**NEBRASKA**

**STATE REPORT**

*May 31, 2017*

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**Nebraska to join Wildlife Violator Compact –** On April 27, 2017, Governor Rickets approved a bill to adopt the Interstate Wildlife Violator compact. The bill was introduced by the Natural Resources Committee with support from a broad coalition of Nebraska sportsmen’s groups and the Commission. The same bill also increased increased fines for unlawful taking of big game species (deer, antelope, and elk) and for shooting from a highway or roadway.

**Berggren Plan for Pheasants -** In spring of 2016, Game and Parks approved the Berggren Plan, a comprehensive five-year initiative to improve the pheasant hunting experience in Nebraska. The plan, named after late Commissioner Lynn Berggren of Broken Bow considers all aspects of the pheasant hunting experience. Improving upland gamebird habitat and increasing hunter access are the cornerstone activities identified in the Plan and these efforts will be concentrated in areas where it will be most effective.

The agency developed habitat goals, and began implementation on 8 private Focus on Pheasant (FOP) and Pheasant Opportunity Areas (POA) and 17 public Wildlife Management Areas. On private lands, area-specific landowner incentives were developed. In 2016, over 124,000 acres of habitat were improved; a first step towards the plan goal of 800,000 acres over 5 years.

Promotion of Game and Parks’ public access programs and new enrollments in the Open Fields and Waters (OFW) program were targeted within the POAs and FOP areas, and many existing OFW properties were replaced with higher-quality sites. Approximately 225,000 acres were enrolled in OFW for the 2016-17 hunting season.

Historically, pheasant hunting provided an economic boost to rural Nebraska. Re-establishing this link between pheasant hunting and rural economies is also a priority identified in the Berggren Plan. Staff have been exploring partnerships with economic development and tourism groups and communities. These new partnerships have provided opportunities for Game and Parks to share information about the plan and gather local support.

**Reducing roadside mowing –** The Nebraska legislature approved changes to reduce roadside mowing on county roads that will assist in reducing mowing during the nesting season. The revised statute does not allow the counties to require landowners to mow roadsides prior to July 1, nor can county employees or contractors mow roadsides prior to July 1. The bill was introduced by the Chairman of the Transportation Committee with support from Nebraska sportsmen’s groups, the Nebraska Association of County Officials, and the Commission. Reduced roadside mowing to benefit pheasants, quail, songbirds and pollinators were all highlighted by supporters, as well as reducing expenditures by counties and landowners. The legislative change is also an action towards the Berggren Plan.

**Monarch Butterfly Conservation -** The Commission is committed to leading and coordinating efforts for monarch butterfly and pollinator conservation in Nebraska. A monarch summit was held to help form Nebraska’s approach to monarch conservation. With planning underway, monarch and pollinator habitat efforts are an agency-wide priority to provide new habitat, provide seed sources for additional habitat restorations, provide visible demonstration sites for monarch and pollinator habitat ,and help engage and educate the public. Game and Parks is working to establish new acres of pollinator habitat at state parks, on the Cowboy Trail, at fish hatcheries, at offices, and on wildlife management areas (WMA’s). We have planted milkweed production plots on WMA’s to produce more milkweed seeds for future needs on 32 WMAs. Other work that benefits monarchs and pollinators includes 58,825 acres of Early Successional Habitat on WMA’s and private lands projects and programs (Farm Bill, Berggern Plan) on 62,899 acre. Game and Parks is also asking Nebraskans to plant milkweed and native flowers; and then make their milkweed count through an online tracking system. Citizens and Master Naturalists are also contributing to tracking monarch populations through voluntary surveys.

**Zebra mussels in Lewis and Clark Reservoir and Missouri River -** Since the initial finding of zebra mussels, aquatic invasive species, in the fall of 2014, Lewis and Clark Lake and the Missouri River downstream are listed as infested waters. During the summer of 2016, sampling documented the rapid increase in mussel densities, especially on structures in marinas and boat dock facilities. Inspections of boat ramps along the entire Missouri River to the Kansas border have resulted in finding adult zebra mussels present. Lake Zorinsky (in Omaha) has been listed as suspect due to positive zebra mussel veliger samples collected in summer of 2016. Additional sampling has all been negative on other water bodies across the 7.

