SOUTH DAKOTA
Game, Fish & Parks

South Dakota

GAME, FISH AND PARKS
2014 ANNUAL REPORT
PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT AND ACCESS
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

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2014 INTRODUCTION

South Dakota is blessed with a diverse and abundant wildlife resource that both residents and nonresidents value greatly. As a vast majority of South Dakota is privately owned; farmers, ranchers and other private landowners are the principal stewards of our wildlife resources and the habitats on which they depend. At the same time, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) is charged with managing the state's public trust wildlife resources for everyone's use, benefit and enjoyment. Cooperative relationships and collaborative approaches among landowners, GFP, and anyone who enjoys or appreciates South Dakota fish and wildlife resources are critical.

GFP offers numerous programs and initiatives to assist landowners with integrating wildlife habitat conservation into their farm and ranch operations. GFP also recognizes the need and desire of hunters and anglers to have access to wildlife and recreation opportunities on both public and private lands. Through its Private Lands Habitat and Access Program, GFP offers several incentives and programs to help make this happen.

The Private Lands Habitat and Access Program operates with the following goals in mind: (1) In cooperation with private landowners, manage, conserve, and restore habitat to sustain diverse wildlife populations; and (2) provide the public with high quality opportunities to access fish and wildlife resources on private land. GFP recognizes it can only achieve these goals by maintaining existing strong partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies; private conservation organizations; and most importantly with the continued support and cooperation of farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners.

IN 2014, GFP WORKED WITH MORE THAN 3,396 COOPERATING FARMERS, RANCHERS, AND LANDOWNERS TO AFFECT WILDLIFE HABITAT ON 23,654 ACRES, AND TO PROVIDE PUBLIC HUNTING ACCESS TO NEARLY 1.4 MILLION ACRES, ALL RESULTING IN $6.11 MILLION BEING PAID DIRECTLY TO THESE HABITAT AND ACCESS COOPERATORS.

FARM BILL CONNECTION

Perhaps no other government program has had as profound an impact on South Dakota's landscape and wildlife population as the Farm Bill. While GFP's private lands habitat and access programs and incentives will never replace conservation provisions of the Farm Bill, they are designed to both complement the federal legislation in a manner that increases soil, water, and wildlife benefits to our state's landscape, and meet the needs of landowners seeking to establish and enhance wildlife habitat on their farms and ranches.

South Dakota's two largest industries - agriculture and tourism - generate approximately $5.2 billion annually, and both are heavily dependent on Farm Bill programs. Pheasant hunting alone contributes an estimated $172 million to South Dakota's economy each year.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is perhaps the most widely recognized and successful conservation initiative in the last five Farm Bills. CRP puts large blocks of undisturbed grassland habitat on the landscape in 10 and 15 year contracts. In addition to providing valuable soil, water, and erosion benefits, CRP helped South Dakota's pheasant population reach a 62-year high in 2007, with hunters harvesting approximately 2.1 million pheasants.

