

**SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT
2022**

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

GFP Launched Go Outdoors South Dakota

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks works hard on all fronts to provide a seamless customer experience – wherever they are in their outdoor journey. We strive to empower and inspire people and families not only to buy something that gets them outside recreating, but to buy into the outdoors and to further promote the recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) of our customer bases. To continue to make it easier for our hunters, anglers, trappers, campers and other outdoor enthusiasts to do business with us, GFP implemented *Go Outdoors South Dakota* on December 15, 2021, a one stop shop e-commerce solution for purchasing hunting and fishing licenses with the ability to make a camping reservation and purchase an annual state park entrance license. Since launching Go Outdoors South Dakota, over 76,000 users have set up their accounts.

The new system provides users with that seamless experience to purchase licenses and make reservations in one simple transaction – and to get outside. We have built in family features, such as being able to link accounts for ease of use when purchasing licenses for your entire family! *Go Outdoors South Dakota* has enhanced camping features such as being able to view campsites with a 360 degree view before you book, signing up for notifications for specific campgrounds, and adding campgrounds to a favorites list so your most frequent locations are easier to access when you are booking. *Go Outdoors South Dakota* also has a commemorative hard card with all user licenses printed on the back to easily store in a wallet with the online app version still available for viewing and storing licenses. This year's hard cards feature scenes from South Dakota's beloved Terry Redlin and can be purchased for \$5.

Again, the focus here has always been to combine customer service with innovative technology to enhance the user experience online to get them outside – doing the things they love the most while creating memories and helping to sustain our state's outdoor heritage.

GFP Works to Transition Users to Go Outdoors South Dakota

To assist with the transition of *Go Outdoors South Dakota*, GFP placed a major emphasis on educating customers through providing them with the resources needed to set up their profiles and navigate it with ease. GFP continues to create and share tutorial videos on major aspects of the system to assist customers primarily in the areas of account set up, camping reservations and applying for big game hunting licenses. As frequent customer questions emerge, GFP tackles them by creating specific resources to meet their needs. Additional on-site and hands-on efforts to assist hunters in applying for the 2022 elk and deer hunting seasons were implemented this spring as well. Customer service is a key priority for the department and the ongoing efforts to assist customers with this transition have proven successful.

Habitat and Access

Habitat restoration, creation, enhancement, and conservation, along with public hunting and fishing access remains a top priority for the department. For the Wildlife Division, habitat and access is the top programmatic priority. To move forward, multiple structural changes and resource re-allocation have been part of the process to position the Department to maximize opportunities to successfully implement this priority.

Delivering GFP wildlife habitat and hunting/fishing access programs to landowners across South Dakota requires a well-trained and empowered staff with clear program goals and objectives. With eight new Private Lands Habitat Biologists (PLHBs) now in place for a total of twelve across the state, and a “call to action” for all staff to promote habitat and access initiatives, GFP regions and districts across the state are currently engaged in developing goals and objectives tailored to meet both the local landscape and the needs and desires of private landowners wanting to improve their lands for wildlife and provide public hunting and fishing access.

GFP staff clearly understand that the most important aspect among the initial goals is those designed to build and sustain a strong partnership and relationship base. To that end, many initial goals include (1) communication efforts to increase outreach and awareness of available private lands habitat and access programs, (2) exploring ways of increasing “kitchen table” contacts with landowners, (3) fostering communication with existing conservation partners and NGOs, and (4) developing and cultivating new partnerships with other local, state, federal and NGO entities.

Habitat Stamp Projects Update

Aquatics staff made efforts to improve aquatic habitat and access at fisheries across the state using funds generated by the Habitat Stamp. Completed projects in 2021 included the installation of artificial fish habitat structures in 13 waters located across the state. Additionally, repair was made to the dam structures on 12 impoundments. Angling access was improved with access trails at 7 locations, as well as with a fishing pier at East Oakwood Lake and dock at South Island Lake. Habitat stamp funded projects planned in 2022 include lake renovation of Newell Lake, as well as well as continued scoping for Stockade and Alvin Lakes renovations. Additional structure repairs are planned with an emphasis on high and significant hazard dams. Staff have also identified improving access through the installation of fishing piers and docks and installation of ramps for launching various kinds of watercraft and improving the conditions at 4 urban fisheries.

