**NEBRASKA**

**STATE REPORT**

*May 25, 2016*

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**$2.4 Billion,** according to latest estimates, is the annual economic impact of hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and state parks on Nebraska**.**

**Hunting – $848 million** impact; $562 million in retail sales and 8,856 jobs supported

**Fishing – $324 million**; $210 million in retail sales and 3,076 jobs supported

**Wildlife Viewing – $722 million**; $513 million in retail sales and 4,818 jobs supported

**State Parks – $749 million**; $448 million in retail sales and 8,199 jobs supported

Wildlife Management Areas – 288 areas, encompassing 185,500 acres

Open Fields and Waters (walk-in hunt, fish, trap) – 252,000 land acres, 449 water acres and 40 river miles

State fish hatcheries – 5

State Park System – 77 areas; 72,165 acres

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission:

* offers vast opportunities for people to have fun, enjoy the outdoors and create memories.
* maintains healthy fish and wildlife populations and improves land and water habitats.
* together with outdoor pursuits has a $2.4 billion annual economic impact in Nebraska.
* is innovative, doing what is in the best interest of all Nebraskans and the resources we manage.
* helps inform, educate and engage Nebraskans in the natural world.

**Updating Legislated Fees and Permits –** Current statutory caps for hunting and fishing permits have been in place since 2003, and most permit fees had been at the legislated caps since 2008. NGPC was holding back spending of funds from permit fees, because we had more authority to spend than funds available. In fall of 2015 NGPC began discussing our challenge with state Senators. During the 2016 legislative session (beginning in January) Senator John McCollister introduced and successfully advanced the most broad-based update of NGPC fees and permits in agency history. On April 14, 2016, the Governor signed LB745, which provided for increases for hunting and fishing permit fees, stamp fees (Habitat, Waterfowl, and Aquatic Habitat Stamps), and park vehicle entry permit fees. With user fees and federal funds comprising 87% of NGPC’s budget and only 13% of our budget from General (tax) Funds, we had strong legislative and user-group support for updating fees and continuing the reliance on the “user-pay” system.

**Historic Agreement Ensures Future of the Niobrara River** - On Sept. 16, 2015, an historic agreement was signed by the Commission, Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), Upper Niobrara White Natural Resources District (NRD), Middle Niobrara NRD, Lower Niobrara NRD, Upper Elkhorn NRD, and Upper Loup NRD. Under the memorandum of understanding, the Commission and NRDs will work to transfer assets from NPPD’s Spencer Hydro Dam, including NPPD’s water appropriations on the Niobrara River, to protect river flows in the Niobrara River. The partners are also seeking an instream flow from below Spencer Dam to the confluence with the Missouri River to protect flows for fish, wildlife, and recreation. On April 18, 2016, the Governor signed a bill passed through the legislature that provides the ability for the water rights from a Hydro Dam to be transferred for purposes of maintaining streamflow for fish, wildlife, and recreation, and for the implementation of approved integrated ground and surface management plans within a river basin. This proactive and cooperative approach to jointly manage water will benefit all users and fish, wildlife, and recreational benefits throughout the basin, with a focus on meeting local needs and providing benefits for all Nebraska citizens.

**Pheasant Numbers up in 2015, with Long-Term Plan for Increasing Population Underway** - This past year was among the best for pheasants and quail in Nebraska in recent memory. According to the Rural Mail Carrier Survey, pheasant and quail numbers were up statewide 55 and 84 percent, respectively, and many hunters reported seeing more birds than they had in years. A mild, wet spring certainly was part of the reason for this good news. But behind-the-scenes habitat work throughout the state, including projects by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Pheasants Forever, and a host of agencies and volunteers, has aided the chance that this year’s season isn’t a one-time success. In fact, multiple projects statewide aim to increase habitat long-term for upland birds, as well as many other species. The Commission devoted much energy in 2015 to making sure hunters continue to find good populations of pheasants and other upland game in Nebraska in coming years, too. In February of 2015, staff began a year-long process of constructing a comprehensive plan to improve pheasant hunting in the state, with the goal of producing the best hunting experience for the largest number of people possible. Following this plan, Commission staff will strive to continue to increase pheasant numbers, as well as to increase hunters’ access to land, and to promote pheasant hunting to residents and nonresidents. As the commissioners learned as they traveled throughout the state hunting public lands, if you have habitat, the birds will come.

