

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
2010 MAFWA State of the State Report

Hunter/Angler Recruitment, Development and Retention Plan: The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is implementing its angler, hunter, and outdoor skills RDR (Recruitment, Development and Retention) program. Thirteen Action Plans are now providing the following: family hunting and fishing camps in state areas (particularly Platte River State Park); family fishing nights at urban lakes; formation of high school fishing clubs; seminars, workshops and activities to advance angler and hunter skills; afterschool programs on outdoor skills and appreciation; angling seminars and workshops, new technology (like blogs and web seminars), and other informational materials to develop and retain current anglers; public access to private land and water for hunting and fishing through a lease program (Open Fields and Waters); orientation of new employees about the North American Model for Conservation as well as opportunities for staff to go hunting and fishing; the "Step Outside/Replace Yourself" mentoring program; and EXPOS at Kearney, Scottsbluff and Platte River State Park. Surveys will be conducted to determine the effectiveness and socio-demographics of kids attending various outdoor skills camps/youth mentor programs; all action plans have evaluation components.

Missouri River Recovery Program (MRRP): MRRP is an overall umbrella U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) program to oversee current USACE actions being implemented to meet the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000 and 2003 Amended Biological Opinion for the Missouri River and the Bank Stabilization and Navigation Mitigation Project. Actions involve purchasing high risk flood prone land from willing sellers, constructing habitat for native and endangered species, implementing a spring pulse from Gavins Point Dam to benefit endangered species, supporting fish hatcheries that spawn and raise pallid sturgeon, conducting research and monitoring activities, as well as adopting adaptive management as a management tool. Within MRRP are many activities including the main objective of putting habitat on the ground after 522,000 of riverine habitat was eliminated through the bank stabilization and channelization project enacted decades ago between Sioux City and Saint Louis; 166,750 acres have been authorized by Congress in the four lower states and over 60,000 acres have been mitigated to date. There is potential to add 203,000 more acres in the future between Sioux City and the Nebraska/Kansas state line. The majority of Nebraska's population resides along the eastern tier of counties bordering the Missouri River, consequently, adding riverine habitat not only helps the riverine ecosystem, but managing them as Wildlife Management Areas open to the public increases opportunities for citizens to participate in hunting and fishing as well as other outdoor activities.

Missouri River Ecosystem Recovery Plan (MRERP): Authorized by Section 5018 of the Water Resources Development Act of 2007, the planning effort is part of the MRRP. It is a collaborative long term study and plan to identify and guide actions required to mitigate losses of aquatic and terrestrial habitat, recover federally listed species under the Endangered Species Act, and restore ecosystem functions to prevent further declines among native species dependent upon the Missouri River. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop MRERP in cooperation with federal and state agencies, basin Tribes and other basin stakeholders. Overall, the goal of the planning effort is to develop and implement a comprehensive and integrated plan to guide implementation of mitigation, recovery and restoration activities in the Missouri River Basin.

The Niobrara River Instream Flow Initiative : In Nebraska only 285 (2.3%) of 12,371 miles of fishable streams and rivers are protected with instream flows. By statute only the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and/or Natural Resource Districts (24) may apply for or hold instream flow appropriations. The river originates in eastern Wyoming and flows 535 miles (mostly across northern Nebraska) to its confluence with the Missouri River just upstream of Lewis and Clark Lake near Yankton, South Dakota. In 1991, 75 miles of the Niobrara from Valentine downstream to the Highway 137 Bridge was designated part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Within this reach, 30 miles are recognized as a premier canoeing and floating stretch. When the Niobrara River was threatened with withdrawals which would dry the river up, the Commissioners of the NGPC passed a resolution in May 2006 directing staff to conduct studies to prepare an instream flow application for recreation and fish and wildlife (includes whooping crane, terns and plovers, and pallid sturgeon). Staff are working collaboratively with a number of partners and the National Park Service to use the state process to protect the Niobrara. Should this fail, chances are a federal reserved water right would be pursued by the National Park Service. Nebraska surface water law has been exploitive since 1895 and many rivers and streams are now over appropriated.

National Fish Habitat Action Plan: Don Gabelhouse, Fisheries Division Administrator, was among those on the Steering Committee who successfully formed a Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership (RFHP) for the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (NFHAP). The RFHP was recognized as a partnership by the NFHAP Board in November 2009 and has now formed an Executive Committee. The RFHP continues to develop an assessment and classification system to provide status on the health of reservoirs and is forming Regional Workgroups that will prioritize reservoir fish habitat enhancement projects for funding. The RFHP will hold its first general meeting as an official Fish Habitat Partnership in Conroe, Texas on September 30–October 1, 2010, in conjunction with the 2010 Toyota Texas Bass Classic.

