

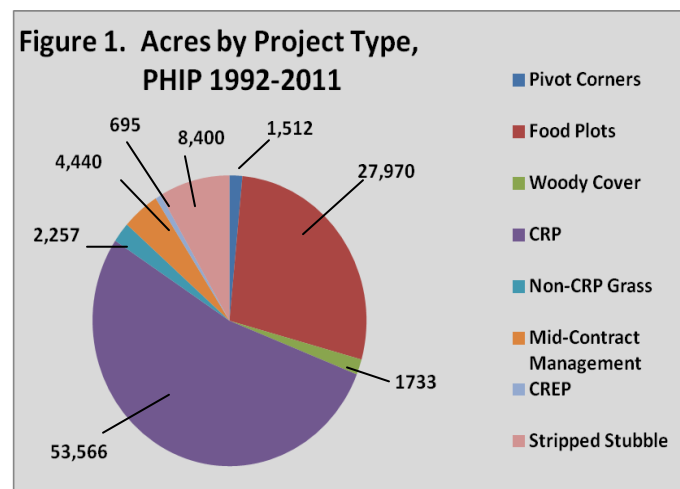
## Upland Bird Grassland Habitat Strategy on the Eastern Plains

Grassland wildlife habitat conservation in eastern Colorado is implemented through a diverse mix of programs and efforts. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has identified and prioritized areas of high upland wildlife habitat and population potential, which typically coincides with historic mid-grass or sand-sage prairie habitats. Importantly, this same geographic area supports and sustains a substantial and significant agricultural economy. Particularly in eastern Colorado, habitat management, and thus wildlife population management, is accomplished by working on private lands with willing producers. Specific project work is supported by utilizing CPW funding, non-government agencies, and federal farm bill programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Many of CPW's habitat efforts on the plains are linked with programs that acquire hunting access to these same private lands. The public can benefit from the projects that their dollars fund and gain a greater appreciation of what habitat creation, enhancement, and conservation really looks like on the ground. These programs focus on the hunted species of upland birds such as pheasants, mourning doves, greater prairie chickens, bobwhite quail, scaled quail, and non-game species of concern including plains sharp-tailed grouse and lesser prairie chickens. A diverse suite of other grassland species also benefit from these targeted and strategic efforts, such as the economically important mule deer and an abundant diversity of grassland dependent non-game birds and mammals. It is impossible to overstate the importance of the private landowner to wildlife habitat conservation on the eastern plains, as it would be nearly impossible to effectively deliver habitat projects without willing, engaged, and interested landowners, considering that >90% of all lands in eastern Colorado are privately owned. Appreciation of this fact supports the voluntary, incentive based conservation efforts which are the foundation of this habitat strategy.

A summary and description of habitat programs on the eastern plains follows. It is important to note that many of the programs described below work in a collaborative manner to achieve habitat and population goals in addition to meeting CPW objectives for enhanced hunting opportunities. These enhanced opportunities are expected to play a role in efforts to retain and recruit hunters.

### Pheasant Habitat Improvement Program, (PHIP)

CPW's PHIP program was initiated in 1992. Since its inception, the program has been contracted out to Pheasants Forever (PF), either directly through local chapters, or to local chapters through the National Pheasants Forever Organization. The program, which develops upland bird habitat on private lands in eastern Colorado, is very successful. CPW provides the funds, habitat guidelines, specifications, and oversight necessary to accomplish the habitat work. Local chapters of PF focus on landowner outreach and habitat development, with the National PF providing the chapter coordination and administration necessary to meet the demands of this large habitat initiative. The PHIP program has two focuses - the aforementioned habitat contract, and the farm bill biologist contract that provides three private land biologists in conjunction with PF and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