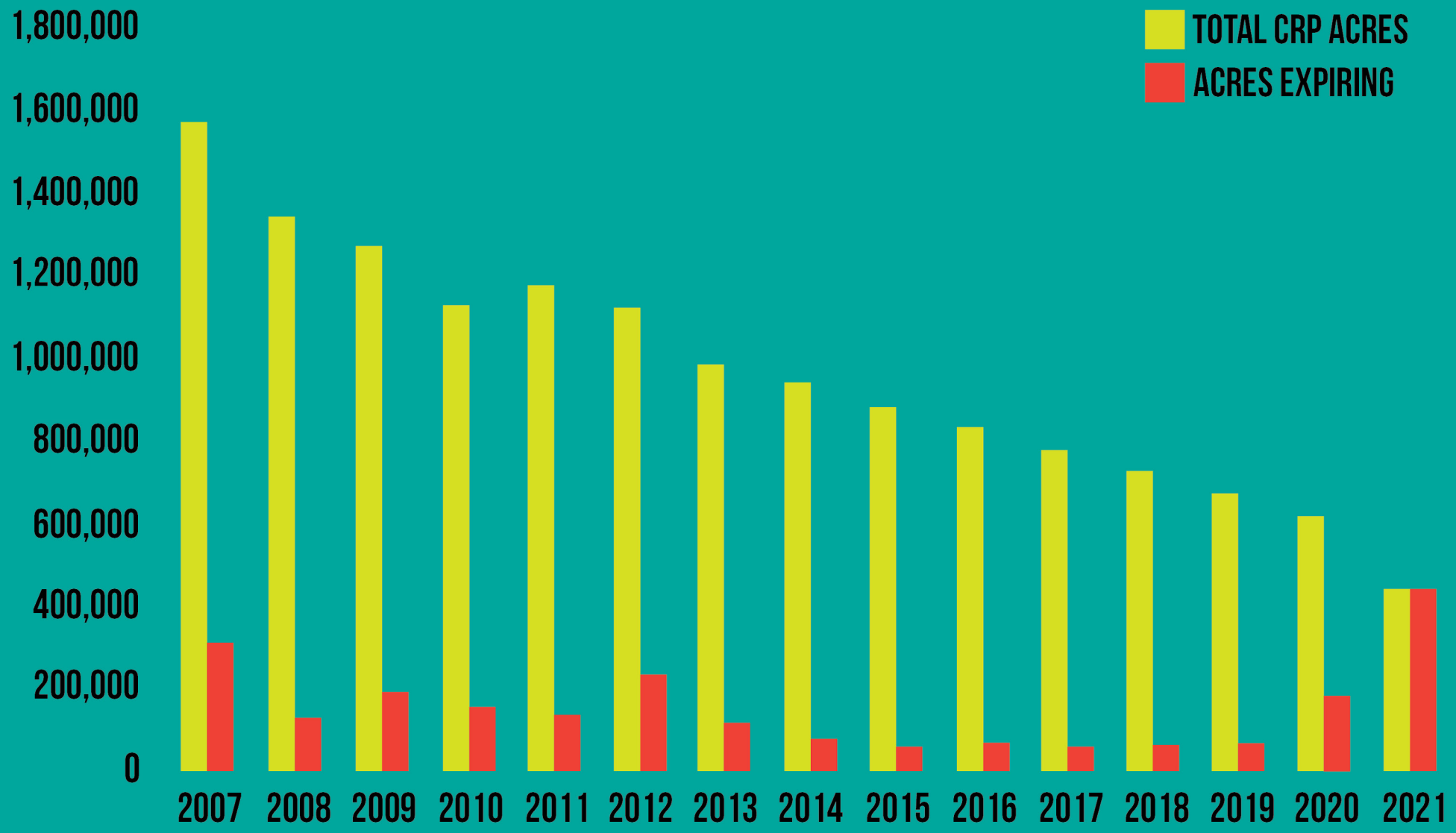
Since 2007, South Dakota has seen the number of CRP acres on the landscape decline by one-third. Currently less than 900,000 acres of CRP remain in South Dakota, with future CRP acres showing a steady decline. Funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), CRP alone is a $66.5 million per year program in South Dakota.

Another program of nearly equal importance to wildlife habitat conservation as CRP is the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE). This is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. Landowners may enroll eligible lands in either permanent conservation easements or 30-year easements agreements, and is designed to help restore and conserve wetland functions and values, along with protecting valuable wildlife habitat. Wetlands are recognized as important landscape features that provide numerous benefits to people and to fish and wildlife, including protecting and improving water quality, providing fish and wildlife habitats, storing floodwaters, and maintaining surface water flow during dry periods.

Since its inception, WRE (and its precursor Wetland Reserve Program and Emergency Watershed Protection Program-Floodplain Easements) has permanently protected nearly 101,000 wetland, floodplain, and associated upland acres with 954 voluntary conservation easements with private landowners.

Additionally, 30-year easements agreements have also protected over 31,500 wetland and associated grassland acres in South Dakota.

Farm Bill conservation programs in South Dakota (CRP, WRE, and Environmental Quality Incentive Program) inject nearly $97 million annually in conservation practices across South Dakota. GFP's entire private lands habitat program funding is budgeted at less than $5 million annually, as it is designed to complement Farm Bill conservation programs like CRP and WRE, not replace them. Funding for all conservation programs, including CRP and WRE, were cut by 9.5 percent in the 2014 Farm Bill, making the next five years increasingly challenging for South Dakota's pheasants and other wildlife populations.

