

**SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT
2020**

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Pierre, SD 57501**

Covid-19 Responses and Impacts: Law Enforcement Program – As with many law enforcement agencies across the country, SD Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) conservation officers and park rangers have also been challenged to effectively conduct compliance checks and other routine law enforcement public contacts while adhering to CDC guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our Agency’s initial COVID-19 response efforts were to ensure all law enforcement staff had access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and to direct these staff to limit their ‘general patrol’ activities in early March 2020. By late-March, law enforcement staff were directed to resume regular patrol activities and to effectively ‘social distance’ during their contacts. Staff were also encouraged to use sound judgement while approaching various law enforcement situations in order to protect their health and that of the public. Officers were discouraged from riding ‘tandem’ in vehicles to reduce potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus and several changes were made to field training program protocols for these same reasons. Some scheduled annual and semi-annual law enforcement training in firearms, defensive tactics and law enforcement scenarios were rescheduled to late spring and then modified to ensure staff safety. Due to the impact of the pandemic, members of the public continue to exhibit a strong desire to ‘get outdoors’, so fishing license sales and campground reservations have increased substantially this spring.

Covid-19 Responses and Impacts: Habitat Program – Initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had all staff working remotely and only able to complete electronic tasks. The timing of this meant habitat staff lost 1-2 weeks of prep and field time which put them behind schedule. After making allowances for staff to conduct limited field work most crews were able to catch up on priority projects. However, some direct impacts listed below included:

- the cancellation of prescribed fires on nearly 6,000 acres of public property; much of the prep work for these burns had already been completed and will need to be started over if they are to be done next year
- a large reduction in temporary staff which will reduce capabilities over the summer, particularly in noxious weed control
- a reduction in the number and potential quality of food plots on public land
- the cancellation of grassland restoration projects that were scheduled for completion after prescribed fires
- the cancellation of education projects with local schools and youth groups, including “Pollinator Days” and other cooperative projects

Staff have found innovative ways to work with private landowners to deliver seed, sign contracts, and complete other private lands projects.

Covid-19 Responses and Impacts: Fisheries Program – The department response to COVID-19 began on March 13, 2020. Because most fisheries field work involves two or more people working in close proximity, fisheries field work and hatchery stockings were suspended at that time. In late March, fish spawning activities for walleye and yellow perch were canceled for the year. Stocking of trout from GFP hatcheries had to resume, on a limited basis, due to loading concerns and fish mortalities beginning to occur. General field work and stocking activities have since resumed for activities where social distancing and PPE can be utilized to conform with work directives. The biggest impacts to fisheries management related to COVID-19 is the lack of walleye and yellow perch stockings this year and reduced trap-and-transfer stockings to support urban fisheries. However, high water conditions and stable weather set the stage for successful natural production and many fish populations were in good shape in 2019, so impacts to fishery quality should be minimal. In-person creel surveys were canceled though some fishing pressure information will be gathered remotely. Watercraft inspection and decontamination stations will be operated using modified protocols for public interaction and use of PPE.

Covid-19 Responses and Impacts: Wildlife Damage Management Program – With the arrival of COVID-19 in early March, wildlife damage specialist field staff were advised to continue providing these focused services to producers while being mindful of social distancing requirements during the early stages of the pandemic. Because these staff normally work alone and have limited daily public contact, staff were well able to continue their focus on predator control activities despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Historic high-water levels across much of the state have also caused an increase in beaver damage complaints and we expect high water will again require staff to address soybean producer damage caused by a healthy resident Canada goose population. Although ongoing budget challenges have somewhat limited our ability to hire seasonal and intern staff across our agency, the wildlife damage program was authorized to fill at least a portion of the seasonal and intern staff positions necessary to meet our needs to assist producers.

Covid-19 Responses and Impacts: Education Program – All in-person education programs have been postponed until further notice. To continue to meet the needs of community outreach and education, Parks and Wildlife staff have shifted their programming to digital formats.

