



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program



Big Game Seasonal Habitat & Migration Corridor Report

Fiscal Year 2024 Accomplishments



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Pronghorn in Wyoming. Photo by Kourtney Stonehouse.

Introduction

The western United States (U.S.) is home to some of the largest herds of wild native ungulates in North America. However, critical winter habitat and migration corridors between seasonal ranges that many of these populations rely on face significant threats. Habitat fragmentation from development often limits the availability of high-quality forage and cover, roads and fences impede movement between and within seasonal ranges, and degraded habitat limits the health and reproductive success of herds.

On February 9, 2018, President Trump's Secretary of the Interior signed Secretarial Order (S.O.) 3362, *Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors*. S.O. 3362 directs appropriate bureaus within the Department of the Interior (DOI) to work in close partnership with the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming to enhance and improve the quality of big game winter range and migration corridor habitat on Federal lands under the management jurisdiction of the DOI in a way that recognizes state authority to conserve and manage big game species and respects private property rights. Since 2018, the focus of S.O. 3362 has been centered around enhancing winter and migration corridor habitat for Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, and pronghorn within priority areas in State Action Plans (which were developed in response to S.O. 3362) and for specific priority projects on Tribal lands. Actions have been taken across ownerships, and voluntary agreements with willing landowners and Tribes are an important tool to achieve strategic results.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program was established in 1987 and has since emerged as a leader in delivering voluntary habitat restoration and enhancement projects on private lands. In response to S.O. 3362, the PFW Program began focusing efforts within and tracking big game winter habitat and migration corridor project accomplishments and has since expanded tracking efforts to include projects completed in summer habitat. PFW Program biologists complete a wide variety of practices with willing private and Tribal landowners, including restoring degraded habitat, installing wildlife-friendly fences to enhance big game movements, and designing creative grazing systems to increase forage production (see Appendix A for examples of big game project accomplishments completed in Fiscal Year 2024).

The PFW Program has demonstrated success at building partnerships with landowners to conserve and restore wildlife habitat related to big game habitat improvements in seasonal habitats and migration corridors. This report describes the work of the PFW Program and its Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 accomplishments with partners supporting big game seasonal habitat and migration corridors within the 11 western states. In this report, "seasonal habitat" is defined as winter and/or summer range, to accurately reflect how data are summarized. In all cases, project accomplishments reported benefit at least one of the S.O. 3362 target species (i.e., Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, pronghorn).

Fiscal Year 2024 Accomplishments

In FY 2024, the Service contributed over \$2.6 million and leveraged nearly \$16.2 million with cooperators to support voluntary conservation efforts in big game seasonal habitat and migration corridors for an \$18.8 million impact and a total leveraging ratio of \$7.14 from a cooperator for every dollar of Service funds (Table 1). The Service's contributions include more than \$1.8 million invested in completed projects directly delivered by PFW Program staff in FY 2024 (Tables 1 and 2) and \$800,000 (\$500k from PFW and \$300k of Service direct to NFWF) allocated to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Western Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridors Fund, of which \$500,000 was awarded to a cooperative agreement between the PFW Program and NFWF.

Table 1. Service and partner contributions in Fiscal Year 2024 to big game seasonal habitat and migration corridor projects.

FY 2024 Activities	Service Contributions (Cash only)	Cooperator Contributions (Cash and In-kind)	Total Conservation Investment
PFW Program Accomplishments	\$1,835,386 ¹	\$5,110,694	\$6,946,080
NFWF Western Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridors Fund	\$800,000 ²	\$11,083,729	\$11,883,729
Total	\$2,635,386	\$16,194,423	\$18,829,809

¹ Total includes \$783,308 in PFW Program funds, \$51,368 in other Service program funds, and \$1,000,710 of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law project funds delivered by the PFW Program.

² Total includes \$500K invested by the PFW Program in a cooperative agreement with NFWF and \$300K from the Service's general appropriations to NFWF.