**Freshwater Mussel Restoration -** Due to population declines of native freshwater mussels, Game and Parks initiated propagation efforts to raise mussels in hatcheries to augment existing populations and to restore them to their historic range. In 2016, 6,592 plain pocketbook mussels were released back into the following streams: Elkhorn River (Holt County), Cache Creek (Holt County), Shell Creek (Platte County) and Rose Creek (Jefferson County). These mussels were approximately 1.5-1.75 inches in length and 15 months of age. The mussel can grow up to 7 inches in length. All the mussels were marked for future reference and research.

**The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project** implements voluntary, incentive-based conservation actions for the benefit of at-risk and common species. Sustainable biodiversity conservation over the long term requires habitat improvement, research and evaluation, and communication and education. The Legacy Project addresses these components through an effective structure of partnerships and by securing funding from external sources. Ground-level habitat improvements are focused primarily in Biologically Unique Landscapes (BUL), which contain relatively intact habitat and higher concentrations of declining species. The most common actions to enhance and restore habitat include invasive species removal, re-introducing natural disturbance such as prescribed fire and modifying existing management tools such as grazing. Over the last three years, thanks to the Nebraska Environmental Trust and State Wildlife Grant Funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 159,345 acres were enhanced (97 percent private land), 1,138 landowners were engaged in projects and ultimately habitat was improved for 89 at-risk species.

**Bighorn sheep conservation and new record ram -** December marked the completion of the 35th year of bighorn sheep management and conservation in Nebraska. It also marked a year when a state record-breaking ram scored 190 5/8. Since the reintroduction of bighorn sheep back to Nebraska in 1981, 21 bighorns have been harvested with 100 percent success. Nebraska’s bighorn sheep management program includes reintroducing bighorns back to their native lands and establishing a self-sustaining, viable population. Along with support from several conservation groups, five introductions of bighorns have occurred, with each herd establishing itself in a different location. Bighorn sheep remain one of Nebraska’s most popular species yet remain an At-Risk species in the state. Approximately 320 sheep live in the Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills escarpments of western Nebraska, providing viewing, photography, hunting and educational opportunities.

**The Nebraska Conservation Roundtable** helps the conservation community become a more cohesive voice, create dialogue and foster collaboration, serve as a resource for policy makers and provide solutions for issues impacting Nebraska’s fish and wildlife habitat. The Roundtable, with representatives from approximately two dozen organizations, has identified the primary issues facing fish, wildlife and habitat conservation in Nebraska that will require a collective and collaborative effort. The Roundtable completed a report on the scope of the eastern red cedar invasion which has assisted in securing grants and aligning conservation partners, and was shared with state senators in 2017.

**Record breaking Elk -** 2016 saw the harvest of a new state-record elk. It is not only the new non-typical record for Nebraska, but also ranks 16th in the all-time world records maintained by the Boone and Crockett Club. The bull, harvested in September near Crawford, was officially scored at 430 6/8.

**Celebrating CRP’s 30th Anniversary -** In August, Farm Service Agency Administrator Val Dolcini addressed a group of conservation partners, landowners, media and Congressional representatives near Valparaiso to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This event, co-hosted by Game and Parks, celebrated the many accomplishments of CRP - the most successful federal conservation program in the USDA’s history. The nearly 800,000 acres enrolled in Nebraska provide vital nesting for grassland birds, control erosion on highly erodible land, and improve water quality. CRP also offers abundant opportunities for hunters pursuing pheasants, quail, deer and turkey.

**R3 -** Game and Parks is a proud leader of the R3 Task Force, which has a goal of recruitment, retention and reactivation of hunters and shooting sports enthusiasts. The task force includes representatives of governmental and non-governmental wildlife resource organizations, industry partners and other stakeholders. In 2016, the task force developed a plan to increase participation in hunting and shooting sports. In Nebraska, a state R3 coordinator was hired by the National Wild Turkey Federation in partnership with Game and Parks. The coordinator’s goals are to collaborate on R3 efforts in Nebraska and expand recruitment via new and existing programs.

**More Opportunities for Special Youth Pheasant Hunts -** Game and Parks expanded opportunities for youth to hunt pheasants in 2016. An additional four wildlife management areas (WMA) were added to the list of sites participating in the special youth pheasant hunts, bringing the total to 14 WMAs. In its sixth year, the hunts remain popular with youth participants and their mentors, and provide an opportunity for new and novice hunters to see and have an opportunity to harvest pheasants. At each participating site, hundreds of rooster pheasants are released the day before the youth hunting season opens. The hunts were a success, as youth participation increased 33 percent and harvest increased 55 percent compared to 2015.

