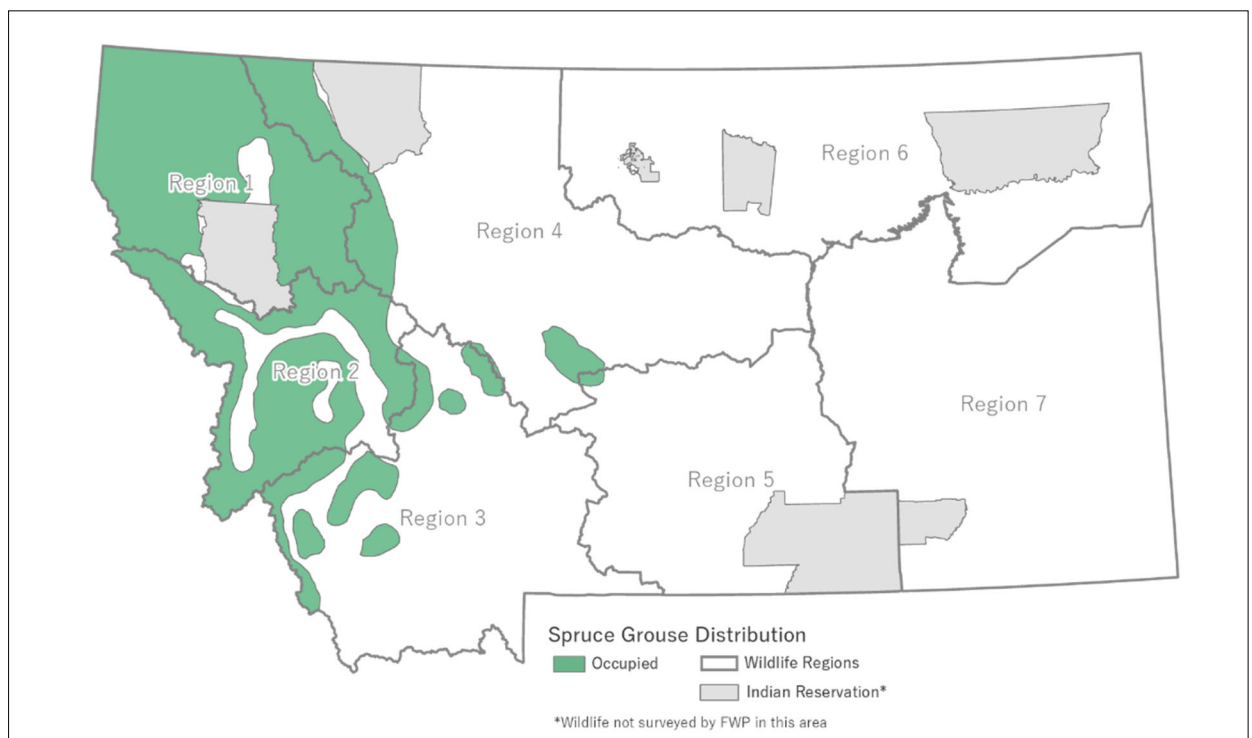


Figure 17. Spruce grouse distribution in Montana.

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 two 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, Wild Turkey Transplant, and Supplemental Feeding, with their unique characteristics are dealt with separately in this section.

Enhancing Program Capacity

Much of the program’s implementation is driven by the regions, specifically from dedicated program staff in regions 4, 6, and 7. The program also partners directly with federal agencies (e.g., BLM, NRCS, USFS, and USFWS) and conservation partners such as National Wild Turkey Federation and Pheasants Forever, Inc, to promote and/or deliver habitat enhancement projects, expanding the program’s conservation footprint across the state.

Objective: Continue to expand and enhance program delivery to FWP regions.

Strategy: Work with federal and conservation partners to utilize partner positions as a way to develop UGBEP projects in places where FWP staff is limited.

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 USDA Farm Services standard costs and other sources of information.

Strategy: Streamline project proposal and review processes.

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; and
- 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 pheasant 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 sounder 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.

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 two 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.
- Equipment maintenance
- Infrastructure maintenance (e.g., annual maintenance of irrigation ditches, fences)
- To maintain grassland/forb integrity and productivity, prescribed fire, light disking, interseeding, and managed grazing will be employed.

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

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 regional staff 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 biennial 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 staff. 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 FSA, 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 FSA employees, this could improve efficiency and would make *program* contributions toward a project clearer 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 habitat projects may involve a cost-share reimbursement or lease payment 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.

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 , Conservation Reserve Program, Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program, and the Conservation Stewardship Program , 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 farmland. For pheasant 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.

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 regional staff 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 minimum 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 FWP's 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.

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. The UGBEP ARM were recently 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).

FWP and DNRC renewed an 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: Work with private landowners and cooperators to develop and implement habitat enhancement projects on priority private lands.

Pen-raised Pheasant Releases

One component of the UGBEP is the release of pen-raised pheasants. The intent of the releases 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 is to reimburse landowners for releasing healthy 10-week old (e.g., minimum age) pheasant between August 1 and September 15 into habitat that has been evaluated by regional staff to determine suitability and pheasant capacity (12.9.602, ARM). Since 2011, when the Strategic Plan was first written, the level of the public’s participation in pheasant releases continues to wane as interest and demand decreases. The program will continue to evaluate releases whenever landowners show interest, building on hunter opportunities and building relationships with landowners new to the UGBEP.

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 pheasant—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: Develop minimal requirements for reimbursing landowners for released pheasant. Landowners who raise their own pheasant for releasing will be reimbursed according to established rules.

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

Strategy: Continue with established timeline for applications to better fit with commercial raiser's schedules and achievable by FWP staff.

Supplemental Feeding of 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 pheasant 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: 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

Wild turkeys are not native to Montana. Established populations are the result of trapping wild 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 wild turkey transplant projects based on biological factors and the potential for hunting opportunity.

Strategy: Utilize a formal review process for each proposed wild 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.

FUNDING ALLOCATION

Program priorities are directly linked to funding allocation. UGBEP funds are allocated by statute and by FWP policy. Prior to the 66th Montana Legislature (2023), UGBEP was required to set aside a maximum of 15 percent of the annual revenue to fund bird planting activities (e.g., pen-raised pheasant releases, wild turkey transplants, and supplemental feeding in Daniels, Sheridan, and Roosevelt counties). Of the 15 percent set aside, at least 25 percent must be spent on pheasant releases.

Since 2018, public interest in pheasant releases waned and the availability of pheasant raisers decreased across the state. The bird planting fund continued to build significantly over time. Through the efforts of the UGBEP Council and Representative Ross Fitzgerald, HB 74, which eliminated the requirement to fund pheasant releases, was enacted. The requirements to set aside 15 percent for bird planting activities with 25 percent of that being required to be spent each year on pheasant releases were eliminated. The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program may still fund pheasant releases and wild turkey transplants when there is public interest and program eligibilities are met.

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 three regional habitat specialists who are dedicated to UGBEP delivery. In addition, provide funding to support cooperative positions located across the state that provide farming activities on areas open to hunting; technical support for forest management that benefit wild turkey and mountain grouse; and program outreach with opportunities to leverage UGBEP with federal funding. Currently, the UGBEP partners with federal agencies, national conservation organizations, and local conservation chapters to support 8 positions.
- 2) Continue funding eligible pheasants releases to enhance populations and as guided by rules and statutes. Releases must include hens and not more than 40% roosters.

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.”

To ensure the program is implemented equitably state-wide, the UGBEP Citizens’ Advisory Council has expressed concern as to the possibility of making excessive expenditures on individual properties. FWP acknowledges the Council’s concern and recognizes the value of investing funding in an equitable manner, achieving the greatest benefits for upland game birds and hunters across the state. This includes not overemphasizing individual properties at the expense of opportunities in other areas, but instead evaluating each funding opportunity on its individual merits.

Upon further discussion with the Council on May 9, 2017, the following elements shall be recognized when making funding decisions and ascertaining project expenditure limits, consistent with statute (MCA 87-1-246) and rule (ARM 12.9.707(4)):

- 1) Program expenditure limits for a particular property shall be determined based on the cumulative UGBEP contribution through active Program contracts.
 - a. An example property includes UGBEP expenses of \$20,000 toward shelterbelts, \$3,000 toward a 3-year annual food plot, \$2,000 toward a pheasant release, and \$70,000 toward a grazing system, all active contracts. The “project” expenditure is the sum of all UGBEP expenses across all active contracts, which in this case is \$95,000. At this point in time, project expenditures are within \$5,000 of reaching the \$100,000 cap.

A few years later, on this same property, the food plot, shelterbelt, and pheasant release contracts have all expired and no new contracts have been developed. At this point in time the grazing contract is still active and the project expenditure for the property is \$70,000.

- 2) Conservation easements that were purchased in part with UGBEP funds will be considered separate projects; their cost is not considered part of the cumulative UGBEP contribution. The justification for this includes 1) the perpetual nature of conservation easements; their longevity is effectively timeless, and 2) the permanent interest held by the state for these properties merits ongoing enhancement, where and when applicable.

- 3) The department will notify the Council via email or at bi-annual meetings of proposed expenditures that approach or exceed the \$100,000 cap.

Objective: Clarify the role of maintenance and related expenses pertaining the statutory expenditure cap and ongoing UGBEP investment in public lands.

Strategy: Maintenance of projects is often essential to keeping a project viable. ARM 12.9.707 and ARM 12.9.705(4d) contain provisions specific to maintenance as follows:

- Maintenance is defined as “a temporary activity necessary for the upkeep, repair, or enhancement of an existing or intended long-term habitat component as identified in the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program contract or work plan.”
- Expenditures related to maintenance activities are separate from project costs and are not administered or capped under statute.

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, extract summary information, and store contracts and related content, all via a well-designed database system. the current system, which was put into use in 2007. This 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, secure, and convenient for tracking.

Strategy: Enter UGBEP project data as it becomes available.

Strategy: Electronic copies of UGBEP contracts are stored in the program database for safekeeping and to ensure accessibility to all program staff.

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 map pages showing the 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 through FWP's Hunt Planner and the UGBEP Web page.

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 2021 to accommodate specific signing for projects on private land or public land; walk-in or permission needed; and safety zone signs. 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 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 5).

