Pheasant Habitat in Western South Dakota

Focused Efforts and Available Programs

Ring-necked pheasants have been, and will continue to be, one of the most important recreational and economic components of South Dakota. Although South Dakota is experiencing some of the best pheasant numbers in over 40 years, not all parts of the state have the number of birds desired.

One great attribute about pheasant populations is their ability to expand when proper habitat is available. Like most wildlife species, quality and the quantity of available habitat is essential to sustain and/or increase a population. When focusing on pheasant habitat, the two most important areas to address are **REPRODUCTION** and **SURVIVAL**.

REPRODUCTION – Nesting Cover

To increase pheasant numbers, the single most important habitat component is undisturbed nesting cover. Pheasants are dependent on grassland cover that has some residual cover, early spring/summer growth, and more importantly not being disturbed to be successful. Roadside ditches, buffers along rivers and streams, alfalfa fields, hay land, and CRP land are all important nesting areas. Below are some ideas and recommendations for the improvement and development of nesting acres.

Cropland Conversion

Converting cropland to nesting cover is typically done through existing Farm Bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). General CRP sign-ups are the most common with enrollments typically of larger acreages; however they are quite often difficult to enroll because of its irregularly timed sign-up periods, competitive bidding process and needed EBI scores. That being said, you should not overlook the General CRP opportunities. On the other hand, there are several programs available through Continuous CRP which are not competitive and enrollment is automatic if minimum qualifications are met. The one offering the most potential would be CP21 (Filter Strips). To qualify for this program, there must be a cropping history 4 out of 6 years (1996-2001), which could include alfalfa ground (check with your local NRCS office for more details).

CP21 specifics:

- ground would be immediately adjacent and parallel to a stream/river
- minimum width of 20 feet
- maximum average width cannot exceed 120 feet
- can cost-share permanent fences to exclude livestock
- can be a 10-15 year contract with an annual payment
- 20% incentive payment
- $10/ac/year up to $100 Signing Incentive Payment
- additional 40% Practice Incentive Payment for installation costs
- $4-$9/ac maintenance rate

[If enrolling in CP21 (Filter Strips), it is recommended to go at least 100 feet wide to maximize wildlife benefits. Narrow grassland strips increase the chance of predation and decrease reproductive potential.]

Another opportunity to convert cropland to wildlife habitat is through a Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) contract. Under this program you can receive up to 75% cost-share for establishment, but receive no annual payment.

SD Game, Fish & Parks (GFP) also offers **cost share to cover 100% cost of seed to convert cropland back to grassland.**

Pasture Land

One of the best opportunities landowners have in western SD to enhance and develop wildlife habitat is to utilize and maximize riparian areas with adjacent pastureland. Fencing projects that would exclude livestock and leave decent size buffers could offer additional nesting cover, winter cover, and traveling corridors. If possible, select areas within the riparian system where it winds extensively and fence out a "block". **(Refer to examples on photo)**

A relatively new program made available through Continuous CRP is CP29 (Marginal Pastureland Wildlife Habitat Buffer). This program was developed to address not only water quality issues as related to livestock, but also to provide wildlife habitat. If the site has sufficient native species growing, only fencing to exclude livestock is needed. If the site is determined not to have the required minimum native species, then a selected mixture, determined by your local NRCS office, will be required to be planted.

CP29 specifics:

- Adjacent to streams and permanent water
- Minimum width of 20 feet, maximum average width of 120 feet
- Natural vegetation for the site is a mix of grasses, shrubs, and forbs
- Must treat a water quality concern
- Can cost-share permanent fences to exclude livestock an watering facilities away from buffer
- 10 to 15 year contract
- 20% Incentive Payment
- $10/ac/yr up to $100 Signing Incentive Payment
- additional 40% Practice Incentive Payment for installation costs
- $4-$9/ac maintenance rate

An alternative to CP29, for landowners who do not want to totally exclude livestock from riparian areas is the **Riparian Pasture Program**. Game, Fish & Parks **will cost share 75% on materials and installation of fence to create a riparian pasture**. Cooperators will generally agree to graze at sustainable stocking rates based on NRCS guidelines. **50% cost share up to $5,000 is also available for alternative water development** (pipe & tank, shallow wells, etc.).

Nesting Cover Planting – Recommended Species

Western Wheat Grass	Intermediate Wheat Grass
Green Needle Grass	Alfalfa
Sweet Clover	Switch Grass
Side Oats Grama	Big Bluestem
Little Bluestem	

[Contact your local NRCS office to determine which mixture of the above will work best for your area and soil types.]

***It is important to have a legume component in your nesting mixture as they attract insects which are essential to chick development. Older nesting cover plots can be enhanced by inter-seeding legumes such as alfalfa and sweet clover.**

SURVIVAL – Winter Cover

When considering the survival of pheasants, we typically think of winter cover; however quality habitat in early spring is very critical to survival as well. This is a time when pheasants are extremely vulnerable as quality habitat is minimal coming out of winter, as this also coincides with the influx of predators due to annual migrations (avian predators).

