

**SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT
2024**

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Habitat and Access - Habitat and access continue to be the top priority for the Wildlife Division within South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP). 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 Pittman-Robertson and Dingle-Johnson funds. Beyond these financial resources, the South Dakota habitat stamp has generated \$5.3 million in the past year for habitat and access projects. GFP has secured grants and partnered with several other organizations to secure grants from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), Natural Resource Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and the National Fish Passage Program Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (NFPP BIL). State Wildlife Grants have also been utilized for habitat improvements. In some cases, GFP has played a crucial role in providing non-federal match dollars for partner grants to use as leverage to develop, protect, and enhance additional habitat. These additional funds have allowed for a suite of programs for landowners to choose from that fit their operation and has grown partnerships across many agencies and NGOs in the state.

The ability to partner with private landowners on habitat and access projects remains critical and requires many human resources. In addition to GFP's 12 private lands habitat biologists and six aquatic habitat and access biologists, GFP contributed financial support to 21 partner positions in 2023 to help deliver GFP habitat and access programs along with many other federal, state, and NGO programs. GFP will continue to evaluate opportunities, as funding is available, to support additional partner positions to expand conservation efforts.

GFP completed 1,086 habitat projects with private landowners that impacted over 85,000 acres in 2023, more than during any of the past five years. These projects include implementing practices to restore and enhance grasslands, wetlands, and woody habitat, development of food plot programs, installation of wildlife friendly fence, and habitat protection. Some of the notable accomplishments in 2023 were restoring 70 acres of wetlands, planting over 100 acres of trees on private land, and removing and replacing 36 miles of woven wire fence in western South Dakota that improved antelope movement over 25,000 acres of land. GFP also made changes and additions to the private land programs to increase incentives for landowners to improve habitat. These included increasing cost share payments, broadening the woody habitat program guidelines and practices, creating a riparian habitat enhancement program, and offering a hardwood release program for native forest and the Black Hills.

Over 1.51 million acres of private land was open to public hunting access in 2023 through one of GFP's access programs. Most of these acres were enrolled in the Walk-in Area program surpassing 1.31 million acres with 1,539 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 over 30,000 acres were enrolled statewide and provided 1,500 hunter days of use.

The new Big Sioux River Watershed CREP project in partnership with USDA to create a maximum of 25,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitat that is open to public hunting and fishing access enrolled over 2,500 acres in 35 contracts by the end of 2023. It is modeled closely after the James River Watershed CREP which has over 81,700 acres enrolled. Over 40% of the state's population resides in the Big Sioux River watershed and will provide quality hunting and fishing opportunities close to home for many hunters and anglers. 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, City of Watertown, and additional incentives from the SD Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Beyond the 1.51 million acres opened for hunting, another 39,000 acres of water over private land has been opened to fishing and hunting through 26 lease agreements with landowners. The leases use 811 acres of upland for boat ramps, parking, and access trails. Another six leases of 22.5 acres have been established to open access to the James and Big Sioux Rivers in the eastern half of the State. These river leases have opened 120 river miles of access for fishing and hunting opportunities.

Habitat Stamp – Aquatic habitat and access efforts on public waters in 2023 focused on improvement and development of dam infrastructure, including boat ramp, shore access, trails, and in-lake habitat. Three dams received structural repairs, meaning 24 of the 86 GFP owned dams have now had infrastructure improvements recently done to ensure their longevity. Crews were also able to establish six new small/primitive boat ramps and rebuild one highly used ramp. The new small/primitive boat ramps are all multi use ramps that not only benefit anglers but waterfowlers as well. Aquatic habitat projects included water quality improvements, a lake aeration system, and fencing off 1.5 miles of stream to improve riparian habitat. Crews also installed fish habitat structures in nine waters. There were also 36 access and trail improvement projects conducted that included six docks, six piers, eight kayak/canoe access points, and five trails covering three miles of roads. An ADA ramp was established at a popular access facility to assist wheelchairs and others to get in and out of boats with ease. Other project types include ice access improvements, shore fishing improvements, cattail removals, and steps down cut banks.

Terrestrial habitat crews focused their habitat stamp project efforts on the 286,000 acres of Game Production Areas (GPAs) located across South Dakota. Many of the habitat improvements projects completed in 2023 were previously identified in the 2018 GPA assessment, an evaluation process undertaken to identify specific habitat and access improvement opportunities on GPAs. This GPA assessment was completed again in 2023. Habitat and public access GPA rankings are improving across and shows we are moving in the right direction. Completed projects in 2023 using habitat stamp funds included improving 4.6 miles of public access trails on six GPAs; improving grazing management infrastructure on three GPAs; seeding 888 acres of high diversity grassland nesting cover and pollinator plots on 24 GPAs; planting 68 acres of woody cover and shelterbelts on 12 GPAs; planting 257 acres of food plots on four GPAs; and enhancing 50 acres of grassland and forest on two GPAs by removing undesirable invasive woody species.

