

North Dakota outdoors: An early look at fall pheasant numbers

By Doug Leier



As September settles in and we inch closer to fall, some hunters have enjoyed August goose hunting, the opening of archery deer and dove hunting. For anxious October pheasant hunters in North Dakota, the early signs are promising.

Each spring, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department conducts its annual pheasant crowing count survey, which gives a preview of the potential fall population by estimating the number of rooster pheasants across the landscape. The 2025 results showed a 6%

increase in crowing counts statewide compared to 2024 – a sign that pheasant numbers are holding steady or improving in most areas.

A second consecutive mild winter played a key role in this.

“We basically have had two really easy winters, especially by North Dakota standards, with not much snow and really nice temperatures,” said RJ Gross, department upland game management biologist. “High overwinter survival gives us a great starting point heading into spring and nesting.”

A key point is these resident populations may have localized pockets producing more birds or less depending on a variety of issues from late season storms or flooding to a random dry slot which missed needed summer rains.

Regional numbers from the crowing counts further support the optimism. The southwest, which has long been the heart of pheasant country in North Dakota, saw counts climb from 28.8 crows per stop in 2024 to 31.1 in 2025. The southeast also posted gains, up from 16.2 to 18.6 crows per stop. The northwest remained essentially flat, dropping

slightly from 21.5 to 21.3, and even the northeast, where pheasant densities are typically lower, saw an increase from 5 to 6.5.

These surveys are conducted each spring when biologists drive designated 20-mile routes at sunrise, stopping every two miles to listen for crowing roosters for two minutes. While not a precise population estimate, the survey provides valuable trend data that helps monitor changes over time.

But spring crowing counts are just one piece of the puzzle. How the nesting and brood-rearing season unfolds is critical to determining how many pheasants hunters will encounter in the fall. So far, the outlook remains good.

“Entering the nesting season, residual grass cover looked good,” Gross said. “The timely May rains caused increased growth in nesting and brood rearing cover across the state. Combined with high overwinter survival the past two years and near ideal nesting habitat conditions, things are looking good for upland birds in North Dakota.”

Of course, a few curveballs from Mother Nature could still shift the outlook. Heavy rains, hail, or a stretch of cool, wet weather during the hatch could affect chick survival. But if favorable weather conditions continue, hunters should expect to see good numbers of birds this fall, especially in areas with quality habitat.

Soon the department’s roadside brood surveys will provide more detailed insight into reproductive success and give a clearer forecast for the hunting season. For now, the trend is positive. Pheasant numbers are stable or increasing in key regions, and habitat conditions have been on the birds’ side. If the weather holds, 2025 could shape up to be another solid year in the uplands.

‘PIPELINE’ CON’T FROM PAGE 3

Pipeline Authority, and Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring listen to discussion about two pipeline project proposals during the Aug. 21, 2025, meeting of the North Dakota Industrial Commission. (Photo by Mary Steurer/North Dakota Monitor) In a worst-case scenario, the state would have to shoulder the full \$500 million, or \$50 million a year for 10 years. To finance this, it would have to take out a loan from the Bank of North Dakota, which would ultimately be repaid with state dollars from the Strategic Investment and Improvements Fund.

Armstrong said he is “extremely confident” the state will be able to transfer its share of the pipeline capacity to a private business. But even if the state is unable to fully recoup its investment, Armstrong said the economic benefits the project will bring will make it worthwhile in the long run.

Without additional natural gas pipelines to the Bakken, companies could have to reduce oil production. As Bakken wells age, they produce a higher percentage of natural gas, which is contributing to a shortage of pipeline capacity. North Dakota produces more than 3 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day.

“If we can’t move our gas, we can’t increase oil production or maintain oil production,” Armstrong said.

Details of the arrangement will be negotiated between WBI and the Industrial Commission. The state would not have any ownership stake in the pipeline, but would have a contract for a certain amount of space on the pipeline for 10 years. Kringstad estimates North Dakota would have roughly 17% of the pipeline capacity for the eastern half of the project. An estimate for the western portion was not immediately available.

Rob Johnson is president of WBI Energy. (Photo provided by WBI Energy) WBI Energy President Rob Johnson said he views the state support as a bridge, not a subsidy. The support from the state helps WBI proceed with the project while other potential customers make final investment decisions, he said.

Johnson said the goal is for the project to not use the state support.

In its application materials, WBI

said many customers who have expressed interest in the pipeline are developing power generation projects to support data centers. There also is demand from other potential industrial customers and residential customers, Johnson said.

“It seems like every week, something else is being announced in the state of North Dakota that’s going to benefit from a project like this,” Wrigley said.

Industrial Commission members encouraged WBI and Intensity to try to partner on a project. Intensity had announced an agreement with Rainbow Energy, which owns Coal Creek Station in Underwood.

Johnson said he could not comment on whether WBI would work with Intensity, as the commissioners suggested.

“We’ll work in the best interest of our customers and the shareholders,” Johnson said.

It’s unclear if Intensity would continue to pursue a project on a smaller scale without the state support. Intensity did not respond to an inquiry sent to the company’s media spokesperson.

Armstrong said the two companies working together could reduce “landowner fatigue” from residents potentially getting approached by two different companies.

WBI has received permission to survey land from over 80% of landowners along the 350-mile route, Johnson said.

The company plans to engage with landowners through meetings. WBI also would hold public meetings as part of the FERC regulatory review process.

The company will begin working with landowners to negotiate easements after the route is finalized. WBI would only use eminent domain for the project as a last resort, Johnson said.

“There are times where sometimes it’s necessary, but the goal going in is to not have to use eminent domain,” Johnson said. “That’s always our stance.”

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