

Testimony from Carl Roe, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Game Commission – 11-7-2011

Chairman Alloway and Members of the Senate Game and Fisheries Committee, as always it is great pleasure to appear before the committee to discuss topics of importance to our wildlife resources. I have been asked to address three areas today; the Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and the Game Commission's Quail Plan. Based upon the agenda I will stop after each major topic and address any questions you may have.

The first topic is the Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas. Although it is not a native species, the ring-necked pheasant historically is one of the most popular game birds in Pennsylvania and throughout North America. Management of this fine game bird is guided by our agency's Ring-necked Pheasant Management Plan, which is available on our website. Our overall purpose in pheasant management is *"to provide a quality ring-necked pheasant hunting experience in Pennsylvania."* The pheasant plan provides the most comprehensive look at the ring-necked pheasant and its management ever conducted in PA. The first goal in the plan calls for restoring self-sustaining and huntable ring-necked pheasant populations in suitable habitats by establishing Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas (WPRAs). WPRAs should be at least 15-20,000 acres. However, we have allowed WPRAs to be as small as 10,000 acres in size and contain adequate amounts of breeding and wintering habitats, and food. Once habitat thresholds are met, wild-trapped pheasants are obtained from western states and released to reestablish populations.

WPRAs essentially start through partnerships between the Pennsylvania Game Commission and Pheasants Forever Chapters and other conservation groups. WPRAs are selected based on potential pheasant habitat available on the landscape. Areas of potential pheasant habitat are based on a pheasant habitat model developed by the Game Commission that specifies less than 20% of the acreage in forest, greater than 50% row crops, greater than 20% hay land/pasture, and less than 10% developed land. In addition to these general landscape and land use features, a WPRAs must also contain a minimum of 5% of the acreage in secure nesting cover that can result from fields planted in cool or warm season grasses, hayfields not mowed until after July 15, small grains, and so forth. The implementation of habitat improvements may be required to meet habitat targets within a WPRAs before it can be approved. Habitat improvements on public and private lands are implemented in partnership with landowners and conservation organizations to meet habitat targets within WPRAs.

Once habitat targets are achieved, wild-trapped pheasants are released with the goal of establishing populations of at least 10 hens per mi² in the spring. Three-hundred wild pheasants are released in WPRAs in February and March each year for 3 years, depending on availability of birds and trapping success in western states. The wild pheasants are monitored by PGC biologists and volunteers to determine survival and population numbers using radio telemetry, crowing counts, brood surveys and flushing surveys. The population is monitored for 3 additional years after the last release to determine population status and success.

Wild pheasants in WPRAs are protected by regulations that make it unlawful to 1) take any pheasant at any time in any WPRAs, 2) release artificially propagated pheasants any time within any WPRAs, and 3) train dogs in any manner or hunt small game, except groundhogs and waterfowl, from the first Sunday in February through July 31 within any WPRAs.

Currently there are 5 approved WPRA's in Pennsylvania:

1. Pike Run – Washington County, which began in 2005 with the Tri- County Chapter of Pheasants Forever;
2. Central Susquehanna – Northumberland, Montour, Columbia Counties, which began in 2007 with the Central Susquehanna Chapter of Pheasants Forever;
3. Somerset – Somerset County, which began in 2009 with the Somerset County Chapter of Pheasants Forever;
4. Hegins-Gratz Valley – Schuylkill, Dauphin Counties, which was established in 2010 with the Schuylkill County Chapter of Pheasants Forever;
5. Franklin – Franklin County, which was designated in 2011 with the Cumberland Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever. The first release of wild pheasants on this WPRA is anticipated in 2012.

Of the five WPRA's we only consider the last four as part of the evaluation process for the success of the program. The Pike's Run WPRA did not have the control measures in place when some of our good intentioned partners received permission to release birds in the Pikes Run area. We will evaluate the total program based on the last four WPRA's.

The most mature WPRA is the one in Central Susquehanna. Although there has been a steady increase in the number of hens per square mile, we have not reached the goal. We hope to be there this year. However, the real test for the WPRA will be when we open it to hunting. The question will be can we still maintain a viable population under hunting pressure.

