



Migratory Bird Wetland Protection Advisory Council (WPAC) Meeting

May 15th 3:00-5:00 pm

Virtual: <https://mt-gov.zoom.us/j/83096775318?pwd=NWJ0c3FrUXFmNFZ3SDZweS9menFpZz09>

The Migratory Bird Wetland Program in Montana was established by the Montana Legislature in 1985 “for the protection, conservation, and development of wetlands in Montana” (MCA 87-2-411(2)).

Meeting Objectives:

- 1) Introduce new(ish) staff
- 2) Partner support perspective
- 3) Department update: review of projects and budget.
- 4) Flow Chart Project Examples

Council Members: Larry Peltz, Steve Christian, Justin Julian, Bridger Pierce, Chris Evenson

FWP Employees and Partners: Martin Townsend (RSA/PF), Shaun McCabe (PF), Adam McDaniel (DU), Rick Northrup, Ken McDonald, Sky Losleben, Faye McNew, Heather Harris

Steve Christian called the meeting to order at 3:02 pm.

Introduce Staff

Faye McNew (waterfowl biologist) and Sky Losleben (Region 6 habitat specialist), were introduced to the WPAC. They provided some personal background and outlined their role within FWP and how it relates to the MBWP. Faye, as the FWP waterfowl expert, will help review proposals and potentially help find projects. Sky will assist in finding and implementing MBWP habitat projects in Region 6.

Executive Action to Approve Minutes from meeting on February 22nd, 2024.

Larry Peltz moved to approve minutes as is, Bridger Pierce seconded. All members approved and motion carried.

Executive Action to Approve the Charter.

Larry Peltz moved to approve Charter as is, and Justin Julian seconded. All members approved and motion carried. Plan to review the charter on an annual basis.

Partner Perspective – Ranchers Stewardship Alliance (RSA) and Pheasants Forever (PF)

Martin (RSA based out of Malta) and Shaun (Blaine County) gave a great overview of PF and RSA and their role working with producers in grassland, sagebrush, and wetland habitats. Slides from their presentation are included below.

A question was asked about the current Farm Bill and if they anticipated any changes in new farm bill that would impact their work and their available resources.

They are hoping for improvements to CRP where it may be a little more diverse and there is talk of a bump in CRP acres nationwide. They are hoping to see RCPP revamped for better delivery on the partner side that would let partners have more oversight throughout the process. There is some concern that the Farm Bill may be held off until after the election year.

Ken asked if they anticipate that PF positions will remain intact. The positions are sitting well, especially with the MBWP input with nonfederal match. They currently have 16 positions; it went from 8 positions to 16 over the last 2 years.

Ducks Unlimited

Adam McDaniel spoke on how their work is done statewide with a specific focus on the Hi-Line. They are working with landowners and keeping working lands working through various programs, as well as partnerships and collaborative efforts.

Adam pointed out if you look at the waterfowl breeding pair density thunderstorm map, and overlay big-game migration, declining songbirds, and sage-grouse core habitat, this area (thunderstorm map area) shows multiple layers of significant habitat, not just in Montana, but nationwide.

Adam provided an update on a few potential MBWP projects that DU engineer, Dylon Peterson has been assisting with. Dylon had a window of time, so he came out a few weeks ago to look at Klindworth and Dammel Reservoir projects. He is hoping to have a cost estimate in the next few weeks. The Petrie Ranch reservoir may be challenging to find a contractor able to install sheet piling in that area and it could be a significant cost.

All of the prospective projects looked like they have a good wetland component.

Review of Information provided by Department.

- Current Projects
- Budget

The Program provided an update of current project status and budget. Most projects are moving along well. If all projects that have a dollar amount assigned go through, we will have spent a significant portion of the existing balance (~2/3rds).

- Active Agreements (Added Partner Match)

The partner match contribution was added to the existing active agreements Excel file and provided to the WPAC, as requested during the previous meeting.

- Project types and Access requirements

Rick provided a document with an outline of project types and access requirements for WPAC review. The question was asked about how people can find the information on access, especially for waterfowl and other forms of access like bird watching or photography.

The plan is to use the watchable wildlife web application that is currently being planned. It would be web based and show projects that have access opportunity and include information on how to secure access.

- Comments or thoughts on 2023 Report?

The council was given the opportunity to provide insight or ask questions about the 2023 Report. There were no concerns or questions offered. FWP will provide a report outlining all new MBWP advancements and projects in December 2024.

Flow Chart of the project approval process – examples by project type

- Rowe (Tall Grass) Low Tech Restoration (streamlined)
- Staton Coulee Reservoir (traditional)
- Isaac Homestead WMA addition (lands)

The program went over a few examples of the flow chart project approval process by project type. It appears to work well for streamlined and traditional projects but does not fit with land projects. Land projects have a unique internal lands prioritization process. *Heather will continue to work with Chris to further develop and refine the MBWP Project Process document, especially around traditional projects that require Design and Construction and Engineering involvement.*

Policy Topics (Topics for WPAC to review, discuss, provide guidance)

- Project Approval Process – how is it working?

The Program asked the WPAC how they thought the current project review process was working. There were no issues raised, the WPAC expressed they thought the current process was working well and stressed they really appreciated when photos were included to help them visualize the project.