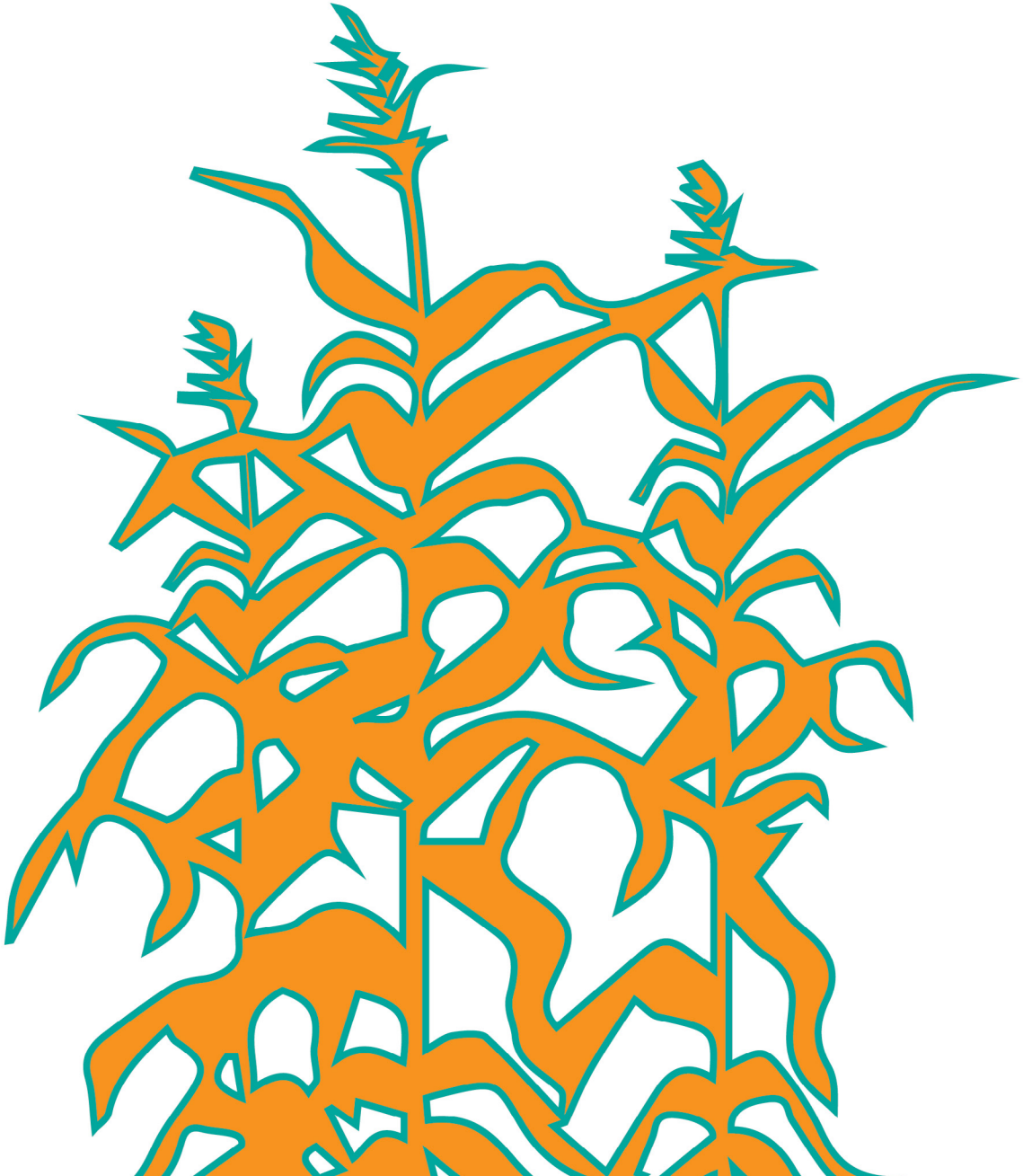

TOTAL CRP ACRES
ACRES EXPIRING
1,800,000
1,600,000
1,400,000
1,200,000
1,000,000
800,000
600,000
400,000
200,000
0
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021

WILDLIFE PARTNERS PROGRAM

Since 1975, GFP has worked with private landowners to develop and/or enhance habitat on private lands. Initially started by the South Dakota Pheasant Congress, a nonprofit, non-governmental, private group of citizens dedicated to bringing back pheasant populations, and later developing into the Pheasants For Everyone program, GFP currently offers these incentives and programs to private landowners through the Wildlife Partners Program (WPP).

Approximately 80 percent of South Dakota is privately owned, meaning private landowners hold the most influence over wildlife populations in the state. As such, it's vital to work with private landowners to develop and maintain habitat on private lands. The WPP is primarily focused on developing new undisturbed habitats and protecting existing habitats, and includes the following incentives: woody habitat, food habitata plots, nesting cover and habitata fencing.

80% OF SOUTH DAKOTA IS PRIVATELY OWNED.



WOODY HABITAT

The woody habitat program incentive provides cost-share to landowners for establishing new tree and shrub plantings. Woody cover projects meeting GFP's program guidelines are cost shared at 75 percent, with a $10,000 maximum payment per cooperator based on the woody cover planting size.

The primary goal of the woody habitat program is to aid local wildlife populations by providing secure and adequate winter cover.

The program also serves to help establish woody cover that secures year-round habitat and a food source for wildlife. Because woody habitat plantings are principally established by landowners to aid ground-nesting and ground-dwelling game species, woody cover projects consist principally of low-growing trees and shrubs.

FOOD HABITAT PLOTS

By far the most popular GFP habitat incentive program with landowners is the food plot habitat program. Program incentives include a $20 per acre cost share payment for establishing winter food plots, or a $40 per acre incentive for food plots located on areas enrolled in the state's Walk-In-Area program. Free seed for planting these food plots is provided to landowners each spring by GFP.

Although food is normally available to wildlife in the form of waste grain and weed seeds, there are times when a well-placed food plot is an important wildlife management tool. Food is an important attractant for wildlife, and they will often readily move to good food sources. This makes food plots useful for attracting and keeping wildlife in areas where landowners want them.

