PHEASANT COUNTS DECLINE FROM HISTORIC HIGHS, BUT STILL GOOD

Pheasant brood counts indicate that pheasant numbers in South Dakota have returned to levels below the remarkable high counts of the past few years.

However, the pheasant population in the main part of the state’s pheasant range will still provide quality hunting opportunities.

From 2003 through 2010, the statewide pheasant-per-mile index was at levels not seen in the previous 40 years. The index this year is 46 percent lower than the 2010 index and 41 percent lower than the average of the past 10 years.

“We observed abnormally high mortality of hen pheasants during the brutal winter of 2010-11,” explained Jeff Vonk, Secretary of the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department. “The loss of that reproductive potential inhibited the ability of our pheasant population to rebound to the record levels that we have enjoyed in recent years.”

Declines in the counts were consistent across the state and most pronounced in eastern South Dakota, where winter’s grip was tightest and grassland nesting habitat is diminished.

“We knew this day was coming when important pheasant habitats provided by the cover in Conservation Reserve Program fields were lost,” Vonk said.

CRP enrollments in the state are currently at 1.17 million acres, down from 1.56 million acres in 2007. The reduction equates to over 600 square miles of grassland habitat.

“The counts in the main pheasant range are similar to or higher than the counts in 2002 when hunters bagged 1.2 million pheasants. Pheasant hunters harvested 1.8 million pheasants in 2010.

“All things considered, pheasant numbers in much of the traditional pheasant range of the state are still good despite the declines in the counts,” Vonk said. “Much of South Dakota will continue to provide a premier opportunity to hunt pheasants.”

The complete 2011 Pheasant Brood Survey Report, including local survey results for different areas of the state, can be found online at http://gfp.sd.gov/hunting/small-game/ pheasant-outlook.aspx

MOUNTAIN LION SEASON PROPOSED

WATERTOWN, S.D. - A proposal being considered by the South Dakota Game Fish and Parks Commission would allow South Dakota hunters to harvest up to 60 mountain lions in the coming season.

The measure, which will be finalized at the commission’s October meeting in Rapid City, also includes a sub-harvest limit of 40 female lions.

The proposed season would run from Jan. 1 through March 31, 2012, but would end if either the harvest limit of 60 total lions or 40 females is reached.

Custer State Park has been proposed to be a part of the statewide season and included in both the total and female harvest limits. To hunt in the park, a random drawing process will allow a minimum of 15 people to hunt in there for a 15-day period. Hunters would apply via the GFP website to hunt inside Custer State Park boundaries.

To view the proposed mountain lion season, visit: http://gfp.sd.gov/ agency/commission/proposals.aspx

Written comments on the proposal can be sent to Game, Fish and Parks, 523 E Capitol, Pierre, SD 57501 or via email to wildinfo@state.sd.us.

The proposal will be decided at the GFP Commission’s Oct. 6 meeting in Rapid City at The Outdoor Campus-West. Public comments on the next mountain lion season will be allowed that day at 2 p.m. MDT.
Benefits to soil, wildlife could keep down-sized conservation program alive

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The loss of more than 400,000 acres of wildlife-friendly habitat enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program was instrumental in a sharp decline this year in South Dakota’s valuable pheasant crop. And the losses are likely to grow if the popular CRP gets hacked by congressional budget cutters in Washington, D.C.

“The budget cutters are looking for whatever they can find,” Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., said. “And in the budget environment we’re in, the Conservation Reserve Program could look a lot different in the future than it does today.”

The program pays landowners to take erodible cropland out of production and plant grasses and other cover crops instead. It also includes assistance programs for wetlands and shelterbelt plantings.

Thune is among those hunting for savings in the federal budget, but he also is a proponent of the CRP program and its benefits to South Dakota’s rural economy and wildlife populations, particularly the ring-necked pheasant.

In the best of times, South Dakota’s gaudy state bird attracts 100,000 nonresidents and 80,000 residents to a nationally known hunting season that produces more than $200 million in direct spending.

So any drop in pheasant numbers eventually is followed by a drop in hunters and a reduction in that spending. That hits hard in rural towns throughout South Dakota’s main pheasant range in the eastern two-thirds of the state, including Thune’s hometown of Murdo.

