SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE REPORT
Issues Update 2008

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DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

Pheasant Population Status

Each year South Dakota's pheasant population is monitored by August roadside brood surveys to provide a statewide Pheasants Per Mile (PPM) Index. This index reached a 40-year high in 2005 (6.63 PPM), however the 2007 Index (7.85) surpassed the 2005 Index by 18%, only to be exceeded during a few years of the Soil Bank era. Approximately 78,000 resident hunters harvested 969,000 pheasants and 103,000 nonresident hunters harvested 1,153,000 pheasants; a total harvest of 2,122,000 pheasants. Pre-season pheasant population was estimated to be approximately 11.9 million birds. Exceptional pheasant numbers provided great opportunities and was followed with high hunter success, as pheasant hunters averaged just under 12 birds per hunter. Estimated economic impact to South Dakota was $219 million dollars.

Quality nesting cover, coupled with mild, open winters and favorable weather conditions during the peak hatch, have been the main reasons for South Dakota's pheasant population surge over the past 5 years. Since 2002, the state's preseason pheasant population estimates have doubled. At the cornerstone of pheasant production are Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres. South Dakota's CRP acreage leveled off at about 1.5 million acres, however in the fall of 2007 lost approximately 300,000 acres and is set to lose an additional 350,000 over the next two years to expiring contracts. Overall impact to the pheasant population can not be accurately determined; however the loss of those acres in key locations of the state will most likely result in a negative impact to the pheasant population.

2007 Walk-In Area Program for Hunter Access

A record of almost 1,160,000 acres of private land was enrolled in the Walk-In Area program for the 2007 hunting season. Despite the net increase in acres statewide, the 2007 enrollment contained 13,500 less acres in permanent, undisturbed habitat for pheasant hunting in eastern South Dakota. This decrease in permanent, undisturbed habitat was due to CRP contract expirations. Our staff is working on several access pilot projects in each region to secure access to lands that we have been unable lease through our traditional Walk-In Area program. GFP Region 1 staff has developed guidelines for a program (Controlled Hunting Access or CHAP) which would be similar to Montana's Block Management program to secure additional access. Several landowners have expressed enrolling land in CHAP in 2008.

CRP Status and Farm Bill

On September 30, 2007, 301,794 acres of CRP expired in South Dakota. This has brought CRP enrollments in South Dakota down from 1.55 million acres to slightly less than 1.25 million acres. Long-term, CRP enrollment in South Dakota will depend on conservation provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill, if general CRP sign-up opportunities are offered to landowners, if early termination of CRP contracts are offered to producers, the structure of the commodity support programs (in the current Farm Bill is more lucrative to grow some program crops) and competition for cropland to grow crops. By mid May of 2008, both the Senate and House approved the conference committee's language, which reduced the CRP acreage cap of CRP from 39.2 million acres to 32 million acres.

Despite some of the challenges that loss of CRP, grassland conversion and high crop prices will have on grassland acreage in the state, South Dakota has been working proactively with its partners to create new opportunities to enroll land into CRP. On March 27, 2008, South Dakota was given clearance to take enrollments for South Dakota's two CP38 proposals. South Dakota was allotted 20,700 acres to enroll land specifically for wildlife habitat. South Dakota's CP38 acres were split between a pheasant nesting habitat proposal (20,200 acres) in eastern & central parts of the state and a sage grouse habitat proposal (500 acres) in the northwest part of the state. In less than two weeks, South Dakota allocated all the acres set aside for the pheasant nesting habitat proposal and is requesting additional acres to meet the landowner demand for this practice. This rapid allocation of acres is proof that despite high crop prices, that CRP remains popular with landowners.

South Dakota CREP Proposal

Another element under development is a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) proposal for the James River Watershed. The objective for the James River CREP proposal would be to establish wildlife habitat and hunting access to 100,000 acres. Contracts would be 10 to 15 years in length and GFP would pay an additional 40% above CRP rent and pick up additional cost-share to establish practices. Hunting and fishing access would be required for all lands enrolled under this CREP. GFP plans to submit the CREP proposal to Washington DC during the summer of 2008 and take enrollments in 2009.

Grassland Conversion

Current commodity programs in the Farm Bill, changes in agricultural technology and recent high crop prices have encouraged hundreds of acres of habitat to be converted to cropland. According research conducted by Ducks Unlimited, the overall average loss of native grassland in the Missouri Coteau of North and South Dakota has been approximately 0.5 percent per year, with some areas approaching nearly 2 percent per year since 1984. According to their research, an annual rate of loss approaching 2 percent per year would result in a loss of one-half the remaining native grassland in 34 years. Even more disturbing is that this trend in conversion has accelerated since 2000. From 2002 through 2006, almost 300,000 acres of native grasslands were converted to cropland in South Dakota.