Table 2. Fiscal Year 2024 PFW Program accomplishments, by state, that improved seasonal and migration corridor habitat for big game species using Service cash and partner contributions.

State	Upland Acres Restored/Enhanced	Wetland Acres Restored/Enhanced	River/Shoreline/Stream Miles Restored/Enhanced	Miles of Fencing Removed, Installed, or Modified	Total Service Cash	Partner Contribution (Cash and in-kind)	Total Conservation Investment
AZ	1,560	0	0.0	1.0	\$186,020	\$38,500	\$224,520
CO	150	1	0.3	0.0	\$16,666	\$2,393	\$19,059
ID	3,935	0	0.0	0.0	\$29,616	\$192,357	\$221,973
MT	30,055	605	68.6	32.6	\$232,928	\$1,898,388	\$2,131,316
NM	2,667	14	3.5	0.0	\$258,909	\$144,821	\$403,730
NV	562	310	0.1	7.0	\$639,299	\$280,594	\$919,893
UT	1,672	3	0.0	0.0	\$77,000	\$633,460	\$710,460
WA	5	13	0.0	0.0	\$124,991	\$1,125,648	\$1,250,639
WY	4,871	0	0.5	23.7	\$269,957	\$794,533	\$1,064,490
Total	45,477	946	73.0	64.4	\$1,835,386	\$5,110,694	\$6,946,080

Through the extraordinary efforts of external and internal partners, 121 project accomplishments were completed by the PFW Program to improve seasonal habitat and migration corridors for big game species with Service funding across 9 of the 11 western states prioritized through S.O. 3362 (Table 2). Completed on-the-ground activities include:

- Restoration and enhancement of 45,477 upland acres of seasonal habitat and migration corridors with 97% (43,909 acres) within winter range and/or migration corridor habitat and 76% (34,340 acres) within state action plan priority areas.
- Restoration and enhancement of 946 wetland acres of seasonal habitat and migration corridors with 98% (929 acres) within winter range and/or migration corridor habitat and 77% (727 acres) within state action plan priority areas.

- Improvement of 73 miles of river, shoreline, and stream channel miles with 95% (69.5 miles) occurring within winter range and/or migration corridor habitat and 92% (67 miles) occurring within state action plan priority areas.
- Removal, installation, or modification of 64.4 miles of fencing that affect big game with 98% (62.9 miles) occurring in migration corridors and winter range and 76% (48.9 miles) in state action plan priority areas.

PFW Program projects completed by cooperators and program staff included treatment and removal of invasive species and reseedling to native habitat, juniper and pinyon pine control, implementation of grazing management systems to improve the quality of habitats, installation of fuel breaks to prevent and control wildfires, and restoration of wetlands and riparian habitat. Fencing projects included removal of wildlife-unfriendly fences (e.g., woven wire fences), installation of new wildlife-friendly fences, and fence modifications to wildlife-friendly specifications that allow wildlife to pass through or over fences unharmed. See Appendix A for examples of projects delivered by the PFW Program.

The Service contributed \$800,000 to support NFWF's Western Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridors Fund, of which \$500,000 was awarded by the PFW Program to NFWF through a cooperative agreement. Service funds in combination with partner contributions and leveraged resources, resulted in a collective conservation investment of over \$11.8 million for big game winter and migration corridor habitat (Table 1). PFW Program staff serve on an advisory panel with other partners to assist with project proposal review and development of project recommendations submitted to the NFWF Board of Directors for funding approval. In FY 2024, NFWF awarded 10 grants for projects in big game winter habitat and migration corridor priority areas on private, Tribal, and federal lands. These projects are expected to protect 1,930 acres through conservation easements; restore 19,420 acres of public, private, and Tribal lands; improve management on 440 acres of rangelands; and remove or improve 70 miles of fencing to be wildlife-friendly. For more information on NFWF's Western Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridors Fund and awarded grants in FY 2024, see [NFWF's press release](#).