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 is conducted by regional staff. FWP will continue monitoring, making monitoring a part of the program staffs' 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 program staff detailing specific measurable objectives for the upcoming fiscal year.

Strategy: Program habitat specialists, 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 contracts); and
- 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;
- Types of administration costs for previous year and at some point, 5-year average;
- Habitat projects monitored, including summary of compliance actions taken; and

- 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); and
- Summary of comment 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); and
- Anticipated program changes, partner contract renewal, rulemaking, among others.

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 through wildlife field staff located throughout Montana. The following Regional strategic plans were prepared 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 the Program and the Advisory Council, as well as 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 Habitat Specialists and the program coordinator. In addition to work plans, Regions 1, 4, and 5 support ongoing farming partner positions and activities in established focus areas that also utilize annual work plans. Region 2 benefits from the efforts of a National Wild Turkey Federation cooperative biologist position who provides technical input to the US Forest Service that benefits wild turkey and mountain grouse. The UGBEP Council has expressed an interest in reviewing draft work plans with a follow-up review of actual accomplishments.

Regions with UGBEP Habitat Specialists continue to 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 partridge areas. First, the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) 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). The Reservation manages extensive riparian habitats that benefit pheasants and other wildlife species. Hunters are often successful hunting gray partridge, which are abundant most times. 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 for all three species, dusky, ruffed, and spruce grouse. To date Region 1 has not used UGBEP funds on mountain grouse habitats although considerations for these species and habitat management actions have occurred as a function of timber management actions on FWP Wildlife Management Areas. Further discussion may be necessary to determine if there are additional opportunities to improve habitat conditions on FWP or private lands with willing owners.

Program Delivery

The Ninepipe WMA area manager oversees all habitat enhancement projects at Ninepipe, to include ongoing maintenance of projects funded by UGBEP. The Flathead Valley wildlife biologist taps into UGBEP funding when opportunities are available to enhance game bird cover on the North Shore WMA.

Since 2015, the region has successfully collaborated with USFWS and Pheasants Forever, Inc, to renovate native grasslands on USFWS-managed Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA). Habitat enhancement activities include renovating degraded uplands, habitat maintenance, and weed management. These activities specifically benefit pheasants and waterfowl, along with other local wildlife species. This collaborative effort is scheduled through 2025, but there is a strong desire and documented support from the public to continue efforts of this partnership in the long term, using available funds from USFWS, UGBEP, and local Pheasants Forever chapters.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

UGBEP opportunities in northwest Montana focus on partner collaborations to affect landscape-scale habitat enhancements located largely on Ninepipe WMA, Northshore WMA, numerous USFWS WPA, and adjacent lands managed by the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes.

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.

In 2023, the Region renewed its cooperative agreement with US Fish Wildlife Service and Pheasants Forever, Inc to employ a Habitat Specialist to conduct habitat renovations on USFWS Waterfowl Production Areas. Discussions are warranted to explore opportunities to expand similar efforts to North Shore WMA and adjacent WPA.

Region 1 staff, in collaboration with other regional staff, have worked on a sharp-tailed grouse reintroduction project targeting three potential release sites containing adequate habitat requirements. The primary release sites consist of the Blackfoot Valley and on the MPG ranch in the northern Bitterroot Valley. Transplant operation began in fall 2021.

Focus Areas and Implementation

The grassland/farmland/wetland complex of the Ninepipe area was identified some 80 years ago as worthy of conservation and management for game bird production and corresponding public hunting opportunities. The Ninepipe area has much community support. 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 local 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 are 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 wild 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 wild 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 often lack sufficient winter forage for wild 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 2022, with interagency cooperation, efforts began on sharp-tailed grouse reintroduction from eastern Montana to suitable habitat in portions of the Sapphire Mountains foothills, the Blackfoot Valley and the lower Flint Creek Valley.

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 utilizes the UGBEP within existing habitat conservation efforts as a supplement, where fitting, for upland game birds to expand conservation accomplishments. Since 2015, Dave Nikonow of the Wild Turkey Federation, with support from UGBEP and Region 1 of the U. S. Forest Service, has worked on a partnership project in Region 2. Dave's focus has been to integrate himself with Forest Service staff to help develop silvicultural prescriptions that incorporate habitat enhancements for native grouse and wild turkey. With increased emphasis since 2015 to manage forests in the wildland-urban interface, as well as manage future fire severity in mid-slope situations, Dave's project has seen constant and increasing activity and effect for the benefit of birds and hunting opportunities. 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 three 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 as pheasant, gray partridge, and wild turkey. 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. 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, sage-grouse, gray partridge, wild turkey, pheasant, and sharp-tailed grouse.

Program Delivery

Region 3 is notably elk-centric, with approximately 50% of the State's elk harvest occurring in the Region. Area biologists are oftentimes consumed with related yet competing priorities, requiring focus on numerous regional needs. Nonetheless, UGBEP implementation is present in the region, historically focused on FWP-managed lands, specifically Canyon Ferry WMA and, to a lesser extent, Poindexter Slough FAS.

Since 2015, additional program implementation occurs on US Forest Service lands where forest management activities focus on aspen regeneration to benefit ruffed grouse through managed burns or hand-thinning conifers.

FWP technician staff at Canyon Ferry WMA conduct habitat enhancements and management for pheasants and waterfowl. Collaboration with local Pheasants Forever chapters remain an instrumental partnership to help advance habitat projects on FWP-managed lands. Chapter members volunteer numerous hours and donate seeds and other material costs.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

Publicly accessible pheasant and wild 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. Wild 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 to access. Canyon Ferry WMA and some fishing access sites along riparian corridors represent the greatest opportunities for pheasants. Opportunities for wild turkey hunting continue to expand across the region in habitats that support populations.

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, USFWS, and private lands. There are opportunities in these areas for enhancing habitat, primarily via grazing management and conifer removal in sage-grouse habitat.

Ruffed and dusky grouse would benefit from grazing management improvements and aspen regeneration projects on some areas—mostly involving USFS, DNRC, and private lands. Conifer removal is primarily through mechanical means funded in part by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Nature Conservancy, and through projects that benefit sage-grouse and ungulates. Opportunities are good with accompanying public access.

Opportunities exist to expand UGBEP implementation on FWP's Fishing Access Sites, State Trust Lands, and USFS-managed lands that potentially provide quality upland game bird

hunting. Collaboration between regional staff, conservation partners, and government agency staff is encouraged whenever possible.

Focus Areas and Implementation

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

Background:

Sage-grouse were previously categorized as warranted but precluded for Endangered Species Act listing due to range-wide declines. They remain a priority for conservation and enhancement. There are opportunities to collaborate with federal and private partners for enhancing grazing management. Conifer removal mitigation is ongoing 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. Conifer removal projects for sage-grouse may require UGBEP funds 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 when funding is available 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 their local sage-grouse working groups.
- f. The Beaverhead County sage-grouse migrations in the SW Gravellys through the valleys to the West and South, as well as local movements to the North are somewhat unique. This is a Priority Area of Conservation for sage-grouse and will continue to receive FWP priority attention.

- **Mountain Coniferous Forests**

Background:

The coniferous forests of Southwest Montana experienced expansive areas of beetle kill in the early 2010s.

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 UGBEP funds for forested species.

- **Riverine Habitats**

Background:

Southwest Montana has seven major rivers with existing and potentially suitable wild turkey habitat.

Goal:

The Region 3 goal for wild 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 wild turkeys could involve NWTF volunteers and private landowners.

- **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 winter 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). A broad assessment of regional FAS and WMA with existing or potential pheasant habitat will help identify sites that would benefit from future habitat enhancements. The primary opportunities for partnering are with organizations like NWTF, DNRC, and PF on mixed public and private land 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 projects as an incentive for enrollment. In addition, work to secure additional CRP lands open to sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge hunting.

Region 4 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program in north-central Montana plays a key role in positively affecting upland game bird habitat, populations, and hunter opportunity. This plan describes Region 4 implementation of the UGBEP.

Primary management considerations include:

- Upland game bird species population levels and distribution;
- New opportunities for enhancing upland game bird habitat;
- Public hunting access opportunities;
- Partnering opportunities with public land management agencies, NGO's, private organizations, and landowners; and
- Maintenance of existing quality habitat and enhancement and restoration of degraded upland game bird habitat.

Overview of Game Bird Species and Associated Habitat Requirements

Region 4 contains topographically and ecologically diverse habitat for upland game birds, from forested mountains to sagebrush-grasslands to productive riparian and agricultural areas. Habitat in Region 4 supports nearly all of Montana's upland game bird species (except Chukar Partridge). The species richness and habitat diversity provide excellent hunting opportunities. Focal species in the Region include sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, dusky, ruffed and spruce grouse, pheasant, gray partridge and wild turkey. Enhancing habitat and hunting opportunities for these species is the primary goal.

Focal Species Overview:

- 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 distribution of suitable native grasslands with residual cover including native outcrops and CRP. Improving and increasing nesting cover, and woody habitat are the primary mechanisms for enhancing sharp-tailed grouse populations. Conversion of native grasslands to crop production loom as the greatest long-term threat.
- b) Pheasant: In Region 4, pheasants are closely associated with native riparian/river bottom habitats, irrigation districts, and mixed agricultural areas with CRP and shelterbelts. Habitats with ample annual cropland, idle nesting cover, and winter

cover (i.e., woody vegetation, cattails, etc.) are preferred. The bulk of pheasants in Region 4 can be found in southern Glacier, Toole and Liberty counties, eastern Pondera and Teton counties, northern Cascade and Judith Basin counties, Fergus and Petroleum counties and the western two-thirds of Chouteau county. The advent of CRP in the 1980s enhanced pheasant populations but the loss of CRP over time has resulted in a like-wise but opposite decline. In Montana, just over 1.5 million acres of CRP was lost from 2012 to 2020.