- Other Topics?

Rick requested that the WPAC review the access outline document provided and provide some feedback. WPAC asked if there were any specific areas of concern and or any guiding state level principals that they need to keep in mind. There seems to be a lot of leeway in the MBWP regarding access, which is appreciated by the WPAC, but wondered if FWP has issues with that.

Rick suggested we put the document to use and as we start working on future projects, we can visit in on a project-by-project basis and adapt as we go. That way we can see how it works in practice.

Once the new Hunt Planner (wildlife viewing application) is developed for MBWP projects, Steve wondered if it would be a good homework assignment for the WPAC, to try and use it.

There were a few questions specifically for Faye. One was regarding the Bird Flu and if there is a plan in place if things “go south”. There is no plan yet, the disease is not currently having population level impacts and compared to previous years and it does not seem to be as prevalent in wild populations. There were a few mammals that have had it, including a young mountain lion.

Another question pertained the waterfowl regulation approval process and how it fits with the FWP commission and how to make comments on Pacific and Central Flyway season extensions and zones. Will there be a citizen committee?

They are set by the USFWS in 2025. The zones are set in 5-year increments, the next season zones that can be changed will be for the 2026 season. The recommendation needs to be in place by August 2024. They are looking for stakeholder engagement and interest around splits and may have an outreach survey.

Ken provided some updates from Helena. They are currently working on budgets and bills for the upcoming 2025 legislative session, 7 months out. If there are things that the WPAC would like department to advocate for on behalf of them, let us know and we can get it in the hopper. One thing of note is the MBWP capitol request for authority. The Director is looking at if we need to ask for more authority as the legislature questioned the program carrying a substantial funding balance in the last session. A request to adjust the ask for spending authority can wait until later into the calendar year, if we determine that may be needed. If we don't ask, we will wait for following session (2027) to ask for more spending authority. The money stays in the MBWP; we wouldn't lose it either way.

Steve stated that we don't want to short ourselves, but we also don't want to ask for more authority unless we can put that amount on the ground.

The June commission meeting is when we will present the habitat conservation leases, a few of them have wetland and wetland associated grassland components. It is nice to have support for those at the commission meetings.

The Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area Addition is a proposed fee title acquisition that would be a good fit for MBWP funding. The parcel has river front and wetland components and would connects two other parcels owned by FWP, resulting in one contiguous WMA. This will be the first fee title first purchase to go in front of this commission. Support for these is always helpful and it could come individually or as a committee. This makes the commission aware of the public's interest. It is open for public comment now.

Steve said he was confused on where funding is coming from, and which projects are using MBWP funding.

Ken responded that normally the funding source would be listed but we are waiting on the FWP budget folks to identify the sources.

We do plan to rely heavily on MBWP funding for the 3 Region 6 HCLs and the Isaac Homestead WMA addition since they seem to be a good fit for the program. These have already been reviewed by WPAC and received their support.

Next meeting date and time?

No decision was made on the next meeting date, type (in person or virtual) or location. Heather will reach back out shortly.

Final Thoughts or Questions?

Homework assignments for next meeting:

- *Next meeting, provide the 2024 year-end report, if the next meeting occurs after the report timeline of December 2024.*
- *Work with Chris to on MBWP project process document.*

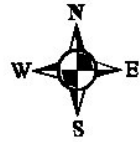
5:00

-Conclusion. Finished at 4:32.

