

**SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT
2021**

Kevin Robling, Secretary
South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
523 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, SD 57501

Law Enforcement Program—Hunting, fishing and camping trends from last year in our state have continued. Overall license sales have been on the incline with parks use and reservations for camping near or above all time highs. The new year brought about expanded COVID-19 vaccination efforts across the state. With that, our operating procedures have begun to normalize with training and meetings going back to face-to-face settings. In the fall of 2020, a newly formed Law Enforcement Section was developed and launched, which included the merger of all Parks (ranger) and Wildlife (conservation officer) law enforcement operating under one Section Chief. Planning and coordination of statewide efforts for the law enforcement section have continued into 2021 with coverage of Parks taking priority over the summer months and a shift of personnel from the Parks into the hunting and fishing realms planned for the fall seasons. There is much work to do with the merger of all law enforcement into one section, but the overarching goal is to form a unified team that will improve efficiencies across the board and ultimately provide a better service to the outdoor users of South Dakota.

Habitat and Access – To meet its fish and wildlife resource stewardship responsibilities, as well as provide opportunities for the public to use and enjoy these resources, GFP recognizes it must continue to partner with private landowners to restore, create, enhance, and protect fish and wildlife habitats while also providing the public with reasonable access to hunting and fishing opportunities. Habitat restoration, creation, enhancement, and conservation, along with public hunting and fishing access remain top priorities for GFP. With this also comes the need to provide the financial and human resources specifically dedicated to supporting and enhancing these efforts.

To help identify and achieve habitat and access goals GFP conducted broad agency-wide outreach with staff to solicit habitat and access ideas, and later convened an internal workgroup to consider these ideas and ultimately evaluate current private lands habitat and access programs to determine their effectiveness in meeting GFP terrestrial and aquatic habitat goals for private lands along with public expectations for hunting and fishing access opportunities.

Current funding for both public and private land habitat and access programs is primarily dependent upon hunting and fishing license fees and Pittman-Robertson/Dingle-Johnson funds, with occasional funding for specific projects from various outside grant and program sources. Revenue levels available for GFP habitat and access programs will of course change correspondingly with changes in the number of licensed hunters and anglers over time. With the number of licensed hunters and anglers changing over time the GFP workgroup is working to identify new revenue sources and innovative approaches to ensuring sustainable funding for priority habitat and access programs. Finally, effectively delivering GFP habitat and access programs requires identifying and quantifying delivery capacity needs, determining the most

efficient and effective approaches to meeting those needs, and identifying and securing the correct people to fill those needs.

Habitat Stamp – The habitat stamp requirement in South Dakota has been in place for a year as of July 1, 2021. Game, Fish and Parks Division of Wildlife staff have spent much of that time planning and beginning to implement spending plans associated with these funds. Staff are extremely excited at the prospects for habitat and access improvement that have been opened by the additional revenue. There are dozens of projects planned for 2021 and beyond.

Aquatics staff have been taking advantage of partnerships for dam repairs and access improvements. To date, projects finished include a new ramp and parking lot at Long Lake boat access, Fairfax Lake GPA spillway repair and road graveling, Murdo Dam spillway repair (Partners included City of Murdo, Jones County Conservation District, NRCS, local PF Chapter) and Belvidere Lake spillway repair (Partners included NRCS, Jackson County Conservation District, City of Belvidere, Ducks Unlimited, West River Water Development District). Currently, staff are in the scoping phase for two full lake restorations at Lake Alvin and Stockade Lake. There is also a large list of dam maintenance repairs scheduled for this summer along with numerous habitat and access improvements around the state.