- c) Gray Partridge: Gray partridge are widely distributed across Region 4, paralleling sharp-tailed grouse and pheasant distribution combined. Due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats and their high reproductive capacity. Gray partridge can sometimes survive where pheasant 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. Gray partridge are particularly susceptible to extreme weather events and can have significant impacts from a population level perspective. Gray partridge have declined in much of the region after large scale extreme snow/winter events in 2019 and 2020.
- d) Sage-Grouse: Sage-grouse are primarily distributed in the eastern third of Region 4 in 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 widespread within the Region, but loss of sagebrush habitat has restricted their range. Sage-grouse are sagebrush prairie obligates. The primary mechanisms for retaining and/or improving sage-grouse populations are to maintain and expand sagebrush habitat and to improve grazing management practices emphasizing residual native plant cover and long-term plant community health, and to energy, residential, and other commercial development in key Priority Areas for Conservation (PAC).
- e) Wild Turkey: Wild turkeys have been introduced to numerous locations in Region 4 and reintroductions/augmentations are an ongoing objective. Huntatable populations occur in Fergus, Petroleum, Choteau, Cascade and Teton counties. Small populations along the Missouri River and its tributaries continue to grow and expand. Ponderosa pine uplands and productive riparian corridors with cottonwoods, native shrubs and cropland are considered good habitat for wild turkeys in the Region.

- f) Mountain Grouse: Ruffed, dusky (Blue), and spruce grouse exist in viable populations in the forested mountains and foothills of Region 4. While there is overlap in range, spruce and dusky grouse typically occupy higher elevations, while ruffed grouse occupy lower elevations. Diets of these grouse are similar during the spring and summer, but during the winter ruffed grouse will focus their foraging on young aspens and berry producing shrubs, while spruce and dusky grouse can be found in higher elevation habitats to eat conifer needles and buds. Mountain grouse are susceptible to extreme winter conditions. During extreme cold events these grouse need dense woody cover such as shrub thickets, young conifers with low canopies, and deep snow for burrowing. In the winter when there isn't adequate woody cover and over 12" of snow, ruffed grouse will burrow into the snow providing thermal cover. On years where the winter is cold and dry, and the woody cover is limited, over winter survival is reduced. Mountain grouse habitat can be improved by using selective logging, prescribed burning, riparian restoration, and prescribed grazing to promote dense understory growth.

Public Hunting Opportunities

Opportunity for upland game bird hunting in Region 4 varies by species, habitat, and access opportunities. Some areas provide great free public hunting opportunities, while in other areas access may be more difficult. Furthermore, some corners of the region provide marginal opportunities for a wide variety of species (i.e., a mixed bag of multiple species), while in other areas, only excellent opportunities for just one species. Whereas more and more private land is becoming unavailable for free public hunting opportunities due to increasing amounts of hunting lease agreements, abundant public land and free private land hunting opportunities remain. Federal public lands commonly hunted include those managed by the USFWS, National Forest Service (NFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Popular state-managed lands include DNRC School Trust Lands, and FWP Wildlife Management Areas. Region 4 regularly enrolls private lands into the Departments Block Management Program resulting in a large portion of private lands open for hunter access. The Region also oversees habitat management and access on nine conservation easements. The Region has been a focal area of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program since its inception in 1987.

Program Delivery

The key to effective delivery of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program in Region 4 is local field personnel working directly with landowners, agency and private partners such as the NRCS, Farm Service Agency (FSA), USFWS, DNRC, BLM, and Pheasants Forever. Region 4 staffs an UGBEP Specialist stationed in Great Falls, as well as five Area Game Biologists and Non-game Biologist, all of which play direct or indirect roles in upland game bird habitat management. Over the years, Pheasants Forever and FWP have partnered to support a habitat technician position based in Lewistown. The technician's role has been to focus on habitat enhancement projects on existing public and accessible private lands such as the FWP-managed Beckman WMA and Pheasants Forever-owned lands.

FWP field staff continually contact the NRCS and FSA and to stay up to date on the best management practices. Informational handouts are regularly distributed to partners and landowners who are interested in the program's opportunities. Other important outreach outlets used include the FWP website, radio and press releases, presentations given to community organizations and working groups, and impromptu field staff conversations with potential interested individuals.

Upland Game Bird Surveys

Various upland game bird demographic data is collected through annual upland bird surveys such as pheasant crow counts, lek surveys, drumming surveys, and hunter harvest surveys. Survey efforts in Region 4 are critical to understanding upland bird land use, population shifts, as well as hunter demographics. Wildlife managers can use the data to make educated decisions on appropriate, up to date, habitat enhancement practices, thus getting the best wildlife benefit for the money. UGBEP staff may opportunistically assist in conducting upland game bird and waterfowl surveys as needed throughout the region.

Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

Enhancing upland game bird habitat has been, and will continue to be, the basis for maintaining sustainable upland game bird populations across Montana. Partnerships with federal and state agencies and private organizations are critical for maximizing the value of available funding. The UGBEP traditionally has cost-shared shelterbelts, food plots, dense nesting cover, grazing management plans, wetland and riparian area protection and

enhancement, conservation easements, sagebrush leases, habitat management leases, and CRP leases (Open Fields) to enhance and secure upland game bird habitat. Other types of leases may be pursued in the future as new opportunities arise and funding permits. Expiring CRP contracts represent a significant loss of important upland game bird habitat across Region 4. The UGBEP will be utilized to encourage continuation of CRP re-enrollments and new enrollments. Additional creative 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 five main ecological, habitat, and/or jurisdictional types in which to frame upland bird habitat projects: 1) Public Lands, 2) Native Foothill Grasslands 3) Sagebrush-Grasslands, 4) Agricultural Lands, and 5) Forested Mountains. For these ecological types, existing habitats, public accessibility, economic factors and community interest play an important role in identifying and prioritizing UGBEP projects.

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

1. **Priority Public Lands** (including but not limited to FWP - Wildlife Management Areas and Conservation Easements, state and other public lands).
 - a. **Background:**

Private land access is diminishing in varying degrees across Region 4, with the rate of leasing of hunting rights on private lands proving especially challenging. 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 hunting access. Thus, it is important to continue pursuing UGBEP opportunities that ensure permanent public access (in combination with quality habitat maintenance). One of the best tools to accomplish this is to protect and enhance large blocks of publicly owned land.
 - b. **Goals:**
 - i. Protect public lands and adjoining private lands from loss of upland game bird habitat;
 - ii. Maintain and improve public access and hunting opportunities for all upland game bird species on public lands; and
 - iii. Increase upland bird hunting opportunity through habitat enhancement projects and block management contracts.

c. Approach:

- i. Work with DNRC, BLM, FWP WMA's and FAS's, and other public land management agencies and private organizations such as Pheasants Forever to promote appropriate UGBEP projects on public lands;
- ii. 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;
- iii. Provide incentives to encourage CRP enrollment and reenrollment on DNRC lands; and
- iv. Collaborate on improved grazing management practices on public lands.

2. **Native Foothill Grasslands** (rangeland in the non-forested portions of the mountain ranges in the Region).

a. Background:

The UGBEP was originally founded on the desire to primarily 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 native foothill grassland habitats.

b. Goals

- i. Maintain and enhance native vegetation in foothill habitat to support viable populations of sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge, and mountain grouse;
- ii. Enhance winter and nesting cover; and
- iii. Improve hunting opportunities.

c. Approach

- i. Manage for residual cover in foothill grasslands;
- ii. Encourage shrub and tree survival in coulees for winter thermal cover and food through plantings, improved grazing management strategies, and Habitat Management Leases;
- iii. Enhance grassland nesting cover through improved grazing management and improved livestock watering systems;

- iv. Increase shrubby/woody winter cover through protection of coulees with appropriate grazing management strategies and habitat management leases;
- v. Increase hunting opportunities with public access programs; and
- vi. Encourage aspen regeneration and riparian protection along the foothills of the mountains.

3. Sagebrush-Grasslands (including but not limited to those in Petroleum, Fergus, Judith Basin, and Meagher counties).

a. Background:

Maintaining healthy sagebrush-grasslands has been identified as a critical objective for sustaining viable sage-grouse populations in Montana.

b. Goals:

- i. Maintain and restore sagebrush habitat and improve grazing management projects to enhance sage-grouse populations and connectivity;
- ii. Minimize anthropogenic disturbances in sage-grouse core areas during critical time of the year; and
- iii. Improve habitat connectivity in areas known to support sage-grouse.

c. Approach:

- i. Initiate collaboration on sagebrush leases and improved grazing management;
- ii. Implement science-based noxious weed management to increase forbs important to sage-grouse during brood-rearing; and
- iii. Build upon or encourage new research projects that may be valuable to the long-term management of sage-grouse populations.

4. Agricultural Lands

a. Background:

Annual cropland, in particularly cropland near large riparian corridors and cropland adjacent to native foothill grassland habitats are ecologically high value areas for upland game birds. These areas contain greater amounts of native range, CRP and hay land which provide nesting cover for upland game

birds. While a large portion of Region 4 is void of perennial vegetation because of high soil productivity, select areas nearer river corridors and mountains are have great potential fine scale habitat improvements and public access.

b. Goals:

- i. Provide critical winter habitat for upland game birds;
- ii. Maintain productive nesting and brood rearing cover;
- iii. Increase public hunting opportunities; and
- iv. Continue promoting wildlife friendly farming and ranching practices through outreach and education.

c. Approach:

- i. Encourage new CRP enrollments and re-enrollments through UGBEP incentives and collaboration with FSA partners;
- ii. Seek out willing landowners for seasonally important cover habitat practices (winter cover, nesting cover, brood rearing cover, etc.);
- iii. Develop and establish food plots and shelterbelts, strategically connecting upland game bird habitat patches over a larger scale;
- iv. Encourage development of more UGBEP on Block Management Areas
- v. Continue wild turkey augmentation and restoration efforts to increase wild turkey numbers along the major river corridors;
- vi. Collaborate with landowners adjoining Pondera County Canal & Reservoir Company (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; and
- vii. Develop and implement grazing management plans that maintain and promote upland game bird habitat.

5. Forested mountains (all forested mountain ranges in the region)

a. Background:

Mountain grouse enhancement projects have historically received little support and interest through the UGBEP.

b. Goals:

- i. Maintain and restore/improve habitat to benefit mountain grouse and wild turkey; and
- ii. Maintain and increase public hunting opportunities.

c. Approach:

- i. Prioritize partnership opportunities for forest management projects;
- ii. Work with public land managers, such as U.S. Forest Service, BLM and UDSA, with aspen management efforts to enhance ruffed grouse habitat;
- iii. Develop and implement mountain grouse projects opportunistically; and
- iv. Collaborate on efforts to assess, monitor, augment, and translocate wild turkey populations.