While the 2002 Farm Bill contains a provision referred to as Sodbuster, the intent of the current Sodbuster provision was to reduce soil erosion rates on newly converted highly erodible lands, not to prevent tillage of native grassland. Under current Sodbuster provisions, producers who bring newly converted highly erodible lands into production must file a form with USDA and file a soil conservation plan with the Natural Resource Conservation Service prior to converting the land. In most instances, the soil conservation plan merely requires crop residue management. If the tract is not classified as highly erodible, then no soil conservation plan is needed.

In response to the grassland conversion issue, many groups have proposed that a "Sodsaver" provision be included in the 2008 Farm Bill. Under Sodsaver proposals in the House and Senate, any native grassland without prior cropping history brought into production would no longer be eligible for federal crop insurance or disaster payments. Unfortunately, the Sodsaver provision was severely weakened in the conference committee report and would only apply to the Prairie Pothole Region of SD, MN, IA, ND and MT. The governors of those states would have the opportunity to decide whether their states would participate. As a result of the actions of the conference committee, Sodsaver has been rendered ineffective. As a result, native grasslands will continue to be under assault during the tenure of the 2008 Farm Bill.

Hatchery Renovations

Renovation of the state's three fish hatcheries is nearly completed. Renovations at Cleghorn Springs and McNenny coldwater hatcheries have been completed, while renovations at Blue Dog, the only cool and warm water facility are expected to be completed by early fall. The entire renovation process, from concept to finished product, took approximately 5 years to complete. Renovation costs were paid for using a combination of funds received from fishing license sales, sport fish restoration grants and state issued bond money. Renovations will serve South Dakota anglers for 20-25 years.

Cleghorn Springs, located in Rapid City, South Dakota, was originally constructed in 1928, renovated in the 1940s, and rebuilt after the 1972 Rapid City Flood. Work began on the current renovation in Sept. 2006 and was completed in Nov. 2007. Major features of the $7,000,000 renovation include replacing a series of linear raceways with 32 twenty-foot diameter circular tanks, renovating the existing hatchery building, and constructing a new shop/office. Modification of the water collection gallery, from local springs, was also accomplished. Annual production of trout and salmon, once the facility is in full production, should be between 200,000 and 300,000 trout and salmon.

McNenny State Fish Hatchery located at Spearfish, South Dakota, and renovations were entered on updating the facilities infrastructure. McNenny Hatchery was constructed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1951 and transferred to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks in 1983. As part of the renovation, a 60 year old fish rearing building was demolished and replaced with a new building containing six 12-foot diameter circular tanks, asbestos was removed from the main hatchery building, and office space and other facilities in the main hatchery building were renovated. McNenny was in full operation during the renovation. Annual production at the facility varies between 150,000 and 200,000 trout and salmon.

Blue Dog Lake State Fish Hatchery, located in Northeast South Dakota, produces predominantly walleye, yellow perch, northern pike, and largemouth and smallmouth bass. The hatchery was built in 1982 and this was the first renovation of the facility. Renovations included replacing the lake water filter system, grading the bottoms of all ponds, installing above-ground valves on all ponds, and installing a water heating system to aid in warm water fish production.

Missouri River Reservoir Conditions

Conditions have improved some with significant rain in the lower basin but dry areas continue to plague much of the upper Missouri River basin. Western South Dakota has received some much needed rain and snowpack in the Rocky Mountains has topped at 110 % of normal.

The biggest challenge in South Dakota continues to be low water levels in Lake Oahe, which is about 20 feet below its normal elevation. Oahe levels were fairly stable during the spring and as a result most fish species had successful spawning. Larval surveys are currently underway and it appears prey fish are on an upward trend. Oahe is projected to be at elevation 1584.5 at the end of May and this is about 5 feet higher than it was last year at this time. Previous efforts to extend boat ramps over the past summers should have boat ramps usable for the entire boating season and in all areas of the reservoir.

Anglers coming to the Missouri River to fish this spring are finding good fishing and healthy fish. Walleye fishing has been excellent and the salmon are starting to take off. Many anglers are also reporting good catches of smallmouth and white bass at the present time too. An example of fishing pressure on the reservoirs would be in 2007, there were 988,000 hours of fishing on Lakes Oahe & Sharpe. Walleye were the most sought after species in 2007 with 764,000 caught in just these two reservoirs. Walleye were followed by smallmouth bass, white bass, channel catfish and salmon in decreasing order of estimated catch. These fisheries resources are a very important component of available outdoor recreation in South Dakota.