

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT 2023

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

Law Enforcement Program

Like many wildlife agencies across the Midwest, the recruitment and retention of conservation officers have been at the forefront of the Department's attention and efforts over the past year. The number of vacant Wildlife Conservation Officer (WCO) positions has ebbed and flowed throughout that time, but in the summer of 2022, there was an all-time high when that number reached twenty. While this was concerning, there was some good news on the horizon: the number of job offers made to qualified applicants was in double digits, setting another record with twelve conditional offers made in one year!

While twenty vacant WCO positions are incredibly concerning, several steps have been taken to increase the number and quality of applicants. First, WCOs were part of a targeted pay increase that increased the starting salary of a new WCO to a much more competitive rate and increased the wages for veteran officers. Second, a much greater emphasis has been put on the recruitment phase.

Many seasonal employees and interns work for the Department, and WCOs made a great effort to contact as many of those individuals to see if they were interested in becoming a WCO, and if they were, a ride-along opportunity was presented.

Third, social media platforms were strategically used to generate interest and announce open positions.

And finally, there was a broadening approach in the examination of prior work and educational experience in the applicants that were being selected. There is momentum right now, and it is truly an exciting time to be a Conservation Officer for the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks!

Habitat and Access

Habitat and access continue to be the top priority for the Wildlife Division within South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP). To be able to take monumental steps forward, 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. With this also comes the need to provide the financial and human resources specifically dedicated to supporting and enhancing these efforts.

Financial resources to support habitat and access programs is variable and primarily based on license sales and financial resources, including Pittman-Robertson and Dingle-Johnson funds. GFP continues to seek additional funding opportunities and recruit, reactivate, and retain outdoor recreationists who will help expand and support the future of conservation through license purchases.

Partnering with private landowners on habitat and access projects remains critical and requires additional human resources. In 2022, GFP increased the number of Private Lands Habitat Biologists from four to twelve statewide. This change expanded the program delivery capacity and effectiveness in meeting with landowners. With this change, a record for the number of acres impacted by GFP private lands habitat programs was set in 2022 at just over 91,000 acres.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT 2023

Over 1.48 million acres of private land were opened to public hunting access in 2022 through GFP's access programs. Most of these were enrolled in the Walk-in Area program, which eclipsed 1.3 million acres with 1,498 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 over the number of hunters using the area. Eighteen CHAP areas totaling over 30,000 acres were enrolled statewide and provided 1,300 hunters days of use.

In the fall, the Big Sioux River Watershed CREP project was launched in partnership with USDA to create 25,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitat open to public hunting and fishing access. It is modeled closely after the James River Watershed CREP, which has over 76,000 acres enrolled. Over 40% of the state's population resides in the Big Sioux River watershed.

CREP will provide quality hunting and fishing opportunities close to home for many hunters and anglers, aligning with R3 goals. The water quality benefits of this project are also significant and have garnered additional financial support for enrollments close to impaired lakes and streams from the East Dakota Watershed Development District and incentives from the SD Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

GFP contributed financial support to 21 partner positions that will help deliver GFP habitat and access programs along with many other federal, state, and NGO programs. These partnerships have played a vital role in implementing habitat and access programs across the state. GFP will continue to evaluate opportunities as funding is available to support additional partner positions expanding conservation efforts. Beyond supporting partner positions, GFP has been crucial in providing non-federal match dollars or projects for several NGOs.

These organizations have used this match to leverage additional funds through various grant opportunities to develop, protect, and enhance additional habitats in South Dakota. GFP values these relationships with NGOs and recognizes their essential role in conservation.