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.

Program Delivery

Region 5 has four field biologists and one wildlife technician who work with the UGBEP. In addition to FWP staff, the department has partnered with Pheasants 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 bird 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 – habitat conservation measures vital to maintaining viable populations and continuing state management.
- Pheasant – high sportsman demand, habitat improvement measures very effective in producing more pheasant.
- 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. More recently development of wind farms threaten some populations.

In Region 5 there are three 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 Initiative, which paid landowners \$12.00 per acre for a 30-year lease on sagebrush grassland habitats, has been a valuable tool. FWP's Habitat Conservation Lease program will provide similar results and will be complementary with the UGBEP. These same efforts will be made in the Lavina area, the third priority focus area.

Past research collaborations with NRCS and the University of Montana to assess the effects of various grazing treatments on sage-grouse habitat and sage-grouse populations were recently concluded. The research outcome will help define future design of grazing systems that will be economically attractive to landowners while also benefitting sage-grouse.

- **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 opportunities 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 two areas along the Yellowstone River: Pompey's Pillar BLM lands and Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area FWP lands. Both sites have irrigated lands with high potential to develop excellent pheasant habitat. A habitat technician jointly funded by FWP, BLM, and Pheasants Forever has been hired and is implementing intensive habitat projects on these 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. Interest in pen-raised pheasant releases has greatly declined, with the last release occurring in 2010.

- **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 opportunities 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.

The region enrolled several properties into Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters, a program option that provides incentives to landowners to enroll in CRP and allow access for game bird hunting. As enrollment opportunities become available, the region will continue to enroll eligible lands that provide enhanced habitat to sharp-tailed grouse.

- **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, the north end of the Pryor Mountains, and the southern portion of the Big Snowy Mountains, where aspen habitats are available for improvement.

FWP has worked closely with the Custer-Gallatin 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 to stimulate regrowth. FWP has also worked with the Lewis and Clark National Forest to regenerate decadent stands of aspen by clear cutting clones along the southern boundary of National Forest in the Big Snowy Mountains. Clearcutting has proven to be the most effective way to regenerate decadent stands and produce dense, young stands of aspen vital to ruffed grouse. Continued work on national forest lands will be dependent on the completion of a programmatic EA by the Custer-Gallatin National Forest.

FWP has completed work with the Custer-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 occupied, so wild turkey releases have not been done recently. Wild turkey numbers are down in the Big and Little Snowy Mountains and along the Musselshell River. Requests by landowners for wild turkey transplants have increased in the last ten years although Region 5 has not completed a wild turkey transplant in recent years.

The requirement to allow public hunting in order to participate in the UGBEP substantially limits the participation of private landowners. Therefore, Region 5 is focusing efforts on public lands, where food plots planted primarily for pheasant will also be designed to benefit wild turkey. 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 partridge may benefit from habitat projects designed to benefit other species such as shelterbelts, food plots, and grazing systems.

Region 6 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

OVERVIEW

Region 6 in northeast Montana is a destination for game bird hunters, both residents and nonresidents alike. Its combination of strong populations of several game bird species, variety of high-quality of habitats, and abundant access draw hunters to the area year after year. Despite having the lowest human population of any region in the state, for the past 10 years it has consistently been the #1 region in the state in terms of the number of bird hunter days, and in the number of both pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse harvested annually. Local communities recognize the importance of game birds and game bird hunting to the economics and culture of the region. Maintaining abundant game bird populations, high habitat quality, good hunting experiences, and community interest in upland game birds are the overarching goals of the UGBEP in Region 6. The following section of the plan reviews the status of game birds and upland hunting in the region, our focus areas and strategic objectives in each, and direction for any supplemental feeding and pheasant releasing activities that may take place in the region.

UPLAND GAME BIRD POPULATION STATUS

Region 6 supports sustainable, huntable populations of native sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse, and non-native pheasants, gray partridge, and wild turkey. Population trends are monitored primarily by spring adult surveys, typically monitoring numbers of male upland game birds due to visual display (sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse) or calling pheasants. These survey data span across a wide variety of environmental conditions, habitat changes, and weather patterns. Survey data indicate a general increase in upland game bird populations from the mid-1980s through early 2000s. More recently from the mid-2000s until early 2020s these populations have tended to stabilize in the eastern parts of the region and may have declined slightly in the western parts of the region. Declines in many areas may be related to a large reduction in the number of acres enrolled in CRP from 2008 through 2021, during which Region 6 lost over 1.1 million acres of CRP.

- a) 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. Due to their absence of a functional gizzard, sage-grouse rely on soft plants, insects and other easily digested food sources. Therefore, they are dependent on sagebrush because it retains leaves year-round. Historical

distribution places them much more widely, but loss of their required sagebrush habitat has restricted their range (Figure 18).

Sage-grouse spring lek surveys serve as the primary indicator of population trend. Surveys of the Valley County Adaptive Harvest Management leks, a subset of leks counted regularly in core habitats for 10 years or more, indicates populations have increased slightly since 1989 (Figure 19). Remaining lek surveys across the region also indicate a stable population. Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered sage-grouse for listing under the Endangered Species Act, and found they were not warranted for listing in 2015. However, significant focus still remains on the species due to concerns about populations and threats range wide. Fish, Wildlife & Parks is currently responsible for management of this native bird species, which is considered a Species of Concern for the state. The primary mechanism for retaining and improving sage-grouse populations is conserving and expanding sagebrush habitat. In Region 6, the primary threat to sagebrush habitat has been conversion to cropland agriculture.

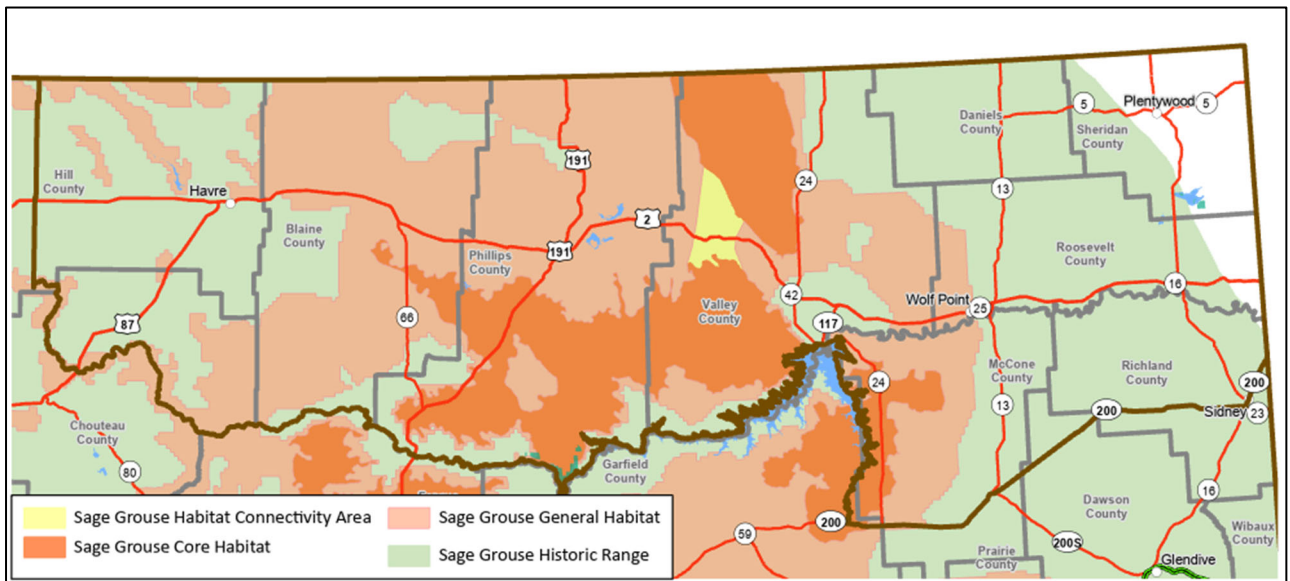


Figure 18. Sage-grouse distribution in Region 6.

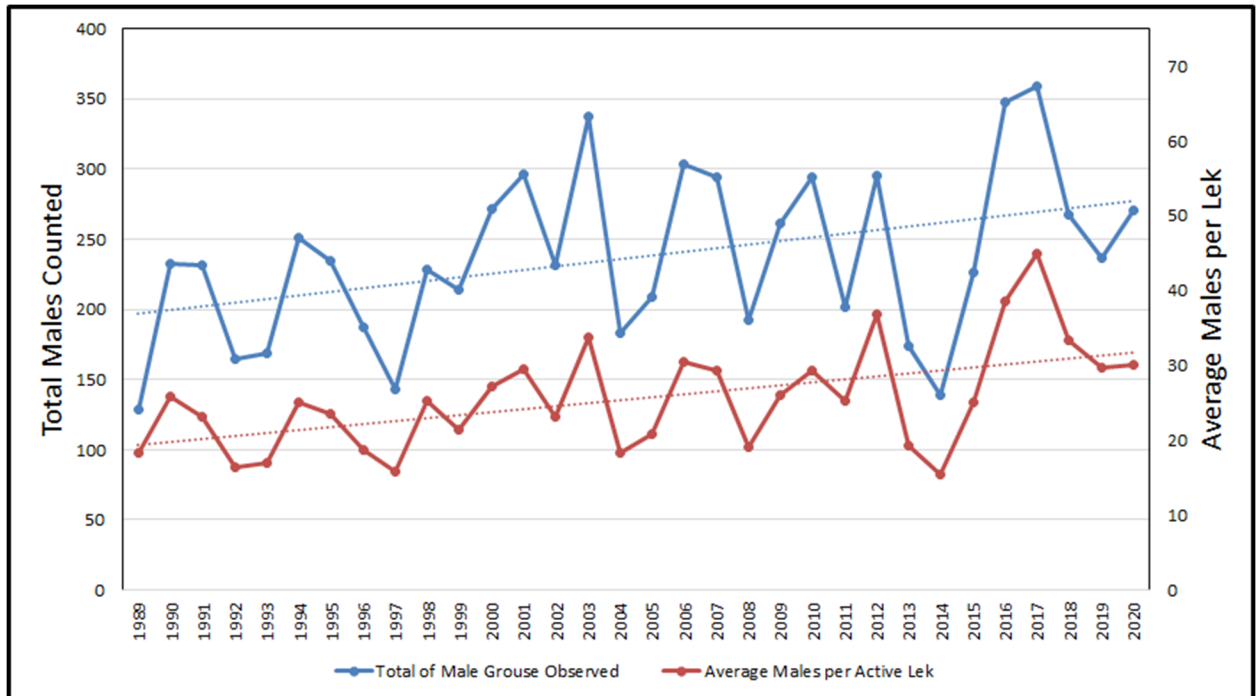


Figure 19. Sage-grouse lek surveys of males on Valley County Adaptive Harvest Management leks from 1989 to 2020.

