

**NORTH DAKOTA  
STATE REPORT**  
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**NDGF Recommends Closing Sage Grouse Season**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2008 spring sage grouse survey revealed the number of strutting males observed was an all-time low and well below management objectives. Therefore, the Game and Fish Department will recommend closing the sage grouse hunting season in 2008.

A total of 77 males were counted on 18 active strutting grounds. The record high number of male sage grouse counted on leks in the southwest was 542 birds in 1953, and the prior low mark of 111 was in 1996. In 2007, biologists counted 159 males on 19 active grounds. The specific cause of the decline is unknown, but with wet weather conditions last spring and standing water available during late summer, West Nile virus, which is transmitted by mosquitoes, is suspected.

Sage grouse are closely tied to sagebrush habitat, which is very limited in southwestern North Dakota. While grasslands and residual cover look in relatively good condition this spring in the southwest, the amount of sagebrush habitat has been slowly declining over the years. Sage grouse hunting seasons have been very restrictive the last 20 years and harvest has exceeded 50 birds only once during this time. There is no indication that hunting has caused a decline in the population.

Management of sage grouse in North Dakota has followed a specific plan developed by a diverse group of participants. The plan outlines hunting harvest objectives for the species with a recommendation that the hunting season close if the spring census indicates fewer than 100 males in the population. This spring's count falls below those guidelines. If the 2008 hunting season is closed, it will mark the first time in nearly half a century the season has not been open. When the spring breeding population increases above 100 males, department biologists will recommend the season reopen.

Even though sage grouse populations throughout the west are undergoing a review in status, the department manages these birds based on the best biological data available and is not influenced by the present lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species as endangered.

**Elk Management in TR Park**

North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Terry Steinwand sent a letter to the National Park Service explaining how his agency would like to see certified volunteers used to reduce the elk population within Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Steinwand defines a certified volunteer as someone who has passed an approved hunter education course, is legally eligible to obtain the necessary North Dakota license or permit to take or possess big game, and participates in a specialized training course designed by TRNP and North Dakota Game and Fish personnel. Once approved, a certified volunteer could receive a permit to remove an elk from the park.

Certified volunteers would remove elk by using high-powered rifles from November through February, a time that coincides with state hunting seasons outside the park, and a time when park visitation is low. Certified volunteers would remove the carcasses as per NPS policy, process the meat themselves and either keep it or donate it to a food pantry.

The Game and Fish Department remains adamant that the park service's development of an Environmental Impact Statement include using certified volunteers as an alternative for reducing elk numbers within the park's south unit. The EIS is scheduled for public presentation in late summer or early fall.

### **CWD Test Results All Negative**

Samples taken from North Dakota deer, elk and moose during the 2007 hunting season have tested negative for chronic wasting disease. Last fall, samples were taken from more than 1,200 deer in the eastern third of the state, and nearly 60 elk and moose. Samples were also submitted for bovine tuberculosis culture.

The Game and Fish Department will continue to be vigilant as sampling efforts continue in the future. Cervids in central North Dakota are scheduled for testing in 2008, while the western third of the state is scheduled for 2009. In addition, the department will continue to test any suspect or high risk cases throughout the year.

Since 2002, more than 10,100 North Dakota deer, nearly 300 elk and 31 moose have tested negative for CWD. To date, CWD has not been diagnosed in wild or farmed cervids in North Dakota, though it has been found in surrounding states.

### **Bird Hunting License Sales Continue to Climb**

The number of residents hunting birds in North Dakota continues to increase, as 110,433 residents hunted small game last fall, compared to 108,263 in 2006. Likewise, the number of nonresidents hunting in North Dakota continues to increase, as 23,490 waterfowl licenses were sold to out-of-state hunters in 2007, compared to 17,309 in 2006. The number of nonresidents purchasing small game licenses in 2007 was 37,976.

### **Fishing Remains Popular, Drought a Concern**

Despite North Dakota's low water levels and ongoing drought concerns, fishing license statistics again show positive results. In 2007, residents and nonresidents purchased more than 170,000 North Dakota fishing licenses, and including children, about 200,000 people fished state waters. More than one in four residents ages 16 or older bought a fishing license. The number of nonresidents coming to North Dakota dropped slightly, but remains relatively strong with Devils Lake the most popular destination.

However, of major concern is the growing affect the drought has as it spreads slowly eastward across the state. With the exception of the extreme southeastern portion of the state, most lakes and reservoirs throughout North Dakota could use more water, and in some cases a lot of water. This is especially evident in the western third and south central portions of the state. Statewide, in the past few years at least 30 water bodies have lost their fisheries due to extremely low lake levels. In addition, even some of the larger systems, including Lakes Sakakawea, Oahe and Darling, have been impacted.