In order for a food plot to be effective, it must be strategically placed near dense winter cover such as cattail sloughs, woody habitat plantings, and warm season native grass plantings. When placed effectively food plots can help reduce winter mortality by allowing pheasants to find adequate food without exposing themselves to predation.

NESTING COVER

Landowners desiring to establish grassland cover for wildlife, over and above what is offered through Farm Bill conservation programs like CRP, can obtain cost-share through GFP's nesting cover program. Landowners with projects meeting program guidelines receive 100 percent reimbursement for grass and seeding costs. Interest in establishing nesting cover through this program was originally very strong, but with the advent of CRP in the 1985 Farm Bill, interest in GFP's nesting cover program waned and remains limited due to currently available CRP options.

It is well established that the lack of adequate nesting cover is the number one limiting factor for pheasant populations in South Dakota. Species like pheasant, ducks, and other upland nesting birds use grasslands for nesting, rearing their broods, roosting, and loafing. Nesting cover established through this program is designed to maximize nesting activity and reproductive success for pheasants on private lands. Native grass and forb plantings also offer important habitat for pheasants, grouse, and other ground-nesting birds. Diverse mixtures of native grasses and forbs provide high quality winter cover, and native broadleaves and legumes attract large numbers of insects that pheasant broods depend on.

HABITAT FENCING

Protecting existing habitats from livestock destruction can be just as valuable (and often times more cost effective) as establishing new habitats.

Whether it's protecting a riparian area from grazing or keeping cattle out of new shelterbelt plantings, the WPP offers incentives for fencing materials.

Cooperators are provided 100 percent cost-share on fencing material costs for projects meeting program guidelines.

2014 WILDLIFE PARTNERS PROGRAM SUMMARY

	COOPERATORS	ACRES	GFP COST-SHARE AMOUNT
WOODY HABITAT	31	118	$213,308
FOOD HABITAT PLOTS	802	9,314	$193,277
NESTING COVER	6	103	$13,112
HABITAT FENCING	7	22	$5,893
TOTALS	846	9,557	$425,590

WETLAND AND GRASSLAND PROGRAM

Much of South Dakota's landscape is characterized by diverse and ecologically important grassland and wetland habitats. With a vast majority of these habitats occurring on private land, partnerships with landowners are essential to GFP's management of our diverse and economically important fish and wildlife populations.

GFP has worked cooperatively with farmers and ranchers to better manage wetland and grassland habitats for nearly three decades. The Private Lands Wetland and Grassland Habitat Program offers a suite of conservation practices that benefit wetland or grassland dependent wildlife by assisting producers with improvements on working grasslands.

Private lands biologists located across the state work with landowners - primarily producers engaged in grass-based livestock operations – to plan and implement a variety of on-the-ground conservation practices.

For many years wetland creations and pond restorations were the principal focus of this program, and have been very popular with landowners - particularly for west river ranchers. In the last decade more emphasis has been placed on grazing management, grass restorations, and riparian area fencing to assist producers with better managing the remaining, but quickly diminishing grassland habitats across the state. Improved grassland management on a landscape scale is important to sustain a viable livestock industry and the diversity of wildlife in South Dakota.

Cooperative efforts with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, local conservation districts, and others are important to efficiently and effectively deliver program funds through partnerships.

TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE IS PROVIDED FOR THE FOLLOWING

- WETLAND RESTORATIONS
- WETLAND CREATIONS AND ENHANCEMENTS
- WATER DEVELOPMENT
- GRASSLAND RESTORATIONS
- GRASSLAND/GRAZING ENHANCEMENTS
- RIPARIAN PASTURES
- WILDLIFE FRIENDLY FENCE

2014 WETLAND AND GRASSLAND PROGRAM SUMMARY

	PROJECTS	ACRES	GFP COST-SHARE AMOUNT
WETLAND RESTORATIONS, CREATIONS, ENHANCEMENTS	18	154	$123,974
GRASSLAND AND RIPARIAN RESTORATIONS, ENHANCEMENTS	79	13,943	$257,826
TOTALS	97	14,097	$381,800