- b) Sharp-tailed Grouse: This native upland game bird is widely distributed across much of eastern Montana, including all of Region 6. Their wide range is primarily due to their adaptability to a variety of habitats, including native rangelands, CRP, and cropland. Sharp-tailed grouse populations increased from the mid-1980s through early 2000s across the region, as evidenced by lek counts in Roosevelt and Hill counties (Figures 20 and 21). These populations have stabilized in the eastern portions of the region over the last 12 years and have declined slightly in the western portions of the region from their recent highs during the same timeframe. The likely drivers behind these changes are the fluctuations in amount of nesting cover due to CRP, the amount of well managed grazing lands, and in the western parts of the region a string of years with challenging weather may also be playing a big role. Improving nesting cover, as well as native woody shrub cover for winter use continues to be the primary mechanisms for improving sharp-tailed grouse populations, although more research is needed to identify more specific areas within the region where habitat work would benefit sharp-tailed grouse the most.

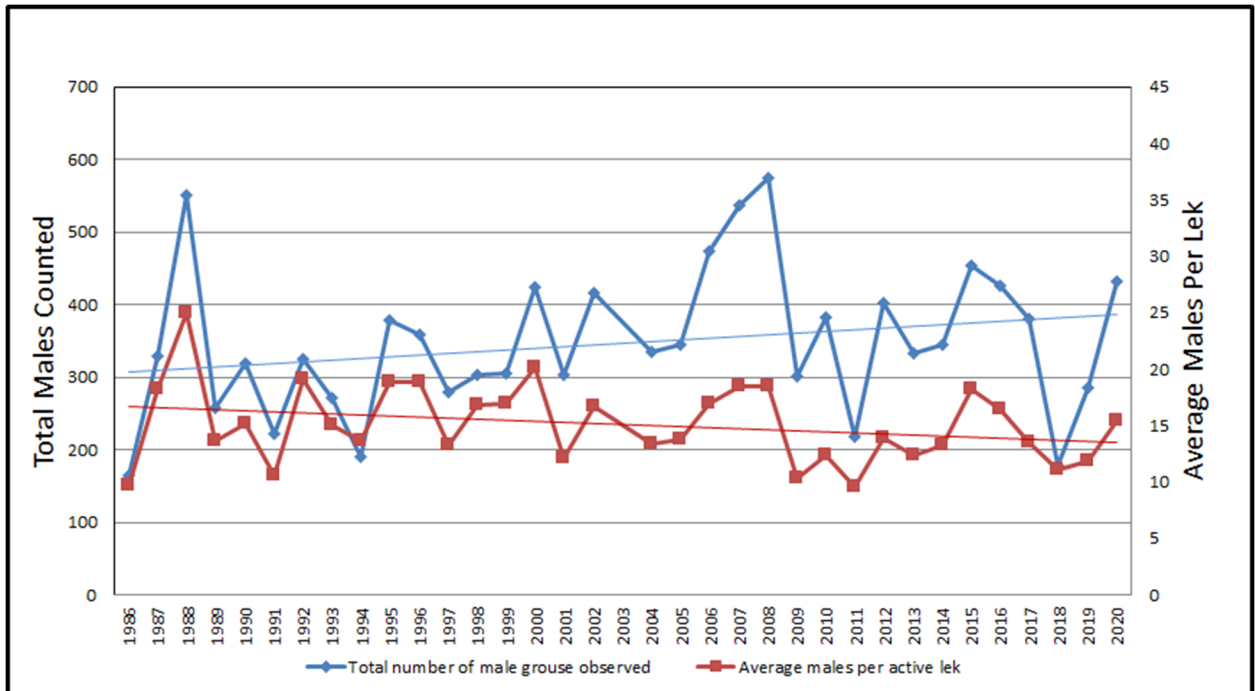


Figure 20. Sharp-tailed grouse lek surveys of males in the Roosevelt County survey area, 1986 to 2020.

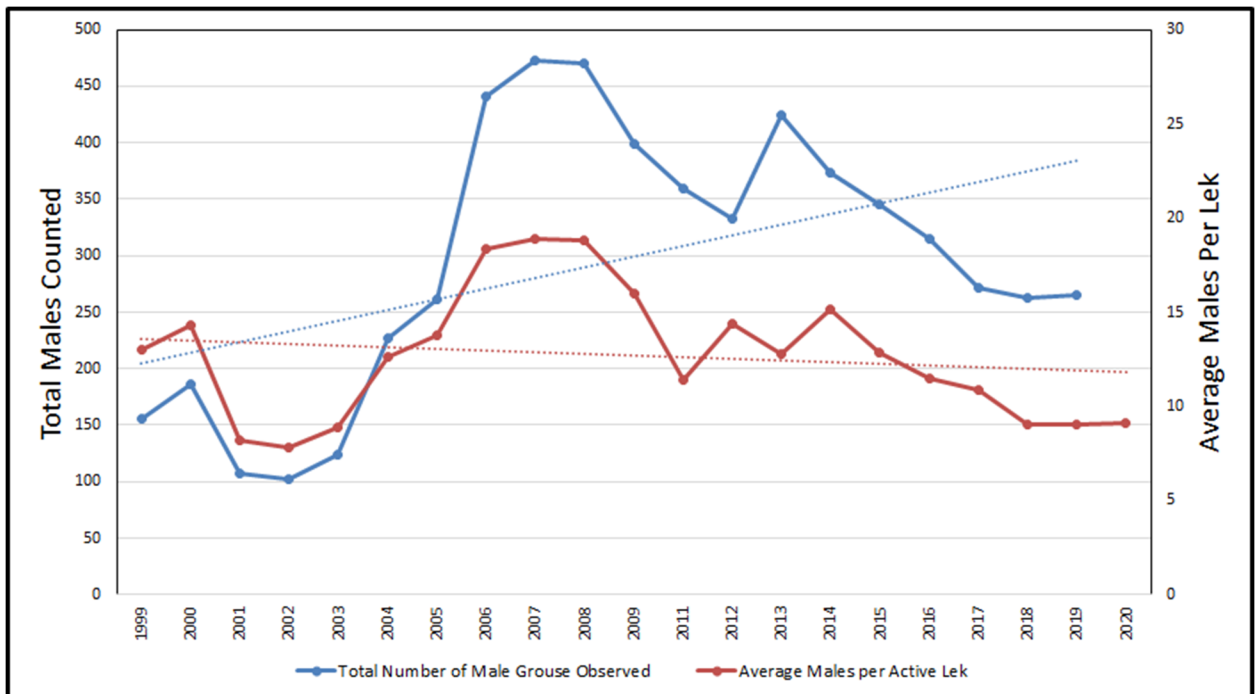


Figure 21. Sharp-tailed grouse lek surveys of males in the Hill County survey area, 1999 to 2020.

- c) Pheasant: This non-native upland game bird is closely associated with riparian/river bottom habitats and mixed agriculture (cropland, CRP, pasture) in Region 6 (Figure 22). Good habitats offer sufficient food sources, ample nesting cover, and winter cover (woody vegetation or cattails). Population monitoring largely relies on spring crowing counts, as well as harvest data. Spring crow counts in the western third of the region indicate slight decline in pheasant populations since the early 2000s, before which they had increased since the late 1980s. The central and eastern parts of the region have seen stable to increasing pheasant counts since about 1986 (Figure 23). Pheasant habitat west of Glasgow is mostly along the Milk River. East of Glasgow pheasant habitats consist of river bottom and mixed agriculture, and pheasants tend to be more widely distributed in that half of the region. Fluctuations in populations of pheasants across the region have largely been tied to changes in nesting cover related to the CRP program but may also be influenced by other habitat factors. Variations in weather, particularly precipitation, over longer time scales may also be a key factor in the different population trajectories in each half of the region in recent years.

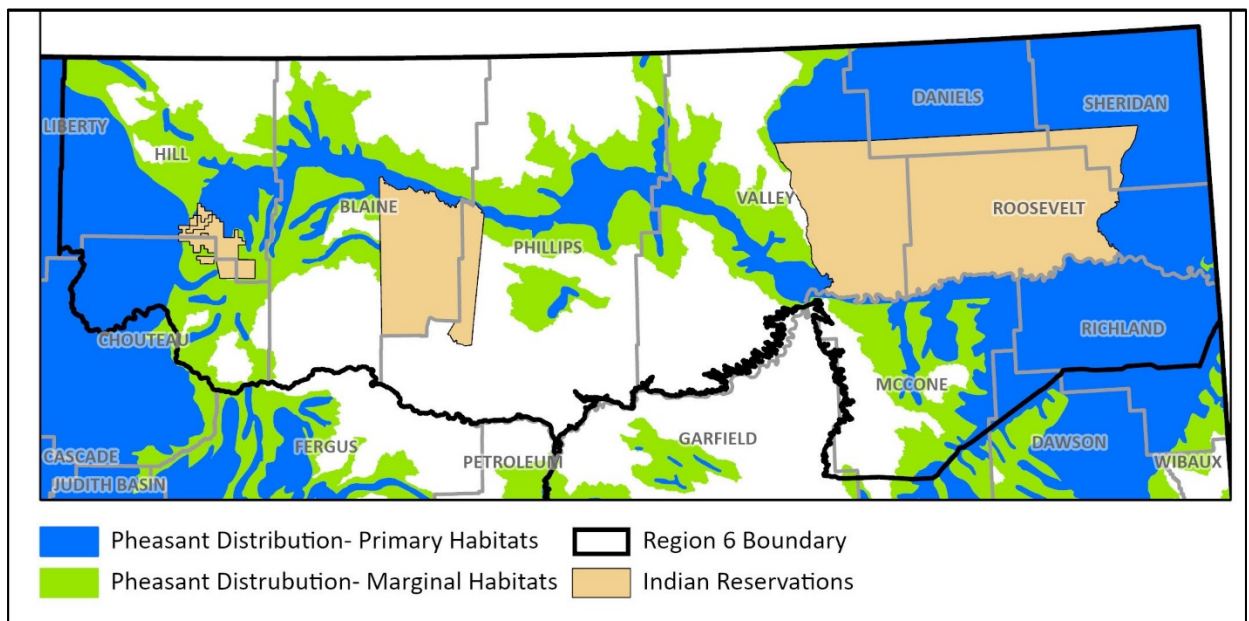


Figure 22. Pheasant habitat in Region 6.