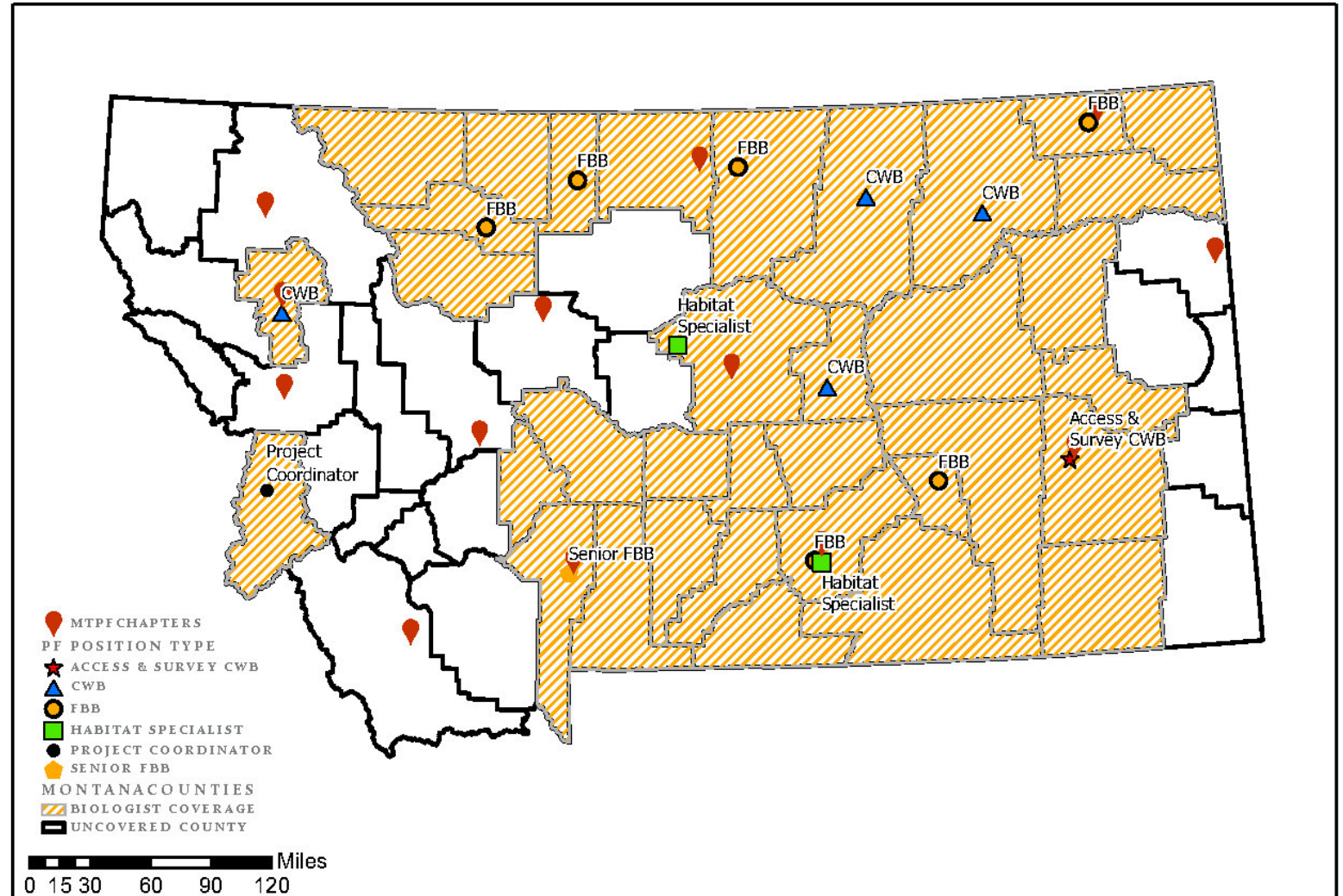
Pheasants Forever Montana



CURRENT STATUS OF PHEASANTS FOREVER IN MONTANA

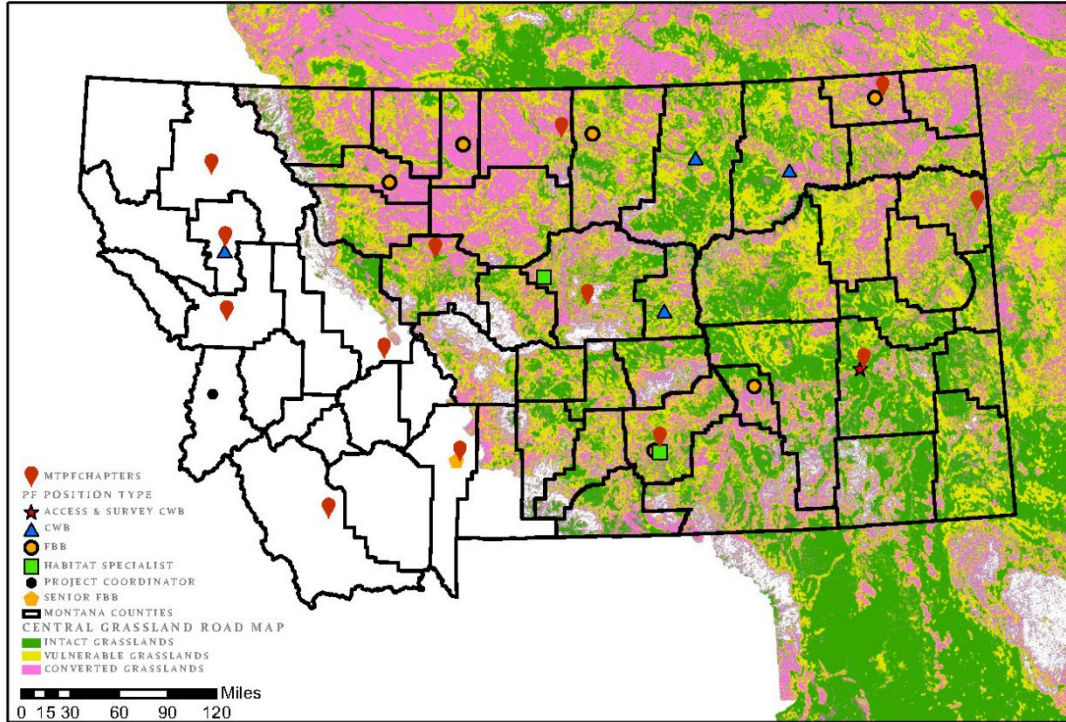


Pheasants Forever in Montana

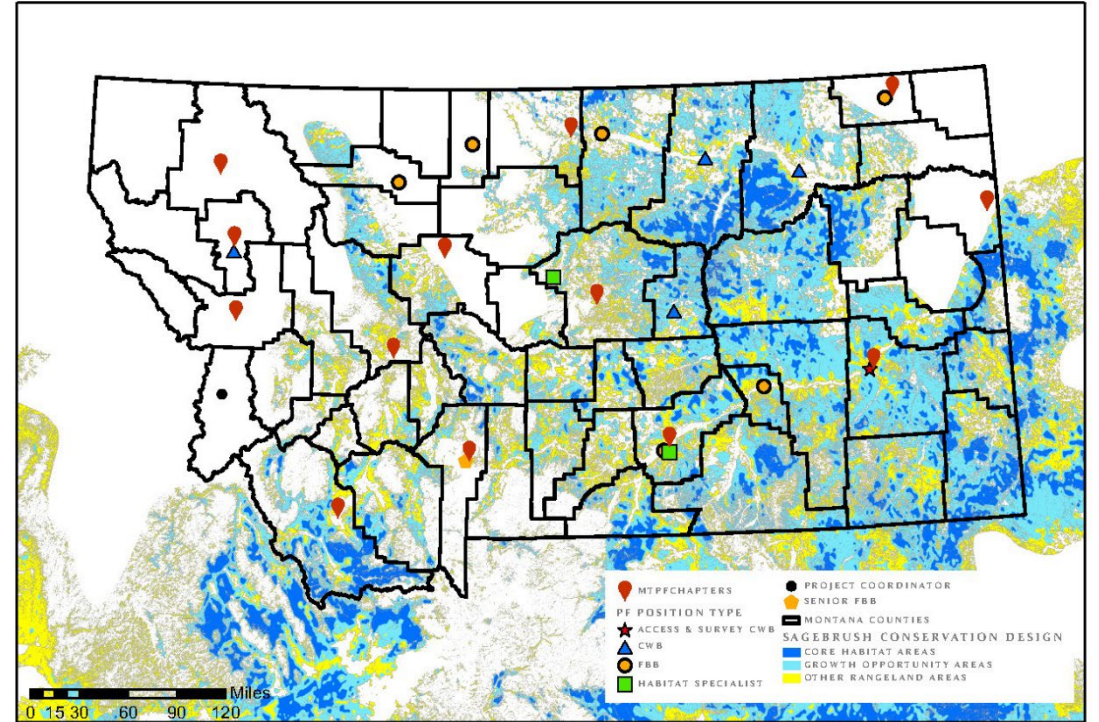