- Social media “how to” videos, online printable conservation lesson plans, and video conferencing interviews and presentations have been the primary focus of education efforts for the months of April and May.
- State parks have remained open and have offered many self-guided activities for visitors including scavenger hunts, fitness challenges, and virtual park tours for those still at home.
- The field day requirement has been waived for all HuntSAFE students at this time, allowing individuals ages 12+ to become HuntSAFE certified using the all-online course alone. The online class fee has been waived until in-person classes can be scheduled again.

Education staff are currently engaged in discussions for how to potentially hold in person classes in the future while maintaining social distance and taking appropriate precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Covid-19 Response and Impacts: Parks - State parks and recreation areas were able to stay open during most of the pandemic. Operations were closed for roughly two weeks in March, but fortunately very little activity takes place at this time. Operations resumed shortly after April 1, with camping and cabin rentals available to the public. Comfort stations and fish cleaning stations remained winterized through mid-May but were brought online for Open House Weekend on May 15. Visitor numbers have been extremely strong through April and May, and park entrance licenses were reinstated on May 18 after a grace period was implemented mid-March. Reservations appear to be strong through July, and we are looking forward to providing a safe outdoor opportunity for our customers.

Habitat Stamp – During the 2020 legislative session a bill was passed and signed by Governor Noem that requires a person eighteen years of age or older to purchase a habitat stamp when applying for or purchasing a hunting, trapping or fishing license in South Dakota. The fee for the habitat stamp was set at ten dollars for residents and twenty-five dollars for nonresidents. Exemptions to purchase a habitat stamp were made for the one-day hunting or fishing license, youth hunting licenses, private shooting preserve license, hunt for habitat application fee, and landowner own-land hunting license. All revenue collected from the sale of the habitat stamp must be used for enhancing terrestrial habitat on public lands, providing additional public access to private lands and aquatic habitat enhancements on public waters. Fees collected from persons who only purchase fishing licenses shall be used solely for aquatic habitat and access projects in public waters and fees collected from persons who only purchase hunting or trapping licenses shall be used solely for terrestrial habitat and public access programs. Fees collected from persons that purchase privileges to fish and hunt, or trap must be split equally for aquatic and terrestrial habitat. The legislation also stated that proceeds from the habitat stamp fee collected may not be used to purchase property in fee title. Revenue projections from the new fee should exceed 5 million dollars.

R3 Plan: Participation and Commission involvement – Through monthly meetings of the GFP R3 Work Group, comprised of department staff and members of the GFP Commission, the department has developed the framework for a state R3 plan. The work group considered hunting license data, the R3 achievements of the previous Education Plan, identified current and future needs of the department, and involved all sections of staff for input and suggestions for ways to improve the efficacy of department R3 strategies. The plan includes action items for recruitment, retention, and reactivation in the areas of hunting, shooting sports, aquatic education, conservation, and outdoor skills development. Once finalized and adopted by the commission, the R3 Work Group hopes to host partner summits to discuss how South Dakota can move forward with R3 efforts as a collective whole. Several initiatives are occurring parallel to the development of the R3 Plan and are resulting in greater R3 momentum in the state. The development of a pheasant hunting strategic marketing plan in partnership with SD Department of Tourism, and the potential adoption of the “3-Splash” 2-tiered waterfowl license option have the potential to dramatically increase participation in small game and waterfowl hunting opportunities in the state of South Dakota over the next 3-5 years.

Watertown Shooting Range – In 2019, GFP partnered with the city of Watertown to help build a public gun range. The partnership and agreement were unique in that the GFP not only helped with engineering resources, staff expertise and Pittman Robertson matching dollars, but were also able to work out an operational plan that placed the gun range in the city limits. The gun

range is free to the public and is open on a weekly basis- no easy feat for a town of 25,000 people. The range offers (2) pistol bays that allow (6) shooters per bay, (2) 100 yard bays that allow (10) shooters per bay, (2) 50 yard benches with the 100 yard bay, (1) 200 yard bay that allows (5) shooters and (1) 300 yard bay that allows (5) shooters. There is also a restroom provided along with benches, concrete walkways and each bay has a covering for shooters a dry shooting bench during periods of rain, snow and shade during sunny hot days. The response and participation from the public has been a resounding stream of positive feedback. It is not uncommon for shooters having to wait during peak times of the year as all the bays are full up with shooters. The city has been excellent to work with, they have taken ownership of the range as well as all daily operations.