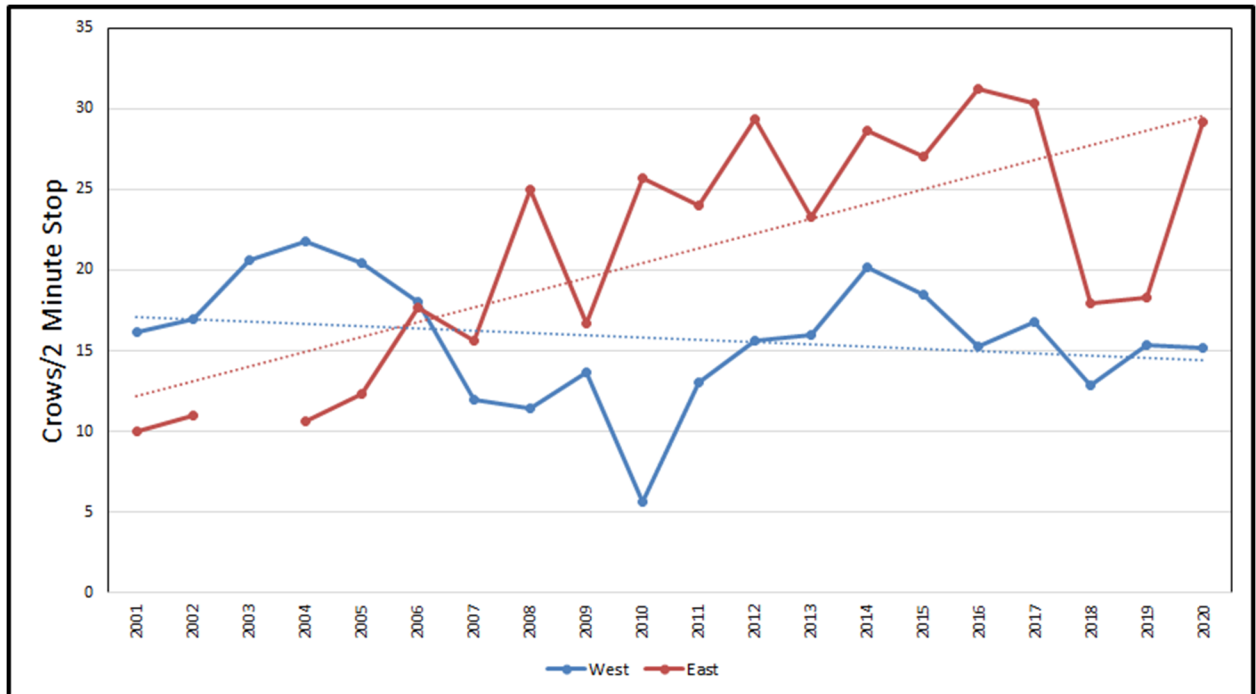


Figure 23. The average numbers of crows per two minute stop on pheasant crowing route surveys across Region 6 from 2001 to 2020. Surveys are grouped as east and west of Glasgow.

Note: The eastern survey no longer includes data from the surveys conducted on Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge as they were cancelled after the 2016 season.

- d) Gray Partridge: Gray partridge, often called Hungarian partridge or just hunns, 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. While they can be found in a wide variety of habitats, in Region 6 partridge seem to be more prevalent in areas of mixed agriculture, where croplands, grass pastures, and patches of woody cover are interspersed. Populations are variable from year to year due to their ability to be highly productive during favorable weather patterns, but susceptible to high winter mortality and severe drought. No surveys are conducted for gray partridge, rather harvest trends indicate long-term population trends (Figure 25). Populations in the region saw very large spikes in production in 1988 and 2003, but often quickly return to a lower-level outside of these highly productive years. Long term, it appears that partridge populations may be slowly declining. However, because our only population measurement is partridge harvest, this decline may be more a function of declining hunter participation rather than an actual decrease in populations.

PUBLIC HUNTING

- a) Free Public Hunting Access: Access is generally good in Region 6 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, and USFWS Refuges (Figure 24). Approximately 1.3 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 conservation easements, UGBEP agreements, and Migratory Bird Wetland Program agreements. The UGBEP has opened up an average of 90,000 acres of additional access to bird hunters annually in Region 6 between 2017-2020.

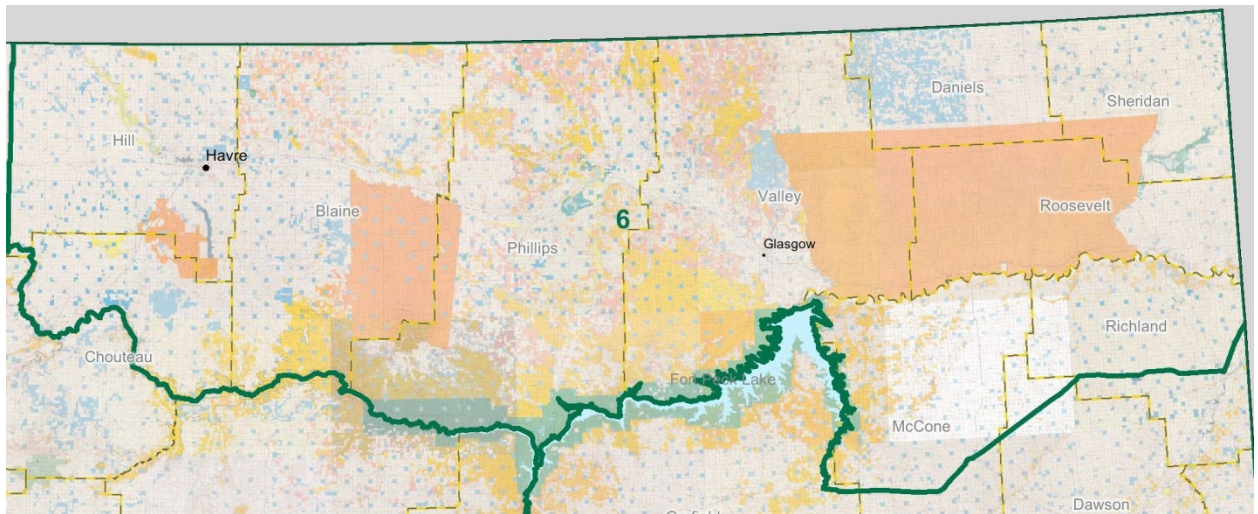


Figure 24. Region 6 public land.

Legend: BLM=yellow and pink, state land=blue, USFWS=green. Note-Reservations=orange are under tribal management.

- b) Harvest trends: A secondary measure of population trends is hunting harvest. In the case of gray partridge and wild turkey, harvest is the primary measure of population trends. These data are the result of the FWP annual statewide telephone harvest survey. Harvest of game birds in the region increased from 1980 until around 2004. There has been a decreasing trend in harvest for all species since 2004, with differing rates of decline depending on the species, and with significant annual variations related to weather (Figure 25). The causes of declining harvest are most likely related to declining hunter numbers, as discussed in more detail in the following section, as well as reduction of CRP habitats across the region. Due to concerns about the species at state and range-wide scales, sage-grouse bag limits

have been reduced and the season shortened, resulting in a decreasing harvest trend. Bag limits and seasons have remained relatively stable for all other species in the region.

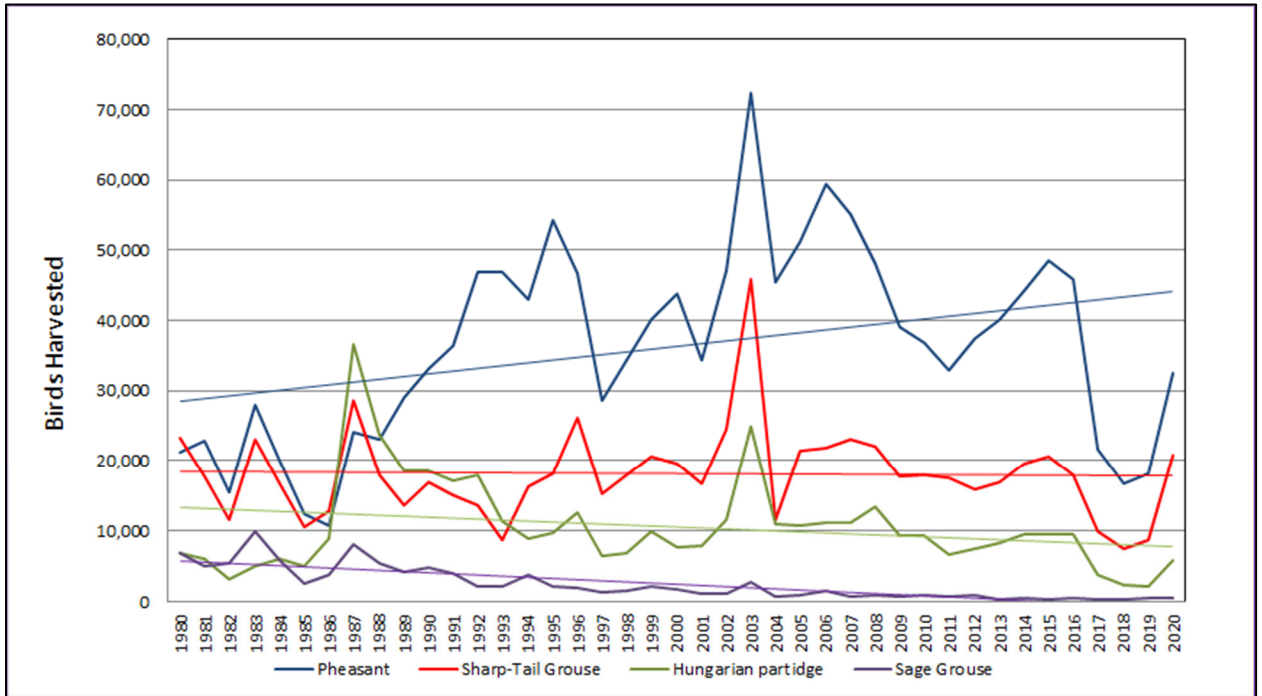


Figure 25. Region 6 upland game bird harvest trends from 1980 to 2020.