### **ANS Regulations in Effect**

Anglers, boaters and personal watercraft users must abide by new regulations intended to prevent the introduction or spread of aquatic nuisance species into and within North Dakota. North Dakota does have some problem areas, such as curly leaf pondweed in the Missouri River System, Eurasian water milfoil in parts of the Sheyenne River drainage and common carp in a number of waters.

In the past, anglers and boaters were encouraged to practice ANS guidelines. Now, these guidelines are rules that must be followed. It is vital that water users understand these important requirements. If introduced, ANS can devastate a fishery and cause serious ecological and economic damage to our state. To comply with these regulations, water enthusiasts must:

- Inspect and remove all aquatic vegetation from boats, personal watercraft, trailers, and associated equipment such as fishing poles and lures before leaving a body of water.
- Remove all aquatic vegetation from bait containers when leaving the water.
- Drain all water from boats and other watercraft, including bilges, livewells and motors, at the ramp site before leaving a water body. The only exception is livewells used to transport game fish or baitfish, and potable water and sewage water which must be disposed of properly.
- Not transport live aquatic bait or aquatic vegetation into North Dakota. All water must be drained from watercraft upon entering the state.
- Not dump bait into any North Dakota water.
- Not introduce any fish into North Dakota water.
- Not transport nongame fish (other than legal live baitfish) in water away from the water body in which they were taken.

### **State, Three Affiliated Tribes Sign Historic MOU**

Gov. John Hoeven and Three Affiliated Tribes Chairman Marcus Wells Jr. have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that directs State and Tribal authorities on regulating hunting, fishing, boating and access within the Fort Berthold Reservation. The state Game and Fish Department and Three Affiliated Tribes Fish and Game Department developed the MOU to facilitate coordination of law enforcement relating to hunting and fishing violations falling under each other's authority within the boundaries of the reservation.

The MOU enables both departments to recognize and honor each other's licenses, and to coordinate season dates and bag limits for Native Americans and non-Natives while hunting on tribal lands within the reservation boundaries. In addition, the MOU promotes the use of the central portion of Lake Sakakawea by not requiring users to have multiple licenses. The Tribe

will no longer charge an access or conservation fee to any non-Native for boating or fishing access within the reservation. In return, the State Game and Fish Department will make an annual payment of \$25,000 to the Tribe.

### **Mountain Lion Season Summary**

North Dakota's mountain lion season closed Nov. 10 in Zone 1 – badland's unit – after filling the zone's pre-determined quota of five. The remainder of the state was open through March 9, where only one mountain lion was taken in southeast North Dakota near Cogswell. The season opened statewide Aug. 31.

### **Lead Fragments in Venison**

The North Dakota Health, Game and Fish, and Agriculture departments are advising food pantries across the state not to distribute or use donated ground venison because of the potential for contamination in lead fragments. A Bismarck physician contacted the Department of Health with concerns about the potential of lead fragments from bullets in ground venison. The doctor collected 95 packages of ground venison donated to food pantries. Of those, x-rays detected the presence of metal in 53 packages. The DOH took five samples targeting the metal pieces, and all five tested strongly positive for lead.

The Department of Agriculture sent a letter to all state- and federal-inspected meat processing plants in North Dakota informing them about the situation, and the DOH sent a letter to food pantries with recommendations of disposing the meat. Additional studies involving lead in wild game and lead levels in children are planned by the DOH. In addition, the three agencies are working to develop guidelines about how to properly clean and dress wild game to reduce the chances of lead in meat. Guidelines should be ready by the next hunting season.

### **CRP Losses Felt in ND**

North Dakota, the beneficiary of 3.4 million Conservation Reserve Program acres for most of the past two decades, lost nearly 400,000 acres in 2007 as farmers chose to take their land out of the government's biggest conservation program. The state stands to see an additional 1.9 million acres converted to cropland from 2008-12 if the trend continues.

### **Farm Bill Biologist Hired**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has entered into a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Pheasants Forever to create and fund a Farm Bill biologist position in Jamestown.

Stephen Stensgard, a native of Fergus Falls, Minn. has been hired for the position. He is an employee of PF, and will assist NRCS with promotion, planning and implementation of Farm Bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, Continuous CRP, Wetland Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and others. He is based out of the NRCS office in Jamestown.

Stensgard will function as the person private landowners should call for creating or enhancing wildlife habitat on their land. Even though this is new, the template has been a proven success in many other Midwestern states. This position is available to assist private landowners

with Farm Bill programs from start to finish. Landowners can work with Stensgard to help develop plans and enroll their land in programs that will benefit their operation and wildlife habitat.

