

Idaho Fish & Game

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CRP has Protected Key Idaho Wildlife Habitat for 25 Years

A farm program aimed at curbing erosion of America's agricultural soils has proven to be a boon to wildlife in Idaho and across the country.

This year is the 25th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). It is administered by the Farm Service Agency, which is part of the United States Department of Agriculture. CRP is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural landowners to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover. Landowners sign up for 10- to 15-year contracts and receive an annual payment.

CRP was introduced in 1986 when soil erosion exceeded 3 billion tons per year nationwide, wetlands were being drained, water quality was deteriorating and wildlife populations were under stress because of the loss of habitat. CRP provided solutions to all of these problems. Since its inception, the program has helped reduce soil erosion, provided natural habitats for wildlife, restored more than 2 million acres of wetlands nationwide and removed millions of tons of carbon dioxide from the air.

CRP is one of the largest private land conservation

programs in the nation, with nearly 32 million acres enrolled, mostly in the Great Plains, Midwest and western United States. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said, "CRP has a 25-year legacy of successfully protecting

the nation's natural resources through voluntary participation. Although it was designed to address soil erosion, CRP has become one of the standouts in the USDA arsenal of conservation programs by continuing to provide significant economic and environmental benefits beyond its original intent."

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Lush CRP land benefits beasts and birds as well as soil. *(IDFG photo)*

Sign-up Ends April 15

The sign-up period for Conservation Reserve Program contracts ends April 15.

Landowners can learn about the program and sign up for the program at local Farm Service Agency offices. Many of these offices have an Idaho Fish and Game staff person available to assist landowners with the offer process and help to increase landowners' opportunities for enrollment.

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Tall grasses and forbes have replaced dryland crops and protect erodible soils among wooded hills in many places in southeast Idaho where lands are conserved under the Conservation Reserve Program.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Knetter

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700,000 acres of highly erodible cropland are enrolled in CRP. These acres provide important wildlife habitat, from pheasants to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and a myriad of nongame songbirds and mammals.

In addition to valuable wildlife habitat, these areas provide recreational opportunities for the citizens of Idaho. Hunting, bird watching, wildlife photography

and just plain quiet enjoyment all occur on land enrolled in CRP.

This year 117,000 acres of CRP will expire in Idaho. We do not know how many of those acres will be re-enrolled in the program. However, the fate of these acres could have a big impact on wildlife, particularly upland game birds in eastern Idaho and the Lewiston area.

CRP is a program within the federal farm bill; this bill must be reauthorized every five to six years and each time it is reauthorized there are opportunities for the U.S. Congress to make changes. In the 2002 federal farm bill, CRP allowed for the enrollment of up to 39 million acres, in the 2008 legislation, congress lowered that number to a maximum of 32 million acres. This change effectively caused the loss of nearly 7 million acres of valuable wildlife

habitat across the nation and tens of thousands of acres of habitat within Idaho.

The federal farm bill is up for reauthorization again in 2012. If CRP is included, it will be able to continue its 25-year track record of providing valuable wildlife habitat and places for Idahoans to recreate.

CRP is a working land conservation program. The economic benefit to Idaho for these lands during this 10-year period is more than \$347 million dollars.

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CRP Key to Sharptail Numbers in Idaho

Idaho shelters the largest population of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse that remain in the West, mostly on farmland held in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands contribute to the survival and abundance of many types of wildlife, but the federal farm bill program is critical for this species of native grouse.

The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse is one of seven subspecies (one extinct) of sharp-tailed grouse in North America. They were once considered the most abundant and well-known upland game bird in the Northwest. Columbian sharptails were found in southern British Columbia, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, northeastern California, northern Nevada, northern Utah, western Colorado, western Wyoming, western Montana and Idaho. Of the six existing subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse, the Columbian has suffered the greatest decline in distribution and abundance.

Columbian sharptails were petitioned twice—1995 and 2004—for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Under both petitions, the finding was deemed not warranted. However, the USFWS retained the option to list them should additional information become available to indicate such action was appropriate and warranted. The USFWS also retained the option to recognize discrete populations for listing if information becomes available to warrant such an action. These

birds are classified as Critically Imperiled in the Idaho Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy.

