



May 10, 2022

Dear Interested Person:

On April 27, I signed a Decision Notice for the Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to release pen-raised ring-necked pheasants on suitable state-owned lands. Due to the recent detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), many citizens have expressed concerns regarding this decision. Attached is a Supplement to the Decision Notice providing further information regarding the decision.

I assure you that FWP is dedicated to the health of Montana's wild bird populations and is proactive in evaluating and preventing the spread of disease due to this program. There is potential for disease transmission between pen-raised pheasants and wild pheasants and native birds. However, despite conducting pheasant releases for the past 35 years, FWP has not documented pathogen transmission between pen-raised pheasants and wild pheasants or other wild birds in Montana. The Montana State Prison has developed a biosecurity plan for FWP's pheasant-raising operation in consultation with FWP's veterinarian, Dr. Jennifer Ramsey, and Department of Livestock staff. The Supplement to the Decision Notice provides more specific information regarding the plan and next steps to prevention of the spread of HPAI.

Thank you for your thoughtful review and comments.

Sincerely,



Henry "Hank" Worsech
Director

**SUPPLEMENT TO THE DECISION NOTICE FOR
ANNUAL RELEASE OF PEN-RAISED RING-NECKED PHEASANTS
PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
MAY 10, 2022**

Background

On April 27, Director Worsech signed a Decision Notice for the Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) to release pen-raised ring-necked pheasants annually on suitable state-owned lands. In light of public concerns over the recent detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) would like to provide additional information to the public regarding this decision.

History of Pheasant Releases and Disease Transmission

There is the potential for disease transmission between pen-raised pheasants and wild pheasants and native birds. However, despite conducting pheasant releases for the past 35 years, FWP has not documented pathogen transmission between pen-raised pheasants and wild pheasants or other wild birds in Montana. The typically short lifespan of released pheasants reduces the opportunity and degree for mixing with wild bird populations. FWP is also required to derive our source birds from National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) hatcheries that meet testing standards and are subject to Department of Livestock (DOL) oversight.

State Prison Biosecurity Plan and Department of Livestock Oversight

The Montana State Prison has developed a biosecurity plan for FWP's pheasant-raising operation in consultation with Dr. Jennifer Ramsey (FWP) and DOL staff. These include rigid protocols for persons entering the egg incubation and chick brooding facility. Because of the plan and precautions in place, the Montana State Prison has been NPIP certified by the DOL.

Broodstock are kept outside and will not be in contact with eggs, after the eggs are collected, or with chicks. After hatching, chicks are kept indoors until they are nine-weeks old and then will be moved to flight pens outside. Given Montana's history and experience with avian influenza, moving the chicks outside is expected to coincide with a decline in environmental HPAI.

In order to maintain NPIP certification, the Prison must have pheasants tested regularly for *Salmonella pullorum* and avian influenza. Testing for the former must occur annually, and the latter every three months.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

The only unmitigated risk of HPAI infection will be to broodstock, as they are maintained outside. There is little to no risk of transmission of HPAI to chicks since they are raised indoors under biosecurity measures. Chicks will not be moved outside until mid-July (at nine weeks old) and spring migration will be long over by then. HPAI detections typically decline in summer, so the risk of HPAI infections is expected to be low. In past outbreaks, the latest HPAI has been detected in Montana was the first week in June.

FWP does not anticipate a risk of transmission *from* pen-raised pheasants to wild birds, but rather a risk of transmission *to* the captive population. Precautions are in place to prevent this.

Fall Pheasant Releases

Upon Fish and Wildlife Commission approval, FWP plans to release pheasants on Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) in September 2022, just prior to the youth pheasant opener. Additional releases may occur in October and November to provide opportunities for all hunters. FWP will evaluate the risk of HPAI transmission as we get closer to the release dates.