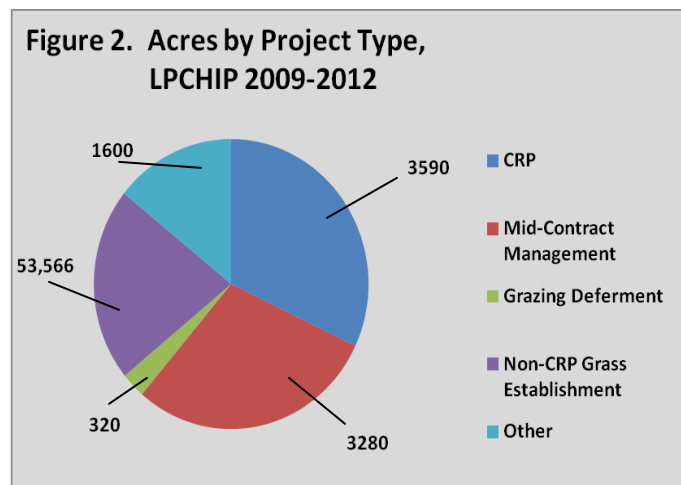


The PHIP program, through these contracts, has accomplished thousands of projects over the two decades it has been in existence, directly impacting more than 103,000 acres and influencing approximately 276,000 acres across the project range. Individual project highlights through 2011 include food plots (27,000 acres), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) projects (53,000 acres), 2,311 woody cover projects, 216 grass center-pivot sprinkler corners, 358 other grass plantings (non-CRP) totaling 2,257 acres, 71 CRP Mid-Contract Management (MCM) projects totaling 4,440 acres and 8,000 acres of stripped wheat stubble projects (Figure 1). Local chapters of Pheasants Forever have worked with more than 1,000 landowners to accomplish pheasant habitat projects within the project zone.

**Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat Improvement Program (LPCHIP)**

The lesser prairie chicken habitat improvement program (LPCHIP) was initiated in 2009. This program was specifically designed to improve and develop habitat on private lands for lesser prairie chickens (LEPC) and other mid-grass and sand sagebrush dependant wildlife found in occupied lesser prairie chicken range in southeast Colorado. Program delivery to date has been achieved through the collective and collaborative work of biologists, district wildlife managers (DWM’s), and the partnership farm bill biologists based in Lamar. In 2012, the LPCHIP initiative adopted the program delivery model of PHIP. Specific project identification and implementation will be contracted through PF to replicate the efficient and effective program delivery demonstrated by PHIP for other upland bird species. Locally led PF chapters will be able to assist in delivery of this program as they currently do with PHIP. Currently the LPCHIP is funded by the severance tax species conservation trust fund. Program funds are targeted to addressing habitat limiting factors for lesser prairie chickens, almost exclusively on private lands. A small portion of funding was used for a project on the Comanche National Grasslands, administered by the United States Forest Service (USFS).

As of June 2012, the LPCHIP has implemented projects directly impacting 11,212 acres. There are an additional 7,413 acres of projects in progress and areas where there is strong landowner interest. The completed acres include 3,590 acres of CRP projects, 3,280 acres of CRP mid-contract management, 320 acres of grazing deferment designed to improve nesting habitat adjacent to leks, and 2,422 acres of non-CRP grass establishment. The other category includes weather stations for grass establishment monitoring and fencing supplies for grazing management that impacted 1,600 acres (Figure 2).



**Private Lands Technical Assistance Programs**

Two CPW programs are charged with increasing delivery of federal farm bill programs administered through the USDA. Both programs deliver habitat-based and wildlife-driven technical assistance to private landowners within Colorado, by serving as a “one-stop shopping” service for a host of federal conservation, CPW habitat and access programs, and non-government conservation group programs. Entering into partnership with PF, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO), and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has greatly improved CPW’s ability to reach landowners that, while interested in conservation opportunities, may not seek

out CPW expertise in habitat development.

The Private Lands Wildlife Biologist (PLWB) program began nearly 10 years ago under a cooperative agreement with the Colorado River Watch Program. The PLWB program continues today under cooperative agreements between CPW, NRCS and RMBO. Five biologists and one range ecologist work under the current contract, three of which are located and work on the eastern plains. Within the current partnership, biologists have coordinated 142 projects totaling 122,000 acres.