In summary the Wild Pheasant Recovery Area Program is a habitat based effort that will not only assist in pheasant restoration but other species as well. More information on WPRA's including specific criteria and procedures, descriptions and maps, annual reports and partners lists are available on our website (www.pgc.state.pa.us). I will be glad to answer any questions on Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is the second topic I was asked to address. CREP is a voluntary land retirement program that helps agricultural producers protect environmentally sensitive land, decrease erosion, restore wildlife habitat, and safeguard ground and surface water. The program is a partnership among producers; tribal, state, and federal governments; and, in some cases, private groups. CREP is an offshoot of the country's largest private-lands environmental improvement program - the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Like CRP, CREP is administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). By combining CRP resources with state, tribal, and private programs, CREP provides farmers and ranchers with a financial package for conserving and enhancing the natural resources of farms. CREP addresses

high-priority conservation issues of both local and national significance, such as impacts to water supplies, loss of critical habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife species, soil erosion, and reduced habitat for fish populations such as salmon. CREP is a community-based, results-oriented effort centered around local participation and leadership.

A specific CREP project begins when a state, Indian tribe, local government, or local nongovernment entity identifies an agriculture-related environmental issue of state or national significance. These parties and the Farm Service Agency then develop a project proposal to address particular environmental issues and goals. Enrollment in a state is limited to specific geographic areas and practices and acres available in the program.

Like CRP, CREP contracts require a 10- to 15-year commitment to keep lands out of agricultural production. CREP provides payments to participants who offer eligible land. A federal annual rental rate, including an FSA state committee-determined maintenance incentive payment, is offered, plus cost-share of up to 50 percent of the eligible costs to install the practice. The program also generally offers a sign-up incentive for participants to install specific practices. FSA uses CRP funding to pay a percentage of the program's cost, while state, tribal governments, or other non-federal sources provide the balance of the funds. States and private groups involved in the effort may also provide technical support and other in-kind services.

For the landowner, CREP is not just a cost-effective way to address rural environmental problems and meet regulatory requirements; it can provide a viable option to supplement farm income as well. This is particularly true when farm commodity prices are low. In many cases this is an economic decision by the land owner.

CREP is convenient for producers because it is based on the familiar, highly successful CRP model. Land must be owned or leased for at least one year prior to enrollment to be eligible, and must be physically and legally capable of being cropped in a normal manner. Land must also meet cropping history and other eligibility requirements. Enrollment can be on a continuous basis, permitting farmers and ranchers to join the program at any time rather than waiting for specific sign-up periods. CREP supports increased conservation practices such as filter strips and forested buffers. These conservation practices help protect streams, lakes, and rivers from sedimentation and agricultural runoff.

CREP also helps landowners develop and restore wetlands through the planting of appropriate groundcover. Restoring water regimes helps protect national treasures like the Chesapeake Bay, Mammoth Cave, and the Florida Everglades. By maintaining clear goals and requiring annual monitoring, CREP helps participants measure progress and ensure success.

CREP is one of the most cost-efficient and effective programs in the Commonwealth for reducing pollution in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Benefits include: Income for landowners. CREP pays up to 90 to 140 percent of the installation cost and annual rent, which is usually \$85 per acre. Good for the environment, CREP helps reduce stream bank erosion, protect natural resource land, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, reduce flooding, and more. CREP participants receive free assistance to plan, design, and implement buffer projects. Planting new

or protecting existing forested buffers earns up to 100 percent cost share for other priority practices.

CREP in Pennsylvania has been a major undertaking. We have managed to get authorization for 200,000 acres in the Susquehanna River Basin/Chesapeake Bay Drainage and 50,000 acres in the Ohio River Basin. We also have a request in for the establishment of a Delaware River CREP. The initial sign up was very successful in the Susquehanna Basin and less so in the Ohio Basin.

A pending amendment with Washington D. C., U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency to shift 20,000 acres from the Ohio River Drainage to the Chesapeake Bay Drainage is still awaiting approval. This has been a frustrating protracted process, for something that should have been relatively benign. Washington Farm Service Agency will give no timeframe for completion, despite requests.