Terrestrial habitat crews focused their habitat stamp project efforts on the 285,000 acres of Game Production Areas (GPA) located across the state. Many of the habitat improvements projects completed in 2021 and scheduled for 2022 were previously identified in the 2018 GPA assessment - an evaluation process undertaken to identify specific habitat and access improvement opportunities on GPAs. Completed projects in 2021 included improved public access trails on nine GPAs; improved grazing management infrastructure on 11 GPAs; establishing 1,345 acres of high diversity grassland nesting cover on 30 GPAs; establishing 123 acres of woody cover habitat on 20 GPAs; and completing 1,092 acres of invasive woody

species control on 9 GPAs. Habitat stamp funded projects on GPAs across the state scheduled for 2022 include 130 acres of woody cover plantings, completing 11 waterfowl hunting access projects, and establishing over 1,900 acres of high diversity native grass and pollinator plantings.

Law Enforcement Program

Like many law enforcement agencies across this country, we have struggled to recruit and retain officers. The days of simply recruiting those with wildlife only backgrounds for conservation law enforcement seem to be behind us. We have started to take a closer look at those with criminal justice backgrounds, especially individuals that have a background in hunting, fishing, trapping or boating. In recent months we presented information to several of our technology two year-based colleges in an effort gauge the interest of graduates coming out of two-year law enforcement programs. This is an area we have traditionally not recruited from, and we see a lot of possibilities and potential partnerships with these schools. These individuals would be coming straight out of college as a certified South Dakota peace officer. This would take a different training model, but there is potential in this effort. Retention efforts are also underway. Increases in officer pay and flexibility with duty station placement/living locations have been at the top of list for areas we can have a direct effect with retention of our officers.

South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex

GFP continues to design and plan for a shooting sports complex on 400 acres of property purchased approximately 11 miles north of Rapid City. The South Dakota Shooting Sport Complex will be the premier firearms range complex in the region. This complex will offer a variety of shooting options for everyone, from beginners to advanced hunters that desire the longer ranges, recreational shooters, training spaces for law enforcement officers, and competitions and trainings for youth groups, such as HuntSafe and 4H Shooting Sports.

Detailed design plans have been completed. GFP continues efforts to raise funding via private donations. GFP will dedicate \$2.5-3 million in PR funding to this project. GFP is hoping to put the project out for bid in July of 2022

2021 Walk-In Area Program for Hunter Access

The Walk-In Area (WIA) program leased over 1.29 million acres of private land for public hunting access from 1,506 cooperators. GFP has made some adjustments to the Walk-in Area program payment guidelines for 2022 in an effort to maintain long-time cooperators, increase the amount private land open to public hunting access with new cooperators, and increase the amount of undisturbed habitat, like CRP, open to public hunting access. Undisturbed habitat acres will now receive \$9/ac up from \$5/ac. The signing bonus amount for undisturbed habitat acres has been increased to \$10/ac/year across most of the state and \$5/ac/year in the far west portion of the state up from \$5 and \$2.50 respectively. The final adjustment is an increase in the payment level from \$1/ac to \$1.50/ac to which field staff can negotiate with cooperators for flat rate contracts on working lands without regional review team approval.

Big Sioux River CREP

The State of South Dakota is working with USDA to create a new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) project for the Big Sioux River Watershed (BSRW). This effort is being led by the Department and modeled after the existing and highly successful James River Watershed CREP. Up to 25,000 acres of marginal cropland and pastureland will be enrolled in the BSRW CREP. All land enrolled will be open to public hunting and fishing access. Landowners, farmers, and ranchers will enroll land with the assistance of Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pheasants Forever and SD Game Fish and Parks staff. CREP contracts will be for 10 to 15 years with a total project cost estimated at \$108,826,950. The State's portion of that total cost is estimated to be \$22,215,600. SD Game, Fish & Parks will be funding the state's portion of the project cost and is seeking partnership funding of up to \$750,000 per year. Enrollment is projected to start by the fall of 2022.

