

**NEBRASKA STATE REPORT**  
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**Take 'Em Fishing** – We rolled out a new campaign in spring of 2019 challenging anglers to take someone new fishing. Our goal is to get more people participating in fishing and to engage our anglers to help make this happen. Whether it's a grandchild, child, spouse, neighbor, colleague or friend, we challenge anglers to share their passion with someone they care about. It doesn't matter if they've never fished before, or if they've just fallen out of the habit. First, anglers take our pledge to show their commitment to taking someone fishing this year and helping keep the sport of fishing alive and well in Nebraska. Those who take the pledge can receive a pin or sticker. When they introduce – or reintroduce – someone new to fishing, they snap a photo and fill out the online form. By taking someone new fishing they will be registered to win great prizes, including a fishing kayak, gift cards to outdoor retailers, guided fishing trips and other outdoor gear that we'll be drawing for all summer long. The grand prize, a Bass Tracker Classic fishing boat, will be drawn in September. See more at <http://OutdoorNebraska.gov/TakeEmFishing/>.

**The Nebraska Upland Slam-** In 2018, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, along with Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever, introduced an exciting new challenge for upland bird hunters – the Nebraska Upland Slam. The Upland Slam challenges hunters to harvest a sharp-tailed grouse, a greater prairie-chicken, a ring-necked pheasant and a northern bobwhite in Nebraska. Hunters enter each harvest via an app (available at [OutdoorNebraska.org/UplandSlam](http://OutdoorNebraska.org/UplandSlam)). Those who successfully complete the Upland Slam receive a certificate and pin, are recognized online and in *Nebraskaland Magazine*, and are entered into a drawing to win one of several prizes sponsored by Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever. The Upland Slam was implemented to improve upland game hunter recruitment/retention and to showcase Nebraska's excellent mixed-bag hunting opportunities. The Upland Slam also highlights the length of Nebraska's upland game seasons and promotes hunting in different regions of the state. More than 250 hunters ranging in age from 13 to 75 years from 14 different states participated. and 140 hunters from 10 states (121 from Nebraska) completed the Upland Slam.

**Pheasant Research** – Based upon research started in 2012 and in conjunction with the agencies Pheasant Plan (Berrgren Plan for Pheasants), we are embarking on research to understand the relationship between pheasant abundance and the amount of suitable habitat in a surrounding landscape. We are especially interested if there are thresholds of suitable habitat in the landscape that result in more than a linear effect (eg. exponential effects) on the pheasant population.

Pheasant genetic research was started in 2016, leading to interesting information indicating pheasants sampled in Nebraska and South Dakota are derived from 2 distinct ancestral lineages – one from northern Eurasia and one from eastern China. More wild pheasants in both NE and SD descend from eastern China compared to northcentral Asia at a 3:1 ratio. We plan to further explore the distribution of pheasants to further our understanding of genetic differences between wild and pen-reared pheasants, to attempt to determine whether a specific genetic stock of pheasants (especially male pheasants) would be better suited to survive in the wild.

We also have begun and will continue research to explore the impact (positive or negative) of pen-reared pheasants on wild populations. With the number of pheasants being released by Controlled Shooting Areas (CSA's), we want to determine what impacts released birds may be having on wild pheasant populations and if there are recommendations that could be made to CSA's that could benefit wild pheasants.

**Flooding Impacts** – Commission properties including Wildlife Management Areas including 3 office and shop locations, 18 Park areas, 3 Trails (including multiple bridges), Angler and Boating access facilities on at least 12 locations (Missouri River access sites south of I80 still underwater), and 2 Fish Hatcheries sustained damage this spring from the “bomb cyclone” and associated flooding that led to a disaster declaration for much of the state. Extensive damage to county roads, state highways, and bridges is creating challenges for staff and the public to get to properties. We estimate the financial impact of the flood at \$7-\$10 M, with a \$3 -\$4 M impact on the Fish and Wildlife side of the agency and \$4-\$6 M impact on State Parks and Trails.