Since 2021 habitat stamp funds have been used to enroll approximately 18,000 acres in the James River Watershed and Big Sioux River Watershed under the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). This has contributed to almost 200 new public access areas for hunting and fishing. Habitat stamp funds applied to enrollment of the CREP program since 2021 total one

million dollars. This number will continue to grow as habitat stamp funds will be used to make annual payments to cooperators on these contracts over the next 10-15 years. Enrollment of these acres in the CREP program creates new habitat available to wildlife and are also open to public hunting increasing opportunities. Habitat stamp dollars also played an important role in the department's Walk-In Area (WIA) program. In 2023, habitat stamp funds totaling approximately \$900,000 were paid as signing bonuses to landowners who enrolled in long-term WIA contracts; enrolling over 58,000 acres of private land in the WIA public hunting access program for an average of 8 years.

South Dakota Shooting Sports Complex – The Department is in the process of building a premiere firearm range in western South Dakota. This facility will be a public rifle, shotgun, and handgun range serving the public in western South Dakota and beyond. The Shooting Sports Complex is located in Meade County and found approximately 10 miles north of Rapid City. The complex will be open to the public, youth groups, shooting sports groups and others. Two general contractors have been hired and construction is under way. Ground moving began in early December 2023 and most of the dirt work and roads are complete; construction is currently about two months ahead of schedule. Completion is scheduled for October of 2025. GFP has currently solidified approximately \$5.85 million in private donations to offset the cost of the project. Total project cost is set at \$20 million.

AIS Field Operations and Communication Plans for 2024 – Slowing the spread of AIS in South Dakota, with an emphasis on zebra mussel management and invasive carp education, is the focus of 2024 AIS field operations, outreach and marketing efforts. Zebra mussels have been documented in all four Missouri River reservoirs, sixteen eastern South Dakota waters and one western South Dakota reservoir, as of April 2024. Management objectives for field operations in 2024 include slowing the spread of all AIS in South Dakota waters, using inspection stations to develop best management practices, and maximizing contacts with boaters. Grant funds have been provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and United States Forest Service for access-based watercraft inspection stations at six western reservoirs this summer. Roadside and access-based 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 and will be partially funded through a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reimbursement program.

The main messages being shared through the 2024 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. Additionally, standard news releases, advertisements, social media posts, and gas station TV will be utilized. Messaging will also focus on the current known distribution of invasive carp within the state and visuals will be provided to help educate users on proper identification. 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. 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.

Record Year of Fish Stocking - South Dakota public fishing waters were stocked with an abundance of fish in 2023. Nineteen fish species were placed into 249 lakes and streams. The 100+ 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 66 lakes. Nearly six million hatchery-reared walleye and saugeye juveniles and adults (ranging from one-to-fourteen inches long) were also released into 31 lakes. Larger, catchable-sized fish accounted for most of the weight stocked,

with a record 270,000 pounds of trout and salmon stocked into South Dakota public fishing waters in 2023. The stocking of large, 2-to-4-pound, rainbow trout continues and has become very popular.

Fish production using recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) technology continued to increase. In 2023, 5,719 pounds of fish came from RAS, compared to 1,398 pounds in 2022 and 732 pounds in 2021. Because of RAS production, the walleye poundage was nearly double that ever previously produced in South Dakota. Walleye production included 1,400 catchable-sized (14") walleyes grown in one-year, that when stocked created an immediate walleye fishery in one lake in the Black Hills. Collaborations benefiting fish production and stocking continued to expand, with many South Dakota stockings resulting from eggs and fish given by Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Washington, and Wyoming.

Outdoor Campus East Expansion – In the 1990's, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks partnered with the City of Sioux Falls to construct a department-owned facility that would serve as the Regional Wildlife office and an outdoor skills learning center. The Outdoor Campus officially opened its doors to the public in 1997 and is known today as Outdoor Campus East. Since then, the Outdoor Campus East has hosted over 21,420 hunting, fishing, trapping, outdoor skills, and conservation science classes at no cost to over 534,400 individuals. These classes have been taught by a variety of staff and interns, as well as 3,496 volunteers who have given over 129,000 hours of service.

