

**By Jan Rahn**

*Tribune Staff*

This Saturday, Oct. 26, marks the traditional opening day for pheasant hunting in Nebraska. Pheasants reign as the favored upland game bird in the state, but other species of birds and small mammals are also available to hunt, including grouse, quail, rabbit, squirrel and partridge. According to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, even though the pheasant population is down this year, the future looks optimistic thanks to a new program being offered. Game and Parks has begun the “Crop Stubble Management Wildlife and Water Conservation Program.”

Enrollment in the program will benefit farmers, along with wildlife seeking habitat which will increase their population in the future.

**How It Works**

Producers who have agreed to leave their wheat and/or milo stubble 14 inches or taller, undisturbed, until April 1 will receive \$10 per acre.

Up to 320 acres per year, per crop type, may be enrolled for two years.

The application deadline was June 14. Landowners with wheat were notified by August if they were approved to receive stubble incentives.

Producers are offered an additional incentive of \$3 per acre if they are willing to allow walk-in hunting access on their stubble fields.

**Program Benefits**

Tall, undisturbed stubble provides multiple benefits from late summer until spring. It provides additional habitat to pheasants and other game birds over the winter for loafing, nesting and feeding.

Additional benefits include: Capturing snowfall to collect and conserve soil moisture, decreasing need for and cost of weed control, decreasing erosion from both wind and water, decreasing runoff of sediments and chemicals, providing potential for higher yields of subsequent crops in a crop rotation, providing additional habitat for some grassland wildlife species, improving water quality downstream.

The increased recreational opportunities offered to hunters can bring economic benefits to small rural communities.

**Hunting Outlook**

According to the 2013 hunting outlook released by Nebraska Game and Parks, the severe drought of 2012 continues to impact pheasant populations statewide, mostly through habitat reductions caused by stunted vegetation growth and emergency haying and grazing.

Much of the state remains in some category of drought, and the USDA has again authorized emergency haying and grazing of CRP land in 54 of Nebraska’s 93 counties. □

Data from the survey indicated that pheasant populations are mostly lower this fall compared to 2012—but based on these surveys, the southwest and Panhandle will again offer the best opportunities.

Early and mid-summer rains produced abundant brood rearing habitat.

In the southwest, abundance should be better than in 2012, but still lower than found in previous years.

Hunters should be advised that hunting in wheat and milo stubble may offer hunting opportunities this year.

Over 20,000 acres of mostly wheat have been enrolled in the Open Fields and Waters program in south-central, southwest and Panhandle regions.

At the time of forecast preparation, few broods have been observed by field staff; however, a late spring seems to have delayed breeding this year, which might account somewhat for the lack of broods.

The overall consensus among staff is for a below average season, with some regional optimism related to the outcome of this year's delayed production.

Habitat loss in the eastern counties continues to be a concern. Hunters are again advised to scout areas prior to hunting to make certain areas are still available.