Western SD winter cover may differ in location and structure; however it serves the same purpose: it is to provide shelter during the most difficult times of the year (shelter from wind, cold temperatures, and predators). Cattails and certain woody areas provide excellent cover for roosting, loafing, escaping predators, and shelter from severe weather conditions. However, these areas are typically grazed, especially during the winter. To maximize these areas for wildlife, consider livestock exclusion fencing. **GFP will cost share 100% for the fencing materials needed to exclude livestock from cattails and woody habitats.**

When considering the planting of a woody habitat area or a new shelterbelt for the purpose of pheasant habitat, it's important to use shrubs and other woody plants that grow low to the ground and those that produce berries that can be used as a winter food source. Low to the ground branches provides excellent cover and shelter from both weather elements and avian predators.

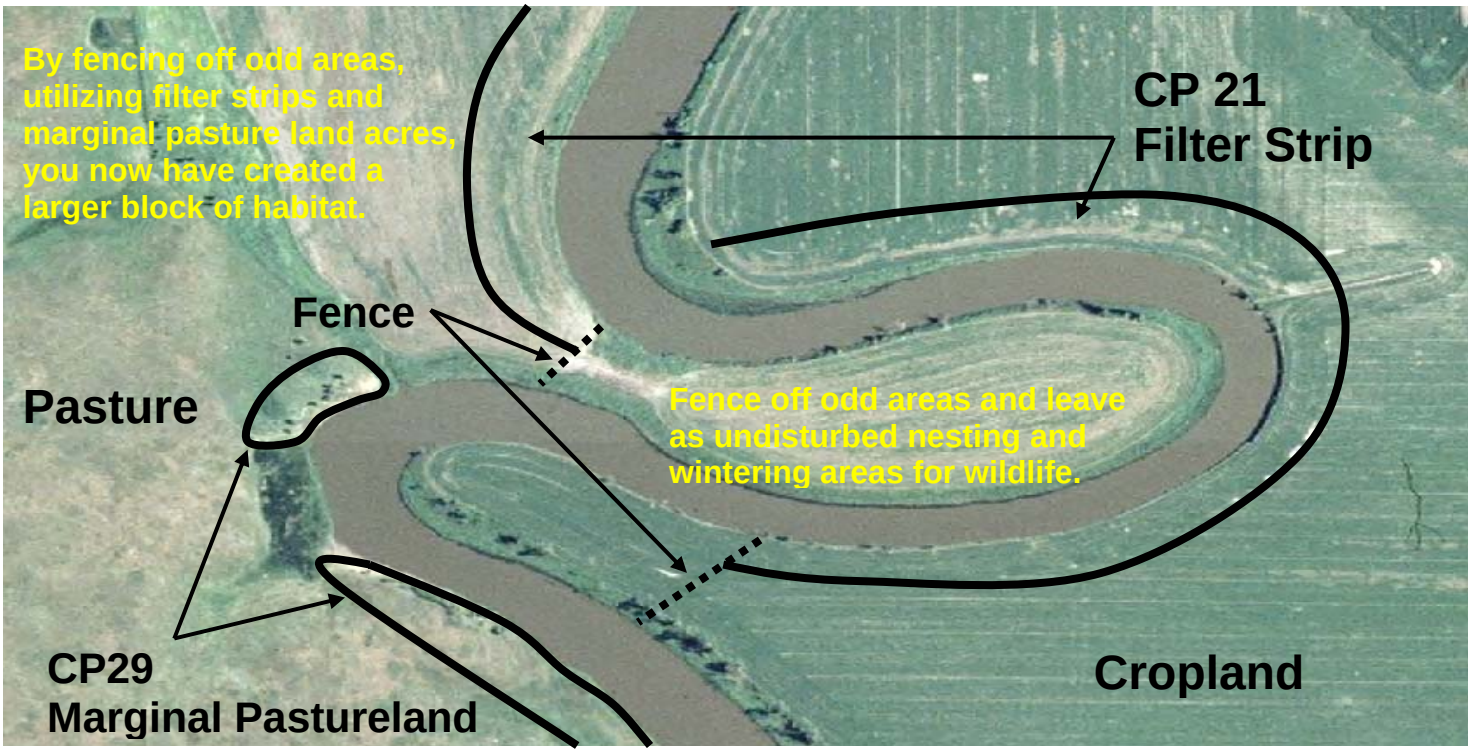
GFP offers 75% cost share up to a maximum of $5,000 to establish woody habitat for wildlife. Wider woody habitat plantings provide better winter cover for pheasants and qualify for higher cost-share.

Woody Cover Plantings – Recommended Species

Shrubs	Intermediate Trees
American Plum	Eastern Red Cedar
Silver Buffalo berry	Rocky Mtn. Juniper
Lilac	
Caragana	

For additional species, contact your local USDA office.

This figure shows some ideas and concepts of using a meandering river area to form a block of habitat by utilizing fencing and Farm Bill programs to create nesting and wintering cover.



For more specifics and details on programs and cost-share funding availability, please contact:

SD Game, Fish & Parks
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OR

Your local USDA Ag Service Center