**Mule Deer Research in Nebraska-** Working with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), NGPC began a multi-year study aiming to better understand mule deer populations in Southwest Nebraska. Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) populations throughout the western states have been declining since the 1990's, causing concern for many state wildlife agencies. In Nebraska, declining harvest trends, challenges associated with hunting permit allocations, and inquiries from the public regarding declining mule deer numbers have underscored the need to look into this issue further. Areas of particular concern for NGPC and the public include southwest, northwest and central Nebraska, where several deer management units with historically large numbers of mule deer have showed a decrease in harvest trends over the last five years. Through this study, the Commission hopes to assess the factors contributing to these declines, primarily focusing on cause-specific mortality and habitat use. This year, UNL researchers successfully placed radio-collars on 59 adult mule deer does and 91 fawns. Currently, researchers are compiling and analyzing this year's data, as well as preparing for the upcoming winter capture season. Next year, the project will be expanded to include Northwest Nebraska, assessing the mule deer population in the Pine Ridge.

**Mountain Lion Season** The Commission approved Nebraska's second harvest season for mountain lions during January – March 2019 in the Pine Ridge Unit (northwest Nebraska). Population estimates for the Pine Ridge increased from 22 in 2014 – when the inaugural season was held – to 59 during the most recent genetic survey in 2017. Up to 8 mountain lions could have been harvested, with a limit of 4 lions and a sublimit of 2 females in 2 hunting units. Five mountain lions were harvested during the 2019 season (4 males, 2 females). In June of 2019, The Commission will be considering approval of a similar mountain lion season for 2020.

**R3 Task Force-**The Nebraska R3 Task Force continues to be a partnership effort that has brought many NGOs and industry partners together with the Commission to focus efforts on R3 needs in Nebraska. The Task Force has provided support to the mentoring video campaign, a large scale data mining effort with UNL to better understand our customer permit purchasing, developed a new series of web pages devoted to mentored hunting/shooting sports for all R3 partners, a collegiate outreach program at UNL, and an effort to provide consistent standards and methods to evaluate all Nebraska R3 programs. In 2018 the Task Force began making changes to the overall group structure to involve more potential partners in R3 efforts in 2019. The changes resulted in development of an R3 Executive Committee for Nebraska that will work to develop a larger R3 Task Force that will meet twice annually on R3 issues in Nebraska.

**Collegiate Sportsperson's Council-** In the fall of 2018, the R3 team developed the CSC which is a group of high school and collegiate hunters that represent the more active hunters in their age cohort to help advise the Commission on R3 actions as well as barriers their age groups faces when hunting, fishing or participating in shooting sports. The group met in the fall of 2018 and already has begun to address several key barriers and opportunities to participation.

**R3 Communications Coordinator-** The Commission entered into agreement with Pheasants Forever to develop a new shared position through PF that will work to develop communication efforts for R3 needs in Nebraska, as well as help tell the conservation story in Nebraska amongst our collective partners. The new PF position, in cooperation with a R3 Coordinator position brought on in 2016 with the National Wild Turkey Federation, will continue Nebraska's innovative efforts to support increasing hunter/angler numbers as well as support shooting sports.

**Collegiate Hunters of Nebraska-** This new outreach effort is developing a communication strategy with college students to address support needs for this cohort. Based upon input from two focus groups, new efforts have resulted in a video campaign targeting University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) students to help them understand how easy it is to continue hunting while in college and a new hunting equipment checkout program with UNL Campus Recreation.

**R3 Summit-** More than 325 individuals, including representatives from 40 state fish and wildlife agencies and a number of non-profit and industry partners, met for the first National R3 Symposium in Lincoln. The symposium provided a venue for partners to share the most current data on participation and the effectiveness of R3 efforts, and sessions focused on the tactics that are proving successful in providing experiences that don't just introduce people to hunting and shooting but offer a series of learning opportunities that keep them active and engaged. On the second day of the symposium, the Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports (CAHSS), Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Archery Trade Association, National Shooting Sports Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed a Memorandum of Understanding signaling their commitment to work together on R3 efforts.

**Commission Customer Data Mining Effort-** The Commission continues work with UNL on a data mining effort to better understand the purchasing desires of our customers, where we are seeing growth and potential opportunity and where we are seeing concern in purchase changes.

From this data, a new Nebraska R3 Plan will be developed as well as being used to analyze potential changes in permitting the agency may want to consider to help meet our R3 goals.