MONTANA PHEASANTS FOREVER HABITAT
FOCAL AREAS - GRASSLANDS



MONTANA PHEASANTS FOREVER HABITAT
FOCAL AREAS - SAGEBRUSH STEPPE

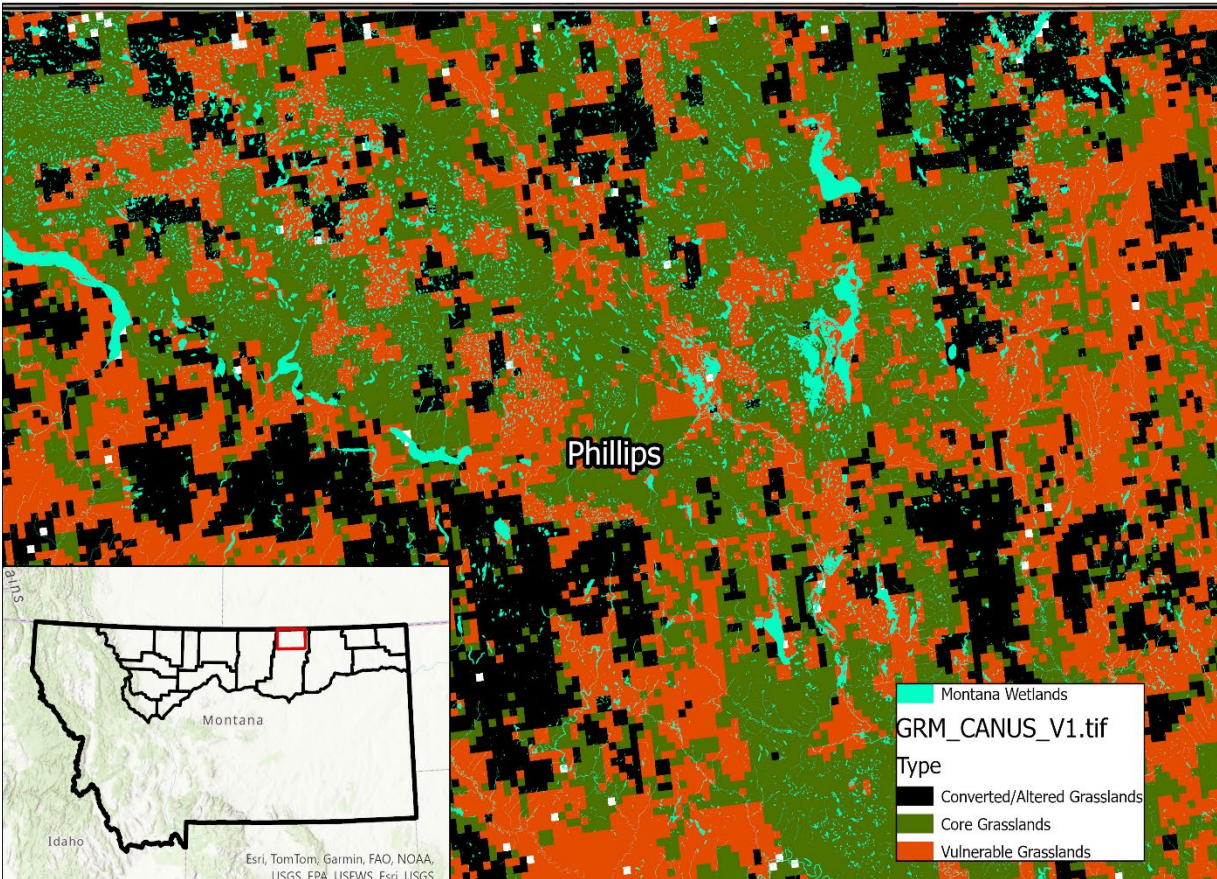


Montana Pheasants Forever Priorities- Grasslands and Wetland Associated Grasslands

