



South  
Dakota  
Division

# The Izaak Walton League of America

DEFENDERS OF SOIL, AIR, WOODS, WATERS, AND WILDLIFE

September 30, 2022

South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks  
523 East Capitol Avenue  
Pierre, SD 57501

The South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft Prairie Grouse Management Plan for South Dakota, 2022-2031. We believe it's critically important for the state to have a comprehensive, long-range plan for the iconic prairie grouse.

The Division supports conserving and enhancing grassland habitat that's essential for healthy prairie grouse populations. We encourage increased collaboration with private landowners and public and Tribal land managers to develop innovative methods that protect and increase grassland habitat across the state.

South Dakota is unique as it is one of few states with huntable populations of both species of prairie grouse and great opportunities for resident and nonresident hunters. Another aspect that's growing in popularity is viewing prairie grouse on their leks during the mating season. This fascinating spectacle can be observed in many areas of the state.

We respectfully request your consideration of our comments on the following topics:

### *Conservation Easements*

The Division encourages the use of perpetual conservation easements to protect grassland habitat. We urge GFP to collaborate with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service for increased funding. Hundreds of South Dakotans are waiting to voluntarily enroll their grassland into perpetual easements, but more funding is urgently needed to accomplish this important objective.

### *Invasive Plant Species*

Another serious threat to grasslands is invasive plants. Invasive grasses and trees have reduced grassland habitat across the state. Smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and crested wheatgrass are outcompeting desired native grasses and forbs, altering native plant communities. Invasive weeds including Canada thistle and leafy spurge are difficult to control and can take over if not effectively managed.

Eastern red cedar, Siberian elm, and Russian olives are rapidly encroaching on grasslands in South Dakota. This is especially happening along the Missouri, White, and Cheyenne rivers. The absence of regular fire has allowed these species to quickly expand into grasslands, negatively impacting prairie grouse habitat. In addition to trees, the southern plains are currently experiencing encroachment of invasive shrubs. We ask the management plan include the threat of invasive shrubs, and methods to deal with them before they become an issue here. We also ask GFP to work with federal and

state agencies, as well as agricultural and conservation groups, to find feasible ways to curb woody encroachment and restore impacted grassland habitat.

### *Habitat Priority Areas*

The Division supports the Priority Areas outlined in the draft plan to ascertain the status of, and management actions needed for, quality grassland habitat in the state. Priority Habitat Areas may help determine where cropland acres could be restored to grassland and places where that would have the highest chance of success. GFP's private lands habitat biologists can help landowners implement grassland conservation practices needed for abundant prairie grouse habitat.

Prairie grouse need healthy, abundant, unfragmented prairie habitat. That habitat benefits many other species while improving water quality and reducing flooding. Grouse chicks need diverse prairie plant communities with forbs and wildflowers to hold insects that are critical for chick growth and development. Well-managed prairie habitat is the best protection grouse can have from both mammalian and avian predation.

### *Grassland Management/Grazing*

We encourage GFP to continue working with the South Dakota Grassland Coalition to promote sustainable and profitable grasslands. This includes grazing management that avoids overgrazing and keep grasslands healthy for the producer, grouse, and other wildlife. Producers should also be encouraged to utilize "wildlife friendly" fencing to minimize negative impacts on grouse and other species.

### *Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)*

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has helped prairie grouse populations, but there is a direct correlation between the type of vegetation and grouse response. CRP increased and expanded prairie chicken populations in areas of their range except for portions of eastern South Dakota where vegetation was too tall. Sharp-tailed grouse also increased and expanded their range. The Division asks that the management plan include recommendations that reflect prairie grouse needs when new CRP is seeded. We also urge GFP to encourage landowners to offer acres into CRP when it's available.

### *Energy Development*

The Division supports renewable energy; however, we have serious concerns on the siting of energy projects and the impact those projects can have on prairie grouse and other wildlife. We urge more research be done on the impacts of wind and other energy projects, and the infrastructure required for those projects, on prairie grouse and other wildlife populations.

### *Retaining Grassland Habitats*

We concur that protecting existing grasslands should be a management priority. The recent rise in conversion of grasslands to cropland has decreased South Dakota's prairie grouse numbers. We support the practices listed in the draft to improve prairie grouse habitat, including the following:

- Delaying haying of grasslands to after August 1

- Spot spraying of herbicide to control noxious weeds
- Control woody encroachment
- Avoid planting trees in or adjacent to grasslands
- Remove abandoned buildings to reduce mammalian predators

### *Hunting*

Outstanding prairie grouse hunting exists in South Dakota. There are excellent public land opportunities, plus walk-in areas, leased by the Department, where people can hunt grouse. We support the GFP's efforts to increase hunting access across the state.

### *Outreach*

We encourage GFP to continue to inform the public about prairie grouse, their habitat needs, population trends, and hunting and viewing opportunities. We ask that GFP share new research and information pertaining to prairie grouse including any changes to dog training rules.

The South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Prairie Grouse Management Plan. We ask to be kept informed of all future developments of this plan.

Sincerely,



Paul Lepisto  
Regional Conservation Coordinator  
Izaak Walton League of America  
1115 South Cleveland Avenue  
Pierre, SD 57501-4456  
[plepisto@iwla.org](mailto:plepisto@iwla.org)  
605-220-1219