

Montana Pheasants Winter Cover Enhancement State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

Authorization

In 2007 the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) unveiled a new initiative, State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), to improve habitat for high-priority wildlife species.

SAFE allows producers to install practices through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that benefit high priority State wildlife conservation objectives. The cooperative effort is based on locally developed conservation proposals that address the highest priority wildlife objectives before the practices may be implemented. The practices must be used to address wildlife habitat that can be enhanced through the restoration of eligible cropland through CRP.

Overview

Pheasant Winter Cover Enhancement SAFE project is a cooperative effort between the following agencies and organizations in Montana: USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, landowners and Pheasants Forever.

The purpose of the Pheasant Winter Cover Enhancement project is to:

- Provide blocks of grass and/or shrub cover for ring-necked pheasants and other upland birds near existing permanent winter cover;
- Improve habitat for ring-necked pheasants and other upland game birds near

existing permanent winter cover;

- Expand habitat for ring-necked pheasants and other upland birds by converting eligible croplands to grassy cover;
- Improve water quality and reduce soil erosion within the project area.

Project Area

Montana recently received an additional 7,500 acres for enrollment in the SAFE Pheasants Winter Cover Area. The following counties are in the SAFE Pheasants Winter Cover Area: Daniels, Dawson, McCone, Richland, Roosevelt, Sheridan and Valley. Over 19,000 acres have been enrolled in the SAFE Pheasants Winter Cover Area since 2009.

Requirements

Year round habitat requirements of the targeted species must be met. Acres enrolled must:

- Be at least 40 acres in size;
- Be located next to winter cover;
- Have available nest cover within 1.5 miles of winter cover;
- Include an area of at least 10 percent winter cover;
- Be evaluated to determine whether planting native shrub thickets is required if shrubby cover is determined to be a limiting feature in the surrounding landscape or for restoring native riparian habitat;
- Have a developed Wildlife Resource Management System;

- Be included in an approved conservation plan.

Cropland Eligibility

Eligible cropland is cropland that has been planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity during 4 of the 6 crop years from 2008 through 2013.

Practices

The 7,500 acres now available for enrollment in this area must be offered as one of the following practices:

- CP38E-CP1 – Introduced Grasses and Legumes
- CP38E-CP2 – Native Grasses
- CP38E-CP4D – Wildlife Habitat
- CP38E-CP12 – Wildlife Food Plot
- CP38B-CP23 – Wetland Restoration
- CP38B-CP23A – Wetland Restoration, Non-Floodplain

Conservation Plan and Planting Specification Review

To meet expected goals of SAFE, conservation plans and planting specifications will be designed by, or in consultation with, a wildlife biologist and will require approval by a wildlife biologist. Conservation plans and planting specifications will meet the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Technical Standards. Planting or sowing of the approved cover shall be completed within 12 months of the effective date of the contract.

Contract Duration

Contracts will be between 10 and 15 years in duration.

Continuous Signup

SAFE applications will be accepted throughout the year. Eligible SAFE applications can be approved by the local FSA County Committee. The contract is effective the first day of the month following the month it is approved by the local FSA County Committee. The effective date may be deferred up to 6 months.

Management Activities

Management activities are site specific and are used to enhance the wildlife habitat and benefits for the site. Management activities must be completed before the end of year 6 for contracts with a 10 year contract length or before the end of year 9 for contracts with a 15 year contract length. Contract participants may receive up to 50 percent cost-share for completing management activities.

Project Acreage Limitation

Producers within the Pheasant Winter Cover Enhancement SAFE area can submit offers to voluntarily enroll cropland in CRP contracts. The Pheasant Winter Cover Enhancement SAFE area now has 7,500 acres available.

Payments

Participants are eligible for the following types of financial assistance:

- **Annual Rental Payments –**
The per acre payment rate is calculated by using:
 1. The average of the rental rates for the 3 predominate soils of the eligible acres offered.
- **Signing Incentive Payment (SIP) –**
Equal to \$10 per acre for each full year (Not to exceed 10 years) of the contract. The SIP payment will be issued after approval of the CRP contract. Re-enrolled acres are not eligible for SIP.

- **Cost-share –**
Payment will be made up to 50 percent of the eligible cost of establishing a permanent cover and completing management activities.
- **Practice Incentive Payment (PIP) –**
Equal to 40 percent of the total eligible cost to establish the practice. PIP is authorized for re-enrolled continuous signup practices only if new cost share is approved.

Maximum Annual Payment Limitation

The maximum annual non-cost-share payments that an eligible entity or attributable limit can receive under CRP is \$50,000. Non-cost-share payments include Annual Rental Payments, Signing Incentive Payments (SIP) and Practice Incentive Payments (PIP).

Additional Cost-share Assistance –

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks may provide additional cost-share assistance for grass seed and/or shrub seedling costs.

Definitions of Terms

Nest Cover – undisturbed grass-legume mixtures, hay fields (undisturbed during the primary nesting season) winter wheat, vegetated roadsides, ditch banks, and rangeland.

Winter Cover – Consists of cattail marshes, tall, stiff-stemmed grasses (i.e., basin wild rye, tall wheatgrass), shelterbelts, woody riparian cover, and areas of tall, rank weeds.

For More Information

Additional information may be obtained at local FSA offices or through the Montana FSA Web site at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/mt>.