2019 Walk-In Area Program for Hunter Access – Over 35,000 acres of private land not previously open to public hunting were added, bringing the total acres enrolled statewide in the Walk-In Area (WIA) program to 1.27 million acres providing public hunting access by 1,474 cooperators. GFP also leased private land for public hunting access through our Controlled Hunting Access Program (CHAP) which provides additional flexibility for the landowner and more control of the number of hunters using the area. Sixteen CHAP areas totaling 26,666 acres were enrolled statewide and provided 1489 hunters days of use.

Effort to Gain Access to Landlocked Parcels of Public Hunting Lands – There are just over 300,000 acres of landlocked public lands in South Dakota, primarily in the western half of the state. The Department's goal is to open or improve access to 50,000 acres of previously inaccessible public lands by 2020. As of May 2020, we've finalized agreements with 19 new private land cooperators signing a total of 27,730 acres of new Walk-In Access Areas which have unlocked 24,714 acres of formerly inaccessible public land parcels. In addition, discussions were initiated with the other public land management agencies affected (Office of SD School & Public Lands, US Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Service) towards achieving this shared goal of gaining public access to landlocked public lands. We have also gained support from the major conservation NGOs in South Dakota to potentially pool resources and work on any cooperative projects in the future where their help would be beneficial.

Waterfowl regulation experiment in the Central Flyway (3 Splash daily bag limit) – Current duck regulations are designed to maximize harvest potential and necessitate a complex system of species-specific regulations. Many experienced hunters support this approach but present a challenge for inexperienced hunters to comply with. The ability to identify ducks on the wing has been identified as a potential barrier to duck hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3). A regulatory system where all available duck hunting opportunity is afforded to those individuals that desire it but complemented by a less complex regulatory system that increases participation, would be ideal in meeting these dual objectives. A two-tier regulation system, where hunters indicate their preference for either maximum opportunity or easier regulations may provide a solution. Working cooperatively with the all flyways and the USFWS, a study design and evaluation plan has been developed and approved by the Service Regulations Committee (SRC). Beginning in the 2021-2022 duck hunting season South Dakota and Nebraska will implement and evaluate a pilot two-tier system of duck hunting regulations for a minimum of four years. In this system, duck hunters will register themselves under one of two different regulatory options, where one tier (Tier I) of hunters is afforded maximum hunting opportunity (i.e., current daily

bag limits with all species-specific daily bag restrictions) while the other tier (Tier II) is afforded simplified regulations (i.e. 3 splash daily bag limit).

External Review of WDM/ADC Programs – During Governor Noem’s campaign, constituents raised concerns over current programs and services as well as efficacy of program operations. These programs aid South Dakota landowners and producers with all types of wildlife damage and predator control needs. As a result, Governor Noem initiated an external review of GFP’s WDM/ADC program, which the Wildlife Management Institute completed in December 2019. At the conclusion of the review, WMI found that GFP provided some great services but needed to make some adjustments to make these services function better and engage stakeholders to help define clear, measurable program objectives. GFP created a work plan to initiate several immediate changes as well as developed several items that would take several months to complete. In February, GFP started providing a stronger focus on predator control activities which included enhancements in aerial predator control operations, new equipment for staff (thermal scopes and scanners), a pre-approved over-time package, additional staff, and separated some work duties for wildlife damage specialists. GFP will also develop an annual customer satisfaction survey to measure overall program success. Lastly, GFP is in the process of holding several statewide public forums to solicit feedback from producers, landowners and other stakeholders to help develop clear program objectives and ways to measure success of programs. These meetings have been delayed due to COVID-19 precautions.