Habitat Stamp

Aquatic habitat and access staff have focused on a broader range of project types. In 2022, projects completed improved both aquatic habitats and access to public waters in 26 counties across the state. One of the focus areas was achieving infrastructure improvements to 18 dams of the 84 owned by GFP to ensure their longevity. Staff completed 11 boat ramp projects, with two new establishments and two major overhauls. Docks and pier projects are very popular, with seven new docks and four new piers established at waters that did not have them. Four trails totaling 2.5 miles were updated to improve access at 4 locations. One dredging project was completed to restore an impoundment. And 27 other access improvement projects were constructed around the state that consisted of items like ice access, kayak/canoe access, solar lights at boat ramps, parking improvements, cattail removals to improve shore fishing opportunities, steps down cut banks, ADA improvements, native plantings, and engineering design work.

Terrestrial habitat crews focused their habitat stamp project efforts on the 285,000 acres of Game Production Areas (GPAs) across South Dakota. Many of the habitat improvement projects completed in 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 included improving public access trails on 26 GPAs; improving grazing management infrastructure on 18 GPAs; seeding 1,628 acres of high diversity grassland nesting cover and pollinator plots on 31 GPAs; planting

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT 2023

28 acres of woody cover and shelterbelts on 10 GPAs; developing waterfowl hunting access trails or ramps at 10 GPAs; and enhancing 1,521 acres of grassland and forest on 11 GPAs by removing undesirable invasive woody species. An assessment will be conducted again in 2023 to evaluate all GPAs.

Western South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex

The Department continues to move forward with plans to develop a world-class firearm range in western South Dakota. The complex will be open to the public, youth groups, shooting sports groups, and others. Final design plans have been completed to construct the complex on a GFP-owned 400-acre property well suited to accommodate this opportunity. Fundraising continues to raise private donations to offset the project's cost; about \$3 million has been raised or committed.

CWD Status and Action Plan Implementation

Enhanced surveillance efforts from the 2022 deer and elk hunting seasons detected chronic wasting disease (CWD) in one additional county (Union County). CWD is now confirmed within 20 counties and, for the first time, detected in the far southeastern corner of South Dakota in free-ranging cervids. Test results on 1,027 samples indicate that 23 white-tailed deer, 11 mule deer, and 23 elk were CWD-positive. As a result, new priority areas will be targeted for surveillance during the 2023 hunting season. In 2020, the GFP Commission modified regulations for transporting and disposing of deer and elk carcasses. Any deer or elk transported outside the county of the 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

As part of Governor Noem's Second Century Initiative, GFP implemented the fourth year of the Nest Predator Bounty Program in 2022. While this program focuses on enhancing pheasant and duck nest survival by utilizing localized predator control (a management tool used for decades in South Dakota), the program was also designed to engage youth and others outdoors. Participants can learn about predators, trapping, obtaining landowner permission, habitat, and how all the different components work together across the landscape. Ultimately, this program is building broader support for the need for habitat and outdoor recreation by people across South Dakota and from a broader group of people than our traditional users.

New for 2022, March was open exclusively for resident youth under 18. The program then opened on April 1 to all South Dakota residents. Youth comprised 32% of the total participants, higher than in 2021 at 29%. 143 youth participated in the youth-only month of March, removing 2,100 nest predators. Overall, there were 2,367 participants of all ages, removing 55,220 nest predators. Similar to 2021, GFP drew the name of a youth participant to receive three live traps, a knife, and a trapping handbook each week; 16 names were drawn. GFP continues to partner with South Dakota State University extension and 4H to offer ETHICS SD, a hands-on all-inclusive trapping education program.

AIS Field Operations and Communication Plans for 2023

Slowing the spread of AIS in South Dakota and emphasizing zebra mussel management is the focus of 2023 AIS field operations and outreach and marketing efforts. Zebra mussels have been documented in the lower three Missouri River reservoirs, ten eastern South Dakota waters, and one western South Dakota reservoir as of April 2023. Management objectives for field operations in 2023 include slowing the spread of zebra mussels in South Dakota waters, using inspection stations to develop best management practices, and maximizing contacts with boaters. Grant funds have been provided by the US Fish and Wildlife

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT 2023

Service for access-based watercraft inspection stations at six western reservoirs this summer. Roadside inspection stations will be used in central and eastern South Dakota to aid in adopting best practices to minimize water movement by watercraft. A roving inspection crew will also be used in eastern South Dakota to conduct access-based inspections.