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Mrs. Janice Nicolay  
 when the CRP program began, so most of his cropland wasn’t eligible. But the economic benefits and soil-saving benefits, there’s just a lot of reasons why the CRP program is important.”

Federal budget cuts could make for even more reductions in enrollment. But Thune said that even if the program is downsized overall, it might be possible to better direct the funding to the most soil-saving, wildlife-producing areas.

That could help make CRP payments more competitive and effective, even if overall acreage is reduced, he said.

“With more focus, maybe we can get more bang for the buck,” Thune said. “When you stack up the economic benefits and soil-saving benefits, will cause the public to bounce around. But long-term, habitat drives the numbers.”

GF&P uses money from its budget to help augment the federal CRP acres, trying to increase overall enrollment in key pheasant zones. Sometimes referred to as the state’s CRP program, the additional payments also provide public hunting access on those specific acres.

But the state effort is small compared to the federal CRP. And without the federal acres, further declines in the pheasant crop are likely.

Thune would hate to see that. The number of acres enrolled in CRP already has declined as contracts of 10 years or more expired and farmers turned to grain crops for more income. With more enticing commodity prices, that was largely a question of economics on the farm, Thune said.

“Right now, these farmers are following market signals, and when you can do $400 or $500 an acre farming and $100 or so on CRP, the economics are pretty obvious,” he said.

Business leaders in the state and across the nation say maintaining a viable CRP is important. The program’s benefit to soil and wildlife, and the reduction in that spending. That hits hard in rural towns throughout South Dakota’s main pheasant range in the eastern two-thirds of the state, including Thune’s hometown of Murdo.

“In the long term, our pheasant population is driven by the amount and quality of habitat on the ground,” he said. “Short-term environmental conditions, weather and other factors, will cause the public to bounce around. But long-term, habitat drives the numbers.”

Replanting highly erodible soil to protect cover crops reduces soil erosion and provides essential wildlife habitat that is largely nesting cover for pheasants but also provides important winter protection. Added to that are shelterbelt plantings that provide even more winter protection and give birds cover from aerial predators.

Winner-area farmer Bill Ferguson said the shelterbelt provisions offered assistance in planting costs for thousands of trees on his property, in addition to annual payments. And while it’s not a way to make a living, it makes it worth his while to take some cropland out of production in order to plant trees, he said.

“It’s worth it to us to give up some of that cropland production to provide winter habitat for pheasants,” said Ferguson, who operates a lodge and commercial pheasant hunting service as a supplement to his main work as a grain farmer.

Ferguson said he was already using no-till farming practices to limit soil erosion when the CRP program began, so most of his cropland wasn’t eligible. But the program pays cutters and grazer’s interest to provide a productive habitat base for pheasants. And whether landowners use the shelterbelt provisions or grass or wetland coverage, or all of them, the program is a proven wildlife producer, said Tony Leif, Wildlife Division director for the state Game, Fish & Parks Department in Pierre.

Leif said the 46-percent decline in pheasant broods this year was a result of both harsh winter weather and reduced CRP acres. From a high of almost 1.8 million acres enrolled in the mid-1990s, it’s slipped to about 1.1 million acres. About 400,000 of those went out in the past three years, largely because farmers were turning land coming out of long-term CRP contracts back to crop production.

Habitat helps pheasants and losing it hurts, Leif said.

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President's Column by Bill Antonides

Please permit me to begin this column by giving my heartfelt thanks to the Brookings Wildlife Federation for hosting our annual convention on short notice. Not only did they agree to host the convention when our High Plains Wildlife affiliate in the Pierre area could not because of the flooding, they did so in a highly proficient manner. There was no evidence they had only weeks to plan the convention, rather than months. The shooting and food Friday evening were great, as were the banquet and auction on Saturday night. Brookings has a wealth of wildlife experts, thanks in no small part to SDSU, and the programs they put on were superb and well attended. GF&P Wildlife Division Director Tony Leif kindly gave up a day of his time to apprise us of the latest happenings across the state, and was inundated with excellent questions from the audience; perhaps next year we can schedule an extra hour or two. Thank you to all who made the 2011 convention a success!

