

PHEASANTS FOREVER

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February 4, 2014

Mr. Dale Kurschner
Editor
Twin Cities Business
220 S. 6th Street, Suite 500
Minneapolis, MN 55402

Mr. Kurschner,

Undoubtedly, “*MN’s Legacy Amendment: Whose Legacy Is It?*” and the companion editorial “*Foxes in Henhouses*” were intended to generate greater scrutiny of the sizeable funds being allocated as a result of the Legacy Amendment. Pheasants Forever has no argument with that intent. We too, believe that government spending should carry appropriate checks and balances. However, the errors, omissions and veiled innuendo included in these stories not only impact your publication’s credibility, but they unnecessarily and unfairly indict our organization’s reputation. That’s why I’m writing to you today.

The attached document outlines substantive misrepresentations that result in an inaccurate and misleading picture of the Legacy Amendment and Pheasants Forever’s role.

As you can imagine, I’m very passionate about the positive benefits the Legacy Amendment funds are providing all Minnesotans, and I believe spending state money on the environment and natural resources is a wise long-term investment. While you may not hold those values as dear, I know you take pride in your craft. I would like to request a meeting with you to further illustrate these misrepresentations and discuss possible remedies for the damage this article has done to our highly cherished reputation.



Howard K. Vincent
President & Chief Executive Officer

Twin Cities Business
“MN’s Legacy Amendment: Whose Legacy Is It?” and the companion editorial
Misrepresentations

Public, Not Private. The article and editorial misrepresent our role and purpose at least three different times when referring to public vs. private interests. While you note deep in your article that all lands are conveyed to the DNR or US Fish and Wildlife service, early on in your article you write “pheasant habitat has become the biggest private purpose” of the Legacy Amendment and later on write “roughly a seventh of all Legacy funds going to private interests.” In addition, one of the callout graphics is titled “Legacy’s Largest Private Beneficiaries.” Not one single Legacy grant that we have administered has been used for any sort of private benefit. We made this point multiple times with your reporters and fact checkers.

Description of the Granting Process. The article included inaccurate characterizations of how the granting process works. In particular, it states that there is “no single river through which the revenue flows.” There is indeed a single river – the Minnesota Legislature. Legacy funding, just as all government funding, goes through the appropriations process. The Minnesota Legislature votes and the Governor signs off on all appropriation bills. In fact, all Outdoor Heritage Fund grants have an even more transparent process with Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council review, public hearings, and LSOHC recommendations before a bill is offered.

Matching Grants Disregarded. The article says “Pheasants excels at securing grants from Minnesota’s Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, which is funded through the Legacy Amendment. All told, it won \$45.5 million in Legacy money...” We also explained to your reporters and fact checkers on multiple occasions that Pheasants Forever has been chosen to administer these grants in part due to our ability to secure matching dollars. In fact, we have brought more than \$11 Million in matching funds to these grants to stretch the tax payer’s contribution further (25 percent of grant funds came from Pheasants Forever chapters and sources other than Legacy funds). These matching funds are an important component of our role as a grant recipient, yet this was omitted from the story. Furthermore, Pheasants Forever didn’t “win” grant money for its organization – as stated earlier; the money went back to the state in the form of public lands.

Allegation of Lack of Transparency. Perhaps the most inflammatory component was your editorial’s mention of “pheasantgate,” “foxes in henhouses” and “there’s enough here to cry foul” to depict your opinion of the system. These are terms suggesting scandal and predatory activity. Nothing of the sort has been happening with the Legacy Amendment and it is irresponsible to suggest otherwise. Pheasants Forever grant proposals are public record; they are scrutinized by a council of citizens and elected officials, voted upon by the Minnesota legislature and signed off on by the Governor. Our activities have been monitored by state auditors and evaluated by the Office of the Legislative Auditor without any suggestion of wrongdoing. We are a non-profit with a solid track record and reputation, which you have sullied through an accusation without any merit or evidence.

Prairies & Wetlands, not Pheasants: Throughout both pieces and via the cover artwork, the publication repeatedly calls into question the value of utilizing tax payer’s dollars for the purpose of creating pheasant habitat with quotes like “The question from a taxpayer perspective is how important is it that Minnesotans can hunt pheasants?” and “Why do pheasants get special treatment?” and “So far, \$45 million has been spent on habitat for pheasants” and “Averaged, pheasant habitat has been getting about \$10 million a year.” Each of these statements is incorrect both in fact and in principle. Every single grant awarded through this process has been awarded to Pheasants Forever for the purpose of protecting or restoring *prairies and/or wetlands*. So to answer the question in your editorial, Pheasants Forever grants are indeed benefiting rabbits and deer, along with pheasants. In fact, waterfowl, turkeys, pollinators, water quality, flood mitigation, soil resources, butterflies, song birds, and endangered species are also enjoying the results of these projects. Additionally, all of these lands provide access to all Minnesotans for a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities; including, bird watching, hiking, fishing and hunting. These are two of the fastest disappearing Minnesota ecosystems and are critical priorities for both the DNR and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. If our organization’s name were “Prairies Forever” would the article have treated us differently?