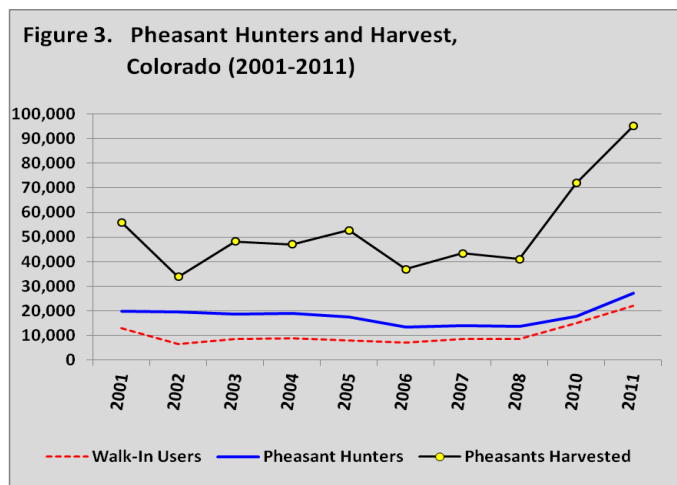
The PHIP farm bill biologist program was initiated in March 2010, with the objective of providing a portion of the personnel costs for up to three private lands biologists, located in Holyoke, Burlington and Lamar in conjunction with PF NRCS. From inception in May of 2010 through the end of 2011, CPW-PF-NRCS partnership biologists impacted 277,936 acres, primarily by providing technical wildlife assistance to landowners enrolling in CRP.

### **Small Game Walk-In Access Program (WIA)**

The Walk-In Access program was established in 2001 to help address steady and severe declines in the number of pheasant hunters in Colorado. The program is a collaborative effort between CPW and nine partner groups that coordinate the WIA program. The program is coordinated by Pheasants Forever chapters in Morgan, Yuma and Kit Carson Counties, the Washington County Conservation District, Centennial Conservation District (Logan County), Sedgwick County Conservation District, Haxtun Conservation District (Phillips County), Stratton Knights of Columbus (Kit Carson County), and Kiowa County School District. Parks and Wildlife personnel directly offer the program in areas where partner groups are not available.

The WIA program initially was limited to pheasant hunting on the eastern plains, but has since expanded to enroll lands statewide, for a variety of opportunities including doves, scaled quail, bobwhite quail, and waterfowl. In September of 2010, program staff applied for and received a Voluntary Public Access (VPA) grant from Farm Service Agency (FSA), which effectively doubled the amount of funding available for the program. In the 2011 season, the first in which the VPA grant was available, CPW offered increased rental rates to landowners enrolling quality habitats, and increased opportunities for any interested landowner to participate. Approximately 265,000 acres were enrolled into the program in 2011, a 20% increase in accessible acres from 2010.

From 2001 through December of 2009, hunters were required to purchase a WIA permit to legally hunt lands enrolled in the program. The permit was discontinued by a Wildlife Commission action on January 1, 2010, with the objective of increasing hunting participation by removing an additional barrier to hunting. Removal of the permit, an increased pheasant population, additional access and improved habitat enrolled in WIA, has increased hunter use of the program dramatically. Small Game Harvest Survey data estimates that 22,000 hunters accessed WIA properties in 2011, an increase of nearly 6,000 hunters from 2010 and more than double the number of hunters from 2009 (Figure 3). Hunters identifying themselves as pheasant hunters during the 2011-12 small game survey



totaled 27,157, the highest estimate since 1996. Approximately 80% of Colorado's pheasant hunters utilize lands enrolled in the program and approximately 30% of the statewide pheasant harvest came from WIA properties.

The WIA program has also been tremendously popular with landowners who enroll land into the program. Since the program began, CPW has tracked renewal rates for landowners offering lands. Across the program, 90% of all landowners that are accepted into the program offer their land again in following years. Likewise, over 80% of all lands are of sufficient habitat quality to re-enroll in following years. These estimates fluctuate slightly between individual years depending on weather events, habitat quality, land ownership and a host of other factors, however, renewal and acceptance rates are very high. The WIA program directly, or through the local WIA coordinators, enters into Landowner License Agreements with approximately 350 landowners annually.

The WIA program is tied very closely to PHIP and CPW's other efforts to create more and better conservation practices within the federal farm bill, resulting in improved upland bird and grassland-associated game and non-game wildlife populations in eastern Colorado. This synergy is accomplished by employing a PHIP or a farm bill program, or a combination of programs, to complete a project on private land. After project completion, the WIA program can provide a significantly higher rental rate to the landowner for voluntarily enrolling that project into WIA. Providing that additional incentive to landowners' complements the benefits a landowner obtains from the conservation project, and gives the public access to improved, higher quality habitat, potentially increasing hunter participation and retention rates over time.