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 6 is fortunate to have an upland game bird program specialist stationed in Plentywood, as well as four area biologists actively managing upland game birds. In addition, there are two partner Farm Bill biologists, one stationed in Scobey and one in Chinook, that are funded jointly by FWP, NRCS, Pheasants Forever, and Ducks Unlimited, who work out of NRCS offices and help to promote the UGBEP and other wildlife habitat programs. A brochure for the program has been developed that can be handed out at regional FWP offices and NRCS offices, as well as more detailed fact sheets about the more popular project types if requested by landowners. Informational mailings are sent annually to landowners to highlight specific programs, particularly Open Fields. Social media posts and press releases at key times of the year have been used occasionally with some success. Other communication and means to disseminate information include the FWP website and local radio stations, through partnering agencies and most importantly, through landowner references.

Focus Areas, Implementation, and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Opportunities

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. 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**
 - a) Background
 1. The existing habitats, the public accessibility and the community interest all make the Milk River Valley an area of conservation priority.
 - b) Objectives
 1. Work towards long-term conservation, habitat enhancement and restoration along the Milk River.
 - c) Goals
 1. Actively manage to maintain high quality bird habitats and improve habitats where needed on existing publicly accessible wildlife areas and utilize these areas as cornerstones for expansion of habitat influences on the adjacent private and public lands.
 2. Work with all interested agencies and organizations to achieve habitat improvement goals, especially on private lands due to the multitude of opportunities available.
 3. Continue to pursue conservation easements with landowners as opportunities present themselves in the focal area.

Eastern Region 6- Daniels, Eastern McCone, Richland, Roosevelt, and Sheridan Counties

- **Major Creeks and Tributaries, CRP, Block Management Areas, Expired Contracts, Prairie Potholes**
 - a) Background
 1. 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. Primary factors limiting pheasant populations are old nesting cover/CRP stands that are less productive and lack food sources. Secondary limiting factor is lack of

suitable winter habitat for important over-winter survival of pheasant. Primary factors limiting sharp-tailed grouse in this focus area are limited high quality nesting cover in cropland dominated areas, and potentially livestock grazing and deer browsing suppressing native shrub recovery in rangeland habitats. Gray partridge may be limited by similar factors to pheasant.

b) Objectives

1. Work on cooperative habitat enhancement projects to improve upland game bird habitat and subsequent upland game bird populations.

Goals

- a) Increase nesting cover available to game birds.
 - i. Strategy: Take advantage of cost sharing opportunities during CRP sign-ups, with other Farm Bill programs, and any other grant opportunities with partner organizations to leverage funding and include wildlife priorities when planting grasses.
 - ii. Strategy: Utilize incentive programs to enhance existing nesting cover in poor condition to increase plant productivity and diversity.
 - b) Increase the amount and distribution of winter cover for pheasant by doing one or more shelterbelt planting or renovation projects per year.
2. Use existing Block Management Areas, previous UGBEP habitat projects, and lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program as areas to focus additional habitat improvements.

Goals:

- a) Ensure at least 50% of projects completed in the focus area annually build off of existing access areas or habitat programs.
 - i. Strategy: initiate mailing outreach to BMA or CRP landowners on an annual basis, depending on opportunities for leveraging funding in a given year.
 - ii. Strategy: maintain relationships with existing FWP program landowners by touching base during BMA contract renewals and by having a presence at local events landowners may attend.
3. Maintain a fiscally sustainable amount and distribution of food plots in Daniels, Sheridan, and Roosevelt counties to decrease the need for

emergency supplemental feeding during severe winters. In the remainder of the priority area, install occasional food plots as an introduction to habitat work for interested landowners new to the program, and to provide enhanced hunting opportunities.

Goals:

- a) Maintain 75% of food plots on land of existing BMA or UGBEP cooperators.
 - b) Ensure 100% of food plots are within ¼ mile of winter cover suitable to harbor game birds in severe conditions.
- 4. Use Habitat Management Leases to keep expiring shelterbelts in the program and to continue maintenance activities. Innovate methods to improve on existing marginal winter cover that attracts game birds but may not be sufficient during severe weather.
 - 5. Utilize partnerships and innovate new methods to help landowners implement habitat improvements if they lack certain resources.

Goals:

- a) Continue to work with local Pheasants Forever chapters to assist landowners with installing projects.
 - b) Seek to identify new opportunities to address challenges landowners face when enhancing habitats.
- 6. Work with landowners to renew contracts to maintain habitat for another contract term.

Goals:

- a) Renew or lease at least 25% of expiring shelterbelts, nesting cover projects, or grazing systems.
 - i. Strategy: Utilize Habitat Management Leases to maintain high quality habitat established through the UGBEP for another 5-10 years for shelterbelts and nesting cover projects.
 - ii. Strategy: Offer all landowners with expiring grazing systems options for smaller scale infrastructure maintenance improvements to maintain the grazing system for another 1-2 rotations (3 to 6 years).
 - iii. Strategy: Utilize all funding opportunities in an effort to make the contract renewal more appealing and beneficial to landowners.

7. FWP will ensure that contracts are being implemented and maintained according to the contract terms in both the habitat improvement and public access.

Goals:

- a) Monitor all projects according to inspection schedules outlined for each project type in the UGBEP Field Manual.
 - i. Strategy: R6 UGBEP Specialist will create list of projects that must be monitored each year in the region. If the number of projects will be too high to monitor alone, specialist will work with other R6 wildlife staff to aid in completing inspections.
 - ii. Strategy: Utilize technology to speed up inspections and reduce paperwork.

Sage-grouse Habitat Priority- Blaine, Western McCone, Phillips and Valley Counties

(Figure 26)

- **Canadian Connectivity Areas, Phillips County, Valley County Winter Habitat**

- a) Background

1. 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.

- b) Objectives

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

Goals:

- a) Accomplish at least 1 habitat project in the sage-grouse conservation area annually.
 - i. Strategy: Promote the use and benefits of grazing systems. Work with partner organization to cost-share on infrastructure improvements that enable producers to implement good grazing systems that will maintain or enhance sagebrush rangelands.
 - ii. Strategy: Utilize conservation easements, or 30-year conservation leases when funding opportunities are available, to provide long-term sagebrush habitat protection.
 - iii. Strategy: Innovate project types to deal with emerging issues that may occur in the priority area and are known to impact sage-grouse elsewhere, such as conifer encroachment or invasive annual grasses.

- iv. Strategy: Focus on the areas surrounding Antelope, Brazil and Larb Creeks of Valley County to conserve existing sage-grouse habitat and restored disturbed habitats.
- 2. 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.

Goals:

- a) Work with resources and partnerships focused on wildlife migration in these areas to also conserve or enhance sage-grouse habitat where possible.
- 3. Work with partners to improve and protect sage-grouse habitat in Blaine, Phillips and Valley counties, particularly federal programs that are working under the Sage-Grouse Initiative and the local Rancher's Stewardship Alliance.

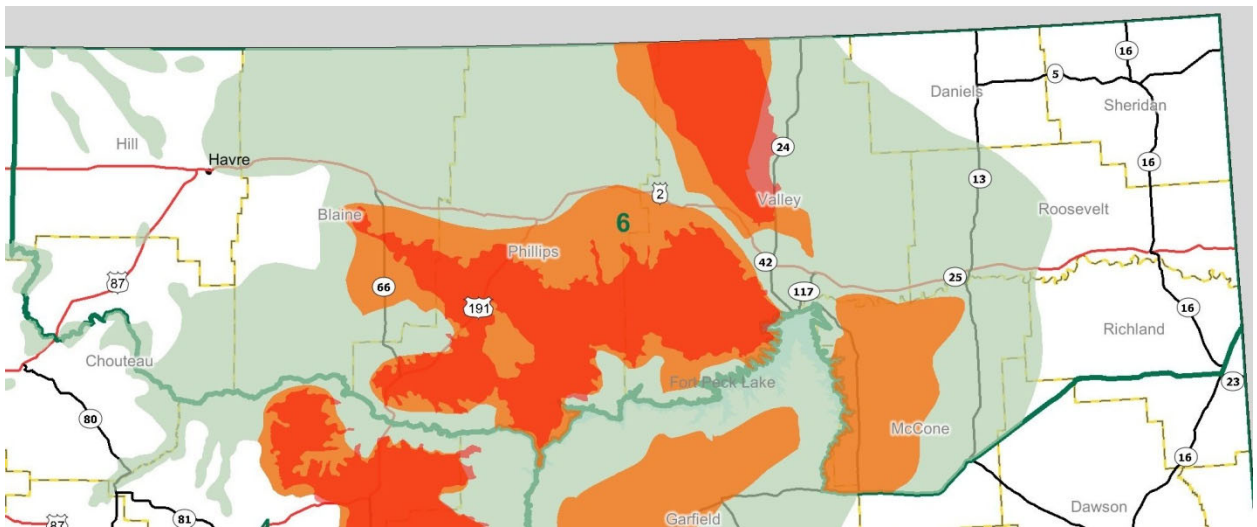


Figure 26. The Sage-grouse Habitat Priority Areas in Region 6, corresponding to their distribution with all areas receiving equal priority status.

(Green=historical, Red= core habitat, Orange=nesting/brooding)

4. Partnerships

Partnerships can create opportunities for additional habitat work and provide the benefit of leveraging or matching funds and the improvement of hunter access.