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 with the 2021-2022 duck hunting season South Dakota and Nebraska implemented 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 2-tier experiment began on July 1, 2021 when hunters were able to select the 3 duck option. Hunters who chose the 3-duck option were asked to participate in both a harvest diary and parts collection, sending in wings that will be used in comparison to hunters using current duck regulation. Post-season surveys were sent to track satisfaction, motivations, and avidity of 3 duck option participants. During the 2021 duck season 876 South Dakota Duck hunters chose the 3 duck option (5% of total HIP certifications). Hunters that submitted wings averaged 4.5 ducks per season and hunted and averaged of 4.4 days. Human dimensions survey data analysis is ongoing with preliminary information indicating a high level of support for continuation of the 3-duck option for 2021 participants.

EHD Status and Impacts

South Dakota experienced a substantial mortality event of mainly white-tailed deer during July-November 2021 due to Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHDV) and/or Blue Tongue (BTV). The Department received reports of sick and deceased white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and 1 elk during the summer and fall of 2021. Through laboratory testing, confirmation was received that EHDV or BTV was present in 60 white-tailed deer, 7 pronghorn, 6 mule deer, 3 bighorn sheep, and 1 elk.

Forty-two counties from across South Dakota had suspected, reported, or confirmed EHDV or BTV virus. Statewide, a total of 1,639 dead or sick animals were recorded, which included 1,584 white-tailed deer, 27 pronghorn, 24 mule deer, 3 bighorn sheep, and 1 elk.

Due to the large number of dead white-tailed deer reported, GFP removed a portion or

all unsold licenses (938 licenses: 1,865 tags) from Bennett, Harding, Meade, and Perkins counties for the West River Deer Season. In addition, GFP offered refunds to hunters who wished to return licenses for any reason. In 2021, a total of 1,600 licenses were returned.

Nest Predator Bounty Program 2022

GFP implemented the fourth year of the Nest Predator Bounty Program designed to enhance localized pheasant and duck nest success by removing nest predators while engaging families in trapping and outdoor recreation. Since the program started in 2019, over 5,600 participants have removed over 136,000 nest predators (i.e. raccoon, striped skunk, opossum, red fox and badger), primarily in eastern South Dakota. New for 2022, the program was open only to resident youth under age 18 for the month of March. Starting on April 1st all residents were then eligible to participate. The program concludes on July 1st or sooner if the \$500,000 maximum (\$10/tail bounty) is reached. Nearly 1,500 nest predators were removed by about 100 youth in March 2022. To continue to encourage youth participation, GFP is again implementing a weekly giveaway drawing for participants under age 18. The giveaway consists of a GFP-sponsored trapping package that includes three live traps, knife, and the *National Trappers Association Trapping Handbook*.

In 2021, 29% of participants were under age 18 which is a 16% increase from 2020. Participants have the opportunity to learn about predators, trapping, obtaining landowner permission, habitat and how all the different components work together across the landscape. GFP staff offer a variety of trapping-based educational opportunities including in-person and virtual classes. Trapping education classes took place across the state including the Sioux Falls and Rapid City Outdoor Campuses, as well as in Fort Pierre. These education classes pilot a future Trapping 101 course that will be available statewide in the future.

AIS Field Operations and Communication Plans for 2022

Zebra mussel management is the focus of 2022 AIS field operations and outreach and marketing efforts. Zebra mussels have been documented in the lower three Missouri River reservoirs and seven eastern South Dakota waters, as of April 2022. Management objectives for field operations in 2022 include preventing the spread of zebra mussels to western South Dakota reservoirs, using inspection stations to develop best management practices, and maximizing contacts with boaters who use mussel- infested waters. Grant funds have been provided by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for access- based watercraft inspection stations at six western reservoirs this summer. Roadside inspection stations will be used in central South Dakota, while a combination of access-based and roadside inspections will be used in eastern South Dakota to aid in adoption of best practices to minimize movement of water by watercraft. Additional efforts in eastern South Dakota include partnering with lake associations and interested parties to help with AIS communication and inspection activities. In cooperation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of South Dakota, invasive carp work continues with efforts focused on telemetry and eDNA in eastern South Dakota.

