



ASSOCIATION of  
FISH & WILDLIFE  
AGENCIES

---

**BIRD CONSERVATION COMMITTEE PART II**  
Chair: Gordon Myers, NC Wildlife Resources Commission  
Vice-Chair: Ross Melinchuk, TX Parks and Wildlife Department

10 March 2017  
North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference  
Spokane, WA

**Announcement:** EJ Williams, of American Bird Conservancy, was recognized for receiving the NABCI/AJVMB Gary T. Myers award on Wednesday, 8 March 2017 at the BLM/USFS “Wings Across America” reception.

**Resident Game Bird (RGB) Working Group Report**

*Breck Carmichael, Special Assistant to the Director, SC Department of Natural Resources*

National Wild Turkey Federation: Save the Habitat, Save the Hunt initiative is at year 4 of 10 and is ahead of pace to meet all objectives re: conservation acres, etc.

Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever (PF/QF): PF is organized into four regions of management with a coordinator in each region. Their focus is state-federal partnerships and putting partner biologists on the ground. They signed an MOU with BLM to expand quail initiatives on BLM land. QF has ~160 chapters throughout the country.

National Wild Pheasant Conservation Partnership: This initiative now has a logo, a mission statement, and a website: [nationalpheasantplan.org](http://nationalpheasantplan.org). They are working on a Farm Bill White paper, as well as a decision support tool to quantify impacts of policy on pheasant population.

National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI): NBCI is planning a quail symposium, which will be held this fall. NBCI and QF signed an MOU in March. NBCI is working on a national communication strategy. They are completing a three-year trial funding period, with states using PR funds, and many states have committed to funding NBCI for another five years.

Grouse Partnership: works with MAFWA and WAFWA to coordinate interstate working groups (14 states). There has been discussion on potential plans to put sage grouse management out of federal hands and into states- stay tuned. More than \$1.5 billion has been spent in the sagebrush ecosystem since 1995.

Western Quail Working Group: is having a technical section meeting May 23-25 in New Mexico, and western states are encouraged to attend.

Ruffed Grouse Conservation Plan: Several states have developed grouse plans for this species. Indiana has reached such low levels of Ruffed Grouse that they are considering listing this species. PA also having problems with grouse numbers, and they are proposing to shorten grouse season. West Nile Virus may be playing a role in declines.

Chukar and Gray Partridge: A plan has been drafted to improve habitat and maximize hunting opportunities. They want to do a review through RGB WG. Breck requests that once RGB provides comments, the BCC can choose to move this up to the Directors, consistent with how similar Plans have been addressed.

North American Bird Conservation Initiative: NABCI recently released several communication tools, including a new website ([nabci-us.org](http://nabci-us.org)). This site has a page dedicated to Resident Game Bird plan initiatives and their contacts. Note communication tools, especially website- RGB page with plan initiatives and contact (<http://nabci-us.org/bird-conservation-community/resident-game-birds/>). NABCI is also working on a State of the Birds report focused on Farm Bill conservation programs.

The RGB WG also discussed standardizing measurements of hunter harvest/hunter numbers for RGB species so that these measurements would be consistent across states. The RGB WG recommends developing a survey to gather information across states and across species, and sending this survey to the Directors and Wildlife Chiefs.

The Bird Conservation Committee offered no objections to moving forward with this recommendation.

### **National Flyway Council Update**

*Dave Morrison, Texas Parks and Wildlife*

Reward Banding for Dove: Since the 1-800 number used to report banded doves is being phased out in favor of an online reporting method, recommendations are moving through the Flyway system to develop a reward banding system for dove to evaluate online reporting rates. Reward banding will begin in 2018; this will come forward as a recommendation through the Flyways as part of the next Flyway cycle.

Peregrine Falcons: The three Eastern Flyways passed similar recommendations regarding take of Peregrine Falcons. Stable isotope research indicates that taking more peregrines for falconry will not have significant population impacts, so the Flyways are recommending an increase in take to 144 birds, equally distributed across the Flyways, to go into effect in 2017 or 2018.

NRCS and Wetlands: The individual Flyways are sending letters to NRCS in response to a report from the Office of Inspector General auditing wetland conservation provisions in the Prairie Pothole region. To eliminate a backlog of drainage requests, NRCS is using older data to identify wetlands, which has caused concerns (see additional notes below).

Trumpeter Swans are doing well.

### **Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Working Group (MSUGBWG) Report**

*Dave Morrison, Texas Parks and Wildlife*

Woodcock Task Force (WTF): The WTF was formed to reverse woodcock population decline by 2012 and achieve positive growth by 2022. This Task Force has achieved its short-term goals, and they continue to work with NGOs to promote habitat work. WTF proposed the establishment of a Woodcock/Early Forest WG to report directly to BCC, to replace the existing WTF. The group reported that this proposal received strong support from WMI and the Ruffed Grouse society. Ultimately, the WTF wants to remain an entity and seeks guidance for how to do that beyond a short-term task force.