**Comprehensive Pheasant Management Planning** - In February of 2015, we began a year-long process of constructing a comprehensive plan to improve pheasant hunting in the state, with the specific objective defined as “producing the best hunting experience for the largest number of people possible.” A conceptual model was constructed detailing how we will reach that objective (i.e., increasing pheasant abundance, increasing hunter access to land, increasing the pool of potential pheasant hunters, and managing hunter expectations appropriately). Specific actions were identified for each objective. Specific areas of the state were indentified where investing in habitat projects or increasing public hunting access was likely to increase quality hunting opportunities, detailed the kinds of investments each area needed, and estimated the resources necessary to complete those projects. The resulting plan, which will be finalized in early 2016, will provide a comprehensive road map for the Commission and our conservation partners to follow to keep Nebraska a pheasant hunting destination for residents and non-residents alike.

**Aquatic Invasive Species Program Created** - The Nebraska Legislature passed LB 142 in 2015 that increased the three-year resident boat registration fee by $5 and created a $15 annual non-resident boat stamp to fund the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Program. The program aims to prevent the introduction and/or spread of aquatic invasive species in Nebraska. Owners of 130 bait shops in Nebraska were surveyed in 2015 to assess their operations and their awareness of invasive species issues. That was followed up with visits by Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff to all bait shops to see their operations and to determine what is being sold in Nebraska as fishing bait. AIS are exotic or non-native aquatic organisms that pose a significant threat to the aquatic resources, water supplies or water infrastructure of this state. These organisms can be plants, fish, mussels, crayfish, invertebrates or pathogens.

**Milkweed Planted for Monarchs -**Monarch populations have declined at alarming rates in recent years, and habitat loss across the Midwest (specifically loss of milkweed) has been identified as one factor limiting populations. Monarchs rely on milkweeds for egg deposition and caterpillar survival. The Commission has partnered with multiple agencies and organizations to improve monarch habitat and increase milkweed plantings on public and private land. The Commission has already started planting milkweed across the state and plans for milkweed production plots on more than two dozen wildlife management areas, which will served as a seed source for future habitat work. Working alongside several partner organizations with a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Commission plans to plant 3,000 milkweed seedlings along stretches of the Cowboy Trail, the recreational trail that runs from Norfolk to Valentine.

**Research Helps Understand Mountain Lion Movement, Habitat Use and Population Size -**The recent recolonization of the Pine Ridge, Niobrara River Valley, and Wildcat Hills has brought new questions regarding management of mountain lions and their impact on prey species such as bighorn sheep, elk and mule deer. To help answer these questions and allow for better management of both predator and prey, the Commission began a statewide research project in 2015. As part of this research, mountain lions are fitted with global positioning system (GPS) collars in the Pine Ridge and statewide as possible. Location data from collared animals will also allow for identification of home range sizes, movement patterns, habitat use after wildfires in 2012, and impacts on prey species. This research will also allow for refinement of estimates derived through genetic surveys. Nine mountain lions were captured and collared. Capture efforts will continue over the next few years.

**Cool Water Streams Initiative Aims to Protect, Enhance Waters -** Nebraska has tremendous water resources in more than 2,100 rivers, streams and creeks. Approximately 4,600 miles of the rivers, streams and creeks in Nebraska can be classified as supporting aquatic communities dependent on cold or cool water thermal conditions. These communities include fish, and associated vertebrate and invertebrate organisms and plants. The Cool Water Streams Initiative was created to provide unique angling opportunities, promote recovery of at-risk species, and provide natural habitat for aquatic and terrestrial species. A collaborative and innovative approach with partners including the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality and the Natural Resources Conservation Service has been undertaken to complete a Management Plan to protect and enhance the integrity of these cool water streams. The initiative’s primary goal is to demonstrate how the integration of wise stewardship practices within watersheds and riparian zones, combined with site-specific, in-stream enhancements provide long-term benefits to landowners and sensitive aquatic communities.