To slow the spread of AIS species, particularly zebra mussels, GFP has used multiple platforms to reach anglers and boaters to make them aware of the issue and what they can do to assist in slowing the spread of these species through our campaign of “Clean, Drain, Dry”. GFP’s foundation of communication efforts has been traditional mediums, targeted emails from the

department to anglers and boaters as well as department social media platforms. To further enhance the reach of this message, GFP has an ongoing partnership with a local advertising agency to implement geofencing with our social media platforms to deliver AIS messaging to users who entered a certain area and have also placed messages on gas station television at 42 gas stations across South Dakota.

In addition to these messaging efforts, GFP has also taken an enhanced look at signage at boat ramps, particularly on waterbodies with zebra mussels present. Signage efforts include traditional signs at the ramp, painted messages on the pavement of boat ramps and larger signs on waterbodies with zebra mussels present in northeast South Dakota. GFP continues to reach anglers and boaters where they are, whether this is on social media, in their email inboxes, filling their boat/vehicle with gas and at the ramp itself. Increased awareness of AIS and educating individuals on how they can do their part in slowing the spread is the key priority of this multipronged communications approach.

Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation (R3) Strategic Approach

Over the decades, customer service delivery has evolved and changed based on customer attitudes, behaviors, and expectations. Therefore, business development and strategies have had to do the same; especially when it comes to information technology, marketing, relationship management, inclusivity, and the total customer experience. Our omni-channel approach in South Dakota is all about the customer experience – from the storefront, to the mobile device, to the web and circling back to social. It puts the customer in the center of the equation as opposed to just being on the outside receiving the information. And it focuses on target audience segmentation, personalization, tools and technology, data and analytics. This approach also overlaps with what we do on the education front to increase outdoor families. All of our education programming is driven by the R3 relevancy strategy to ensure outdoor enthusiasts have the ability to increase new skills and decrease barriers to their outdoor recreational opportunities.

In partnership with the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, the department developed this R3 plan to ensure current customers and emerging customers have every opportunity to find their niche in the outdoors. The two main “buckets” for objectives within this plan focus on increasing access to quality hunting, shooting sports, and fishing locations, and increasing awareness of and engagement with diverse populations, both internally and externally. This plan further enhances those efforts by identifying underserved populations, elevating marketing of urban fisheries, increasing ADA accessibility, and more.

Marketing the Outdoors

In an enhanced effort to recruit, retain and reactivate outdoor users the department partnered with the South Dakota Department of Tourism to launch a pheasant hunting marketing campaign, *Hunt the Greatest*, in 2020. In the spring of 2022, the department launched an additional campaign, *Fishing South Dakota*, to target both resident and nonresident anglers. Additionally, the department continues to see growth in state park visitations due to the story telling and customer service these *Hidden Gems* provide.

Pheasant Marketing | Hunt the Greatest

The first year of the campaign generated \$643,037 total license revenue in trackable paid media efforts. GFP also experienced a 55% increase in website traffic, 65% increase in email subscribers and 16% increase in Facebook following. In 2021, the campaign built off its success in 2020 to generate \$1.74 million in total license revenue and a total of 24.5k license transactions. An emphasis on targeting female hunters generated strong performance as did reaching lapsed hunters. The success of these audiences was pivotal in the overall success of the campaign and continued to reiterate the outdoors are open for everyone.

Fishing Marketing | Fishing South Dakota

The campaign focuses on showcasing the state's destination fisheries to nonresident anglers in the spring and winter months, while targeting resident anglers by highlighting urban fisheries and educational resources during the summer months. The campaign also is designed to showcase South Dakota state parks and the fisheries available within/near these park locations. Highlighting the amenities and activities within each park and encouraging planning fishing trips as a family is focused on increasing visitation to these parks, while getting families involved in the sport of fishing as well.