**Modernizing Hunter Education** - In 2015, changes to hunter education made the program more convenient to new hunters and easier to obtain certification. The new options increased the number of students certified from 8,000 to 9,000 annually. Changes included adding an online course as an option and replacing the field day with a two-hour Hunt Safe Session for some students who complete the online course. Another change in 2016 provided for an online combined firearm/bowhunter education course. Nebraska still offers the traditional classroom course, which is still popular with many students.

**The Nebraska Game and Parks Outdoor Education Center**, opened in 2014, has found a unique niche in developing new hunters and shooters. In 2016, the center greatly expanded its day camps and programs for youth archery. The support from the public has resulted in the doubling of revenue from 2015 to 2016. The facility has also offered novice shooting programs to adult women, which have become extremely popular. In 2016, Game and Parks hosted the first Director’s Cup Archery Tournament. Developed in cooperation with Game and Parks Director Jim Douglas, Cabela’s and archery clubs, the tournament was a new twist on reaching out to experienced and novice archers and will be held again in 2017. The facility, which plans to expand education programming, has served more than 33,000 customers since opening.

**Outreach to underserved audiences in outdoor recreation** is important to Game and Parks:

* A Spanish Hunter Education Class was held at the Nebraska Outdoor Education Center in September. The class reached Spanish speaking customers, removing the language barrier to begin hunting. The class was a success; we want to expand partnerships with this community.
* In August, Fisheries Division staff delivered a presentation to Omaha’s Lutheran Family Services Cultural Orientation class for refugees who have recently arrived in the United States. More than 50 adults and 13 children attended the presentation, and seven interpreters translated the presentation in the following languages: Arabic, Burmese, Dari, Karen, Karenni, Nepali, Somali and Swahili. The presentation covered an introduction to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska’s fishing regulations, fishing opportunities in the Omaha metro, and where to find fishing and hunting information online and in print.
* For the fifth year, a special family camp for families who are deaf or hard of hearing was held at Platte River State Park. The 22 children and 19 adults in attendance experienced fishing, kayaking, camp cooking, archery, trap shooting, horse trail rides, and other activities.

**Aquatic Education Program reaches thousands -** Each year, Game and Parks provides newcomers and novices the opportunity to learn and spend some time fishing. In 2016, the agency hosted 27 Family Fishing events, in which equipment, bait and instruction were provided. Other opportunities included Carp-O-Rama carp fishing events and ice-fishing workshops. In all, more than 200 activities were hosted by Youth Fishing Program volunteers, reaching nearly 18,000 Nebraskans. Two classroom aquatic programs continued to expand. Trout in the Classroom allowed 2,400 students to hatch and raise rainbow trout, thus learning about aquatic ecosystems, water quality, aquatic life cycles, Nebraska fish species and recreational fishing. The Fishing in Nebraska Schools program gave 2,500 students the chance to learn basic fishing skills, including equipment, techniques, fish identification and life history. Students also became familiar with the role of the agency in protecting and managing the state’s aquatic resources.

**Parks are gateways for outdoor education and recreation -** Parks across the state have responded to visitor expectations of providing memorable experiences by offering a variety of new programming opportunities. In addition to the naturalists and outdoor education specialists already working throughout the state, Game and Parks added new seasonal naturalist positions at Fremont Lakes State Recreation Area (SRA), Lake McConaughy SRA, and Fort Kearny State Historical Park (SHP). This resulted in in 90 new programs attended by more than 6,000 people in 16 park areas. October, now one of the busiest months of the year for parks, provides visitors with opportunities including birding walks and nature journaling at Lake McConaughy SRA. Red Willow SRA held a kids essay contest after a series of family fishing nights in the summer, wherein the first prize winner received a kayak donated by a sponsor.

**Venture Parks moving forward** - In an effort to provide more types of park experiences, work is underway on the first phase of the Venture Park complex including Eugene T. Mahoney State Park (SP), Platte River SP, Louisville State Recreation Area (SRA) and Schramm Park SRA. These parks will provide different and new experiences for visitors, expanding educational opportunities and creating adventures around every corner. The Venture Park complex is a $35.5 million project, with the majority of funding coming from private donors and foundations. The key elements of the first phase will include a state-of-the-art Aquatic and Nature Interactive Exploration Center, water features, new and unique lodging opportunities, indoor climbing features, all-season tubing and sledding, and canoe/kayaking access points. Other elements of the phase are biking and hiking trails, natural playgrounds and climbing features, floating playground, naturalist programming, and infrastructure improvements.