COOPERATIVE EFFORTS ON THE GROUND

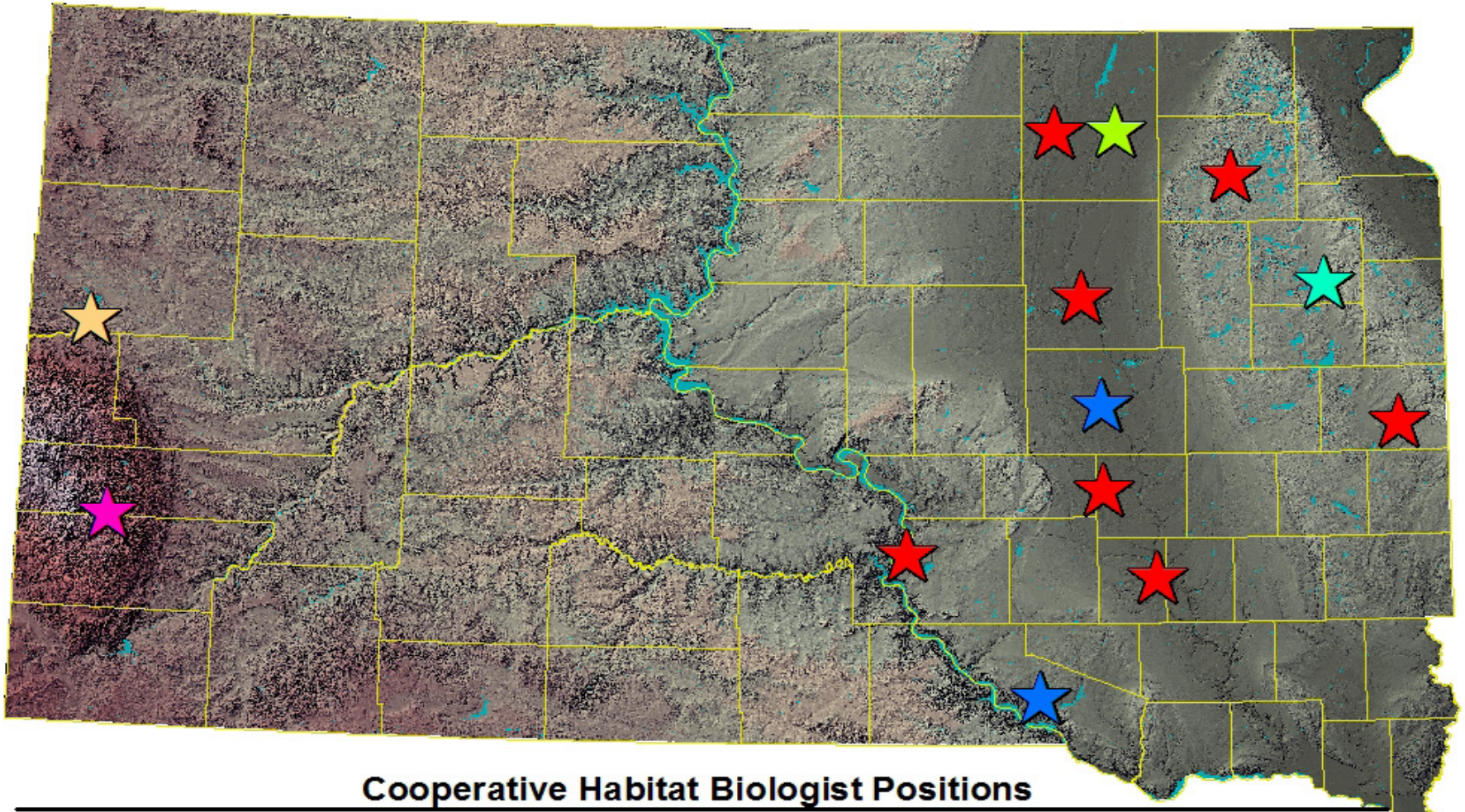
To efficiently and effectively do the necessary work with farmers, ranchers, and landowners across South Dakota to create and improve wildlife habitat on their lands, it takes people. Successfully completing a wildlife habitat project on private land, even for the most eager and willing landowner, can be time consuming and at times complex.

To help deliver habitat conservation programs, whether Farm Bill programs like CRP, CREP, or WRP, or GFP's Wildlife Partners Program incentives, time and energy must be invested in developing and maintaining working relationships with landowners. In order to improve service to landowners, GFP currently provides nearly $348,000 in matching cost share to fund 13 cooperative biologist positions throughout South Dakota to help deliver wildlife habitat, hunting access, and range conservation measures to farmer, ranchers and landowners. These biologists, often located in USDA offices across the state, are employed through cooperative agreements with USDA-NRCS and/or non-governmental conservation organizations such as Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and The National Wild Turkey Federation, and assist in affecting wildlife habitat on thousands of acres of farm and ranch lands every year by working with hundreds of landowners.

WORKING WITH FARMERS, RANCHERS AND LANDOWNERS ACROSS SOUTH DAKOTA TAKES PEOPLE.

2014 HABITAT BIOLOGIST POSITIONS SUMMARY

	POSITIONS	ACRES AFFECTED
PHEASANTS FOREVER FARM BIOLOGISTS	7	77,000
PHEASANTS FOREVER SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE BIOLOGIST	1	41,668
DUCKS UNLIMITED MIGRATORY BIRD INITIATIVE BIOLOGIST	1	17,266
DUCKS UNLIMITED WETLANDS RESERVE PROGRAM BIOLOGIST	1	7,600
DUCKS UNLIMITED CONSERVATION EASEMENT BIOLOGISTS	2	18,438
NATIONAL WILD TURKEY FEDERATION REGIONAL BIOLOGIST	1	1,170
TOTALS	13	163,142