**Expanding public access for hunting and fishing-** Nebraska currently supports over one million acres of federal, state, conservation-partner-owned and private land open to public hunting, trapping and fishing. Nebraska's land-base is over 97% privately-owned and increasing access to private lands continues to be one of the agency's primary objectives (as outlined within our "R3" plan). The Open Fields and Waters Program (OFW) provides incentives to private landowners willing to allow walk-in hunting, trapping and/or fishing and represents the agency's primary mechanism to accomplish this objective. This year (2018-2019 hunting seasons), over 317,000 acres of private lands were enrolled in OFW, which represents an all-time record for the program (23% increase from 2017-2018, and a 36% increase from 2016-17). In recent years, new OFW enrollments have been targeted within pheasant priority areas identified in the Berggren Plan to increase upland game hunting opportunities. Since the Plan was initiated (spring 2016), public access opportunities have increased by 83% within these priority areas. During the 2018-19 season we also targeted additional grouse hunting opportunities (to further increase the chances of hunters being able to complete the Upland Slam on public land), expanded upon our Canyons Access Initiative and the deer and turkey opportunities it provides, while seeking out additional Northern Bobwhite opportunities as well during a time of high quail populations. Many of our conservation partners contribute to access opportunities in Nebraska

**Proposed changes to Nebraska's state threatened and endangered species lists -**The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has the statutory responsibility of administering Nebraska's Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act. Revisions to the list of endangered and threatened species were last completed in 2000. The current revision proposes removal of the North American River Otter from Nebraska's threatened list following successful reintroduction and conservation efforts for that species over the last 15 years. The revision proposes the addition of two species to Nebraska's endangered list: Sicklefin Chub and Western Silvery Minnow; and recommends that four species be added to our state threatened list: McCown's Longspur, Timber Rattlesnake, Flathead Chub, and Plains Minnow. Detailed information for each species, including peer-reviewed listing proposals, response to peer review, outlines of potential impacts, and scheduled public hearings, are available on the agency website.

**Pheasant Plan Efforts Continue-** This is the third year of NGPC's Berggren Plan – a five-year initiative aimed at improving the pheasant hunting experience in the state of Nebraska. In 2018, NGPC staff positively impacted over 20,284 acres of habitat within the priority areas. As in recent years, most efforts in 2018 centered around the establishment and management of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) tracts (more than 13,500 acres). Management of existing grasslands through the use of prescribed fire (>5,000 acres) and tree removal (>600 acres) also continued to be a priority in several of the priority areas. Additional habitat work by other agency programs and conservation partners complements this effort. The Berggren Plan provides a nexus for improving habitat for upland gamebirds, flexible and profitable options for landowners, and great upland game hunting opportunities for our hunters.

**Managing Grasslands for Prairie Grouse: stemming the tide of eastern red cedar invasion-** Starting in 2015, the Commission has been using Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) funds to incentivize eastern redcedar removal, grazing management and prescribed fire across the eastern Sandhills and several of our Biologically Unique Landscapes identified within the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. The goals of these projects are to battle cedar encroachment, improve habitat for our prairie grouse species (greater prairie-chicken and sharp-tailed grouse), and improve grazing conditions for ranchers. Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sandhills Task Force, Pheasants Forever, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, private landowners and other partners as well, our staff has successfully implemented cedar removal on tens of thousands of acres, mostly at low cedar density where costs per acre are very low. This has been done on large blocks of land across multiple ownerships, treating at a landscape scale – which is essential to achieve the goals of the projects. The project has built upon previous strengths in our partnerships with those involved and has led to many other benefits. The use of prescribed fire in the Sandhills was once quite limited. This program and the partners involved are increasing acceptance and utilization of fire. It has also led to a Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) focus area through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which specifically dedicated funding from EQIP to the area for practices that are beneficial to prairie grouse.

**New Hatchery Building for Mussel Propagation-** A new building was constructed at the North Platte Hatchery to facilitate propagating and raising freshwater mussels and other aquatic species of concern. This will allow the Agency to augment and re-establish these species in areas where they have been historically established. Efforts like this may prevent additional species from being listed as threatened or endangered in the future. The building and equipment was funded through a State Wildlife Grant and an NET grant.