### **Habitat Partnership Program (HPP)**

The HPP program has one committee east of I-25, the Republican Rivers committee. The big game/agricultural conflict model that the HPP program was developed for, although applicable to western Colorado doesn't necessarily apply on the eastern plains. Nonetheless, the committee is dedicated to assisting landowners as best they can with conflicts and habitat projects that benefit a multitude of species. Additionally, HPP provides a valuable forum for current issues and discussions between landowners and agencies. Current HPP statutes limit the work that this committee can do but the committee, the region, and the HPP program recognize the value it has in northeastern Colorado.

### **Farm Bill Programs**

Wildlife habitat conservation on the eastern plains is implicitly linked to the farm bill programs offered through the USDA. Much of the current funding for habitat work on the eastern grasslands is associated with these programs. There is a seemingly endless list of programs, and the incessant use of acronyms can become exceedingly confusing. A condensed list of programs follows and includes those most often associated with wildlife habitat potential, and includes hyperlinks to further, more detailed information.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): CRP is a federal farm bill program administered by FSA with program technical assistance and delivery from NRCS. CRP offers 10-15 year contracts to producers to plant formerly cropped acres into grassland cover to improve water quality, reduce soil erosion, and provide wildlife habitat. CPW puts substantial effort into attempting to influence CRP to benefit upland game birds and associated grassland species on the eastern plains. CRP, and the potential to incorporate wildlife habitat considerations, is the single largest potentially beneficial program, currently impacting over 2 million acres in eastern Colorado. Many of the incentives in PHIP are designed to improve the wildlife habitat component of CRP. For further information go to:

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp>

Continuous CRP: CRP is broken into several programs but can be generalized into two primary components pertinent to CPW wildlife habitat concerns. General CRP has periodic enrollments when producers compete for enrollment using an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) score. General CRP is usually not tightly targeted, and has historically accounted for the majority of CRP in Colorado. Continuous CRP has much fewer acres, but it is much more targeted, with several of the programs specifically targeted at wildlife and specific wildlife habitat concerns. Three continuous programs that CPW has been heavily involved in are the High Plains Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), and Buffers for Upland Game Birds (CP-33). There are currently 4 active SAFE programs in Colorado: Lesser prairie chicken SAFE, Western Slope grouse SAFE, Shortgrass Prairie Buffers SAFE, and Plains Sharp-tailed Grouse SAFE. CPW and partners recently submitted a proposal to add an Eastern Plains Upland bird SAFE to target acres in our core pheasant and greater prairie chicken range. SAFE offers additional incentives, and is available on a continuous enrollment basis. This allows producers to apply for and enroll at any time so long as acres are available, and their property falls within an eligible area, regardless of EBI score. CP-33 is targeted predominately at bobwhite quail and is designed to put field borders and vital early succession habitat in targeted areas specifically to improve upland bird habitat. For additional information, go to:

[http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=pfs&newstype=prfactsheet&type=detail&item=pf\\_20060601\\_conservation\\_crpcsup06.html](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=pfs&newstype=prfactsheet&type=detail&item=pf_20060601_conservation_crpcsup06.html)  
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Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): CREP is a federal/state cooperative program targeted at specific agricultural resource concerns. In Colorado, CPW is an active participant in the High Plains CREP by providing additional financial incentives for producer enrollment and for allowing public hunting access via WIA. This program seeks to enroll land into CRP while maximizing upland wildlife habitat value and providing for public hunting access. For additional information, go to:

[http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/colorado\\_high\\_plains.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/colorado_high_plains.pdf)

Mid-contract Management (MCM): All CRP contracts require producers to perform a mid-contract management treatment. As outlined in the federal rulebook for CRP, mid-contract management is a required management activity designed to ensure plant diversity and wildlife benefits. MCM is site specific and is used to enhance the wildlife benefits for the site. MCM thus presents an opportunity to greatly improve wildlife habitat if implemented correctly and with the needs of priority wildlife species in mind. CPW, through PHIP has been a very active participant and advocate for effective MCM treatments specific to eastern Colorado's habitat and climate. The national allocation for all CRP acres continues to decline from the high of 39 million acres nationally, perhaps to as low as 22-25 million acres. One of the strategies to mitigate the negative effects of fewer CRP acres is to make the existing acres better. Effective MCM will be required to offset what is certain to be negative impacts for grassland dependent wildlife species as overall acreage of CRP declines.