The main messages shared through the 2023 Outreach and Marketing campaign are "Clean, Drain, Dry" and "Inspections are easy. If you see a station, you need to do your part", as well as increasing awareness of AIS species and AIS infested waterbodies. In addition to standard news releases, advertisements, and social media posts, gas station TV and a zebra mussel "Instant Experience" will be the primary outreach tools. The "Instant Experience" is a short series of slides on a cell phone on reducing the spread of AIS. Geolocation technology will be used to place ad content on cell phone applications for people who stop at an inspection station or a gas station in the TV network. Specific communication packets have also been developed for groups, such as lake associations and marina slip holders on infested waters, to help inform users of best practices on these waterbodies.

Go Outdoors South Dakota

On December 15, 2021, GFP officially launched Go Outdoors South Dakota, a new one-stop shop E-commerce system! This one-stop shop allows customers to purchase their hunting or fishing licenses while making a camping reservation and purchasing their park entrance license in one transaction.

Whether customers were visiting the parks, fishing, or applying for licenses, they could interact with the new system and do all their business with GFP through one streamlined platform. The 2022 elk application period saw a record number of applications taken through the new system, with over 40,000 total applications received across all five elk seasons. The 2022 deer application period also saw high numbers, with over 70,000 applications received for the six major firearm deer seasons.

The State Parks and Recreation areas saw over 394,000 camping nights reserved in Go Outdoors South Dakota. This was almost identical to the number of camping nights reserved in 2021. Park entrance license sales totaled nearly \$600,000 in the new system. With 76,581 nonresident small game licenses and 38,549 fishing licenses sold, license sales were on par with 2021. Staff worked through a few issues and learned the new system, all while still providing the best experience possible for those people in parks, on the water, and in the field. Front-line staff, park staff, and licensing staff were monumental in helping those first-time visitors through the new territory.

GFP staff continues to listen to our customers regarding feedback on the new system. Staff continues to work to make the system even more user-friendly diligently. Hunters and anglers could also auto-renew their licenses for 2023, see all eligible preference points for 2022 applied to their accounts for the 2023 application seasons, and will continue to see enhancements to system performance.

As with any technology upgrade, it has taken time for customers to adjust to the new system and to have the new system work the way GFP intended. Nevertheless, GFP continues to be committed to our focus of combining customer service with innovative technology to enhance the user's experience online to get them outdoors. GFP's goal is to get our customers out doing what they love the most while creating memories and helping sustain our state's outdoor heritage.

Record Year of Fish Stocking

South Dakota public fishing waters were stocked with abundant fish in 2022. Nineteen fish species were placed into 138 lakes and streams. The 66 million fish stocked were produced by state, federal, and private hatcheries, along with fish trapped and relocated from other waters.

Newly hatched walleye and saugeye fry accounted for most of the fish stocked, with 56 million released into 58 lakes. Nearly six million walleye and saugeye juveniles (ranging from one-to-several inches long) were also released into 48 lakes. Larger, catchable-sized fish accounted for most of the weight stocked, with fifteen fish species from one-half to several pounds stocked in 117 ponds, lakes, and streams. A record 220,000 pounds of trout and salmon were stocked into South Dakota public fishing waters in 2022. The stocking of large, 2-to-4-pound rainbow trout continues to expand in Black Hills lakes.

Novel stockings in 2022 included large juvenile walleyes from Blue Dog State Fish Hatchery in the fall. These stockings took the place of walleyes typically produced by natural rearing ponds. This year, the first stockings of intensively reared juvenile walleyes from Cleghorn Springs State Fish Hatchery also occurred. These walleyes, adult hybrid sunfish, and juvenile bluegill were produced at Cleghorn using new Recirculating Aquaculture System technology. This year's other unique stockings included 115, 10-to-20-pound muskellunge given to South Dakota by Utah, and kokanee salmon, obtained as eggs from Wyoming.