I was elected for another term as president by a landslide; it is easy to win by a huge margin when no one else runs! Perhaps this year will go smoother than last. We have the Camo Coalition up and running to improve our lobbying efforts, and we are well on our way to making organizational changes in the Federation to improve efficiency, fund raising, and member recruitment. We have some new faces in director’s positions to help prod us out of complacency, but old faces still there to remind us. The Federation must continue to grow stronger and even more effective; the price of doing anything less is too high.

As a member of the SDWF, whether you joined directly or through one of our affiliates, you are on the front lines of everything we accomplish. If it were not for our members, the landscape and the hunting and fishing opportunities would mirror that of so many unfortunate states. You know the states that have wasted their natural resources; vehicles with non-resident license plates crowd the parking areas of our boat ramps and public hunting areas.

Many of these nonresidents are members of the SDWF. It is too late to pull the drain tiles from the fields where they live, too late to save more than a pitiful remnant of native grasslands, too late to save their wetlands and waters from pollution or drainage. It is not too late for us, and they are willing to help ensure there is somewhere they can go to enjoy the natural resources, even if it is not at home.

Sadly, only a small fraction of resident sportsmen and women belong to the Federation. If even 50% of our hunters and fishermen would join the only organization whose mission is to protect our hunting and fishing heritage and the natural resources of this state, we would be unstoppable. Why everyone doesn’t do his or her fair share to safeguard what we are so blessed with is a mystery to me. The lack of participation leaves the heavy lifting to a few of us. Please ask your fellow sportsmen to join us, either directly, or even better, by joining an affiliate club.

Meanwhile, we are in the season of the year when we can choose between a fishing rod and a firearm to harvest the bounty South Dakota has to offer. Our hunting and fishing opportunities are second to none, and it is my fervent hope that all our members and their families take time to enjoy our out-of-doors. The Federation works hard to protect the quality of our natural resources and maintain access for the average person and for future generations. Sometimes we work so hard that we don’t take advantage of the treasures we’ve been given.

We mustn’t forget life is short and the number of autumns each of us is given is unknown, but never enough. Get away from the carpet and cement and walk on soil for a while; it will do you good and help put life back in perspective. We will soon enough be fighting battles in the legislature with those who would inhibit our freedoms and despoil our lands and waters. It is time now to rejuvenate our spirits and remind ourselves why we fight the battles we do. It is time to pick up a rod or gun and go afield.

Questions? Answers? Wildlife blog at sdwfcamo.net
Further Experiences of a Citizen Scientist: Bee Watching

By Charles R. Berry

This is the third in a series of articles about “citizen science.” I got started in March as my wife Mary Lou and I took part in the Great Backyard Bird Count, and then we tried a project called Project BudBurst in the spring. This summer we joined the Great Sunflower project and began bee watching. (Photo of a bee watcher) Stay with me you hook and bullet types because this bee watching has an important connection to wildlife habitat.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation encourages science literacy and supports natural resource management based on science. One way to improve our science literacy is to participate in a “citizen science project.” Citizen science means non-scientist volunteers performing research tasks such as observation and measurement.

The purpose of these articles is to encourage you and your family to join a citizen science project. In doing so, you will improve your knowledge of wildlife and habitat, involve your family in out-of-doors activities, and increase your understanding of the scientific process.

In the Great Backyard Bird Count, bird watchers in 61 South Dakota cities to make a list of 101 bird species for one March weekend, and the South Dakota bird watchers added their data to that of 92,000 participants nationwide who logged 596 species and 11.4 million birds.

For Project BudBurst, we joined 24 other South Dakotans as we record the forms (called “phenology;” e.g., dormant, flowering, leafing, fruiting) of six plants in our yard. We are watching American Linden, Quaking Aspen, Common Lilac, Forsythia, and Tulip Poplar and our state flower, the Pasque Flower. Our Pasque Flower did its budbursting on May 4.

The Great Sunflower Project

“Grow sunflowers and count bees and other pollinators that visit,” said the banner on the Great Sunflower Project web site (http://www.greatsunflower.org/about-project). At first blush, this activity seemed – well - silly. However, like our other citizen science projects, this one opened our eyes to conservation issues and science. And, it forced us to stop painting our house and for at least 15 minutes a day and sit quietly in our garden.