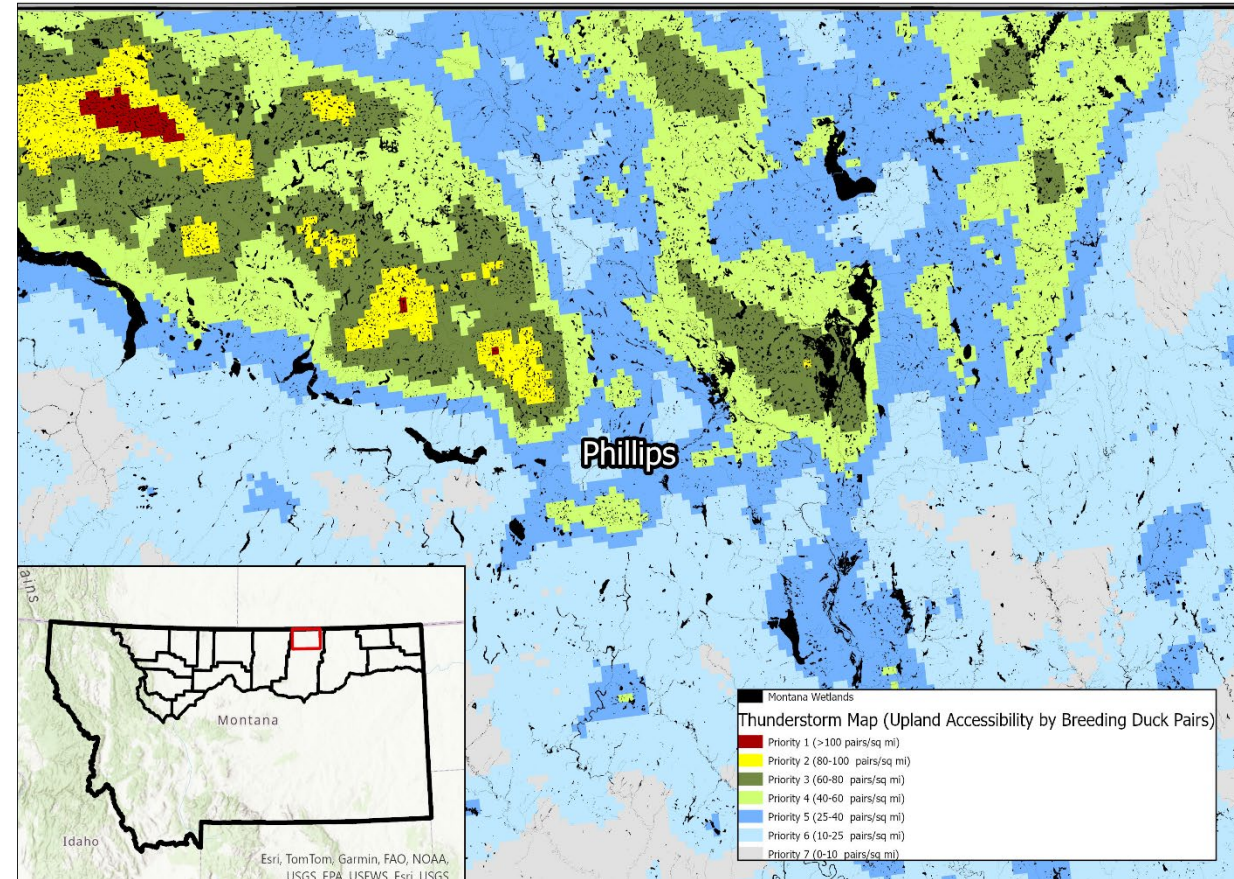
Wetlands in relation to grass cores and duck breeding pair densities



Wetlands in Proximity to Grasslands



Wetlands in Proximity to Waterfowl Nesting Densities



Pheasants Forever Montana Grassland-Strategy

- Utilize the best available science to guide our efforts.
- Anchor Intact Grasslands through:
 - Grazing systems, term protection agreements, grazing technical advice, easements, wildlife friendly fencing options, sustainable grazing techniques.
- Address Vulnerable/Degraded Grasslands through:
 - Grazing systems, term protection agreements/easements, wildlife friendly fencing, mesic restoration projects, invasive treatment projects, conifer removal, native species restoration, CRP re-enrollment, CRP transition to grazing systems.
- Restore Converted/Altered Grasslands through:
 - Grass seeding projects, conifer removal, invasive treatment projects, enrolling new CRP acres, incentivizing grass-based agriculture.
- Increase Public Access through:
 - Relationship building with landowners and partners in key communities, adding capacity to deliver access easements and agreements to land-locked public land, incentivizing private land access programs, and addressing access concerns from landowners.