### **New CRP Practice**

A new habitat practice that enrolls croplands, wetlands, existing grass or expired Conservation Reserve Program acres into CRP is available to landowners. State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Services Agency, is a cooperative conservation effort based on locally developed conservation proposals that target species of conservation priority and their habitats.

SAFE allocates 500,000 acres nationwide, with 27,000 available to North Dakota. There are three SAFE priority focus areas within the state where land may be eligible: 1,000 acres allocated to the Southwest North Dakota Sagebrush Restoration SAFE project for sage grouse and other species that depend on shortgrass sagebrush prairie; 20,000 acres allocated to the Coteau-Drift Prairie Waterbank SAFE project in the central portion of the state, commonly known as the Missouri Coteau and Drift Prairie, for waterfowl, shorebirds and other birds; and 6,000 acres allocated for the Eastern North Dakota Tallgrass Prairie Restoration SAFE project, which consists of two areas in the eastern edge of the state for greater prairie chickens and other grassland nesting birds.

Croplands, wetlands or existing grass within the focus areas may be enrolled in SAFE practice CP38 on a continuous basis until the 27,000 acre allocation is reached. CRP contracts can be for a period of 10-15 years. Landowners will receive annual rental payments for the term of their CRP contract, as well as cost-share assistance, and in some cases practice incentive payments and signup incentive payments from USDA.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department will also provide up to 50 percent of the cost of grass seed, as well as additional incentives for landowners who allow public access on the CRP through the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsman program. Other partners, such as Ducks Unlimited and the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust, will provide incentives to landowners who perform wetland restorations on land they enroll into SAFE.

### **Record Number of Bald Eagles**

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's annual mid-winter bald eagle survey conducted Jan. 11 along a portion of the Missouri River resulted in the highest number of eagles counted in the 22-year history of the survey. Altogether, 85 bald eagles – 68 adults and 17 immature – and two golden eagles were counted along the survey route which extends from Bismarck to the Garrison Dam. The previous high of 75 was established in 2006.

### **Officials Work to Remove Wild Pigs**

The findings of feral pigs in western and north central North Dakota have prompted state and federal agencies to take eradication measures to make sure these unwanted animals don't establish a permanent population in the state. In summer 2007, state and federal agencies became aware of two separate bands of feral pigs in North Dakota: one in the western badlands

southwest of Grassy Butte, and another in the Turtle Mountains in and around the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation.

A task force made up of the Game and Fish Department, North Dakota Department of Agriculture's Board of Animal Health, Wildlife Services and Veterinary Services, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the University of North Dakota is taking aggressive action to eliminate their presence from the state due to threat to domestic livestock, agricultural crops, public safety, natural habitat, and wildlife because of their potential to transmit diseases and destructive nature.

Aside from their potential to transmit diseases, rooting and wallowing behaviors lead to soil erosion and degradation of water quality, they compete with native wildlife for food, destroy wildlife habitat, reduce species diversity, and prey on ground-nesting birds and small and young mammals. Other states with a similar problem have warned agencies in North Dakota to eliminate feral pigs immediately or risk having a long-term problem with an uncontrollable population.

The multi-agency task force quickly worked to locate and eradicate pigs found on the national grasslands in the badlands. Assessment and monitoring activities were initiated on the Turtle Mountain pigs this fall. However, because of the terrain, dense vegetation, heavy foliage, food availability, mixed private/public/tribal land ownership, and conflict with fall hunting seasons, the eradication effort in the Turtle Mountains was pushed back until additional contact and coordination with landowners and tribal officials were completed. It was also believed the pigs would likely be easier to locate and more susceptible to trapping efforts during winter months when natural food availability is reduced.

Wildlife Services is spearheading removal efforts in the state, as eradication efforts in the Turtle Mountains started in January. Pig removal activities include ground and air reconnaissance, trapping, and shooting by agency sharpshooters. Because of disease concerns, blood and tissue samples will be taken from pigs to test for diseases and determine genetic background.

### **Department Evaluates 2007 Deer Season**

North Dakota deer hunters took approximately 100,000 deer during the 2007 hunting season. Deer gun hunters harvested more than 98,100 deer, muzzleloader hunters took more than 1,000, and youth hunters accounted for more than 1,400. Deer bow statistics are not yet available. The overall hunter success rate was 74 percent. The Game and Fish Department allocated 148,550 deer gun licenses in 2007, and more than 97 percent were issued to hunters.

### **Oil Boom**

Oil and gas activity in North Dakota, particularly in the western part of the state, has increased dramatically in recent years on both public and private lands. This activity has an increasingly negative affect on wildlife populations, native prairie and other habitats. Species as diverse as bighorn sheep and sage grouse can be negatively affected by this energy activity. The development of roads, pipelines and oil pads all contribute to the fragmentation of habitat and the disturbance of wildlife.