**Family fishing nights/bilingual fishing nights added (Vamos a Pescar)-** Our first year as a Vamos a Pescar grant recipient was very successful and the program will be expanded in 2019. Over 1200 individuals were reached, through 10 fishing events where equipment and bait as well as instruction in English and Spanish was given. Recreational boating was provided at a special event, Fishing Fiesta, which commemorated Latino Conservation Week. 17 informational sessions about enjoying the outdoors in Nebraska were also given in the Lincoln and Omaha metro areas. Through social media and other promotional campaigns, over 90 posts were made on a variety of pages. The connections with the Latino/immigrant communities was our most significant accomplishment.

**Cabela's end-cap beginning fishing supplies program-** In an attempt to help new anglers, Cabela's and Nebraska Game and Parks teamed up on the New Angler Experience Pilot for the spring and summer of 2018. Five endcap displays were created with new anglers in mind. These endcaps contained affordable quality fishing gear, educational graphics, and informational brochures and activity suggestions. A team of Cabela's and NGPC staff designed the endcaps and the customer care of new anglers. Family Fishing Event participants interested in acquiring fishing equipment were encouraged to visit the Cabela's LaVista store with a coupon for a free tackle box during Lincoln and Omaha area events. One hundred tackle boxes were given to those visiting the LaVista Cabela's, which meant that 24% of those receiving coupons at Family Fishing Events ultimately visited the store and display.

**What is the value of a Nebraska Conservation Officer?**- A 10 year average shows that a single conservation officer will contact 1,065 fishermen, 545 hunters, 28 fur harvesters, 2,606 park patrons, 528 boaters, and another 2,311 miscellaneous individuals in addition to giving 30 community based programs each year. Conservation officers are highly mobile and on average are responsible for covering over 1,700 square miles of the State. Assigned patrol areas vary greatly across the state: the largest patrol area encompasses a land mass larger than the state of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, while the smallest area has over a half million people. These varying patrol areas present challenges to addressing complaints in a timely manner and establishing an enforcement presence in remote areas. On average, Conservation Officers drive over 1.5 million miles every year in the performance of their duties, illustrated by the Division's top two operating expenditures: fuel costs (23%) and vehicle purchases (22%).

**Agency strategic plan: Focus on the Future- A vision for tomorrow** - To meet the mission of "being stewards of the state's fish, wildlife, park and outdoor recreation resources in the best long-term interests of the people and those resources," a strategic plan, entitled "Focus on the Future" was completed for 2018-2022. The plan outlines the agency's core values and provides the guiding principles to meet public needs, while addressing key challenges regarding the natural resources managed by the agency. Goals, strategies, strategic directions and desired outcomes are identified for seven major pillars of the agency. These goals deal with policy, preservation of the natural resources, management of the outdoor recreation opportunities, cultivation of public understanding of the natural and cultural resources and investment in professional development of staff. Activities undertaken by the agency will put the natural resources above short-term interests and ensure work is done with excellence, using the best scientific knowledge and management practices, while maintaining fiscal responsibility. This is a roadmap towards the future to ensure Time Outdoors is Time Well Spent.

**Using technology to reach stakeholders.** In 2018, social media – particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube – played a big role. We used these channels to share information about hunting seasons, fishing opportunities, outdoor tutorials, park events, wildlife viewing opportunities, photography tips, and updates to regulations and orders. Video, especially, proved to be a valuable tool. We introduced many of our new Venture Parks features through videos and produced video tours of some of our most popular state parks. In 2018, Game and Parks also reached customers through video livestreams. We hosted several Facebook Live events in which the public could ask biologists questions about fishing and other activities. We also live-streamed a big game meeting on YouTube, so hunters and landowners who wanted to attend but couldn't make the drive had the opportunity to ask questions of our big game managers. We also reached out to customers with more traditional means through public meetings, hundreds of news releases and workshops, day camps and other events. These activities and our online presence, allowed us to reach thousands of Nebraskans in 2018:

- Outdoor Discovery Programs: 5,478
- Hunter Education: more than 9,000
- Missouri River and Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo's: 43,000
- Facebook: 106,000
- National Archery in the Schools Program: 35,000
- Instagram: 18,000
- Twitter: 23,000