Discussion: Some support for Woodcock group to expand its focus to habitat and integrate with other groups. Gordon Myers- Working Groups are established at the Chair's discretion. He recommends that the WTF start with a problem statement, and the BCC can determine the most appropriate response to the problem statement. He reminds the group that Working Groups are not taxa-focused, and he likes the idea of broadening this group beyond a single taxa. Chairman Myers recommends that the WTF submit a proposal to the BCC.

Dove Task Force: The 1-800 number, used to report reward banding, is being phased out, and the group is working to start a new process (online reporting) before this goes away.

#### Additional Items:

-MSUGBWG will ask Dove and Woodcock communities to review and update Webless Game Bird Priority needs Document.

-Budget cuts at USFWS impact webless funding.

## **Waterfowl Working Group Report**

*Diane Eggeman, Director, Hunting and Game Management Division, FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

[See presentation for summary.](#)

Group focused on five issues: NAWMP implementation and update, State Contributions to Canada, Private Lands conservation, Legislative Updates, and NRCS's Wetland Conservation Provisions in the Prairie Pothole Region. See slide 3 for WWG Action Items. Note that Tom Moorman will replace Scott Yaich as the Chair of the Water Task Team, and he will submit a proposal for the 2018 North American.

NRCS Issue Background: Eric Lindstrom (DU) and John Devney [provided a background presentation](#) on the NRCS issue- see presentation for a comprehensive overview. NRCS had a backlog of requests for wetland determinations as part of their Swampbuster program. For expediency in dealing with these requests, NRCS used old (pre-1996) wetland determinations, which decreased wetland protections. 3 of 4 Flyways are sending letters on this. Swampbuster is incentive-based and helps protect 3.3 million acres nationwide; this is especially important in the Prairie Potholes Region because of small, shallow wetlands that are critical for ducks; ~40% of the US carrying capacity for ducks is protected because of this policy. However, we are still losing wetlands at a rate of 290,000 acres per year in the US, with the rate in Canada 6 times faster. It would cost \$1.3 billion to lease these basins over 5 years. Technology has changed over the last 20 years, and 90% of pre-1996 maps in North Dakota were deemed insufficient. See slides for representation of old vs new maps. Examples show major negative wetland changes, with wetlands going from good duck carrying capacity to no duck carrying capacity, in the period that NRCS changed its protocols.

Recommendation to BCC: The WWG recommends that AFWA send a letter to NRCS requesting that the agency take appropriate action regarding a report released by the Office of the Inspector General on wetland delineation practices in the Prairie Pothole Region. WWG recommends that the letter urge NRCS to:

- Resume use of current, technically rigorous methods for wetland determination
- Ensure intent of Swampbuster is implemented and public benefits of wetlands are retained
- Mitigate wetland losses resulting from these unsound methods
- Provide information on how the situation will be corrected, and when

### Discussion:

-Is there parallel action coming from the Ag Committee (Ross Melinchuk)? The Ag Committee focused most of their attention on the next Farm Bill, but they are very aware of this issue (Paul Schmidt). Conclusion: The BCC is the committee of jurisdiction for action from AFWA.

-This is the prime topic for the NABCI State of the Birds Report in 2017, which NRCS is a collaborator on. We need to justify programs like Swampbuster and Sodbuster but also address the implementation issue- it's hard to justify how great these programs are if we are not implementing them well (Ken Rosenberg).

-NRCS has updated their policies, and this does not need to go through broad federal review. NRCS says that their maps are legible, and thus eligible to be used- NRCS does not address the issue of the maps being technically defensible and has decided to use old maps moving forward despite the OIG findings. We need to retain the Swampbuster policy as a whole but also convey a sense of urgency to improve implementation (Eric Lindstrom)

Bill Bates moves to request that the AFWA president send a letter to NRCS expressing the immediate urgency that NRCS take action (see language below in bold). Diane Eggeman seconds, and the motion is approved unanimously.