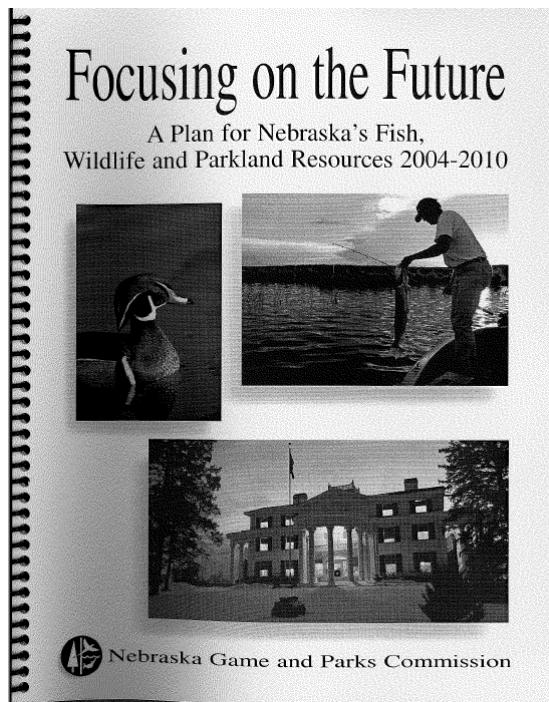
Aquatic Habitat Initiative: In 2009, the Nebraska Legislature passed a bill that increased the cost of the Aquatic Habitat Stamp by \$2.50 and authorizes the agency to use a portion of stamp revenues to improve angler access to public waters. Beginning in 2010, Fisheries Division will begin adding features to Nebraska's reservoirs, lakes, rivers, and streams that will make it easier for bank anglers to fish productive areas. Techniques will include creation of trails, piers, jetties, and hard points, jetty surfacing, terrestrial vegetation management, aquatic vegetation management

Wildlife Health Issues: This past year was an eventful one for Nebraska's wildlife health. Biologists tested 3,049 deer and 37 elk for Chronic Wasting Disease and had 46 deer and 1 elk confirmed positive. A total of 10 reports of dead deer with symptoms associated with hemorrhagic disease were received and recorded. Avian influenza surveillance was conducted from 8/26/2009 through 12/19/2009 with a total of 531 birds tested. None tested positive for highly pathogenic H5N1. There was confirmed clinical illness and mortality in mule deer from 5 counties attributed to the foreign chewing louse *Bovicola tibialis*. This louse is now suspected to occur statewide. In 2009 there were 133 reports of sick mule deer with symptoms associated with meningeal worm *Parelaphostrongylus tenuis* infection. Conditions for this particular parasite were apparently optimum in the central part of Nebraska where white-tailed deer, the normal host, and mule deer populations overlap. Bovine tuberculosis (TB) surveillance in wild deer is planned for this fall in Northeast Nebraska during the firearm deer season. This surveillance is being initiated because 4 cows in South Dakota tested positive with the same strain of TB as that found in a captive elk and fallow deer facility in Knox County, NE that was depopulated last

year. The South Dakota cows had been pastured in Nebraska in the vicinity of the facility and epidemiologists would like to know if wild deer may also be infected.

Addition to Wood Duck WMA in Stanton County: Governor Heineman approved the acquisition of a 156.24 acre tract in Stanton County. 116 acres will be encumbered by a WRP Easement and the restoration will begin this spring. This tract will be a great addition to the Wood Duck Wildlife Management Area and provide many hunting opportunities to include excellent duck hunting. Two local groups contributed to the purchase, Izaak Walton League and Cub Scout Pack #212. Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund, National Wild Turkey Federation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were partners for funding as well.

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE (A Plan for Nebraska's Fish, Wildlife and Parkland Resources)



Staff members are currently in the process of updating the Focusing on the Future document. In 1996, the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission completed its first long-range agency plan. Since that time, Focusing on the Future has served as a management blueprint for Commission activities. Considering the successes that the Commission has had and the benefits our constituents have realized from the application of the creative thinking contained in Focusing on the Future, it is appropriate that we update this plan and look even "further down the road". One change to note for this update is that detailed tactics will be added to the strategies outlined in the document. This will make the plan more operational and will serve as a great planning tool.

Law Enforcement: As with many agencies during these challenging economic times, the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission is undergoing some internal scrutiny and adjustments to accommodate decreasing budgets and increasing workloads. In this vein the Law Enforcement Division has been providing strong support for the development and implementation of the new agency hunter and angler recruitment, development and retention program (RDR), and the new Open Fields and Waters (OFW) program (contracting more private ground to be open to the

public for hunting and fishing) while endeavoring to provide quality response to conservation law enforcement issues and priorities with a decreasing staff resulting from funding cuts. Some of our specific accomplishments over the past year presented in the standard Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies report format:

TRAINING ISSUES: To enhance training relative to delivery of the RDR program 10 Conservation Officers attended the train-the-trainer Focus on Forever outdoor skills training session for three days in July. This program was geared toward training outdoor skills instructors targeted at youth education and was a cooperative effort among Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in support of the “No Child Left Indoors” initiative. Training topics included Advanced Mentor Training; Developing Young Conservation Leaders; Dog Training and Care for Youth; Schoolyard Habitat Projects; and Teaching Marksmanship Skills to Kids among others. All officers who attended were pleased and impressed with the quality of training they received.

