

# Focused on

# FOREVER

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## FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

The pheasant, like many Americans, is an immigrant to North America. The first successful introduction of pheasants to this country occurred in 1881 when Judge Owen Nickerson Denny (U.S. consul to China) shipped 30 Chinese ringnecks (26 survived the journey) to his home in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Eleven years later, Oregon opened a 75-day season and hunters bagged 50,000 pheasants. America's love affair with ringnecks had begun.

Aldo Leopold also liked pheasants. That's right; the author of *A Sand County Almanac* and "father of wildlife management in America" was a pheasant fanatic. And, while President Theodore Roosevelt convened his White House-led Conservation Congress in 1908, dedicated sportsmen were transplanting the birds to South Dakota, today's premiere pheasant hunting destination. In fact, it is said that one of President Roosevelt's last writings was of the ring-necked pheasant.

## ENTER PHEASANTS FOREVER

Fed up with wildlife habitat losses, avid Minnesota pheasant hunters and conservationists helped form Pheasants Forever in 1982. At the heart of Pheasants Forever is the unique grassroots system of fundraising and project development that allows members to see the direct result of their contributions. Pheasants Forever and its quail division, Quail Forever, empower county-based chapters with the responsibility to determine how 100 percent of their locally raised conservation funds will be spent—the only national conservation organization that operates through this truly grassroots structure. As a result, chapter volunteers are able to see the fruits of their

efforts locally, while belonging to a larger national organization with a voice on federal and state conservation policy.

From humble beginnings, Pheasants Forever (PF) today has the support of more than 700 chapters and 125,000 dedicated members. Each year PF's network of chapters completes 20,000 projects on 500,000 acres. While impressive, those accomplishments are dwarfed by comparison to the impacts of federal farm policies and programs. Early on, Pheasants Forever's leadership recognized the might of the pen and its role in effectively turning the shovel for habitat. Consequently, Pheasants Forever has been an omnipresent voice in Washington, D.C., since America's most successful conservation effort, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), was created in 1985.

Speaking of getting conservation on the landscape, PF's Farm Bill biologist program is doing just that. By placing a PF biologist in county USDA service centers, our staff work hand-in-hand with resource professionals from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, and state wildlife agencies. Most importantly, these Farm Bill biologists work directly with farmers and landowners, assisting them with development of habitat improvements on their lands. Today, we have 50 biologists in eight states, and together they have impacted over 1.3 million acres of habitat projects in the last seven years.

## CRP IN 2010 AND THE 2012 FARM BILL

Welcome to 2010, one of the most important years for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) since it was founded in 1985. CRP, and its mother ship the Farm Bill, is nothing

less than the foundation of this nation's upland conservation effort. The CRP, which is a USDA program, pays farmers and ranchers to plant grasses, forbs, shrubs, and tress on environmentally sensitive croplands. In return they get annual payments for 10- or 15- year contracts. For hunters, CRP is the economic stimulus package of conservation; it is the two wars we are fighting for our pheasant hunting future.

This year we are moving toward CRP renewal as part of the 2012 Farm Bill. What is in the mix for the CRP and Farm Bill debates? Consider what figures into the CRP puzzle: fluctuating commodity prices, unstable land and rental prices, a volatile carbon/climate change debate, the demand for low-priced food at a time many are going hungry, the demand for access for outdoor recreation including hunting, and the demand for clean water and fertile soil.

All this comes at a time of declining government revenue due to a poor economy and the astronomical demand for government to meet other obligations. Are you beginning to get the picture here? We have one heck of a fight on our hands and conservation is the underdog.

At the very least, it was reassuring to listen to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack pledge to keep the Conservation Reserve Program fully enrolled at 32 million acres, announce a pending general signup and add 300,000 acres to several wildlife-focused practices at Pheasant Fest in Des Moines last February.

At most, it was the first in a desperately needed series of actions that will keep USDA's most successful conservation program as the Department's premiere habitat initiative. After all, in the next 25 months, not only do 15.44 million acres of CRP

expire, but Congress must reauthorize the program completely as part of the 2012 Farm Bill. Clearly, we have our work cut out for us the next three years. And did I happen to mention that yet this year—specifically on December 23, 2010—CRP’s 25th Anniversary officially begins? Yes, back in 1985 then-President Ronald Reagan signed CRP into law.

### IF I WERE IN CHARGE OF CRP

I strongly believe we need a comprehensive strategy to do just what Secretary Vilsack called for—a fully enrolled CRP. On September 30, 2010, CRP expirations in various states include Colorado (452,000 acres), Kansas (615,000), Minnesota (69,000), Montana (388,000), North Dakota (258,000), Iowa (117,000), Nebraska (179,000), Idaho (156,000) and more. All totaled, 4,482,754 CRP acres are set to expire. Similar acreage expirations occur across multiple pheasant and quail-range states in both 2011 and 2012, totaling 4,422,407 acres and 6,540,939 acres respectively each of those years. In the event the land is not reenrolled in CRP or a similar conservation program, it typically reverts to crop production.

Quite clearly, it is going to take multiple efforts to make up for these massive acreage losses. First, I’d suggested we need a series of general CRP signups combined with expansion of the continuous CRP practices; including the successful CP-33 upland bird buffers and CP-38 State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) buffers to keep the program at Secretary Vilsack’s pledged 32 million acres. Add in efforts to shift existing

CRP in some areas to biofuel and other crops, to place them in wildlife friendly livestock operations and bring new lands into CRP, and we have the overall ability to have more conservation on the landscape.

In addition to multiple conservation programs, the 2008 Farm Bill authorized the development of an “Open Fields” access program to assist states in developing or enhancing access programs for outdoor recreation including hunting and fishing. The budget allocates \$50 million in funding for the next three years. Unfortunately, delays in rulemaking and internal review by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) continue to make the program unavailable. Once final rules are published, it is expected to allow state wildlife agencies the ability to submit proposals supporting access programs for sportsmen that also encourage development of wildlife habitat. In my opinion, “Open Fields” has the potential to make CRP tangible to many bird hunters who don’t have access to private lands. As CRP becomes more tangible through good dog work, flushing pheasants, and bagged birds, it becomes even more valuable to a whole demographic that didn’t understand the program’s importance before.

### ON FOREVER’S HORIZON

Managing lands for upland game birds like pheasants and bobwhite quail goes beyond farm policy and programs. New initiatives in areas, including renewable fuels and programs to address the impacts of climate change, have the potential to dramatically alter the face of America’s croplands and

forest lands. That is why another of our top priorities is to help secure future dedicated funding for our state wildlife agencies to ensure they have the financial resources to address the growing complexity of issues impacting our wildlife resources.

In the area of biofuels, we are encouraging the development of new perennial feedstocks as future biofuels to broaden the current focus on grain-based stocks. Perennial covers have the ability to provide water quality and soil erosion benefits and if planted and managed correctly, may provide additional wildlife benefits. In a similar fashion, habitat projects including tree plantings and the planting of deep-rooted native grasses can provide wildlife habitat while sequestering carbon to help offset buildup of greenhouse gasses like CO<sub>2</sub>. That is why we are engaged in debate over future energy policy and biofuels along with many of our colleagues in other conservation organizations including the Boone and Crockett Club. Working together as conservationists, we can be part of the solution.

We owe it to future generations of pheasant and quail hunters to work through and solve each of these challenges in the coming months. I’m convinced that we can not only survive these turbulent times, but also benefit from them. Good Hunting. ■



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