For additional information, please go to:

[http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/2-crp.pdf](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/2-crp.pdf)  
[http://www.coloradopf.com/?page\\_id=708](http://www.coloradopf.com/?page_id=708)

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP): EQIP is a farm bill program designed to assist producers in managing their natural resources in a sustainable fashion. CPW partner biologists assist in the technical assistance and program delivery to ensure wildlife habitat concerns are taken into account. For more information, go to: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial>

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP): WHIP is a farm bill program to assist landowners who voluntarily want to improve or protect wildlife habitat on private lands. Part of this program is a partnership between the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and NRCS called Working Lands for Wildlife. Two of the seven priority species and programs are found in Colorado, the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative and the Greater Sage Grouse Initiative. CPW is an active partner in the delivery of this program, primarily through the partnership biologists. WHIP is being absorbed into EQIP, and is now an option available to producers through EQIP. For additional information, go to:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/whip>

Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP): GRP is a voluntary farm bill program that provides incentives to producers to support working grazing operations, improve plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland facing threats of conversion to other uses. This has secondary benefits to grassland wildlife species that require large tracts of relatively intact grassland habitat. For additional information, go to:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/grassland>

Lesser Prairie Chicken Conservation Initiative (LPCI): LPCI is a collaborative program (part of the working lands for wildlife program) and is designed to improve and protect habitat in the 5 states that make up the range of lesser prairie chickens. Lesser prairie chickens have been petitioned to be federally listed, and are only found in Colorado, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. LPCI is a special initiative that uses funding through WHIP, EQIP, and GRP to promote conservation of this species of prairie grouse. CPW is an active partner in the delivery of this program through the private lands biologist program. For more information go to:

[http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/farmland/initiatives/?&cid=nrcsdev11\\_023912](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/farmland/initiatives/?&cid=nrcsdev11_023912)

## **Summary**

Effective wildlife habitat conservation on the eastern plains of Colorado is a balance of applying sound wildlife management principles to address population limiting factors while being cognizant of the socio-political challenges of working in a private land dominated landscape. Inherent challenges exist in utilizing an enormous cadre of programs and funding sources from several diverse government agencies to accomplish these goals. Incentive based voluntary conservation is a proven model in this landscape, and the greatest challenge facing CPW is maintaining and increasing wildlife benefits from federal programs. The ability to influence the types of habitat created by these programs, in the form of technical assistance, habitat-driven incentives, and access payments, is critical to successfully addressing landscape scale habitat conservation.

An opportunity exists to enhance the CPW mission by combining the substantial efforts and funds invested into these habitat programs with efforts aimed at recruiting and retaining hunters. Over the last four years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of hunters identifying themselves as pheasant hunters, because CPW has successfully influenced the types of habitat created by PHIP and Farm Bill programs, and then acquired access to those lands for public hunting. Small game hunting is often a gateway for new or novice hunters and a major component of recruiting and retaining these hunters is providing abundant and publically accessible small game and upland bird resources.

Habitat conservation, restoration and or enhancement projects focused on hunted species are not an exclusive management model. Rather, private and public interest in these hunted species provides the pathway and mechanism to implement a comprehensive wildlife strategy at a landscape scale with habitat efforts that support a multitude of grassland dependent species. For example, wildlife surveys in Kansas have documented a significant increase in the occupied range and population of LEPC. Most of the increase of LEPC in Kansas is attributed to the establishment of warm season mid and tall bunch grasses interspersed with forbs in the area through the CRP program. This habitat improvement resulted from concerted efforts to improve and enhance pheasant populations with the objective of increasing hunting opportunities. Lesser prairie chickens were able to greatly expand in range and population as a result of pheasant-driven CRP projects. The lesser prairie chicken response to CRP grasslands is not unique to Kansas. Currently, CRP is extremely important to LEPC in Colorado because the majority of known active leks are located on CRP. The fact that LEPC and other grassland wildlife are heavily dependent on CRP in Colorado and elsewhere underscores the importance of creating habitat for locally desired or economically important species as a means of addressing the needs of all wildlife.

A comprehensive, landscape scale strategy on the eastern plains is a sum of many parts that individually may not seem to be comprehensive in nature. However, when effectively combined, the aforementioned programs cumulatively result in a comprehensive strategy benefiting a multitude of both game and non-game species, and providing benefits for CPW constituents, including consumptive and non-consumptive publics. Maintaining, improving and expanding CPW effectiveness in these endeavors is important to the mission of CPW and our ability to increase the scope of habitat conservation efforts on the eastern plains.