After we registered on the sunflower project website, we received a password to our own account, one of about 100,000 accounts of bee watchers from across the nation. Information on the web site of this 4-year old program explained why we were counting bees as follows: “Where did the ingredients for your lunch and dinner come from? One of every three bites you took probably came from a plant pollinated by wild pollinators. The value of pollination services from wild pollinators in the U.S. alone is estimated at four to six billion dollars per year. Warning! Pollinators are declining in certain wild and many agricultural landscapes. The data you collect from your sunflower will provide an insight into how our green spaces in the urban, suburban and rural landscapes are connected as well as shading light on how to help pollinators.

We entered data about our garden (e.g., slope, size, location, gardening practices), viewed the brief information on how to distinguish bees (e.g., bumble, green, honey, and unknown), wasps, and flies, and copied the simple data sheets.

One of the first principles of science is standardizing procedures. The sunflower project standardizes by asking volunteers to plant one type of sunflower – a variety called Lemon Queen. We found the seeds in the local garden shop, planted them, watched them emerge from the soil at the end of May, and by August 4 we had 12 Lemon Queens blooming in our garden. We were ready to count bees.

The standard counting procedures were: sample in the morning (9 – 10 am is recommended), count how many sunflowers are blooming, count and record the number of open flowers on one plant, pick a flower that has pollen, write the start time and arrival time of each bee that visits, stop after 15 minutes, enter data at www.greatsunflower.org.

Standard equipment is: a place to sit, a data sheet, a pen, a watch, a camera if you like, and a cup of coffee or tea. I found myself taking garden photos and I tried to get photos of pollinators but most were out of focus. Even though we were sitting 6 feet from our sunflower, we found that binoculars were very helpful. We could really see bees as they foraged for nectar and collected pollen.

I don’t want to be a bee-bragger, but our data shows that we are well served by pollinators. The bee scientists lump bee visits to three categories of pollination service. Poor service is 0-1 bee in 15 minutes. Twenty percent of the sites in the US had poor pollinator service in 2010. Moderate service is 2-3 bees in 15 minutes and good service is more than 4 bees in 15 minutes. We probably averaged 15 bees in 15 minutes.

I wonder what the neighbors thought as we excitedly recorded bee arrivals and tried to jot down other observations. “There’s a honey bee - now another; what’s the arrival time?, there’s a bumble; green bee touch down, there’s a touch and go; whoops, a bee fight; ohhhhh- that one’s loaded; stayed 2 minutes; little-brown-unknown just landed, I spilled my coffee,” and so goes the conversation in the fast-paced world of bee watching.

The Worker Bee

The worker bee is the chief citizen of the colony. It develops from an egg in one hexagonal wax cubby hole in the hive, then a nurse bee feeds it pollen for 6 days. It spins its own cocoon and metamorphoses to an adult during 12 days of pupation. As an adult it will have a fascinating life but a life of toil. For 10 days it is a nurse feeding younger larvae, for 10 days it cleans the hive and builds combs, and then it leaves the hive to forage for pollen and nectar.

The bee is covered with hairs that hold pollen; there is 2 pairs of wings, and a barbed stinger. A bee is equipped with 5 eyes, 2 antennae, mandibles for crushing and shaping wax, a proboscis for sipping nectar, honey and water, and 3 pairs of legs with structures for three chores. The front legs have grooves to clean antennae, the middle legs have spines to gather wax from glands on the abdomen, and the rear legs have baskets for pollen. With our binoculars we could easily see the clusters of pollen on the rear legs of some bees.

Bees have a “language” that has been a fascinating topic of research. To tell each other where nectar may be found, worker bees do one of two dances on the comb, a round dance for nearby nectar ... aspects of life in the hive to understand how diseases, man-made chemicals, and land use change can affect survival.

