LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

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MEMORANDUM

TO:	Legislative Audit Committee Members
FROM:	Angie Grove, Deputy Legislative Auditor
CC:	Joe Maurier, Director, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
DATE:	August 31, 2010
RE:	Performance Audit Follow-up 10SP-25: Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program 08P-01 (UGBEP)
Attachment:	Original UGBEP Performance Audit Summary (08P-01)

INTRODUCTION

In March 2009, we issued our performance audit of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP). The audit made four recommendations to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (department). This memo summarizes the results of our follow-up work in addition to presenting background information on the audit.

Overview

Audit recommendations focused on improving the use of program funds, improving management oversight, and strengthening management information for the program. Audit work found two recommendations were implemented and a third was being implemented. The fourth recommendation had three parts to help improve management information by strengthening controls over the program's database. We found the first part of recommendation was being implemented, the second part was being implemented, and the third part was not implemented. The Legislative Audit Committee may want to request a future status update from the department on recommendations not fully implemented.

BACKGROUND

The UGBEP was created by the legislature in 1989 by modifying an existing pheasant release program enacted in 1987. The program's main focus involves releasing upland game birds in suitable habitat and enhancing, developing, and conserving upland game bird habitat.

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FOLLOW-UP AUDIT FINDINGS

Recommendation #1

We recommend the department revisit the 15 percent funding allocations that can be used for designated administrative duties found in section 87-1-247(1), MCA.

Implementation Status – Implemented

The 61st legislature proposed and passed House Bill (HB) 499, which amended §87-1-247, MCA, by removing the portion of the law that stated not more than 15 percent of the money generated under §87-1-246, MCA, may be used by the department for program administration. This took effect on July 1, 2009. As a result, the UGBEP no longer has any restrictions on administrative expenses. With the passage of HB 499, there was also authorization to hire three biologist positions to better implement the UGBEP at the regional level. In winter 2010 three regional biologists were hired and placed in Plentywood, Miles City, and Conrad. These positions will be responsible for working with landowners and other stakeholders to develop new upland game bird habitat projects. As of June 2010, 15 projects have been approved. The department expends an additional $250,000 annually for the three regional biologists and the UGBEP biologist in Helena.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the department develop an Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program management plan that guides the long-term vision of the program, which is driven by specific goals, quantifiable objectives, and results-oriented performance measures.

Implementation Status – Being Implemented

Using the newly implemented UGBEP Advisory Council (discussed under Recommendation #3), department officials indicated they will have a final draft of the UGBEP ten-year strategic plan available to advisory council members at their October meeting. According to the department, the plan will establish regional and statewide priorities for the development of upland game bird habitat based on land management needs, sustaining upland game bird populations, and landowner input. The regional plans are being developed by the three regional biologists and the UGBEP biologist in Helena. Department personnel anticipate delivering the completed strategic plan to the department director in December 2010.

Upon completion of the strategic plan, the department foresees some minor changes to program rules, to be completed in the early part of 2010. A potential change to program laws is not expected to take place during the 2011 legislative session.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the department create an Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program advisory council to assist in management planning and to provide a review mechanism for assessing whether program goals and objectives are being accomplished.

Implementation Status – Implemented

This recommendation was implemented under HB 499, which was passed by the 61st legislature. Under the new law, §87-1-251, MCA, the UGBEP now has “an upland game bird citizens' advisory council consisting of 12 members appointed by the director and serving staggered 4-year terms.” Under law, this council will, among other duties:

- define quantifiable goals, objectives, and performance measurements for the UGBEP based on need by administrative region
- establish regional and statewide priorities for the developing of upland game bird habitat based on land management needs, sustaining upland game bird populations, and obtaining landowner input

- promote landowner outreach and relations with both private and public landowners

The council, which first met in July 2009, has met seven times. Meetings generally include a tour of habitat projects, discussions with regional staff, opportunities to hear public comment, and continued development of the UGBEP strategic plan development. Council members have also endorsed recent department actions, such as the hiring of the three UGBEP biologists, and the development of a new partnership between the department and the federal Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program. The council and the department have also worked together to improve the marketing of the UGBEP and to enhance the educational components of the department's annual upland game bird access guides.

Recommendation #4

We recommend the department:

A. Take steps to correct existing database information to assure data is complete and accurate as required in the work plan for the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program biologist.
B. Establish controls to assure database information is complete and accurate.
C. Assure program information is accessible at the regional level.

A. Implementation Status – Being Implemented

According to department personnel, hard copy contracts are being compared to database information. Any inaccuracies are corrected, empty database fields are filled in, and payments not previously recorded in the database have been added as "historical payments." According to the department, approximately ten percent of the 900+ contracts have been updated since the audit was published. Interviews with personnel found the department hopes to have the database completely updated and accurate by the end of 2011. Implementation has been slow because of the department's focus on the advisory council and the drafting of the strategic plan. The Legislative Audit Committee may want to request a future status update from the department regarding this recommendation's implementation status.

B. Implementation Status – Being Implemented

Department personnel stated they established new controls to assure database information is complete and accurate. According to department personnel, since October 2009 the UGBEP biologist in Helena enters all new habitat contracts into the database and a program administrative assistant enters all upland game bird release contracts. They believe this will reduce the number of errors as there are fewer people working with the database.

Observation from audit staff found the database is currently the same as it was during audit fieldwork. In the present database, fields can be left blank and letters can be entered in numeric fields. Department personnel stated they want to wait to make structural edits to the database until after the strategic plan is completed, as they anticipate the plan will have recommendations relating to the information input into the database. The Legislative Audit Committee may want to request a future status update from the department regarding this recommendation's implementation status.

C. Implementation Status – Not Implemented

The department stated it is still trying to coordinate improved database access to the regional UGBEP biologists. At this point the biologists have the ability to access the database and review contracts on a read-only basis. However, department personnel stated their query permissions are limited and they have yet to be trained on how to access and view the database. Personnel also stated that eventually the biologists will have the ability to enter contract data into the database, but this is a task that is not anticipated to happen soon.