CRP impact on waterfowl production

- Research on the effects of CRP concluded that duck nest success increased 46% as a result of CRP, and that CRP resulted in an additional 10.5 million ducks recruited into the fall population during 1992-97 (Reynolds et al. 2000).
- Greenwood et al. (1995) reported that dabbling duck nest success was correlated positively with the proportion of grassland in their study sites in southern Canada.
- Findings from Beintema (1997), which indicate that agricultural tillage decreases diversity of invertebrate forage available to wetland avifauna, reinforce our contention that human-induced modifications in upland habitats are related to processes within wetland complexes.

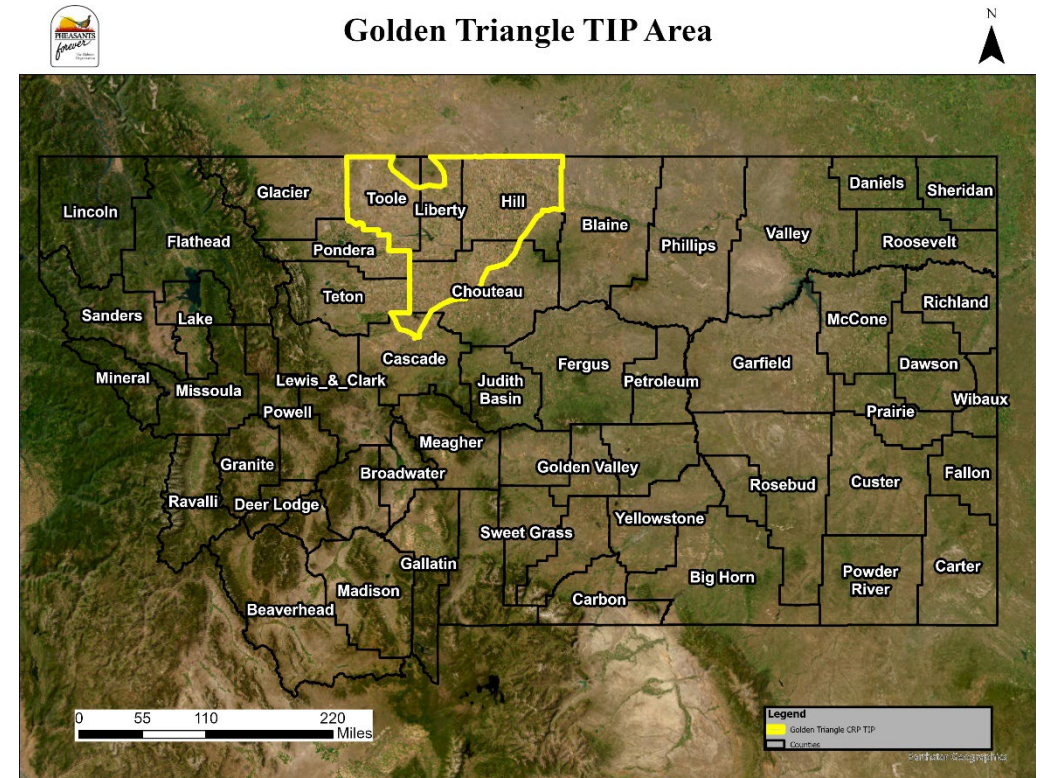
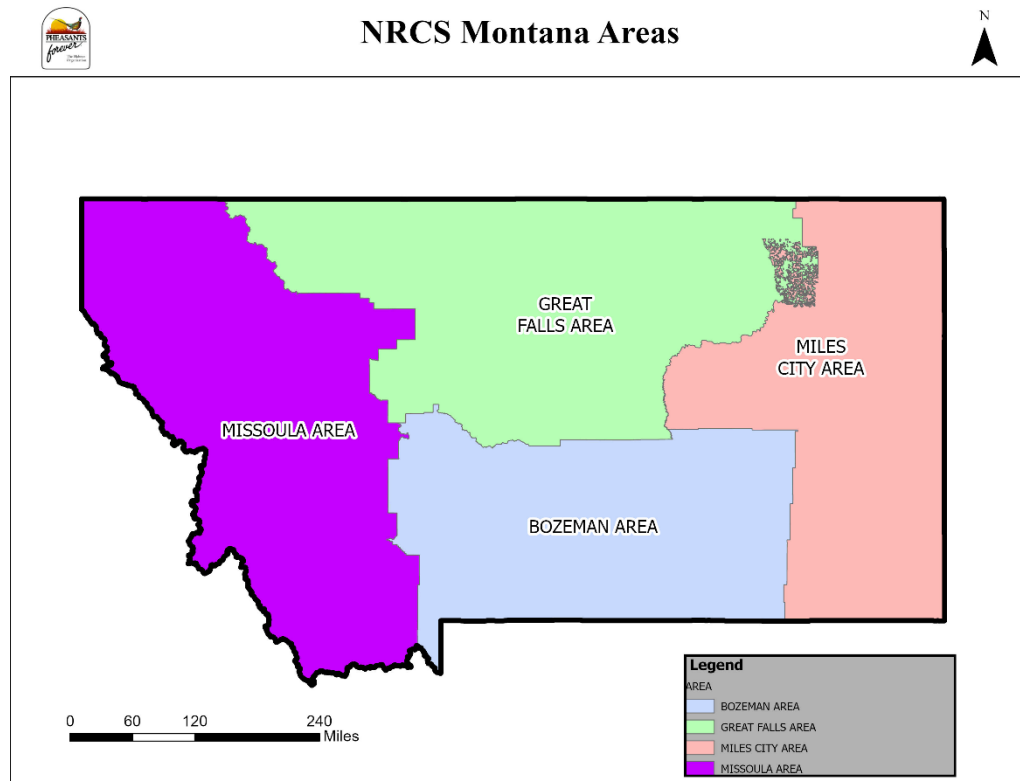
Montana Pheasants Forever and MT FWP Migratory Bird Program