Starting in 2021, conversations began about expanding the Outdoor Campus East to keep up with the exponential growth of Sioux Falls and surrounding area. Through collaborative design efforts, concept materials were created to initiate a \$3 million fundraising campaign with efforts led by the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation. These expansion efforts include a 2-phase project. Phase 1 is a 60-yard, 12-lane outdoor archery range. Phase 2 is a remodel and expansion of the indoor facility, which includes a 30-yard indoor archery range, 3 new classrooms, a wild game cooking classroom, a game processing space, intern workspace, wildlife viewing area, and more.

Groundbreaking for the outdoor archery range is expected in summer 2024, with work on the indoor expansion beginning in fall 2024. All construction is expected to be completed by winter 2025.

Management Plan Revisions - Updates to fisheries management plan priorities for 2024 were adopted by the GFP Commission in January. The top priorities for the fisheries management program in 2024 and beyond are (1) urban and community fishery development and support, (2) aquatic habitat and access, (3) consistently meeting fisheries manager requests for fish, and (4) evaluating hatchery products, fish habitat and fishing access improvements, and urban and community management strategies. With regards to fish rearing capacity, efforts will focus on increasing capacity for warmwater fish species, like bluegill, largemouth bass, and catfish, which are needed to support urban and community fisheries. Each fisheries management area and statewide program also identified specific priorities aimed at helping them accomplish overall fisheries priorities and the mission of the department. Statewide measurable outcomes for aquatic management efforts were included in the 2024 plan, including benchmarks for angler satisfaction, license sales, and angler days, implementation of the aquatic habitat stamp plan, and increasing fish rearing capacity to consistently meet area fisheries manager's stocking requests by 2029.

The Ring-necked Pheasant Action Plan was revised for the 2024-2028 period. Objectives and strategies include measurable goals to improve pheasant habitat on public and private lands,

increasing hunting access on public and private lands, and continuing to monitor populations through harvest surveys.

Work has begun on revising South Dakota's Wildlife Action Plan by preparing a planning grant for funding through State Wildlife Grants. Our goal is to complete the revised draft plan by spring 2025. Activities include increased coordination with MAFWA and WAFWA states to improve collaborative opportunities, review of the Midwest Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) list, consideration of a coordinated habitat/landscape classification system across MAFWA states, continued coordination with entities and agencies across the state, use of a public attitude survey and relevancy survey of agencies and partners to assess the effectiveness of the plan and use of internal working groups to encourage involvement of a broader array of agency staff. The draft revised SGCN list includes plant and invertebrate species. GFP also plans to include sections on enhanced environmental education and wildlife-associated recreation to maximize opportunities.

A Bobcat Management Action Plan has been adopted that implements harvest strategies for established management zones of the eastern, western, and Black Hills portions of South Dakota. Each management zone has two harvest strategies that can be implemented: 1) Moderate Harvest- a 52-day season that allows for unlimited bobcat harvest per trapper or hunter in that zone; and 2) Low Harvest- a 52-day season that allows for the harvest of only one bobcat per trapper or hunter in that zone. The harvest strategies are supported by research data collected from South Dakota.

The South Dakota White-tailed and Mule Deer Action Plan was adopted in May 2024. This plan contains priorities, objectives, and management strategies to focus GFP's efforts over the next four years. Development of the plan has been an expansive process and has included numerous internal committee meetings, a public opinion survey, and public stakeholder meetings. The objectives of the draft action plan focus on managing deer for biologically and socially acceptable levels, distributing hunting opportunity fairly and equitably, working with private landowners to alleviate depredation, and increasing deer habitat and hunter access.

Bighorn Sheep Status - Five herds of bighorn sheep (Deadwood, Rapid City, Custer State Park, Hell Canyon, Elk Mountain) currently reside in the Black Hills area and one herd in the Badlands, or in the prairie habitats of western South Dakota. Throughout its range, bighorn populations have been devastated by disease epidemics over time. The bacterial pathogen *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M. ovi*) is suspected as a leading pathogen in causing pneumonia die-offs. However, a unique technique of "test-and-remove" research and management has promise in the recovery of bighorn sheep across the West. Since 2014 South Dakota has evidence of population recovery using test-and-remove in 3 herds in South Dakota: Custer State Park, Rapid City, and Deadwood.

Surveys are conducted every fall and early winter to collect data on ram:ewe ratios, lamb:ewe ratios, and minimum abundance estimates in each herd. Unfortunately, *M. ovi* has been documented once again in the Custer State Park, Hell Canyon, and Badlands herds in 2023-2024. Research and test-and-remove management has been started in both Badlands and Hell Canyon herds.

Overall, we estimate a range estimate of 335-415 sheep in the South Dakota in 2024 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Estimates of abundance of bighorn sheep in South Dakota using minimum counts, 2014-2024.