Cooperative Habitat Biologist Positions

- Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists
- Pheasant Forever Sage Grouse Initiative Biologist
- Ducks Unlimited Migratory Bird Biologist
- Ducks Unlimited Wetlands Reserve Program Biologist
- Ducks Unlimited Conservation Easement Biologist
- National Wild Turkey Federation Biologist

PUBLIC HUNTING ACCESS

WALK-IN AREAS • CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM • LOWER OAHE WATERFOWL ACCESS • CONTROLLED HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAM

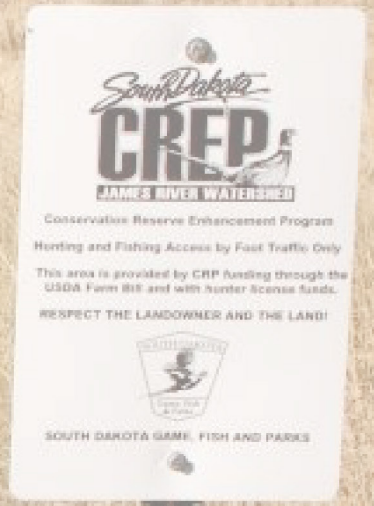
WALK-IN AREAS

The Walk-In Area (WIA) program was implemented in 1988 with the objective of improving public hunting access to private lands, with a specific emphasis on gaining hunter access to land enrolled in CRP. In 2014, approximately 1.25 million acres of private land was enrolled in WIA. Total WIA lease payments to private landowners for 2014 are estimated to be $2 million dollars.

In September 2014, GFP was awarded a three year $1.5 million dollar grant from USDA's Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program to provide signing bonuses for placing private lands enrolled in federal conservation programs like CRP and WRP in the WIA program for multiple years. GFP plans to enroll up to 50,000 acres of undisturbed habitat in the WIA with the assistance of this grant.

CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

GFP partnered with USDA in 2009 to develop a 100,000 acre Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in the James River Watershed. This partnership effort, designed to enroll private lands into CRP habitat practices with a public hunting and fishing access requirement, has cooperated with 787 landowners to date, and enrolled 81,823 acres at an annual cost of $3,021,602. New enrollment in CREP was temporarily suspended in 2014 as the budgetary cap for this program was met.



LOWER OAHE WATERFOWL ACCESS

Created in 1998 at the direction of the South Dakota Legislature, the Lower Oahe Waterfowl Access (LOWA) program leases private land around the Pierre and Ft. Pierre area for public waterfowl hunting access, offering hunters field decoy and pass shooting opportunities.

This program has maintained a hunter satisfaction score of approximately 80 percent since 2003. For the 2014-2015 hunting season, eight landowners have enrolled 36,700 acres in the LOWA at a cost of $212,573.

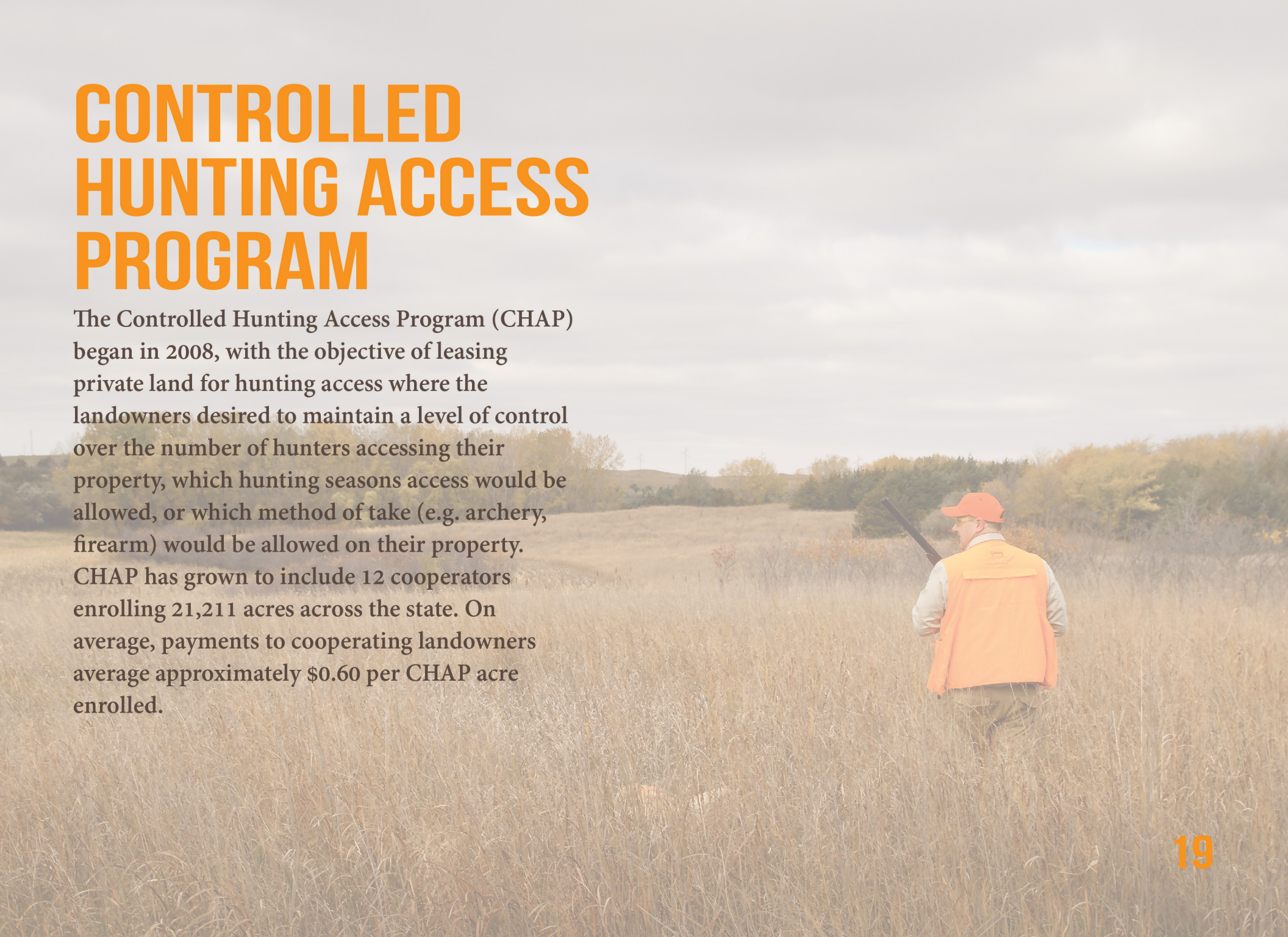
The 2013-2014 waterfowl season saw reduced use of the decoy-only waterfowl unit in the LOWA area than in 2012 with 544 groups (1,644 hunters) using the unit. An estimated total of 1,958 Canada geese were harvested at the decoy-only unit, down from the 3,707 harvested during the 2012-2013 season.

