



Legislative Audit Division

Performance Audit Summary

Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program December 2000

Introduction

The Department of Fish, Wildlife and Park's Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP) was created by the legislature in 1989 by modifying an existing program created in 1987, known as the Pheasant Enhancement Program. We visited 65 habitat project sites located throughout the state, interviewed various department staff, and reviewed program administration at both the regional and central office level.

Background

The 1987 legislation for the initial pheasant program specified \$2.00 from each resident game bird license and \$23.00 from each nonresident game bird license be used to share in the cost of releasing pheasants into suitable habitat. The 1989 legislature added a provision to the original legislation that allowed unexpended pheasant release funds remaining at the end of the fiscal year to be devoted to development, enhancement, and conservation of upland game bird habitat. Since 1998, the FWP has supplemented the UGBHEP license revenues with federal Pittman-Robertson Act funds.

Habitat enhancement efforts include assistance to landowners in the establishment of suitable nesting cover, winter cover, and feeding areas. UGBHEP projects generally complement existing agricultural uses and try to create a habitat that meets the needs of upland game birds. Upland game birds include grouse, partridges, turkeys, and pheasants. UGBHEP projects are typically cost-share arrangements developed on private lands. A contract between the department and landowner is developed. Contract length and cost-share arrangements vary according to project type.

The pheasant release component of the UGBHEP is now a relatively small portion of the overall program. In 1999 the Legislature placed language in the General Appropriations Act which limited expenditures for pheasant releases to \$30,000 per year for the 2001 biennium.

The UGBHEP manager in Helena is responsible for reviewing and approving project contracts, monitoring and tracking overall program expenditures and project-related management information, and helping to establish

a coordinated approach. Regional wildlife biologists are generally responsible for working with landowners and federal agencies to identify and develop potential project types and locations. If landowners are not willing to provide publicly listed hunting access to project sites and/or other lands, projects will not be placed on their land.

Upon selection and approval of a site and development of contract conditions, the project site is developed. The project type dictates the amount of landowner/cooperator involvement in the project. To compensate the cooperator for costs associated with project development, a cost-share agreement is negotiated during contract development. The UGBHEP manager indicated for current contracts the department expects the cooperator to pay or offer in-kind services of 10-15 percent of large projects (those exceeding \$20,000) and 25-30 percent of those projects where the costs are estimated to be under \$20,000. Many cooperators provide both in-kind services, such as planting and cultivation as well as funds for project materials. Cooperators are to submit receipts for project-related expenses to the biologist responsible for monitoring the project. Receipts are forwarded to Helena for processing and payment.

Regional UGBHEP Contract Data July 1, 1989 through December 21, 2000							
#	Contracts	Open Acres	Shelter Belts	Food Plots	Nesting Cover	Range Mang & Wetlands	Cost to Date
1	8	159	4	1	4	3	\$28,937
2	33	652	27	33	2	0	\$144,664
3	15	2,407	12	5	6	3	\$95,359
4	147	42,880	116	31	67	16	\$1,344,155
5	38	14,567	21	9	14	7	\$518,065
6	274	198,275	89	14	186	28	\$3,383,143
7	92	207,931	41	22	45	18	\$2,503,559
All	607	466,871	310	115	324	75	\$8,017,882
1-Kalispell 2-Missoula 3-Bozeman 4-Great Falls 5-Billings 6-Glasgow 7-Miles City							

Review of UGBHEP Sites

We selected a sample of 65 project sites to visit. A variety of project types were included such as: shelter belts, food plots, nesting cover, and range management systems. The purpose of the field visits was to:

- Verify project existence.
- Determine if contract components were completed.
- Look for evidence of public use.

- Determine if informational signs were posted at the sites to facilitate public access.

Overall, it appears projects benefit wildlife in terms of improving habitat. However, the amount or level of habitat improvement varies significantly from site to site and is not formally considered or measured by the department. Additionally, 54 percent of the 65 sites did not have informational signs indicating they were UGBHEP sites.

Findings and Suggested Improvements

Since 1998 the department has taken a number of steps to improve program operations. It has:

- Established a project evaluation scoring procedure.
- Listed names and locations of projects.
- Required project-monitoring plans.
- Clarified contract language.

While the department has or is making some changes, there were several areas where program administration could be strengthened through operational improvements.

We recommended the department strengthen fiscal controls over expenditures in the UGBHEP by:

- 1. Clearly stating cost-share arrangements in the contracts.***
- 2. Providing additional guidance to staff responsible for reviewing and processing claims for payment.***
- 3. Requiring appropriate supporting documentation prior to payment.***
- 4. Documenting supervisory review and approval of claims prior to payment.***
- 5. Establishing a method for tracking location of contracts and related files.***

The department chose to let each region essentially operate the program as it saw fit. The lack of a centralized program focus has contributed to inconsistencies in program administration and operation. Some examples include lack of program performance measures, some project sites are of questionable value, and there is continuing controversy about hunter access to project sites. ***We recommended the department work with the regional staff to establish specific and formal program goals and objectives for the UGBHEP.***

Since program inception in 1989 there have been at least three different program managers. Each has had to learn from experience about program administration and about the regional differences in program operation due to the lack of standardized program procedures. This type of informal approach has led to administration inconsistencies and region-to-region confusion. ***We recommended the department develop a formal procedure manual for the UGBHEP.***

Based on our review/comparison of database information and project contracts, we determined there are inaccuracies with the individual elements that make up the program database. The effect of incomplete or inaccurate management information is two-fold. One, inaccuracies potentially jeopardize the credibility of program information which provides output results. Secondly, programmatic or management decisions which are based on database information can be flawed or incorrect as a result of reliance on the data. ***We recommended the department ensure creation of accurate management information.***

The UGBHEP has evolved from a pheasant release program to a statewide habitat enhancement program for upland game birds. The department has done minimal formal assessment of the impacts on habitat enhancement on bird populations and no assessment of their programmatic decisions. ***Due to potential changes in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the large number of upcoming contract expirations, and the changing emphasis on preferred project types and locations, the department should be formally analyzing and reporting on these types of issues.***

Legislative Considerations

The statutes authorizing the UGBHEP and its operations contain requirements for two very different program components. The original 1987 legislation was enacted to provide a pheasant release funding source. The 1989 legislative modifications provided for unspent pheasant release funds to be used for upland game bird habitat projects. This modification allowed the department to change emphasis and use the unspent funds from pheasant releases for development, enhancement, and conservation of upland game bird habitat. During the 1999 Legislative Session, the emphasis on pheasant releases was further de-emphasized when language was placed in the General Appropriations Act to limit the use of UGBHEP funds for pheasant releases for the 2001 biennium.

The statutes authorizing the pheasant release and upland game bird habitat programs are confusing in terms of legislative intent. References to the program and the related requirements in the statute are not always clear. In addition, the language in the 2000-2001 appropriation bill limiting the funding only affects the current biennium.

We believe the legislature needs to clarify the UGBHEP statutes and clearly establish the purpose of the two program components.

For a complete copy of the report (01P-04) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to lad@mt.gov; or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>.