**The following talking points (italics) were presented at the Business Meeting, and the associated action (bold) was approved by the Directors.**

*NRCS has a Swampbuster provision: if an agricultural producer drains wetlands, they don't qualify for federal crop insurance, other Farm Bill benefits.*

*In January 2017, Office of the Inspector General released an audit report called NRCS Wetland Conservation Provisions in the Prairie Pothole Region. Report showed:*

- *NRCS actions have weakened value of Swampbuster in ND, MN, IA, beginning in 2013*
- *Currently, NRCS using old (pre-'96), inaccurate wetland determinations to certify wetlands AND*
- *OIG review found in sample of cases reviewed, 75% of wetlands that should have been protected were not protected- and were subject to drainage and loss of public benefit intended by Swampbuster.*

*NRCS has responded to this report and agrees with the two main findings; however, we need to ensure that their response brings back the integrity of the wetland determination process. As such,*

#### **ACTION**

**The Bird Conservation Committee requests that the AFWA President send a letter to the Department Agriculture expressing the immediate urgency that NRCS take appropriate action to:**

- **Resume use of current, technically rigorous methods for wetland determination**
- **Ensure intent of Swampbuster is implemented and public benefits of wetlands are retained**
- **Provide a commitment to use appropriate data necessary to accurately delineate wetlands, consistent with the OIG report and the Congressional intent of Swampbuster provisions**

#### **PIF/Shorebird/Waterbird Working Group Report**

*Sara Schweitzer, Wildlife Diversity Biologist NC Wildlife Resources Commission*

This Working Group has a new Vice-Chair: Eric Gardner, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Partners in Flight: The 6 focal areas of the 2016 PIF Landbird Conservation Plan are being used to advance landbird conservation with state and federal agencies, NGO partners, as well as private land owners. A key initiative that will be acted upon quickly is the 2018 Farm Bill and its integration of bird conservation and monitoring as indicators of success. Partners in Flight also released a revised website (April 2017): <https://www.partnersinflight.org/> The sixth Partners in Flight international meeting will be October 30-November 3 in Costa Rica.

Avian Conservation Assessment Database (ACAD): Expanding the PIF database to all birds, from Canada to Panama. This will become one-stop shopping for all bird data.

Atlantic Shorebird Flyway Initiative (AFSI) has initiated multi-state projects to enhance shorebird populations and habitats.

MOU for Shorebirds: In February 2017, the US, France, and Canada signed an MOU to share information about harvest and hunting regulations for shorebirds in Atlantic jurisdictions (shorebirds are still hunted in French jurisdictions in the Caribbean).

Data Management and Sharing: The Avian Knowledge Network (AKN) is working to make data more available for analysis, interpretation, and data sharing. The AKN Steering Committee is working closely with Flyway Non-game Technical Committees and is working to develop a bulk uploader for data; states can use their data to test this uploader. One AKN node is for the Integrated Waterbird Monitoring and Management project- 5 states are uploading data into that node. See [this document](#) for more information about AKN.

Comment: The Resident Game Bird WG indicated a strong need to compile and integrate RGB data across states; the AKN has been doing this with shorebirds, waterbirds, etc, so there is an opportunity for partnership here (Ken Rosenberg).

### **10:10 BCC Grassland Work Group Report**

*Bill White, Private Land Services Division Chief, MO Department of Conservation*

This WG has been active for 2.5 months and has ~35 WG members so far, representing game and non-game bird organizations, bird partnerships, state and federal agencies, and joint ventures. The Work Group has four charges, and four teams have formed to address each of these charges:

- a.) Resolution- The WG, in concert with other appropriate working groups, develop and submit for consideration a resolution outlining the crisis and prioritizing grassland birds conservation by AFWA and participating states for consideration by the AFWA Resolutions Committee,
- b.) Evaluation and Recommendations- AFWA facilitate evaluation of tri-national grassland habitats and bird conservation efforts and develop a report with synopsis of current programs (goals, objectives, funding entities, etc.) and recommendations for collaboratively and collectively addressing declines in the broad suite of grassland birds,
- c.) NCN- The WG begin development, in concert with other appropriate working groups, of an NCN to address grassland bird conservation needs currently identified by conservation partners and to operationally address potential new recommendations from the above evaluation, and
- d.) Funding- AFWA avail itself of all possible avenues for encouraging prioritization of grassland birds conservation in budgeting of federal agencies.

The BCC submitted an NCN, co-sponsored by MAFWA, for consideration during the March 2017 evaluation (note: NCN was not selected).

The Evaluation and Recommendation sub-group has developed a template to gather information about grassland habitat and bird conservation efforts. Discussion has focused on how far down we want to go- what scale of project meets the cut-off for compilation. Group is also considering: 1) should we include other initiatives, such as pollinators? 2) do we include bird plans without implementation strategies? Group hopes to pilot template in one BCR and then proceed to a tri-national effort.

Resolution sub-group: Developing a resolution outlining the grassland bird crisis and asking AFWA to prioritize grassland bird conservation efforts. Subgroup aims to have draft by June or July.

Comment: Brad Bortner asks Bill for a summary report to present to the Trilateral this May.