Contradictions between Article and Editorial: Your editorial states “Areas served by the Legacy Amendment are important – we all benefit from clean water. But they already, or could instead be, receiving support through already established, accountable resources.” However, your own article states that “even as dedicated money rolled in for various conservation-related initiatives, core state services were being slashed. Something similar has been happening in Minnesota, recalling the budget crises of 2008-09, where state finances were squeezed just as Legacy dollars began flowing in.” This is one part of your article that is correct. The portion of the state’s general fund budget allocated to conservation and environmental spending has decreased in the last twelve years from 2 percent to .7 percent by 2013; more than a 50 percent reduction. The point is that these “established, accountable sources” that you vaguely refer to have presided over a 50 percent reduction in the state’s general fund budget for the outdoors, clean water and the environment despite a growing population and tax base. Minnesotans clearly see the value in spending on environmental causes, particularly in light of recent spending declines for that purpose, which is why nearly two-thirds of Minnesotans voted to allocate a portion of their taxes toward the Legacy Amendment.

The Goal of the Legacy Amendment. The article questions multiple times whether the money is being spent in the manner intended. There is a complete omission of the fact the LSOHC, Minnesota DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have prioritized the *permanent protection of prairies and wetlands* as paramount to the successful use of these funds. That goal is exactly what is being accomplished by the grants awarded to Pheasants Forever to date.

Economic Impact of the Outdoors. While the editorial makes a backhanded reference to economic benefits (by referencing game farms), the article significantly understates the value of a healthy outdoors and wildlife populations to the state’s business community. Consider the tourism industry, sporting goods retailers, boat manufacturers, all-terrain vehicles, resort industry and outdoor clothing manufacturers as just a sampling of the businesses positively impacted by Legacy funding. In fact, the outdoors industry represents over \$3 Billion to the state of Minnesota and the Twin Cities consistently ranks among the nation’s top outdoor retail markets in the country. We would have thought a media organization like *Twin Cities Business* would have recognized these important statistics relevant to your readers.

Habitat Loss and “Outcomes” Measurement. The authors of both the article and editorial imply that the projects funded by the Legacy Amendment aren’t achieving “outcomes.” Over the past 50 years, there has been a massive loss of prairie and wetland habitat occurring across Minnesota and the resulting decline in wildlife numbers and degradation of water quality. These are not trends that can be reversed in a few short years. The Legacy Amendment is indeed about “legacy;” it’s all about future generations of Minnesotans enjoying sky blue waters, prairies, wetlands and forests that make our state special. In essence, we all do in fact “live off the land.” Minnesotans have consistently been polled as placing a high value on clean water and wildlife habitat. Healthy wildlife habitat and clean water are intertwined, and your story omitted any discussion on the positive benefits brought forth to Minnesota’s water resources through the protection of these lands.

Other Criticisms:

- **“Pheasants’s members function almost as real estate brokers in connecting their organization with private owners willing to sell their land.”** You’ve paraphrased a statement from Garry Leaf, and done so inaccurately. Pheasants Forever is not connecting itself with private owners – it is connecting private owners with the state. In addition, unlike real estate brokers, Pheasants Forever does not receive any commissions on the sale of any land.
- The editorial suggests that Dennis Anderson has not written pro-habitat stories about other wildlife species and accuses him of not **“disclosing to his readers his personal bias on the subject.”** If you

take the time to read Dennis Anderson's columns, you'll see he writes about all of these topics and has many times disclosed his past affiliation with Pheasants Forever (for the record, he has not been involved with the organization for several years).

- **“There’s some economic benefit here as well, given that thousands of people hunt pheasants each year, increasingly on land that’s stocked with birds.”** You state this, and then in the same editorial call pheasant hunting a “white man’s sport.” Setting aside the extremely offensive stereotype (women and Asian-Americans are two of the fastest growing segments of the hunting community), you might want to know that there is no stocking of pheasants on public land in Minnesota and Pheasants Forever does not have any involvement in private stocking programs. Any Minnesotan – white, black, Hmong, Asian, Native American – can hunt deer and small game for licenses of less than \$50 a year if they do it on the public lands acquired through the Legacy Fund.
- **“Legacy is a challenging concept to impose on the masses.”** This wasn’t imposed on the masses, it was voted on BY the masses, and they overwhelmingly approved it. If the “masses” didn’t want it, they would have voted it down.
- **“An Auditors Nightmare.”** This entire sidebar is misleading. Its headline and subhead **“Auditing the effectiveness and integrity of the Legacy Amendment is proving difficult”** imply that the money isn’t being spent properly and with the appropriate checks and balances. Yet the majority of the issue explored in the sidebar relates to the Legislature’s desire to tap into the Legacy Funds to patch existing programs. In short, the headline implies that the nightmare is impropriety, when the body of the sidebar articulates that the “nightmare” is the fact that some legislators and state agencies sought to use Legacy funds for programs that had been cut in the past.