- Montana PF Team provides outreach, education, and capacity for the Migratory bird program and other MT FWP programs. (100 contacts/yr.)
- Farm Bill Biologists- Connect program to the power of the farm bill, have strong connections to area landowners, refer and connect landowners to programs.
- Coordinating Wildlife Biologists- Coordinate specific efforts with local partners on private and public land. Typically centered around grasslands/sagebrush/wetland conservation.
- The Montana PF Team will assist with a minimum of 2 program contracts/yr resulting in a minimum of 1,000 ac/yr.

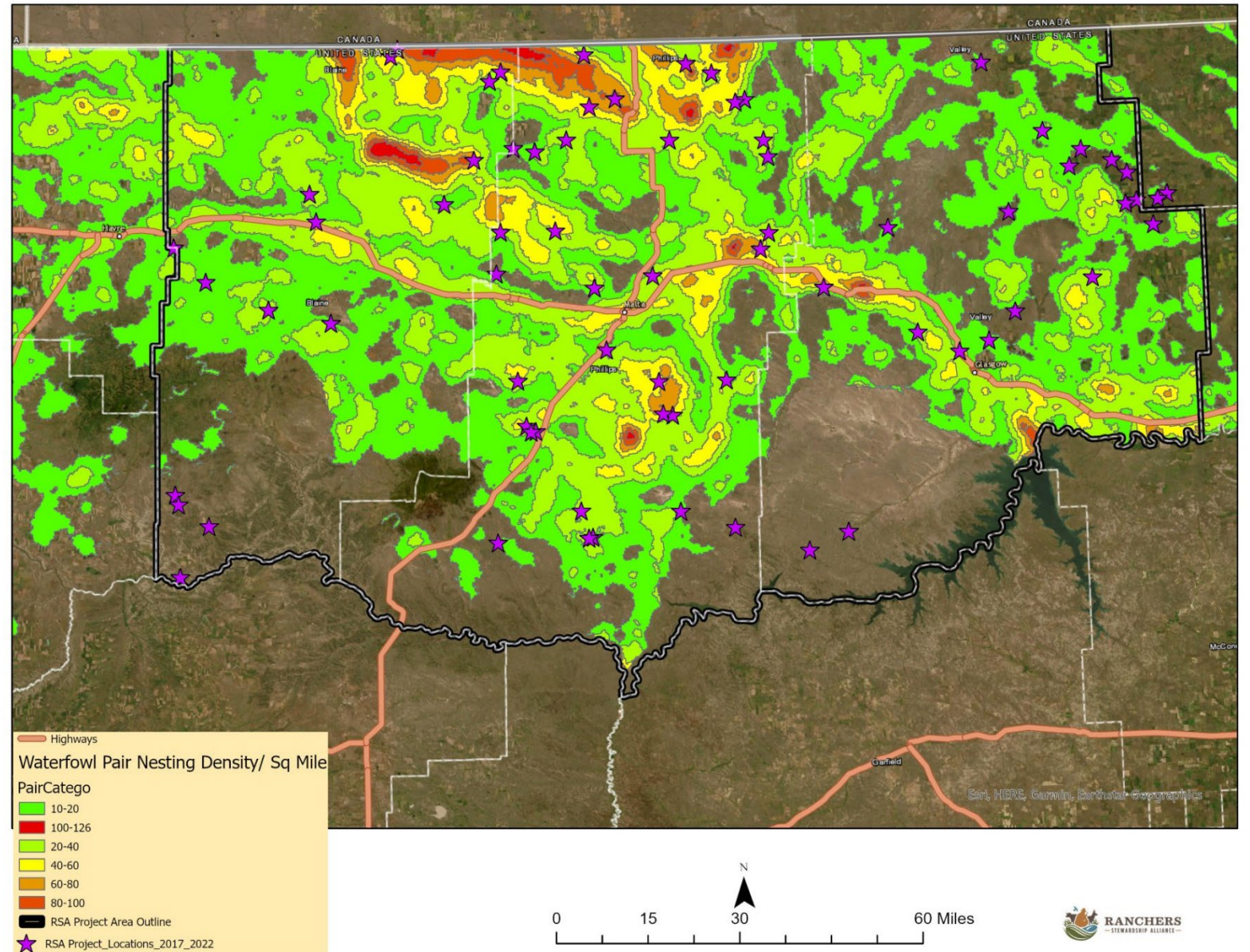


Work with Montana NRCS Focused Conservation and Targeted Implementation Plans.