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 Wetland Program, Habitat Montana, Public Access Land Agreements, and Unlocking Public Lands, and occasional shorter term grant funded efforts like the Working Grasslands Initiative.
- b) USDA NRCS & FSA programs: Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP), Sage-Grouse Initiative etc. Partnering with these agencies and programs are one of the foundational opportunities for leveraging UGBEP dollars in Region 6. Primarily UGBEP is used to cost-share on the portions of projects that these programs do not cover to make them more attainable for landowners. FWP involvement in these programs requires reasonable public access, whereas access is not required with only federal dollars. When available, cost-sharing on CRP establishment is the most efficient way for the program to help create nesting cover at large scales. Great opportunities also exist with CSP participants that are required to conduct specific improvements using funding other than federal NRCS dollars. There are good opportunities to assist in targeting local funding towards wildlife in the planning phases of EQIP and the associated local Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs) and at a larger scale, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The VPA-HIP program has been a key funding source for Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters, which is very popular in the region with both landowners and hunters. All USDA programs change occasionally with new Farm Bills or changes in leadership, and regional UGBEP staff should be prepared to adapt our programs so we can continue successful partnerships with these agencies and leverage the funding available in these programs.
- c) USFWS- Wetland and grassland easements, Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, wetland restoration projects, and habitat enhancement projects of wetlands or grasslands on their publicly accessible lands.
- d) BLM- Opportunities to partner on projects involving publicly accessible lands, especially on projects involving habitat improvements for sage-grouse.

- e) DNRC- Opportunities to partner on projects involving publicly accessible lands.
- f) Pheasants Forever- Working closely with the Farm Bill Partner Biologists stationed in the region to represent UGBEP in local USDA offices, inform landowners about the UGBEP, and to educate other NRCS & FSA staff on UGBEP opportunities. Partnerships with local chapters to implement habitat projects, especially by providing labor or equipment that landowners may lack to establish habitat enhancement projects.
- g) National Wild Turkey Federation- Working with NWTf biologists on private or public lands projects to improve wild turkey habitat and hunting access when opportunities arise to do so.
- h) Rancher's Stewardship Alliance- partnering to cost-share on rangeland improvement projects, which often requires multiple partners and funding sources to make increasingly expensive projects financially viable for landowners.

5. Pheasant stocking for population enhancement

Region 6 will consider requests from landowners for stocking of pen-raised pheasants for population enhancement purposes on their land on a case by case basis. Releases will be evaluated using criteria outlined in Administrative Rule. (12.9.62, ARM)

6. 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 (12.9.615, ARM) when initiated by extreme winter conditions and public desire to undertake feeding activities. FWP will only initiate winter feeding based on requests from the public during periods of winter severity that meet the triggers in this plan. The use of an emergency supplemental pheasant feeding plan will help to create a feeding program that is efficient and easy to implement. It must be recognized that emergency supplemental feeding will not be sufficient to save populations from declines in severe winters. Emergency supplement feeding protocols, process, and evaluation methods are located in the UGBEP User's Manual.

Region 7 UGBEP Strategic Plan

Background

Upland Game Bird Populations

Region 7 supports robust, huntable populations of sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasant, gray partridge, and wild 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 areas throughout their range in Montana. Two sage-grouse core areas 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.
- Pheasant: Pheasant 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.
- Wild Turkey: Wild 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 wild turkeys in southeastern Montana. The availability of winter food sources is also crucial for overwinter survival of wild turkeys. Byproducts of winter livestock feeding operations such as small grains, grain hay, or corn generally provide wild turkeys with adequate winter food. The reliance of wild turkeys on these winter food sources can result in agricultural damage issues.

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, Baker, Sidney, 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

Habitat enhancement activities

- 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.
- Nesting cover establishment to improve upland game bird production. Typically involves federal programs such as CRP, CSP, and grassland easements.
- 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.
- Food plot development to improve upland game bird over-winter survival. Requires strategic placement to avoid being completely covered with snow.
- Grazing systems to provide idle nesting and brood rearing cover, maintain or improve woody cover, and improve overall range condition. Secondly, maintains native and/or non-native grass stands and reduces likelihood of conversion to cropland.
- Wetland enhancement/restoration to establish wetland habitat and associated vegetation, providing thermal winter cover (cattails), security cover, some food sources, and nesting cover.

- Sagebrush lease to prevent loss or conversion of sagebrush-grasslands, providing year-round sage-grouse habitat.

Protecting Habitat Enhancements:

- 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.
- Term contracts of 1-20 years conserve habitat enhancements and ensure public hunting access for the term.

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 UGBEP Sagebrush Initiative 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 UGBEP Sagebrush Initiative 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 (decrepit) nesting cover/CRP stands that lack productivity and food sources. Secondary limiting factor is lack of suitable winter habitat important to foster over-winter survival of pheasant.

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.

Wild Turkey Transplants

Background:

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

Goal:

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

Approach:

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

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

During the 2023 Legislative Session, Representative Ross H. Fitzgerald sponsored HB 74, an act removing the requirement that the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program fund bird releases; amending section 87-1-247, MCA. The bill passed the committees and was signed into law by Governor Gianforte on April 18, 2023.

The following recommendations from the Council are incorporated in this plan and/or may be considered at a future time.

- A few Council members would like the program to conduct research to quantify program components to justify use of funding and potentially justify additional funding in the future. Staff recognizes the importance of research to determine the successes and failures of program outcome, but because of competing time and funds, staff utilize project monitoring, hunter feedback, and landowner input as appropriate, anecdotal tools to assess the broad successes and needs of the program.
- Council expressed support for program staff to seek additional opportunities to conduct habitat enhancements on DNRC State Lands as supported by the DNRC/FWP MOU. Staff recognize that opportunities exist when there are willing lessees and continue to build on the State Trust land projects over time.
- 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).
- Council recognizes the value of Russian olive as an effective source of food and woody cover outside riparian areas and sub-irrigated habitats. The Council further encourages FWP to conserve Russian olive on strategically located dryland sites for food and winter cover where native plant options are not feasible.
- 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.
- Upland game bird distribution maps do not include spatial data from the Reservations due in part because structured survey data are not readily available. In the future, when comprehensive maps are available, the Strategic Plan maps will update the distribution maps.

ACRONYMS USED IN THIS PLAN

ACEP-WRE -- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program's Wetlands Reserve Easements

ARM Rule – Administrative Rules of Montana

BLM – US Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management

CRP – Conservation Reserve Program

CSKT – Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

CSP – Conservation Stewardship 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

PF – Pheasants Forever

RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program

TIP – Targeted Implementation Plans

UGBEP – Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program

USFS – United States Forest Service (Department of Agriculture)

USFWS – United States Fish & Wildlife Service

VPA-HIP – Voluntary Public Access 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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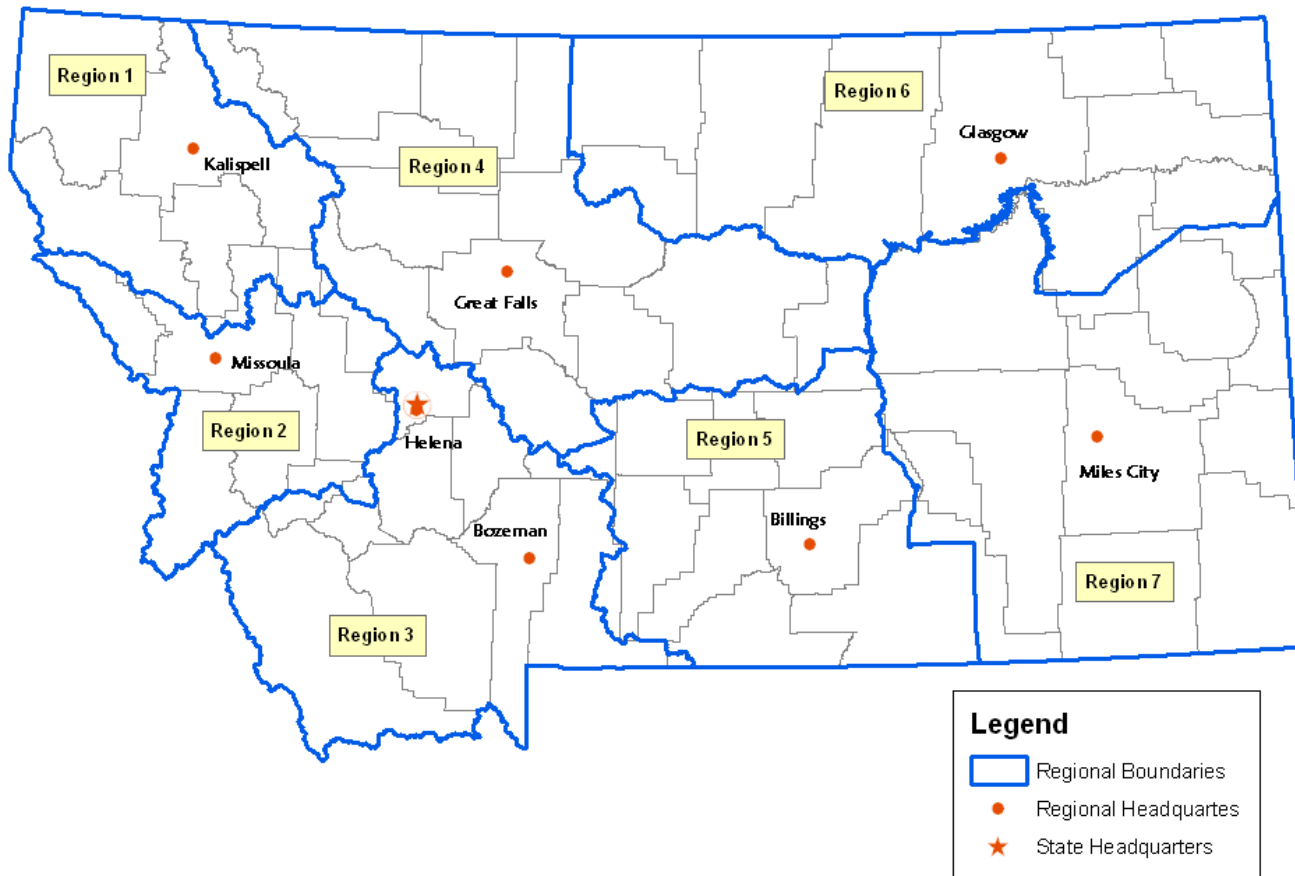
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FWP Regional Boundaries



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