Pheasant Population Status & Harvest – During the 2019–2020 pheasant hunting season, 47,403 resident and 63,801 non-resident hunters harvested an estimated 830,000 rooster pheasants. Total pheasant hunters decreased by 9.3% while total harvest decreased 13% from the previous year. The decline in hunters and harvest was expected given the 17% drop in the pre-season pheasant population index. Harvest averaged 1,285,000 during the previous ten years. Long term declines in hunters and harvest remains a concern.

CWD Status and Action Plan Implementation – Enhanced surveillance efforts from the 2019 deer and elk hunting seasons detected chronic wasting disease (CWD) in eight additional counties. CWD is now confirmed within Bennett, Butte, Corson, Custer, Fall River, Haakon, Harding, Jackson, Meade, Lawrence, Pennington and Tripp counties, all west of the Missouri River. Test results received on 1,956 samples indicate 57 white-tailed deer, 14 mule deer, and 18 elk were CWD positive. As a result, new priority areas will be targeted for surveillance for the 2020 hunting seasons. In addition, the GFP Commission has created regulations for the transportation and disposal of deer and elk carcasses from other states and from hunting units within South Dakota's known CWD endemic areas. The new regulations will go into effect for the 2020 hunting seasons. Additional information on CWD can be found at <https://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife-disease/>.

Hunt Safe in Schools – In order to increase HuntSAFE instructor recruitment and to meet the need for Hunter Education certification for students who currently struggle to make it to in-person classes, GFP developed the HuntSAFE in the Schools curriculum. Teachers can be trained as HuntSAFE instructors and offer the curriculum to students as part of their physical education or agricultural studies curriculum. HuntSAFE in the Schools is aligned with public school education standards and provides an excellent experiential education opportunity to learn safe firearm practices for students who are interested in hunting or may come across firearms in

the home or in a friend's home. No functional guns are used in the course and all materials are provided by GFP. After running the pilot program in 7 schools during the 2018-2019 school year and through community outreach directly to schools and school administrators, GFP has received great interest in the program. To date 40 teachers and 10 scholastic shooting sports coaches have been certified to teach HuntSAFE in the Schools, with many more interested teachers and coaches waiting to be trained. Those existing instructors have certified 281 students. To continue to grow the program GFP will be working directly with Department of Education to broadly advertise the instructor training opportunity and gain school district support for the program. Additionally, GFP will offer a summer Teacher Academy where teachers can participate in a free 1-stop-shop training in all programs GFP offers including: HuntSAFE in the Schools, National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP), Project Wild, and FISH SD.

Nest Predator Bounty Program – As part of Governor Noem's Second Century Initiative, GFP implemented the Nest Predator Bounty Program, again for 2020. The initial program was conducted in 2019, where more than 3,000 participants removed over 54,000 nest predators (at \$10 per tail), primarily in eastern South Dakota. This initial program ran from April 1 to August 12, 2019. The 2020 program offers a \$5 bounty for the tails of five primary nest predators (raccoon, striped skunk, opossum, red fox and badger) that are submitted at GFP offices. While the focus of this program is to enhance duck and pheasant nest survival by utilizing predator control (a management tool that has been used for decades in South Dakota), the program is also about engaging youth and others in the outdoors. Participants can learn about predators, trapping, obtaining landowner permission, habitat and how all the different components work together across the landscape. In the end, this program is building broader support for habitat and outdoor recreation by people across South Dakota and from a broader group of people than our traditional users. A 2019 survey conducted by Responsive Management, found that 82% of South Dakota residents supported the program. As of May 18, 2020, approximately \$43,000 has been paid out in bounty payments. The 2020 program runs from April 1 through July 1, or if a \$250,000 cap is reached.