Conservation and the Bee-conomy

The Adee Bee Company in Bruce, South Dakota, is our local bee keeper so I called Brett Adee to chat about my sunflowers. He said that Adee hives are placed throughout South Dakota and neighboring states. “We’ve got some bees by the river that might be visiting you,” he said. Brett confirmed that they use several different strains of bees for genetic...
diversity and that might explain why we are seeing honey bees with slightly different colors and sizes. In the fall, employees harvest the honey and then take the hives to California where the South Dakota bees serve as pollinators for various crops. Brett says that the soybean harvesters say that their yield meter on the combine goes up when they are harvesting near the hives. The pollinators help bean production.

Bee populations are declining as are the populations of other pollinators. Domesticated bees suffer from colony collapse, which is probably caused by a combination of problems including disease, urbanization, mono-agriculture, and pesticides. Scientists who study the interaction of landscape patterns and animal populations speculate that a diverse landscape with a variety of crops and corridors is best for bees. vi Isn’t that how it works for pheasants too?

Native bees and prairies are linked, as Emily Dickenson wrote in her short poem.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and a bee
   And reverie.
   The reverie alone will do.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service in Madison South Dakota can’t rely on reverie, they are trying to make real prairies on public land. They also recognize that to make a prairie it takes a bee, so they have contracted with SDSU Entomologist Dr. Paul Johnson to investigate the pollinator situation in South Dakota. Johnson and graduate students are making pollinator inventories, investigating the link between prairie grasses and flowers and pollinators, and studying how surrounding landscapes affect the patches of restored prairie and the pollinators.

Appreciation for science and scientists

I have been walking through my yard with only a superficial appreciation and understanding of it. When I really focus on the house finch, or the linden tree, or a sunflower to get some citizen science data, I have a fresh comprehension of their ecology and connection to humans – our economy and our stewardship responsibilities.

Our volunteer bee counting has made us realize the importance of science. Scientists in our industries and universities are using the process of science to discover the facts about bee identification, honey production, bee behavior, landscapes, and pollution. We hope that educators are teaching students about their responsibilities as stewards of nature.

And, we are glad there is a place in all of this science and education for the citizen scientist to make a contribution. I encourage you to investigate citizen science. There are great science projects here for kids, but don’t pass off the project to the kids, you get involved.

i Berry is a retired USGS fisheries scientist: now Professor Emeritus, Department Natural Resources Management (formerly Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences), South Dakota State University, Brookings.

ii Our experiences as rookie citizen scientists in the March and May issues of Out of Doors, the monthly newsletter of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.


iv Barnes, Jeremy. 2010. To Bee or not to bee. Outdoor America, Isaak Walton League.


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Recreational Fishing and Hunting Heritage and Opportunities Act

Representatives Dan Benishek (R-MI) and Dan Boren (D-OK) recently introduced the Recreational Fishing and Hunting Heritage and Opportunities Act in recognition of the active sportsmen’s legacy in America. The legislation spins a nice narrative of the positive impacts of the sportsmen community has on the economy and the assistance of hunters and anglers when it comes to managing conservation of our public lands. The bill’s initial focus is to improve access for sportsmen on public lands by specifically including hunting, fishing, and sport shooting in federal land management plans. In addition:

- It directs land management officials to use current authority to improve access to public lands and to facilitate activities such as hunting and fishing.
- It authorizes land managers to use skilled hunters as volunteers to manage wildlife populations in areas where hunting is prohibited.

The additional emphasis on hunting and fishing impacts in the process of preparing land use management plans is welcome, the bill provides little in the way of substantive improvements for hunters and anglers. Most public lands including Wilderness and WSAs, already open to hunting and fishing. The bill, in fact, has often defined the difficulty of gaining access across private lands in the bill to address the issue of gaining access to public lands that are locked in by surrounding private holdings. In fact, the bill codifies USFS and BLM authority to close public lands to hunting and fishing in order to protect private property. Once you take a deeper look into the legislation its value to hunters and anglers is not so clear. For example:

- Language contained in the bill specifically states that lands may be restricted or closed to hunting and fishing if agency officials find it necessary or reasonable for energy or mineral production, energy generation, transmission infrastructure, protection of other permits, or protection of private property.

The bill states no action under the provision is to be considered a “major federal action” therefore no identification, analysis, or consideration of environmental effects is required. This provision essentially bypasses the NEPA process that is designed to maintain conservation values on public lands including habitat for fish and wildlife.