**Nebraskans Celebrate Birds in a Big Way** - In Nebraska, birds and bird migration are important because Nebraska is geographically situated on a major bird migration route. Birds and bird watching are critical to both Nebraska’s ecosystems and to its economy. In 2015, Game and Parks outdoor education staff invited parks, museums and both novice and experience bird watchers to stretch this unique annual celebration throughout the entire month of May. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission worked with state and community parks, museums, nature centers and other entities across the state to organize more than 60 events held across the state. Gov. Pete Ricketts declared May International Migratory Bird Month in Nebraska in 2015 and again in 2016. Even more events were planned in 2016 for Nebraska celebrating International Migratory Bird Month, with goals to educate, inspire and empower citizens to conserve and protect our bird populations.

**Agency Launches New Website** - A new agency website was launched in December of 2015. The new site offers improved navigation and search, mobile responsive design, better access to multimedia and GIS maps, rules and regulations and information on ways to participate in outdoor recreation; as well we showcase the great photography of NEBRASKAland Magazine staff. Additionally, the new site offers visitors a quick overview of amenities available at Nebraska’s state parks and recreation areas, and offers detailed information on trails, camping, wildlife viewing opportunities and much more. Additionally, the new site makes it easier for visitors to find and register for workshops and events. Assessment and improvement of the new site continues.

**Shooting Sports Programs Continue to Grow** - Two of the largest shooting sports programs in Nebraska are the middle and high school trap shooting program and the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP). The trap shooting program continues to grow, with more than 2,500 youth shooters at the Cornhusker Trapshoot in Doniphan. NASP saw growth again at the state tournament, with an increase from 600 to 700 youth archers. The Commission has begun a new effort to explore methods that would help develop these young shooters into hunters. In the summer, the Commission hosted the Cornhusker State Games of America with more than 600 archers from across the country shooting at the Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center in Lincoln over a three-day period. The Commission continues a growing partnership with the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension team in continuing to host the 4-H National Shoot in Grand Island, with more than 600 youth from across the nation competing in various shooting sports venues.

**Outdoor Discovery Programs Reach Youth** - The four scholastic outdoor skills programs continued to reach several thousand youth in schools across Nebraska. Research suggested that more than 50 percent of youth attending these programs tried a new outdoor skill based activity. Teachers and youth continue to utilize the program to meet key teaching objectives using outdoor activities as the catalyst.

**Mentored Youth Archery Big Game Program Ranks High** - This program pairs youth with mentors from the bow hunter education program and places them on partnership lands with high deer populations. With restrictions, youth and mentors alike hunt throughout the archery season with many participants logging several hundred hours in the program. This is the top-ranked program out of 70 evaluated nationally for getting youth out hunting after they leave a program. Youth and their mentors form positive relationships, establishing the social support new participants need and helping us to continue Nebraska’s outdoor heritage.

**Opportunities for Women and Families Grow -** The Commission provides opportunities for women and families to learn about outdoor recreation in a safe and friendly environment. Programs such as family camps, Family Fishing Nights, Families on Target, and Becoming an Outdoors-Woman bring beginners and outdoor enthusiasts together in a fun, social setting for hand-on, interactive learning of activities such as camping, wildlife viewing, fishing, outdoor cooking, kayaking, archery and shooting sports. Combined, these programs have expanded the Commission outreach efforts to tens of thousands of new participants annually. Family Fishing Nights have grown from a handful of programs in 2008 to more than 50 in 2015, reaching over 3,000 people. The Outdoor Discovery Program provides outdoor education days to 6,000 students and teachers. The Commission has tremendously expanded its outreach and education serving people with family-friendly programming in convenient locations, empowering people with the skills they need to participate in many forms of outdoor recreation, so they know time outdoors is time well spent.