A pending request for new Delaware River CREP for 15,000 acres is also with Washington USDA FSA. This has even further to go than the amendment, but we are assured that it is moving forward. No commitment from Washington FSA on timeline for this new proposal. PA DEP is the lead agency on this proposal.

Washington FSA with support from Pennsylvania FSA are the lead with PA Department of Agriculture being the state signatory agency. State cost-share is primarily through Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection with some from Pennsylvania Game Commission. The PGC funds two positions that work on CREP enrollment and conservation plans in the Ohio Drainage, and two positions that work on CREP in the Chesapeake Bay Drainage, in cooperation with Pheasants Forever and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

One of the great challenges is the reenrollment of farms in CREP. This is basically an economic decision by the landowner. No acres are due to expire in the Ohio River CREP this year or next year. Currently 29,404 acres are enrolled in the Ohio River CREP and we are attempting to transfer the other 20,000 to the Chesapeake area.

About 21,115 acres are due to expire this year in the Chesapeake Bay CREP, and preliminary estimates are that less than 50% will be re-enrolled, probably closer to 30%. Primary reason cited by Pennsylvania FSA for low re-enrollment is the high demand for cropland due to record high corn and soybean commodity prices. Actual re-enrollment numbers are due out in mid-October by PA FSA. Next year, 27,190 acres are due to expire. Current enrollment in the Chesapeake Bay CREP prior to contracts expiring September 30th is 176,754 acres.

Economic conditions drive the availability of lands for CREP. We had a saying in the 2001 that farmers should farm the best and CREP the rest. This was a viable strategy when commodity prices were low. As I mentioned previously, the commodity prices are considerably higher today compared to 2001 when the program got started. Let me provide some examples. In 2001 corn was \$81.96 per metric ton. As of August 2011 it was \$310.34. For the same time periods wheat was \$115.39 and today \$327.09. Soybeans were \$152.06 and today \$501.43. At these prices farmers can get a yield off their worst land and make it economically feasible to do so.

We will continue to work CREP within the resources we have available, but it is difficult to compete against the current market values. I will be glad to answer any questions on CREP.

The last area to be discussed is the Northern Bobwhite Quail. Northern Bobwhite Quail were historically a relatively common game bird across southern Pennsylvania farmland and brush lands. Populations declined rapidly between 1945-1955, but made a recovery in the early 1960s. Since 1966, the range and populations of bobwhites have declined to the point that most counties in the Commonwealth no longer have bobwhites as a breeding species. In the last breeding bird atlas inventory there were only 18 areas that had nesting sites for bobwhite quail.

This is not a problem unique to Pennsylvania. There is a national effort called the Northern Bobwhite Quail Initiative that is located in the University of Tennessee for the eastern part of the United States. There has been a continuous and significant declining population across the entire quail range. Our problem is exacerbated by the fact that we are at the northern edge of the historic quail range that has marginal habitat in most areas.

To restore this native game bird the PGC has just finished drafting a Northern Bobwhite Quail Management Plan. The mission of the Northern Bobwhite Quail Management Plan for Pennsylvania is *“to maintain and restore wild breeding populations of Northern Bobwhite Quail in suitable habitats.”*

There are 6 strategic goals identified in the plan. The first 5 Goals identified in this plan seek to identify, maintain and re-establish wild self-sustaining Northern Bobwhite populations in PA. Bobwhite Quail Focus Areas will be used to determine, if and where, we can maintain viable wild Northern Bobwhite populations. In order to sustain hunting of bobwhites again, the next step will be to increase these populations and the distribution of bobwhites to all identified suitable habitat in PA (Goal 6). If we can create and maintain early successional habitats on public and private lands, we believe Bobwhite populations can be restored. The Board of Commissioners accepted the Northern Bobwhite Quail Plan at the recent commission meeting.

Restoring Northern Bobwhite Quail to Pennsylvania will require a substantial commitment from numerous partners and annual expenditures on habitat improvements, monitoring and research. The opportunity to import wild quail from other states will be limited because of the scarcity of birds in other states. We would have to enable local populations and then possibly transfer within the state.

Again, this is a very challenging issue that we are more than willing to take on. I will be glad to answer any questions.