

Dear Committee Members

I am Brian Brake landowner and a producer in the Franklin County WPRA and have land enrolled in CREP. I am a Pheasants Forever member and habitat chairman of the local chapter and in PA PF chapters have completed over 5,700 projects on 68,000 acres. CREP has provided over \$25.9 million in rental payments to over 11,000 producers on over 200,000 acres of land. Franklin County has lost all 17 CREP contracts up for renewal this year.

Pheasants Forever (PF) is deeply concerned about the direction and commitment of the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) to the Farm Bill and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) at the state and national level. It looks to us that the PGC is not aware of, or is not placing a high priority on these programs. We think that there is only one responsible choice and that is to fully commit to implementing CREP and working with partners at the state and national level promoting Farm Bill for Pennsylvania that garners \$20.00 in federal and state dollars for every \$1.00 spent by the PGC.

**PF would like to see the PGC:**

- 1) Once again commit resources to retain habitat acres and even expand further the wildlife habitat development opportunities across the agricultural landscape of Pennsylvania.
- 2) Meet the PA CREP 2000 agreement and provide the \$2.0 million dollars promised for this program and return to the strategy that had served CREP and Farm Bill conservation programs so well in the past.
- 3) Established a Cooperative Agreement with NRCS PA to hire 10 Habitat Biologist to work directly with landowners and partners.
- 4) Put a much higher priority placed on these programs like CREP that are critical for restoring ring-necked pheasants and all farmland wildlife including many species of special concern identified in the PGC Wildlife Action Plan.

The resources and strategy the PGC had committed to CREP and the Farm Bill in the years 2000-2006 established Pennsylvania as a leader in restoring farmland wildlife habitat for the Northeastern Region. The first draft of the Pennsylvania CREP was completed by a PGC Wildlife Biologist to make sure wildlife habitat was a major objective. Without the PGC, our CREP could have ended up a buffer only program with few benefits to farmland wildlife in decline. By 2006, the Pennsylvania CREP had the most acres on the ground of any CREP in the nation! Unfortunately, cuts in the program and reorganization have resulted in much less emphasis on CREP and Farm Bill Programs by the PGC. PF would like to see the PGC once again commit those resources to retain those habitat acres and even expand further the wildlife habitat development opportunities across the agricultural landscape of Pennsylvania.

Another substantial benefit of CREP is the hundreds of millions of federal dollars it will bring in to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Annual rental payments already exceed \$20 million dollars annually. We recognize that the PGC does not have the resources to restore farmland wildlife habitat on a landscape scale. However, by providing small incentives in addition to CREP, a tremendous amount of habitat can be restored or saved.

The PA CREP Agreement signed by the Governor in 2000 required a commitment of state funds for PA to participate. The PGC committed to providing \$2.0 million dollars annually for 15 years. The PGC estimated \$1.0 million for incentive payments to landowners and \$500,000 annually for monitoring and research, and \$ 500,000 annually for habitat biologists for technical assistance to landowners. It was estimated that for every dollar the PGC committed to CREP another \$20 federal dollars would go to CREP!

That is a 20:1 match! We are asking you to meet the PA CREP 2000 agreement and provide the \$2.0 million dollars promised for this program. Failure of the PGC to meet its matching obligations could put the entire PA CREP Agreement in jeopardy, according to FSA in Washington.

The PGC established a Cooperative Agreement with NRCS PA to hire 10 Habitat Biologist to work directly with landowners and partners. The positions were located in NRCS offices. The PGC also established a Farm Bill Outreach Coordinator position to assist the Pheasant Biologist (Farm Bill Coordinator) with all marketing and outreach efforts to reach enrollment targets and to insure compliance with Conservation Plans after the cover was established. This PGC Team of 10 Habitat Biologists, the Pheasant Biologist serving as Farm Bill Coordinator, Farm Bill Outreach Coordinator, FSA Conservation Program Manager, and NRCS State Biologist made this program work.

Today, things are much different. Based on what we have been able to find out from the Bureau of Wildlife Habitat Management, the PGC and NRCS Agreement was not renewed when it expired. Only 2 Habitat Biologists remain on staff and the Program now resides with the Private Lands Section Chief in the Bureau of Wildlife Habitat Management. The Farm Bill Outreach Program Coordinator position is not being renewed. This level of program resources will not insure that as acres expire from CREP starting in 2010, they will be re-enrolled. It provides no resources to assist landowners with managing their CREP acres for wildlife and it provides no resources for expanding the program.

At the start of developing a CREP proposal in 1998 PF members were at the table supporting this effort and the nay sayers were there as well ("It will never work in PA" "It can't be done they need every square inch"). Thanks to the efforts of the PGC and some very key legislators, including, State Representative Staback, and US Congressman Holden the nay sayers did not prevail. Instead, with the PGC and DEP leading the way CREP enrolled over 150,000 acres by the end of 2006. An FSA District Director commenting at a CREP Committee Meeting in 2005 said, "If it wasn't for the PGC and its Farm Bill Biologist (Pheasant Biologist), Farm Bill Outreach Coordinator, and habitat biologists, there would be no CREP acres in Pennsylvania."

PF believes CREP has afforded tremendous benefits to the sportsmen and women of Pennsylvania by being the most effective and successful private lands wildlife habitat program in

the history of the PGC. Scot Williamson, Wildlife Management Institute agrees, “We firmly believe CREP is the only program that can save grassland birds and ringnecked pheasants in Pennsylvania. The PGC should take advantage of this federal program. We know of no other programs where you can invest \$1.00 in conservation and have other agencies contribute \$20. Adequate staffing and the right organization for the full 15 years of CREP will be necessary to achieve success.” The importance of a program such as CREP is without a doubt critical to all farmland wildlife across Pennsylvania.

PF would like to see the PGC return to the strategy that had served CREP and Farm Bill conservation programs so well in the past. Only a bold and tenacious sustained effort and resource commitment by the PGC will allow CREP to succeed in establishing 265,000 acres of wildlife habitat across PA. More importantly, it is the only way to insure what we have accomplished to date will not be lost tomorrow!

PF has long been an advocate for Farm Bill conservation programs and as Don McKenzie of WMI has said, “the agricultural arena is not for the faint of heart but the habitat benefits in Farm Bill conservation programs are so substantial it cannot be ignored”. The only question now is will the PGC make farmland wildlife habitat a priority or will it let it slide into what it was like before CREP. We think that there is only one responsible choice and that is to fully commit to implementing CREP and working with partners at the state and national level promoting Farm Bill for Pennsylvania.

The PGC Pheasant Management Plan was supported by nearly all Pennsylvania sportsman. Without a strong commitment to Farm Bill and CREP and that right structure to make it happen, we do not believe we can restore pheasants and other farmland wildlife in PA, but with it, we have a chance. Please, let’s not miss this great opportunity!

We would like to meet with you and discuss what we need to do to put the necessary resources and organizational structure together to make our CREP succeed. The PGC was the leader when CREP began. Let’s make it so again!

Sincerely,

Brian J. Brake