Terrestrial Habitat crews focused their habitat stamp project efforts on the 285,000 acres of Game Production Areas (GPA) located across South Dakota. Many of the habitat improvements projects completed in 2020 were previously identified in the 2018 GPA assessment - an evaluation process undertaken to identify specific habitat and access improvement opportunities on GPAs. Completed projects included improved public access trails completed on seven GPAs; improved grazing management infrastructure on eight GPAs; establishing 881 acres of high diversity grassland nesting cover on 19 GPAs; developing a waterfowl hunting access trail at the Chip Allen GPA; completing a 14 acre buckthorn removal project to enhance an existing riparian woodland at the Gary Gulch GPA; enhancing 34 acres of mountain mahogany through hinging and pine removal at the Friendshuh Ranch GPA; enhancing 19 acres of oak forest through pine thinning and removal at the Badger GPA; and preparing seven new sites totaling 56 acres for tree and shrub plantings in spring 2021.

Rapid City Shooting Range – GFP is currently working to develop a firearm range in western South Dakota. This opportunity will serve as a free public rifle, shotgun, and handgun range within a 30-minute driving radius of Rapid City, open to the public, youth groups, shooting sports groups and others. The range will also serve airmen and women from Ellsworth Air Force Base and public from Rapid City and Box Elder along with public in Sturgis and Piedmont. GFP has identified a 400-acre property that is well suited to accommodate this opportunity. The Department is collaborating with the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation to purchase the land for the firearm range and hold it while GFP works through the Pittman-Robertson grant process and is prepared to purchase the land. The Foundation purchased the land in late March. Current efforts include working on the range design and meeting with stakeholders to take input and help inform the public of plans to build the range.

2020 Walk-In Area Program for Hunter Access – The Walk-In Area (WIA) program leased over 1.27 million acres of private land for public hunting access from 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. Seventeen CHAP areas totaling 27,909 acres were enrolled statewide and provided 1449 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. At year end, we’ve finalized agreements with 21 new private land cooperators signing a total of 36,374 acres of new Walk-In Access Areas which have unlocked 31,754 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.

2-tiered waterfowl regulation experiment in the Central Flyway (3 duck daily bag limit) – Declines in duck hunters in many states across the Central Flyway are well documented. In an attempt to recruit, retain, and reactivate hunters’ experimental regulations will be used to evaluate the potential barrier of identifying waterfowl on the wing. Beginning in the 2021-2022 duck hunting season South Dakota and Nebraska will begin a two-tiered 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 duck daily bag limit). The three-duck option will begin to be available to hunters on July 1. Hunters who choose the 3-duck option will be asked to participate in both a harvest diary and parts collection, sending in wings to be used in comparison to hunters using current duck regulation. Post season surveys will be used to track satisfaction and avidity of 3 duck option participants. Internal and external outreach efforts are ongoing and will increase as the duck season approaches.

Wildlife Damage Management/Animal Damage Control Programs and Implementation – Over the past 2 years, the department has implemented a number of improvements to the services provided under our ‘umbrella’ wildlife damage management program, including predator control services and efforts to assist producers with big game, Canada goose and other wildlife damage concerns. Most recently, the department developed a Strategic Plan for this important program that outlined 3 primary goals: 1) Provide excellent customer service and program transparency; 2) Foster landowner relations while enhancing communications; and 3) Mitigate livestock and property loss through effective delivery of wildlife damage services. The department held a second round of virtual public meetings within each of the four administrative regions to gather producer input, comments, concerns and ideas for additional program improvement needs. A new customer service satisfaction survey will be implemented later this year to measure program success and identify additional areas for improving effective delivery of services. The department has also implemented measures to improve and maintain effective internal communications and recently implemented an on-line Canada goose take permit process in order to expedite timely responses to landowner damage concerns. Finally, 2 additional full-time

positions were added to our program in western South Dakota, including one field-level supervisor and 1 wildlife damage specialist, to enhance predator control efforts and ensure program administrative oversight and effectiveness.

CWD Status and Action Plan Implementation – Enhanced surveillance efforts from the 2020 deer and elk hunting seasons detected chronic wasting disease (CWD) in four additional counties. CWD is now confirmed within 16 counties and for the first time detected east of the Missouri River in free-ranging cervids. Test results received on 1,746 samples indicate 38 white-tailed deer, 9 mule deer, and 9 elk were CWD positive. As a result, new priority areas will be targeted for surveillance during the 2021 hunting seasons. In addition, the GFP Commission recently modified regulations for the transportation and disposal of deer and elk carcasses. Any deer or elk transported outside the county of harvest would have to be disposed of with a waste management provider or permitted landfill. Additional information on CWD in South Dakota can be found at <https://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife-disease/>.