There is language in the bill that could open Wilderness to vehicle use under what were designed as limited exemptions to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the land. Under this provision, USFS and BLM could issue waivers for vehicle access to accommodate special access for hunters and anglers in Wilderness.

The bill also contains a provision prohibiting USFS and BLM from enforcing any restrictions in designated Wilderness that are inconsistent with the original or primary purposes for which Federal public lands were established. Since most public lands were originally established for uses other than wilderness conservation, this provision has the potential to authorize extractive activities, such as timber production in designated Wilderness and, in effect, extinguish the meaning of the designation. This provision includes no mention of hunting or fishing. With a better understanding of the bill, the question becomes what is the real motivation behind the legislation: is it to improve access for sportsmen and shooters, or is this a poorly cloaked attempt to use and divide the sportsmen community and promote an extreme agenda that attacks the undisturbed and unregulated public lands that hunter and anglers have come to depend on for outdoor solitude and trophy game. Sportsmen organizations should be angry that their tradition and values are being hijacked.
National Wildlife Federation Priorities Unveiled at Brookings Convention

The 66th Annual Convention of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation was held in Brookings on August 26-28. The evening awards banquet was attended by 100 people including delegates from 15 affiliate clubs from across South Dakota, leaders of National Wildlife Federation (NWF) subunits at the local, state and regional levels, and members of the Brookings Wildlife Federation, the host for the convention.

The Convention agenda included social events at the Brookings Gun Club and Staurolite Inn, and more serious deliberations about conservation issues at two business meetings. David Ditloff, NWF Regional Representative and Outreach Coordinator spoke about politics and the NWF’s main goals. The NWF is the largest and oldest conservation organization in the USA and is celebrating its 75th birthday. However, there is little celebration within the organization as Federal funding for conservation has been cut from 1.7% to 0.6% of the budget.

Dittoff unveiled the national “action items” and asked for help from state and local affiliates. The Federation will be stepping up advocacy for the conservation provisions in the 2012 Farm Bill, safety assurances for the Keystone pipeline, and water, air and endangered species acts. Ditloff introduced the “Be Out There” Campaign that offers youth education and activities in the out-of-doors.

Ditloff said “our survey found that the American child engages in 7 hours and 38 minutes each day in electronic entertainment, and this activity has not benefitted their health, attitudes toward others, or academic performance. The Be Out There campaign is a program to get kids outside so they will have a greater appreciation of nature and become better stewards of the environment.”

Three prestigious conservation awards were presented to South Dakotans at an evening banquet. Conservationist of the Year was Arnie Goldade, Aberdeen for his dedication to preserving the hunting and fishing heritage in South Dakota. Wildlife Conservationist of the Year was Robert Rennolet, Menno for his management of lands for wildlife. South Dakota Legislator Conservationist of the Year was Gene Abdallah, Brandon Valley for his support of sportsmen’s issues in the Legislature.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation (SDWF) was founded in 1945 by outdoor enthusiasts who cared about wildlife and were willing to work to protect the state’s natural resources. Executive Director Chris Hesla said “the Federation has about 3000 members who will continue advocacy for the wise use and conservation of our natural resources.” President Bill Antonides, who grew up in Brookings but now lives in Aberdeen, was reelected SDWF President. Antonides will promote the group’s mission to represent the interests of all South Dakotans in wildlife, outdoor recreation, natural resources and a quality environment.

The Brookings Wildlife Federation (BWF) was praised for hosting the Convention on short notice after flooding washed out plans for the Convention in Pierre. BWF President Rich Widman said “Brookings merchants, Convention Bureau, and club members joined in making the Convention a success and demonstrating what Brookings has to offer for recreation and natural resource conservation interests.”

Arnie Goldade of Aberdeen, (C) was named South Dakota Conservationist of the Year. He was recently honored at the SDWF Annual Convention held and hosted by Brookings Wildlife Federation. BWF President Rich Widman (L), and Tom Putzier (R) SDWF Board Member are shown giving Arnie his Conservationist’s Award.

Gene Abdallah was honored as Conservationist Legislator of the Year, recently at Brookings. Gene and his wife Judy are shown with his Conservationist’s Award.