The PFW Program accomplishments described here are a credit to the 38 cooperating landowners, Tribes, organizations, and agencies which voluntarily collaborated with the PFW Program staff in FY2024 (Table 3). The cooperation and support of PFW Program partners are essential to the long-term conservation and sustainability of habitats benefitting western big game and all other species sharing the landscape.

Table 3. List of Fiscal Year 2024 external partners the PFW Program collaborated with to deliver habitat restoration and enhancement projects in big game seasonal and migration corridor habitat on private and Tribal lands.

Partner Type	Partner Name
Conservation District	Dubois-Crowheart Conservation District Kittitas County Conservation District
Federal Agency	Bureau of Land Management Farm Services Agency - Emergency Conservation Program Natural Resources Conservation Service
Local Unit of Government	Sublette County Weed & Pest Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative
Non-Governmental Organization/Land Trust	Colorado Wildlife Heritage Foundation Ducks Unlimited Knobloch Family Foundation Methow Conservancy Mule Deer Foundation Muley Fanatics National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Pheasants Forever Ranchers Stewardship Alliance Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Safari Club International Sportsman For Fish and Wildlife The Nature Conservancy Water For Wildlife Winnett Agricultural Community Enhancement and Sustainability World Wildlife Fund
Private Corporation	Reineke Construction, LLC
School	Montana State University
State Agency	Idaho Department of Fish and Game Idaho Office of Species Conservation Montana Conservation Corps Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Nevada Department of Wildlife Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Washington Department of Ecology Wyoming Game and Fish Department Wyoming Governor's Big Game License Coalition Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust
Tribal	Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation Summit Lake Paiute Tribe

Summary and Looking Forward

In FY 2024, the Service contributed more than \$2.6 million to big game seasonal habitat and migration corridor projects, which, along with partner contributions, resulted in a total conservation investment of over \$18.8 million. Of the \$2.6 million provided by the Service, \$1.8 million was delivered through the PFW Program, in collaboration with 38 partners, to improve big game seasonal habitat and migration corridors. The PFW Program also provided \$500,000 with additional Service allocations to provide a total of \$800,000 to NFWF's Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridor Fund.

The PFW Program made significant investments in the accomplishments for big game migration corridor and seasonal habitat restoration and enhancement projects with cooperators. This work has remained a priority of the Administration, Department, and Service since S.O. 3362 was signed by the Trump Administration in 2018. The PFW Program will continue to engage and build partnerships with external and internal partners to conserve, protect, and restore valuable big game migratory and seasonal habitat on private and Tribal lands through voluntary agreements.



Staff from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Natural Resources Conservation Service, a local Conservation District and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service meet to plan a fencing project in Wyoming that ultimately benefited elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and many other species. Working collaboratively with partners is key to achieving landscape-scale conservation. Photo by Mark Hogan (USFWS).

**Appendix A: Examples of Big Game Winter Habitat and Migration Corridor
Restoration/Enhancement Accomplishments for FY 2024 in Nevada and Wyoming**



Mule deer during the winter in Washington. Photo by Kourtney Stonehouse.