Platte River SP’s Jenny Newman Lake has received a number of improvements. A new water control structure, accessible fishing piers and a boat ramp were installed. An interpretive stream was created and flows through a series of shallow ponds in which children can play as they discover the biology riparian and pond environments have to offer, and provide for “hands wet” naturalist programs and educational opportunities for all ages.

**Future of Lake McConaughy and Lake Ogallala taking shape -** Lake McConaughy and Lake Ogallala state recreation areas are two of Nebraska’s most popular areas. With more than 100 miles of shoreline and 40,000 acres of land and water, they provide tremendous recreational value. Game and Parks approved the Lake McConaughy/Lake Ogallala Master Plan in October of 2016. The 20-year plan guides the agency on the development of the lakes and addresses current and future management issues and operational challenges. The plan will conserve the natural resources of the lakes and provide high-quality recreational experiences. A local advisory committee assisted in creating 10 goals for the future of the lakes. Public input was sought through a series of meetings, along with meetings with Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District who own the lakes, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who are interested in the protection of the threatened and endangered species that nest at the lakes.

**Wildcat Hills Nature Center Expansion/Renovation and Shooting Facility -** A substantial addition and improvements were made to the Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area (SRA) Nature Center. The Nature Center will house the main office, expanded meeting facilities, classrooms and interpretive exhibits. The renovated Nature Center will open in the spring of 2017. The new shooting facility at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area opened in the late summer, providing a modern, safe environment for shooting sports enthusiasts that includes rimfire rifles, high-powered rifles, shotguns, pistols, air rifles and archery. The range is popular with hunters sighting in rifles, parents teaching children the safe use of firearms, and first-time shooters.

**Best turkey hunting destination in the nation -** Nebraska offers an amazing turkey hunting experience with plentiful permits, long seasons, great public access and $5 permits for youth. Turkeys can be found in every county of the state, and hunters will find good turkey opportunities on more than 500,000 acres of public and public-access land in Nebraska. Additionally, Nebraska is the easternmost state with large populations of highly sought after Merriam’s turkeys. Nonresident turkey hunters continue to increased, as does our reputation as a turkey hunting destination.

**The Nebraska Waterfowl Zones Application** was developed by Game and Parks to help waterfowl hunters. This new computer- and mobile-friendly GIS application allows hunters to quickly retrieve information related to a particular zone. The interactive zone maps portray those as seen in the Nebraska Waterfowl Guide. Users can zoom in to view boundary roads, search for a location, and click or tap on a zone of interest to retrieve the zone information (season dates, shooting hours, bag and possession limits, etc). When used on a mobile device with a cellular connection, the auto locate button can zoom to the users location within the application.

**Automated Reminder Emails -**We live in a changing world where customers expect ease and convenience when it comes to making purchases big and small. In 2016, Game and Parks worked with email vendor GovDelivery to remind customers when it’s time to purchase a new permit. GovDelivery is able to look at when customers purchased permits during the preceding year, and automatically send them an email reminding them to purchase that same permit at the same time the following year. This program also automatically sends customers links to guides, public access locations and more after purchasing. In 2016, Game and Parks began offering automated reminders for fishing permit buyers. In the coming years, the program will be expanded to hunting permits and park permits.

**Missouri River Outdoor Recreation Guide** - The Missouri River flows approximately 400 miles along Nebraska’s eastern border, with approximately 160 public access sites along the river. Game and Parks created the Missouri River Outdoor Recreation Guide, a user-friendly GIS map that provides information on all recreational opportunities along the river. It can be used as a safety and navigational tool for boating including river segment descriptions, river mile markers, and proximity to boat ramps and cities. It provides information and photographs on fishing opportunities, hunting access sites, wildlife viewing areas, camping and other recreational activities along the river. Each of the 9 segments has a description that includes depth, unique qualities, hazards, recreational information and other information for the public. This project was recognized at the 2016 Environmental Systems Research Institute conference and won first place in the Story Map contest for Best Travel, Destinations and Recreation category. This guide is a web-based application that can be used on a computer or a mobile device.