**Youth Important to State’s Hunting Tradition -** Youth hunters are an important component to Nebraska’s hunting tradition. The Commission provides unique opportunities to make it easier and more affordable for family members and mentors to introduce youth to hunting. Since 2010, the Commission has offered the ever-popular $5 youth deer and turkey permits. Sales in 2015 were 12,232 youth deer and 7,267 youth turkey permits. In addition, the weekend before spring shotgun turkey, waterfowl and upland bird season openers are set aside to allow youth an opportunity to hunt before the regular season. Also, 2015 marked the fifth year that the Commission has released pheasants on select wildlife management areas to increase youth upland bird hunting participation. During the 2015 Special Youth Pheasant Hunt events, 290 adult mentors accompanied 344 youth hunters afield. For many of the youth, this special hunt is their first hunting experience. Many youth return each year to participate and most have said they now hunt pheasants during the regular season, as well.

**Deer Herd Recovers** - In 2012 and 2013, epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) killed an estimated 30 percent of Nebraska’s white-tailed deer herd and about 5 percent of the mule deer herd. Whitetail losses ranged from 4 percent in southwestern Nebraska to 60 percent in north-central Nebraska. In response, nearly 100,000 whitetail antlerless permits and free “bonus” antlerless whitetail tags were removed in 2013 and 2014, resulting in a 63 percent reduction in the harvest of antlerless whitetails. Herd recovery has been slow but steady. Whitetail buck harvest dropped to 24,400 in 2013, increased to 25,082 in 2014, and exceeded 27,000 in 2015, making it the 10th highest harvest on record. Mule deer buck harvest was 6,876 in 2013, increased to 7,497 in 2014, and exceeded 8,400 in 2015, which is the fifth-highest on record. A similar increase in 2016 would be a record harvest for Nebraska.

**Changes Aim to Make Hunter Education More Convenient -** In 2015, Nebraska made changes to the mandatory hunter and bow hunter education programs to make the program more convenient for the public. These changes allow hunters ages 16-29 to complete both courses online and meet all of their requirements. Hunters ages 11-15 also can fulfill their hunter education requirement by taking the online course, though they also are required to attend a two-hour Hunt Safe Session for certification. The Hunt Safe Session allows a certified instructor to review key safety objectives with youth before certification. Nebraska is noting a significant increase in online classes since July 2015.

**Open Fields and Waters Program Offers Quality Public Access** - In 2015, 434,000 acres were open to public hunting. This includes 182,000 acres of wildlife management areas owned by the Commission and areas owned by other entities but managed by Nebraska Game and Parks, as well as 252,000 acres of Open Fields and Waters (OFW) program private land that is open to walk-in hunting, fishing, and trapping statewide. Within the OFW program an initiative was piloted for 2015 in Lincoln County that opened more than 8,000 acres of access for big game hunting such as turkey, mule deer and elk. Interviews and surveys with hunters continue to show that the OFW program provides high quality access sites and excellent hunting opportunities. All of the state’s public and OFW sites are detailed in the Public Access Atlas, which has seen a significant increase in the usage of its interactive version available at OutdoorNebraska.org.

**Aquatic Education Efforts Expanded in 2015** - A total of 40 fishing events, attended by 2,454 individuals, were held in 2015. These events included 36 Family Fishing Night events, two Carp-O-Rama events, and two Discover Ice Fishing events. These events attract young families and children – potential new and future permit buyers. The Trout in the Classroom program expanded to 42 schools and 1,800 students (grades 2-12) in 2015, thanks to a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant. By hatching and raising rainbow trout, students learn about aquatic ecosystems, water quality, aquatic life cycles, Nebraska fish species, and recreational fishing. The Fishing in Nebraska Schools (FiNS) expanded to 15 schools and 1,200 students (grades 4-12) in 2015. Through this program, students learn basic fishing skills, including necessary fishing equipment, techniques, fish identification, and life history.

**Mobile Turkey Permits Now Available -** Turkey permits were first made available on the mobile permits system in the spring of 2015. Hunters, who increasingly rely on the convenience of using their mobile devices, can now purchase their turkey permits, display them for conservation officers, and cancel them on their phones or tablets. Even though the spring turkey permits were made available on the mobile site after these permits first went on sale, a significant number were purchased on the mobile site this first year. In 2015, 806 spring and 217 fall permits were purchased via mobile device.