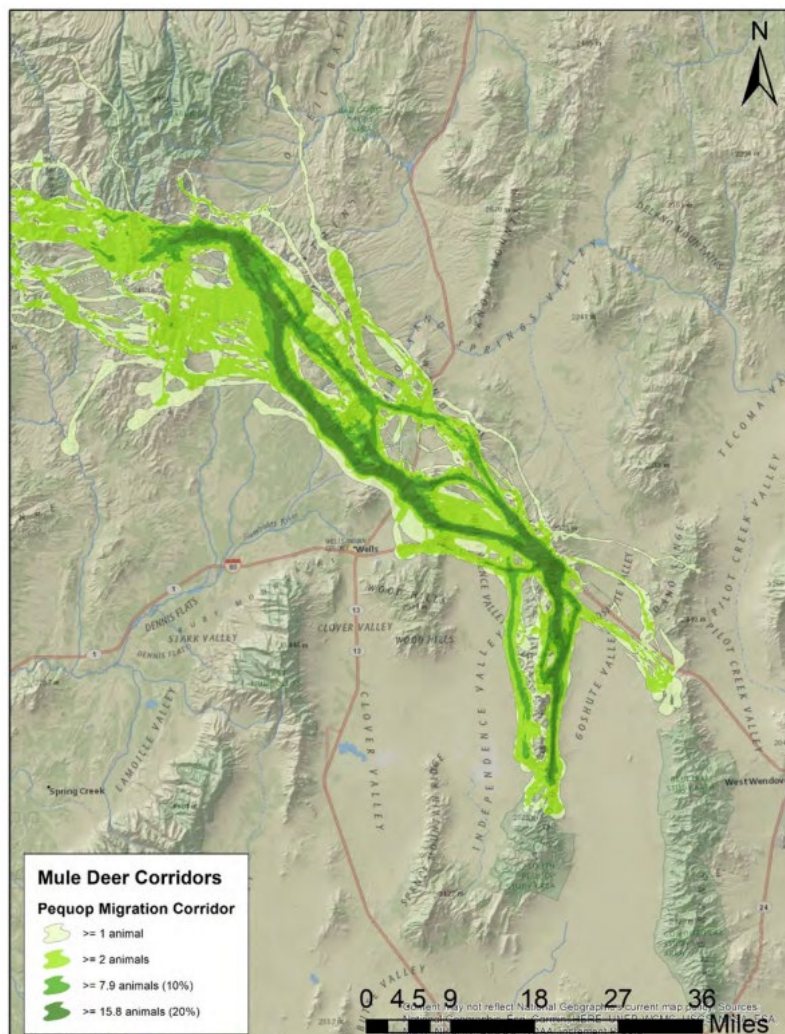


Mule deer on hillside overlooking a project restoration area in Utah. Photo by Clint Wirick (USFWS).

Clearing the Way for Mule Deer: Addressing Conifer Encroachment in Nevada's Longest Migratory Corridor

The Pequop migration corridor in Elko County, Nevada is one of the longest mule deer migration routes in the state. Twice a year, mule deer travel between their summer and winter ranges, facing numerous obstacles along the way, including fences, fragmented and degraded habitat, and busy roadways. To help alleviate these challenges, extensive restoration work has been carried out over the past decade on both public and private lands in the area, with a focus on restoring or enhancing sagebrush habitats that are critical to mule deer.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) has played a key role in the habitat restoration efforts, investing millions of dollars in projects in the Pequop migration corridor to improve mule deer passage across a major highway (US highway 93) and interstate (Interstate 80). NDOW also continues to fund restoration projects following wildfires, conifer removal projects, and weed treatments.



Map of Pequop migration corridor in Management Area 7, Elko County, Nevada, USA. The Pequop herd is a subset of the Area 7 mule deer population. Map from the [2024 Nevada State Action Plan](#).

Building on the conservation efforts completed by NDOW, a private landowner, in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program, completed multiple projects within the Pequop migration corridor over the past decade. These projects focused on improving migration routes and winter habitat for big game and included modifying over ten miles of fence to wildlife-friendly specifications that allow mule deer to pass over and under fences unharmed. As opportunities arise, the private landowner continues to modify existing fences to meet wildlife-friendly fence standards and remove those that are no longer needed.

More recently, PFW Program funding was used to address additional habitat concerns for mule deer and other wildlife species on the private landowner's property. One of the greatest threats to the Pequop mule deer population, as identified in the [2024 Nevada State Action Plan](#), is conifer encroachment into open sagebrush habitats, which reduces the productivity of understory vegetation. The PFW Program partnered with NDOW and the private landowner to delineate the project area and begin habitat restoration efforts in the Murdock Mountain Range. In FY 2024, restoration work included removing young conifer trees that had spread into the sagebrush shrublands across 451 acres. Removal of trees at the early encroachment phase will reinvigorate the existing understory, preserving critical habitat for mule deer. In addition to benefitting mule deer, the restoration efforts will also enhance habitat for Greater sage-grouse in a designated priority area for this species.