ETHICS SD- Furbearer and Trapping Education - ETHICS SD is a comprehensive furbearer education program that is the result of collaboration between GFP, 4-H, the South Dakota Trappers Association, and the Western South Dakota Fur Harvesters. There are six 4-H clubs from around the state who participated in ETHICS SD as a pilot program from October 2019-April 2020. Classes met at least once a month to allow for students to harvest fur during prime fur season. The ETHICS acronym stands for Ecology, Trapping, History, Identification, Conservation, and Stewardship, which are all knowledge and skills emphasized throughout the class, along with the incredible sense of responsibility placed on trappers to ethically and humanely harvest wildlife. Once furs are harvested, students learn skills in fleshing, stretching, salting and drying furs to compete for \$1,000 in scholarships at next spring's South Dakota Trapper's Association youth division fur competition. Each 4-H group has approximately 10 student participants (ages 10-18), one 4-H advisor for classroom management and student development, and at least one trapping expert to assist with the class content. Parental and volunteer involvement has been key to the success of the program. The ETHICS SD program will be increasing in size to allow for twice the number of participants in 2020-2021.

Addition of Spring Creek and Roy Lake Resorts - Spring Creek and Roy Lake resorts have been long standing concession opportunities offered by the Department. Over the last several

years, both leases expired and prospectuses were offered. Neither opportunity generated interest at the appraised value and the department worked to negotiate a selling price for the possessory interest of each concession. The department took possession of the areas in early spring and began needed maintenance of the facilities, including the marina at Spring Creek. The marina was opened to boats on May 1 with occupancy at nearly 90%. In addition to the cabins and marina, Spring Creek provides the opportunity for a restaurant. After several prospectus offerings, a local entrepreneur expressed interest in operating the restaurant and a lease was negotiated. The business was able to open on Memorial weekend with positive reviews from customers. The opportunity to purchase the possessory interest in these two concessions provides the department with solutions to some less than desirable business situations. The department now has possession of the buildings that sit on state owned property and have the flexibility to create more reasonable public/private business opportunities.

Palisades State Park Expansion - Palisades is a small, 167-acre park located about 25 miles northeast of Sioux Falls near Garretson. Over 90,000 visitors each year are drawn to the park's quartzite rock formations along Split Rock Creek. The campground has more than a 98 percent occupancy rating and trails have seen an increasing number of users. With the increasing growth of the Sioux Falls metro area, these numbers are sure to keep growing as well. In the fall of 2018, the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation (SDPWF) purchased and donated 267.5 acres of adjoining property to Palisades State Park. This more than doubles the current acreage of the park, bringing the new total to 434.5 acres. Development of the property will follow a phased planning approach over the course of five years, with an estimated cost of \$8.3 million. Governor Noem and the Legislature have committed \$500,000 for development and habitat on the new land. The SDPWF has agreed to raise \$1.6 million in private funds to match the Governor's commitment. Beginning in 2020, portions of the new property will be planted into native grasses, pollinator plots and shelterbelts. Construction of the future entrance and campground road system is planned to begin in the fall of 2020 with the final construction anticipated in spring of 2025.

2019 Flooding Impacts - South Dakota Parks continue to deal with the ramifications of flooding events experienced in 2019. The impacts of these floods, and the subsequent financial burden created, will likely be felt over the next decade. The latest estimate submitted to FEMA identifies almost \$14 million in flood damage. This includes damage to dams, bridges, campgrounds and roads. GFP is still working through the FEMA process in hopes of identifying some funding to help with these repairs. Absent FEMA funding, the cost must be borne by license dollars and other federal funding sources. Governor Noem submitted a bill in the most recent legislative session that allows state reserve funds to be loaned to governmental entities for flood projects. Any FEMA dollars provided for these projects will go to offset the loan, with the balance being paid over a seven-year period at low interest. This creative funding program will allow projects to be completed in a timely manner while relieving the burden of funding these projects strictly with dedicated dollars. This process also allows scheduled preventative maintenance to continue by not requiring maintenance dollars to be allocated to flood repair efforts.