Mean hunter satisfaction has been high for the last ten years. On average, in 2013-2014 hunters' were moderately satisfied with their hunting experience on the LOWA area, with a majority of hunting groups (55 percent) very satisfied with their hunting experience in the decoy-only waterfowl area, with an additional 27 percent moderately or slightly satisfied.

Overall, 82 percent of hunting groups were satisfied with their hunting experience. Hunting groups who reported being satisfied with their hunting experience harvested approximately four more birds, on average, than groups reporting a neutral level of satisfaction or those reporting being dissatisfied. Groups who hunted in the early part of the 2013-2014 season had the highest average harvests with approximately five waterfowl (geese and ducks) per group. The majority of groups (60 percent) were from cities/towns outside the local area.

CONTROLLED HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAM

The Controlled Hunting Access Program (CHAP) began in 2008, with the objective of leasing private land for hunting access where the landowners desired to maintain a level of control over the number of hunters accessing their property, which hunting seasons access would be allowed, or which method of take (e.g. archery, firearm) would be allowed on their property. CHAP has grown to include 12 cooperators enrolling 21,211 acres across the state. On average, payments to cooperating landowners average approximately $0.60 per CHAP acre enrolled.



2014 HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAM SUMMARY

	CONTRACTS	ACRES	ACCESS LEASE COSTS
WALK-IN AREA	1,608	1,250,000	$2,050,000
CREP	833	81,823	$3,021,602
LOWA	8	36,700	$212,573
CHAP	12	21,211	$13,000
TOTALS	2,461	1,389,734	$5,297,175

HABITAT PARTNER OF THE YEAR

Habitat is key to healthy and abundant wildlife populations across South Dakota; both on public and private lands. Each year farmers, ranchers, and other landowners across South Dakota spend countless amounts of time, money, and energy to improve and create habitat on their property. To recognize these efforts and show appreciation for their commitment to our natural resources, GFP annually recognizes a worthy individual as its Habitat Partner of the Year.

The Habitat Partner of the Year is a person who shows leadership, innovation, and hard work in establishing and enhancing wildlife habitat on their land by utilizing Farm Bill conservation programs, taking part in private lands habitat programs offered by GFP or others, and serving as an example to other landowners by making wildlife habitat an important part of their farming or ranching operation.