Before (top) and after (bottom) lop and scatter of young pinyon and juniper on private lands. Photo credits: NDOW.

The PFW Program continues to work with NDOW and the private landowner to identify and secure funding to continue habitat enhancement efforts for mule deer and other sagebrush ecosystem dependent species in northeastern Nevada.



Overview of lop and scatter treatment of young conifer (top and bottom). Follow-up treatments for larger trees will occur using a masticator to reduce post-treatment ground fuels. Photo credits: NDOW.

From Fenced to Free: Restoring Pronghorn Access to Critical Winter Habitat in Wyoming's Red Desert

Wyoming is home to over 50% of all remaining pronghorn antelope in North America, which thrive in some of the most expansive and ecologically intact sagebrush-steppe and grassland habitats in the Western United States. Twice a year, pronghorn embark on long-distance migrations, traveling hundreds of miles to find food sources and new habitats as the seasons change. They usually travel the same pathways between their summer and winter habitats, creating a highway known as a migration corridor. However, when these paths are obstructed by barriers, such as fencing, pronghorn populations can suffer significant setbacks. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program worked collaboratively with conservation partners in the Red Desert in southwest Wyoming to study pronghorn herd movement, identify barriers to their movement, and implement solutions.

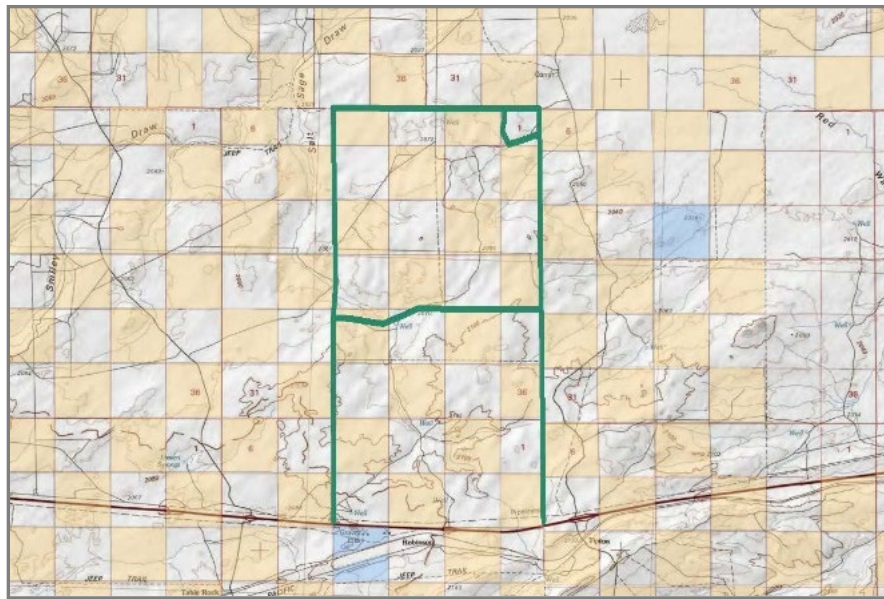


Pronghorn in the Red Desert of Wyoming (left) and sagebrush-steppe habitat within the project area (right). The habitat is in excellent condition and productive for a wide array of sagebrush-steppe species. Photos by Tim Kramer (USFWS).