- Directly leverage resources to expand impacts of NRCS and MT FWP programs.
- Examples of wetland related TIPs/Farm Bill efforts.
 - Expired CRP TIP- Currently there are 2 active pre-approved applications and 1 contract in Hill Co.
 - ❖ One is interested in enrolling in the FWP Mig Bird Program
 - Grassland Seeding TIPs-Potential area wide TIP in the works with the NRCS starting in FY 25

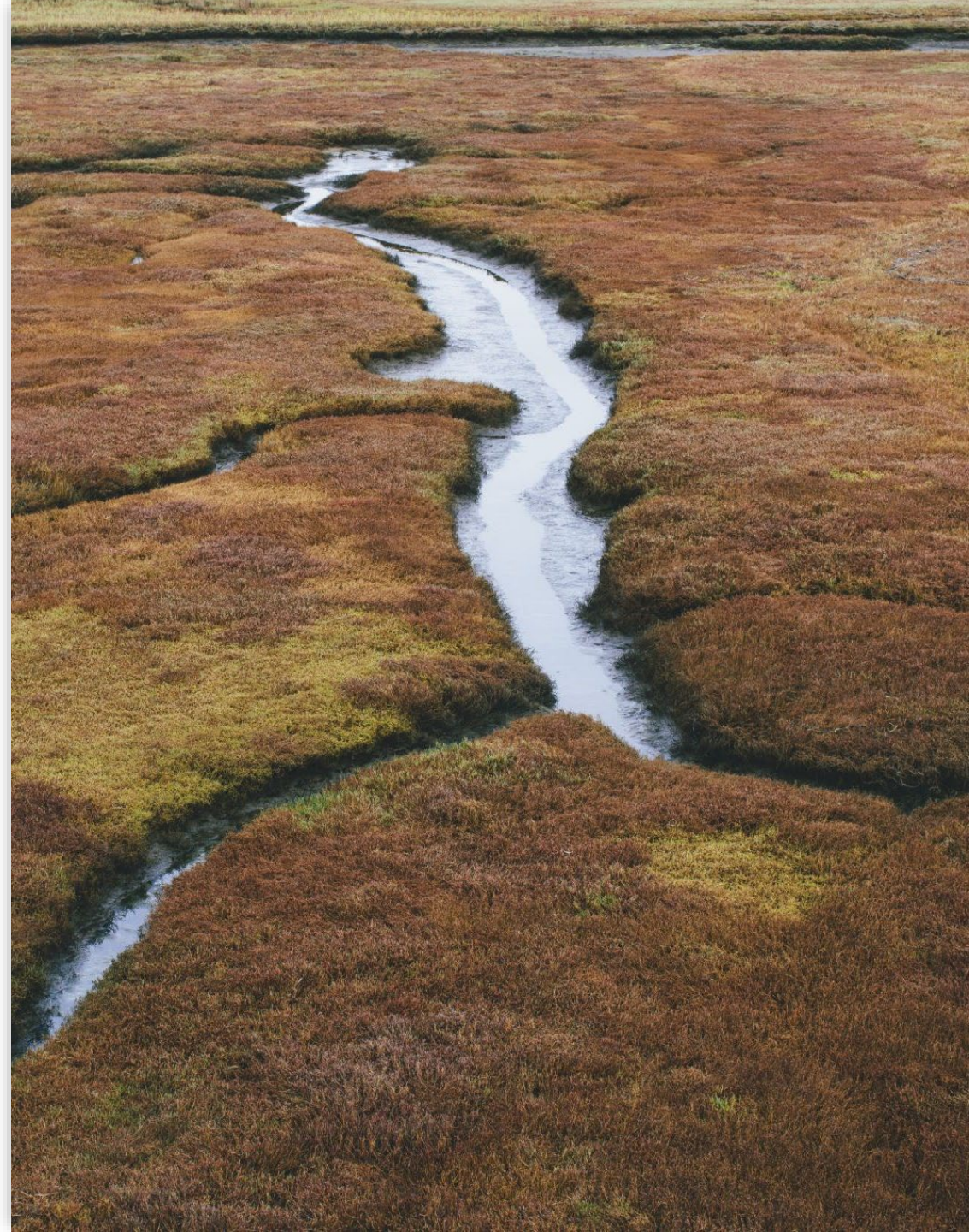


RSA Project Locations in Relation to Waterfowl Nesting Densities



Focusing where Grasslands and Wetlands Intersect

- Wetland associated uplands are high value wildlife habitat. They support a myriad of species including upland birds and waterfowl.
- These landscapes are the perfect place for PF to step in adding additional resources for habitat improvements.
- The PF/WPAC partnership is a great example of leveraging resources and successful collaboration. Through this funding PF is able to secure an additional \$1 million in funding and support 11 full time positions.
- That is better than a 16:1 leverage ratio



A photograph of three hunters in a field. They are wearing orange and brown gear, including hats and backpacks, and are carrying rifles. They are walking away from the camera towards a blue pond in the middle ground. The background shows rolling hills under a clear sky. The text 'Thank you for your Partnership' is overlaid in white, centered over the image.

Thank you for your
Partnership

Questions?