

## **A REVIEW OF THE MONTANA UPLAND GAME BIRD HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM: THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE DEAD<sup>TWS</sup>**

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The Pheasant Enhancement Program (PEP) was created through the passage of Senate Bill 331, by the 1987 Montana Legislature in response to concerns over low pheasant populations and the potential of additional habitat being created through the Conservation Reserve Program.. The program authorized state financial reimbursement to cooperators for raising and releasing pen reared pheasants to supplement the wild populations in the state of Montana. In 1989, the PEP was renamed the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP) and amended to allow annual surplus funds not used for stocking pheasants to be funneled into habitat improvement projects. The habitat portion of the program has had continuous support; however, various publics and agency personnel have expressed concern about the biological validity of stocking pheasants into the wild. Recent complaints by sportsmen groups, landowners and other program cooperators prompted Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to reevaluate the stocking portion of the program. Banding of pheasants and field surveys were used by MFWP to monitor post release survival and hunter harvest of released pheasants. Previous studies indicate high mortality rates, poor reproductive success and minimal enhancement of hunter harvest associated with the release of pen reared pheasants into the wild. These studies support the finding of MFWP. Habitat quality, climatic conditions, predation and the inability of released pheasants to cope with the transition from the pen to the field are the main factors limiting the survival of these birds.