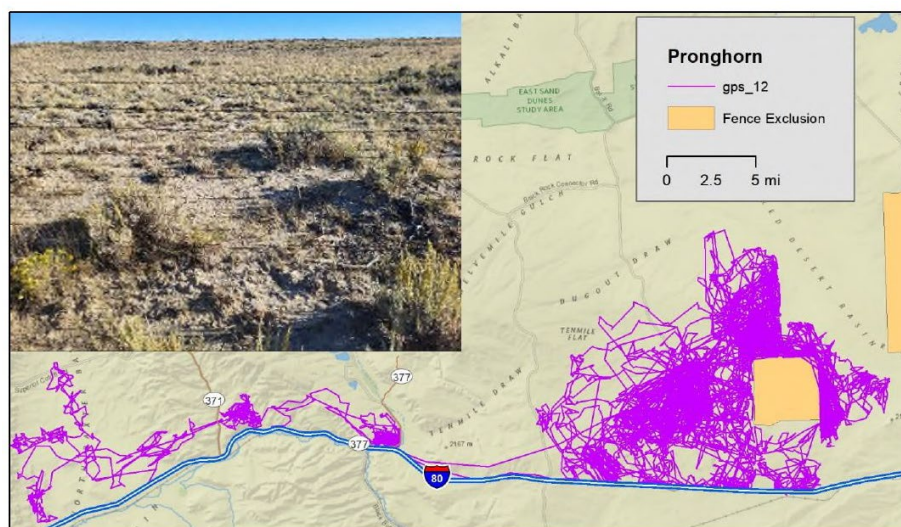
The Red Desert Unit is home to a key pronghorn population managed by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). Although the population objective for this herd is around 15,000 individuals, it has consistently fallen short of this goal since 2020, fluctuating between 7,650 and 10,000 animals. After a severe winter in 2022–2023, the population significantly declined, dropping to fewer than 4,500 pronghorns.

From 2020 to 2023, the WGFD used GPS collars to track pronghorn movements between their winter and summer ranges in the Red Desert. The study revealed barriers to their movement, including areas that were nearly impossible for pronghorn to traverse. One major obstacle was domestic sheep fencing, which has barbed wire on top and a woven wire bottom nearly flush with the ground. While this type of fencing is highly effective for containing livestock, it also unintentionally prevents pronghorn from passing through as they are unable to jump over or pass underneath the fence.

Some areas in the Red Desert, including the Tipton grazing allotment, are no longer used for sheep production, which presented an opportunity for the PFW Program and partners to remove fencing and benefit the pronghorn herd. The Tipton grazing allotment, which spans about 18,600 acres—split evenly between private land and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—serves as crucial summer and winter habitat for pronghorn. Within this area, nearly 24 miles of internal and external fencing exist. Notably, the northern 9,000-acre portion of the Tipton Allotment was completely inaccessible to pronghorn due to fencing barriers.



The North Tipton grazing allotment is located about 55 miles west of Rawlins and 45 miles East of Rock Springs, Wyoming. The green lines indicate where sheep fencing was replaced in 2024 with wildlife-friendly fencing. The red linear feature at south boundary is Interstate 80, which further prohibits wildlife movement north and south.



Pronghorn GPS collar data showing complete exclusion from north 9,000 acres of the Tipton Allotment. The area is within WGFD core and crucial winter range. Map from the WGFD, 2024.

In collaboration with partners, the PFW Program removed 24 miles of sheep fencing in the Red Desert and replaced it with wildlife-friendly fencing designed to allow pronghorn to pass freely underneath. This area is also crucial habitat for Rocky Mountain elk, so certain segments of the fence were constructed with welded pipe at strategic crossing points to enable elk to safely jump over the fence without the risk of injury to themselves or the fence. By replacing sheep fencing with wildlife-friendly fencing, the PFW Program and partners restored pronghorn and elk access to 9,000 acres of sagebrush-steppe habitat. The project was a joint effort involving the private landowner, PFW Program staff in Wyoming, WGFD, BLM, and several supporting organizations, including the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, the Knobloch Family Foundation, the WGFD Trust, Muley Fanatics, The Wildlife Fund, and the Wyoming Governor's Big Game License Coalition.



Before (top photo) of old woven wire fencing and after (bottom photos) of new wildlife-friendly fencing at the Tipton grazing allotment. Bottom right photo showing staff measuring fence specifications after installation. Note the welded pipe elk crossing on the right. Photos by Amy Anderson and Tim Kramer (USFWS).

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Cover: Elk in winter on the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming by Kari Cieszkiewicz (USFWS).