The entire breeding population of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in the

miles, less than five percent of the historic range estimate of 484,380 square miles.

More than 95 percent of the breeding population of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in the United States occurs in two separate populations: northwestern Colorado and south-central Wyoming, and southeastern Idaho and northern Utah. It is estimated that Idaho supports between 59 percent and 66 percent of the remaining population in the United States; however, recent studies suggest that populations of this grouse in British Columbia, Washington, Idaho and Utah are genetically distinct from other subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse and should be managed as a distinct entity. A remnant population hangs on in the western Idaho counties of Adams and Washington where hunting for sharp-tails is closed.

It is apparent that Idaho plays a critical role in the continued existence of Columbian sharptails.

Threats to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse are widespread across its range and transcend local, state, and regional

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Sharptails and the hunter/dog teams that hunt them need big country with intact habitat. *Photo courtesy of Josh Rydalch*

United States has been estimated at 51,000 to 52,000, based on the best data available. The breeding population range-wide, including British Columbia, has been estimated at 56,000 to 61,500 grouse. Within the United States, the current occupied range encompasses about 23,846 square

IDFG Region	Active CRP Acres 2010	Total Acres Expiring 2010-2014	Total % Acres Expiring 2010-2014
Southwest	8705	4638	53.28%
Magic Valley	49124	43000	87.53%
Southeast	396027	300853	75.97%
Upper Snake	146988	106406	72.39%



CRP Key to Sharptail Numbers

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jurisdictions. The primary threats are all human-related. Foremost are habitat loss and degradation caused by conversion of native habitats to pasture and croplands, intensive grazing by domestic livestock, energy development, use of herbicides to control big sagebrush, alteration of natural fire regimes, invasion of exotic plants, and urban and rural expansion.

Possible loss of CRP lands is the single most important immediate threat to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in Idaho and throughout the subspecies' range. CRP has restored many thousands of acres, primarily from dryland wheat to perennial grasses and forbs. These extensive and mostly undisturbed grasslands provide secure nesting and brood-rearing habitat on private lands in southeast Idaho.

Since the inception of CRP in 1985, grouse populations have increased in Idaho, a trend counter to the general decline over the past century. Currently, there are more than 451,000 acres of CRP across the occupied range for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in Idaho. In 2011, the economic impact of CRP in sharp-tailed grouse range in Idaho is over \$22 million.

Although there have been recent general enrollment opportunities, the

total number of CRP acres throughout sharp-tail range in Idaho continue to decline. About 70 percent of sharp-tail habitat occurs on private land in Idaho.



A brace of sharp-tails and a happy dog make a good day of Idaho hunting.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Knetter

Possible loss of CRP lands is the most important immediate threat to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in Idaho

Each spring, males gather on traditional breeding areas called "leks", or dancing grounds. Leks attract as few as two males to as many as 30 or more, but average about 12 males. Here the males perform elaborate courtship displays and vocalizations to attract females for breeding and to defend their territory on the lek from other males. Males that occupy the center of the lek do most

of the breeding, which occurs mostly in April.

Biologists have also been attracted to these lek sites. Because Idaho supports the bulk of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, birds have been trapped on lek sites and translocated to suitable locations in Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington to augment remnant populations or to establish new ones. The University of Idaho currently has a PhD student working in collaboration with Fish and Game to determine the importance of CRP to this grouse and to develop monitoring and modeling techniques to monitor populations better.

Although their numbers have declined since pioneer days, sharp-tailed grouse remain a popular game bird in Idaho. The hunting season occurs during the month of October, with a daily bag limit of two and a possession limit of four. Hunting regulations have remained unchanged since 2000. Annual harvest surveys suggest that about 2,300 hunters spent 6,500 days hunting to harvest 5,100 Columbian sharp-tailed grouse annually, from 2000 to 2009.

Fish and Game aims to maintain this bird that belongs in the landscape of Idaho and, more than that, ensure that its numbers remain high enough to delight future generations of hunters.