Nest Predator Bounty Program 2021 – As part of Governor Noem’s Second Century Initiative, GFP implemented the third year of the Nest Predator Bounty Program in 2021. While the focus of this program is to enhance pheasant and duck nest survival by utilizing predator control (a management tool that has been used for decades in South Dakota), the program was also designed to engage youth and others in the outdoors. Participants have the opportunity to 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. Since the program started in 2021, over 2,000 participants have removed nearly 30,600 nest predators (i.e. raccoon, striped skunk, opossum, red fox and badger), primarily in eastern South Dakota.

The 2021 program started on April 1st and will conclude on July 1st or sooner if the \$500,000 maximum is reached. Nearly 16,000 nest predators have been removed (\$10/predator bounty) so far, with over 35% of participants being youth (i.e. 17 years old or younger). To encourage more youth participation in 2021, GFP implemented a weekly prize giveaway for youth participants 17 years old and younger. These giveaways will continue every week throughout the program and consists of a GFP-sponsored trapping package that includes three live traps, knife, and the *National Trappers Association Trapping Handbook* (the total package is worth approximately \$350/package). So far, there have been five youth winners and the kids have been extremely excited about winning and participating in the program. Strong participation from youth and others is expected throughout the remainder of the 2021 program.

AIS Field Operations and Communication Plans for 2021 - Zebra mussel management is the focus of 2021 AIS field operations and outreach and marketing efforts this year. Zebra mussels have been documented in the lower three Missouri River reservoirs and six eastern South Dakota waters, as of April 2021. Management objectives for field operations in 2021 include preventing the spread of zebra mussels to western South Dakota reservoirs, use inspection stations to develop best management practices, and maximize contacts with boaters who use mussel-infested waters. Grant funds have been provided by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for access-based watercraft inspection stations at five western reservoirs this summer. Roadside inspection

stations will be used in central and eastern South Dakota to aid in adoption of best practices to minimize movement of water by watercraft.

The three main messages being shared through the 2021 Outreach and Marketing campaign are “Clean, Drain, Dry”, “Don't move water” (mostly bait/fish related), and “Inspections are easy. If you see a station, you need to do your part”. In addition to standard news releases, advertisements, and social media posts, gas station TV and a zebra mussel “Instant Experience” will be the main outreach tools. The “Instant Experience” is a short series of slides viewed on a cell phone on how to reduce the spread of AIS. Geolocation technology will be used to place ad content on cell phone applications for people who stopped at an inspection station or a gas station in the TV network.

Go Outdoors South Dakota - SDGFP has partnered with Brandt Information Services to enhance our customer experience. While we currently have an in-house system on the Wildlife side and a vendor system for Parks, our goal is to have a one-stop-shop customer experience where our customers go to one place to do business with our Department. Go Outdoors South Dakota will launch December 15, 2021. This is a big lift that will enhance interactions with our customers. Some of the amplified features we are working on are:

- **One cart where you can purchase your hunting and fishing licenses, make reservations at campgrounds, and be able to purchase merchandise in one location with one transaction.**
- **New Go Outdoors South Dakota app.**
- **Integrated target marketing in our licensing system.**
- **Package options to give our customers peace of mind when they purchase a license. This will give them the ability to purchase all the licenses necessary to do a certain activity as opposed to having to figure it out on their own.**
- **Enhanced call center hosted by Brandt.**
- **360 views of campsites so customers can see what they are reserving.**
- **Camping this weekend feature to show available campsites across the state to fit user's preferences.**
- **Harvest Survey access through their customer profile.**

While we only kicked off this project in February 2021, we are making quick progress. This is going to be a new way for us to do business and will align with our customer service goals for the Department.