
CONFLICTING PRIORITIES, COMPETING INTERESTS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES – THREE DECADES OF LESSONS LEARNED MANAGING WILDLIFE HABITAT

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Management of food, cover and water at the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA), an intermountain prairie pothole complex in the Mission Valley of western Montana involves many facets beyond decisions to benefit waterfowl and pheasants populations and hunters for which the WMA was established. Interests of WMA users have expanded beyond game species, the mission of Fish, Wildlife & Parks has evolved, and management goals of the WMA program have broadened. This paper describes management approaches and

lessons learned in response to often conflicting priorities and competing interests as the local environment and human values have changed. Pheasants and some waterfowl species have overlapping habitat requirements that serve different life history needs. Habitat features that are good for reproduction and survival are not necessarily the best for hunting. Members of the general public who lobby for their particular interests are not aware of what it takes to get the habitat they think is best. Using farming practices to grow food and nesting cover while conserving and protecting soil, water, and vegetation is the driving goal. Using flood irrigation to manipulate water levels in wetland basins ensures abundant, diverse, and productive habitat. Weed management activities are conducted to improve habitat, whereas habitat improvements are conducted in a manner to minimize the spread of weeds. Trees planted for pheasant winter cover have resulted in grizzly bear/human conflicts – lesson learned! Other lessons include that management practices must be based first on the needs of the natural resources, habitat conditions are fluid and dynamic, great habitat does not necessarily result in high wildlife populations or high hunter satisfaction, and keeping a broad perspective is the best strategy, regardless of short term conditions and pressures. Hopefully the lessons that were learned will be instructive to others managing similar habitats.