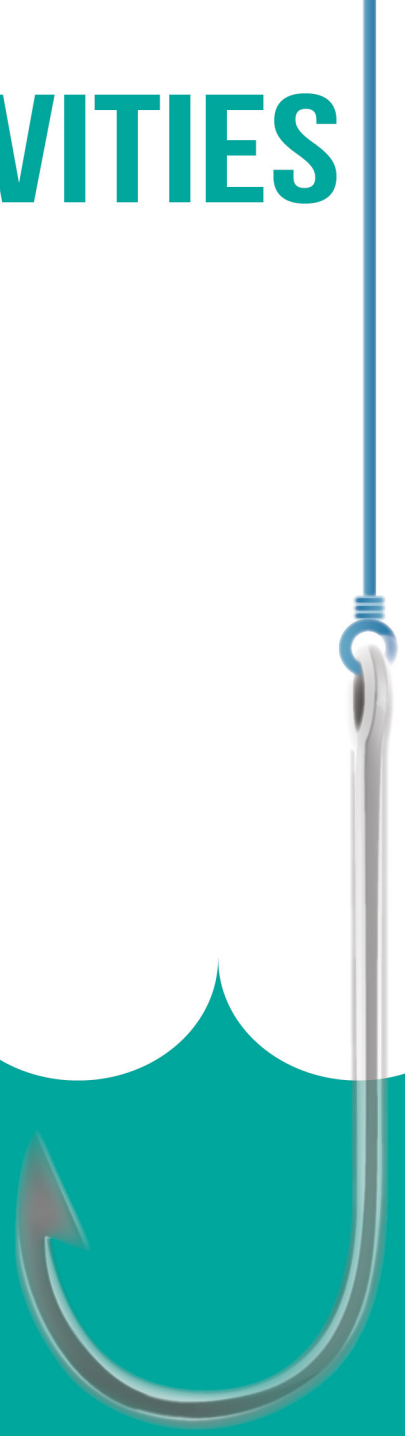
Four regional Habitat Partners of the Year are selected from nominations made by GFP biologists, managers, and conservation officers from across the state, with one of the four regional nominees being selected as the Habitat Partner of the Year. In 2014, Delwin Ochsner of Alpena was selected as GFP's Habitat Partner of the Year.

For decades, Del has effectively managed his Beadle County farm for both agriculture and wildlife. Del is mainly a livestock producer, but his operation includes a mix of cropland and native pastureland he manages for the benefit of both livestock and resident and migratory wildlife. He uses a rotational grazing system to ensure native grasses keep their vigor and ground nesting birds have a place to nest and raise their young. With his operation on both sides of Cain Creek, he works hard to maintain stable banks and adequate grass cover in riparian area; all of which benefit his cattle, wildlife, and water quality. GFP private lands biologists have also cooperated with Del on several habitat improvement projects over the years, including several fencing projects to enhance his grazing management systems and improve water quality both on and off his property.

Del is also a believer in taking care of the soil, and utilizes cover crops every year, many of which the local Canada geese and whitetail deer seem to also enjoy. He truly leads by example in how he runs his operation, understanding that what's good for land and wildlife is also good for his farming and ranching operation. Del also serves as a member of the GFP Southeast advisory panel, giving him an opportunity to share his experiences and observations about the landscape with others.

FISHING ACCESS ACTIVITIES
ON PRIVATE LANDS

In an effort to provide additional access to private lands for fishing opportunities, GFP utilizes fish management agreements with private landowners. Under these agreements, landowners provide reasonable public access to fishing waters on their lands, many of which are stocked by GFP. Anglers must still obtain access permission from the landowner, and utilize only legal fishing methods. GFP works with the landowner to establish certain management strategies designed to maintain or improve the overall fishing opportunities. Requests to stock warm water fish species are approved in January for stocking the upcoming summer, while stocking requests for cold water species like trout are approved in September of the year prior to the stocking date. Fish management agreements are usually for a ten year period on waters managed for warm water species, and for six years for trout waters. Currently GFP has 68 agreements in place, with 12 new agreements put in place last year. Over 20 waters on private land covered by fish management agreements were stocked in 2014.



EXAMPLES OF FISHING ACCESS
ON PRIVATE LANDS

GFP also uses fishing access lease agreements with private landowners when public access is unavailable or difficult. Several examples of this effort on private lands include:

BESLER RANCH - GFP has a long-term hunting and fishing access lease agreement with the Besler Ranch on approximately 16,646 acres in Perkins County. Rainbow trout, bluegill, largemouth bass, and yellow perch are currently stocked or managed in various combinations on three of the ponds located on the property. A "Disabled Hunting Access Area" is located on the north end of the ranch, and is available to disabled hunters and anglers using ATV's on designated trails. These trails provide access to two fishing ponds on the ranch.

OLIVET DAM IN HUTCHINSON COUNTY - boat ramp

JAMES RIVER HIGHWAY 38 ACCESS IN DAVISON COUNTY - primitive rock ramp

REID LAKE IN CLARK COUNTY - cement plank ramp, roll-in dock, and parking area

ANTELOPE LAKE IN DAY COUNTY - cement plank ramp, roll-in dock, and parking area

REETZ LAKE IN DAY COUNTY - cement plank ramp, roll-in dock, and parking area

CLEAR LAKE IN HAMLIN COUNTY - primitive rock ramp, roll-in dock and parking area

LAKE JOHN IN HAMLIN COUNTY - cement plank ramp and parking area

ANTELOPE LAKE IN CLARK COUNTY - primitive rock ramp and parking area

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