FUNDING AND STAFFING ISSUES: The Law Enforcement Division lost 3 vacant officer positions in this biennium budget beginning July 1, 2009, and we have 8 other officer vacancies, 2 due to untimely deaths of officers (one age 54, one 49), and 1 open staff position that have been left unfilled due to funding shortfalls. The agency is in the midst of reviewing cost-cutting and consolidation of operations and administration. This very likely will result in redefining some duties for Conservation Officers to include more education and outreach as well as expanded wildlife management duties.

We have implemented a wide variety of money-saving efforts and projects including purchase of 8 bicycles (mountain bikes) to save fuel for patrol on park and recreation areas as well as wildlife areas and around lakes and reservoirs. They have been very successful and effective and have generated a considerable amount of positive public comment. Implementation of three on/off road motorcycles for similar expanded patrol options and fuel savings this year have met with similar positive results during their first season of use.

The directive to all officers to plan patrols and respond to complaints in a prioritized manner is still in effect. Purchase of large equipment items such as boats has been curtailed substantially. We were able to acquire a 22 foot heavy-weather-capable walk-around cabin boat with LETPP federal funds to augment our fleet for protection of large dams in western Nebraska and general boating/fishing law enforcement operations.

MAJOR CONSERVATION LAW ENFORCEMENT TRENDS: Conservation Officer support for priority agency programs such as hunter and angler recruitment, development and retention (RDR) has continued to expand with their involvement in the planning process for most of the RDR Action Items and assistance with their implementation. Several action items such as expanded outdoor expos are well underway with strong officer presence at each – the agency currently hosts 4 outdoor expos annually. Other RDR action items are in process of development and will rely on active involvement by COs for support and implementation. In 2009 Conservation Officers presented or assisted with 1,999 programs on all facets of the agency operation.

Another new agency program – Open Fields and Waters (OFW) – is focused on contracting additional private lands for public hunting and fishing access. 2009 was the first year. Conservation Officers were among the most involved employees in signing contracts and posting lands enrolled in the program. For examples, District 5 officers signed 59 contracts alone and District 3 officers made 306 landowner contacts in support of the program. The sign-up for 2010

contracts is underway at this time and we hope for an expansion in interest due to the spread of program awareness and success. Conservation Officers have served as the primary “go-to” people in seeking out new lands to enroll in the program.

As a result of officer support of these priority efforts to enhance participation in hunting and angling, law enforcement time and focus have been somewhat curtailed, but there have been unexpected benefits to law enforcement effectiveness as well. The focused contacts for RDR and OFW have produced many new quality contacts for officers and expanded support for law enforcement efforts and increased cooperation in providing information on wildlife violations in some areas.

With the reduction in funding and staffing we have to work smarter and more efficiently in our law enforcement efforts overall to maintain effectiveness.

NEW INNOVATIONS IN CONSERVATION LAW ENFORCEMENT: Due to reduced funding and staffing we are looking for and implementing ways to do more with less. To that end we have made the transition to wireless data via smart phones with tether capabilities to laptop computers which give officers the ability to access e-mails directly on the smart phones and to generate reports and other more complex documents on their laptops and send them via the smart phone wireless modem. This will allow us to publish the smart phone number as the primary contact number for all officers thereby eliminating the cost of home phones and wire internet access. Previously we have used a combination of home phones, some wire internet access for key officers, and limited cellular telephone use (due to the multiple costs) for communications. This conglomeration of communication approaches evolved over time based on needs/solutions and budget availability. Under the new wireless phone and data plan officers will also still have commercial long distance telephone calling cards for use from landlines whenever needed.

The new State Public Safety Radio System is finally being constructed and phased-in with a completion goal of late 2010. We were able to identify sufficient carryover funding to acquire the user equipment (mobile and portable radios and vehicular repeaters) necessary for our officers to participate in the system.

Digital voice recorders were recently issued to all officers to replace older tape recorders, and new compact digital cameras were provided to them to replace older/bulky digital cameras. These new equipment items allow total digital integration of audio/video records for case/court documents and presentations.

On three occasions District 4 officers were able to access Facebook accounts of suspects to gain information on their poaching activities to establish evidence of wildlife violations and support for subsequent convictions.

Substantial increases in some fines and liquidated damages for wildlife taken illegally were passed in the 2009 legislative session including some trophy recognition for deer and elk with liquidated damages of \$5,000 for these, and \$15,000 for bighorns.

Electronic permit fraud investigations are netting an increasing number of good cases – many involving nonresidents purchasing resident permits online using false resident addresses. We have recently sent officers to Texas, Colorado, Wyoming and Kansas on these investigations in concert with US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agents and state officers from those states.

COST SAVINGS INITIATIVES: Overall, budget and staffing challenges have created an atmosphere of change for the way we must do business. Some of the changes have improved our ability to meet agency and division goals and objectives. Reduced officer staff time and the ever-present geographical factors (windshield time and cost to address patrol needs, complaints and other calls for service) are still challenges that we must find solutions for to insure continued appropriate response to our constituents, and adequate protection of our wildlife and natural resources.