“We are part of the earth and the earth is part of us.”
Chief Seattle (1786-1866)

“A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.”
Lou Holtz, coach, author and motivational speaker.

“Birds are indicators of the environment. If they are in trouble, we know we’ll soon be in trouble.”
Roger Tory Peterson 1908-1996
world spurs growing demand for food, fiber, and fuel. High prices are already pushing farmers to plant monoculture crops and convert environmentally sensitive land to crop production. Moreover, a dramatic increase in fruit and vegetable production will be necessary if we are to come close to meeting nutritional guidelines with domestic production. Biofuel mandates and subsidies are already adding fuel to the fire, and production of biomass for electricity generation will further intensify the scramble for land and water resources.

Our changing climate is becoming less friendly to agricultural production, which will make meeting these challenges even more difficult. Volatile weather and extreme events are already more evident in the climate record since 1970, and it is likely that intensified droughts, floods, and storms will continue to beset agriculture throughout this century.

Our natural resources and environment simply cannot stand up to this pressure unless conservation intensifies in lock step with production. We will not be able to sustain high levels of agricultural production if we allow our soil and water resources to degrade, especially in the face of challenging weather and increasing prices for energy and other inputs. Moreover, we clearly will fail to sustain critical ecological functions such as drinking water, fish, wildlife, biodiversity, and watershed health if the new farm bill takes a step back from its commitment to conservation.

We will have to run faster and be smarter to just stay where we are today. And where we are today is not where we need to be. In order to meet these challenges, we affirm the following set of principles:

I. FUNDING

Funding must be adequate to continue critical conservation programs at robust levels. We recognize there will be additional demands on all farm bill titles to find savings. However, the Conservation Title will have to fill the funding gap left by the expiring budget baseline for the Wetlands Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program. Given the importance of conservation, Congress should prioritize the Conservation Title by funding it as close as possible to the current baseline average of $6 billion a year.

II. HARMONIZE CROP SUBSIDIES, INSURANCE AND CONSERVATION

In order to ensure that the agricultural safety net works in harmony with conservation programs, conservation compliance provisions should be strengthened — and enforced — to blunt the unintended consequences of commodity, insurance, and disbursement programs. We must maintain the requirement that agricultural producers and their landlords undertake a basic level of soil and water conservation on vulnerable lands and protect wetlands. In addition, those who plow up native grassland or other environmentally sensitive land should be ineligible for USDA benefits on those lands.

Criticizing conservation compliance costs would be expanded to cover conservation since it is now the largest farm support program. In short, farm bill funding must not subsidize the destruction of wildlife habitat areas or degradation of water resources.

III. PERFORMANCE, RESULTS AND EFFICIENCY

Conservation Technical Assistance — Conservation technical assistance (TA) to farmers and ranchers is critical for maximizing the effectiveness of the programs, but it is chronically underfunded. An increased share of total Conservation Title funding should be devoted to TA.

Focus for Effect — Significant improvements in performance can be achieved by focusing conservation resources where the opportunities for environmental outcomes are greatest. The new farm bill must allocate far more assistance to project-based and outcome-oriented initiatives focused on local priority resource concerns and the most critical areas, while still continuing to help farms in all regions improve conservation of natural resources. In addition, we must maintain the requirement that agricultural producers and their landlords undertake a basic level of soil and water conservation on vulnerable lands and protect wetlands. In addition, those who plow up native grassland or other environmentally sensitive land should be ineligible for USDA benefits on those lands.

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Whole-Farm Systems — The Conservation Title should support whole-farm, sustainable, and organic conservation systems in addition to individual practices. These whole-farm systems have the potential to drastically improve environmental outcomes.

IV. EQUITY AND OUTREACH

More needs to be done to ensure conservation programs are accessible to all segments of the agricultural community. Women and racial and ethnic minority farmers and landowners have been historically underserved by the conservation programs, while new and beginning farmers and ranchers require additional conservation technical and financial assistance to lock in good stewardship for the next generation.

Special funding pools for these groups, higher cost-share rates, and targeted outreach should continue, as should efforts begun in the last farm bill to provide conservation resources to underserved fruit and vegetable producers.