**Survey Gauges Outdoor Recreation Opinions -** The Commission created a survey to understand the opinions of Nebraskans. The survey analyzed participation rates in outdoor recreation, distances traveled to participate in outdoor recreation, outdoor recreation expenditures, opinions on Nebraska Game and Parks, opinions on fishing, hunting and shooting sports, and participation and opinions on wildlife watching. According to the survey, 64 percent of Nebraskans visited a state park or recreation site within the last year. Eighty-eight percent of households participated in outdoor exercise, play or hobbies, and 69 percent participated in nature, wildlife, or other outdoor recreation activities. The types of recreation facilities that are most important to people surveyed were trails, fishing access, campsites, outdoor swimming areas, playgrounds, and picnic areas. Results will be used to better communicate with the public and improve the Commission’s offerings and services.

**Wildcat Hills Nature Center Expansion and Outdoor Heritage Park -** The Nature Center at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area (SRA) will be expanded to accommodate larger group rentals and allow for enhanced interpretation of the diverse flora and fauna found in this unique area of Nebraska. The expansion will increase exhibit space, offer a large multipurpose room, and add an upper level to the building that will feature an observation deck. The enhanced nature center will allow for educational programming and exhibits. Another project at the SRA is the Outdoor Heritage Park, which is scheduled to open in 2016. The state-of-the art facility will feature an outdoor small-bore firearm range, archery target range, trap range, 100-yard rifle range and indoor air gun range. It will serve young families, youth, women and those who would like to get more involved in outdoor sports such as hunting and target shooting. It also will offer other quality outdoor education programs.

**Officers Equipped to Handle Variety of Situations -** Conservation officers have widespread roles within communities. If something happens in a rural or remote area, there is a good chance that a conservation officer will be involved. Officers are equipped and trained to handle various issues that they may encounter. Some examples from 2015 include:

* Many times officers were called to assist with the search and rescue of persons threatened by flood waters using side-scan sonar, airboats and johnboats. They frequently provided support for search, rescue and recovery operations along rivers in the summer when paddlers are most active. In addition, officers have helped locate missing persons on lakes across the state.
* Officers solved and apprehended burglary suspects in a series of break-ins from a private residence near Dead Timber State Recreation Area in Dodge County.
* While serving a search warrant related to the illegal spotlighting of game animals in Hayes County, officers were involved in the arrest of a felon in possession of a firearm and illegal drugs.
* Officers assisted local authorities in a domestic disturbance at Jeffery Reservoir, making an arrest for terroristic threats involving a firearm.
* Other examples of incidents where conservation officers assisted other agencies include: the search for missing hunters in three counties; helping the Nebraska State Patrol on three occasions with disturbances in White Clay; a traffic stop and felony drug possession arrest of three people in Cherry County; domestic assault in Hays Springs; domestic assault and possible kidnapping in Valentine; and the search and rescue of a missing woman who was found in the creek bottom in Lancaster County.

**Boating Safety and Boater Education -** The Boating Safety Section of Nebraska Game and Parks annually provides training to county treasurer offices related to boat registrations and the collection of registration fees. The Commission secured a $2.7 million grant through the U.S. Coast Guard in support of boater education and enforcement. They also processed $736,000 in boat registration fees from January through September of 2015. One hundred and sixty-two boater education classes were offered in 2015, certifying 2,719 students. Hands-on kayak clinics and workshops were held across the state involving another 3,000 constituents. In 2015, there were 34 reported boating accidents, 27 of which required investigation by conservation officers. Thirty-one persons were injured requiring medical attention and there were four fatalities.

**Nebraska Wildlife Crime Stoppers -** Nebraska Wildlife Crime Stoppers (WCS) is a cooperative wildlife enforcement program sponsored by Nebraska Game and Parks and the Nebraska Wildlife Protectors Association (NWPA). It offers rewards for information resulting in arrests for game law violations. Initiated in 1982, this program allows concerned sportspersons to report violations and give needed information on wildlife crimes. To date 1,517 investigations have been initiated, resulting in 979 arrests and seizure of hundreds of protected species with more than $70,000 in rewards being paid. To report a violation, persons can call 1-800-742-7627 and remain anonymous.