

# South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

2026-2028

## Habitat Stamp Strategic Approach



SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH AND PARKS

**HABITAT STAMP**

**THIS IS A HABITAT  
STAMP PROJECT**

Learn about how the habitat stamp  
benefits South Dakota by scanning the QR Code  
below or visiting [gfp.sd.gov](http://gfp.sd.gov).



*Special thanks to our project partners*



### **Agency Mission**

We serve and connect people and families to the outdoors through effective management of our state's parks, fisheries, and wildlife resources.

### **Agency Vision**

We will conserve our state's outdoor heritage to enhance the quality of life for current and future generations.

## **Executive Summary**

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) is charged with managing South Dakota's public lands and natural resources for current and future generations. South Dakota is home to abundant wildlife and recreational opportunities and one of the primary goals of GFP is to optimize the quantity and quality of sustainable hunting, fishing, camping, trapping and other outdoor recreational opportunities. As such, one of the highest priorities for GFP is habitat and access. To meet fish and wildlife resource stewardship responsibilities and provide opportunities for the public to use and enjoy these resources, GFP strives to continually improve habitat and access management of public and private lands. This is accomplished by expanding and creating new partnerships with landowners and conservation groups and remaining focused on improving existing aquatic and terrestrial habitat on private and public lands while seeking additional habitat acres. Furthermore, it is enhanced by providing additional public access to privately owned lands while continuously improving access to existing public lands. With the establishment of the Habitat Stamp, a new revenue source was created to help accomplish this. This strategic approach is meant to guide actions for the next three years as to how those funds are expended to accomplish projects that benefit both the wildlife and users of South Dakota.

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## **Introduction:**

During the 2020 South Dakota Legislative Session, Senate Bill 75 was passed to create a Habitat Stamp that would add an annual fee to all South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) license buyers to be used solely for terrestrial and aquatic habitat and access projects in South Dakota (SDCL 41-6-85; Appendix A). As of July 1, 2020, a Habitat Stamp is required for anyone 18 years of age or older when purchasing or applying for a hunting, fishing or furbearer license in South Dakota. The annual fee for the Habitat Stamp is \$10 for residents and \$25 for nonresidents. However, a purchase of the Habitat Stamp is not required for the one-day hunting or fishing license, youth hunting license, private shooting preserve license, hunt for habitat application fee, or landowner hunting license. Habitat Stamp funds associated with fishing license sales will fund aquatic habitat projects on public waters across South Dakota. Habitat stamp funds associated with hunting and furbearer license sales will fund wildlife habitat developments and public access improvements on GFP lands across South Dakota. If someone purchases a combination license, funds will be split evenly between terrestrial and aquatic habitat. The Habitat Stamp purchase is associated with the first license purchased by an individual and is not necessary for subsequent license purchases.

Approximately, \$5 million are generated annually from the sales of Habitat Stamps. While it may vary interannually, the split between aquatic and terrestrial has been around 50/50. The use of these funds is limited to projects that directly benefit habitat and access and cannot be used for purchase of property and equipment. A detailed report of expenditures is provided annually to the Government Operations and Audit Committee (Appendix B).

Aquatic Habitat Stamp funds are estimated to be approximately \$2.5 million annually. These will be used for projects in three categories:

1. Large-scale projects– Projects of this nature can come in many forms and a “one size fits all” approach by staff is unrealistic. When determining what is considered “large scale”, considerations of cost, staff time, partners involved, etc., will be taken into account. As such, no set thresholds exist to determine what qualifies; however, a clear separation would be evident when comparing all projects accomplished within the program annually. In certain cases, GFP may be the lead agency (e.g., renovation of the Lower Booth Dam on the Ft. Pierre National Grasslands) or simply a partner with another entity acting as the lead (e.g., West Dam in Custer, SD).
2. Small-scale habitat and access projects– Designed to improve water quality, access, fish habitat, etc. These projects are smaller in nature and can include activities such as dredging, aeration, stream restoration, artificial structure placement and access development/leases (e.g., shore fishing, urban and community fisheries).
3. Dam infrastructure improvements– On an annual basis, all GFP-owned dams are inspected for maintenance needs by internal staff. If additional information or an in-depth inspection is needed, a private engineering firm will be hired. The associated inspection form allows for “smaller scale” needs to be address annually. Larger repair needs will be worked into a priority schedule based on dam hazard classification (low, significant, or high) as well as

dam priority. The dam priority is based on a rating system considering the reservoir characteristics, land quality, and dam characteristics.

Terrestrial Habitat Stamp funds are estimated to be approximately \$2.5 to \$3 million annually. These will be used for projects in the following categories:

1. Habitat improvements on GFP owned property – Projects on land owned by GFP and includes native grass seedings, pollinator plantings, tree plantings, food plots, grass and forest enhancement, and grazing infrastructure.
2. Access improvements for GFP owned property – Projects will provide new or improve access for users on GFP owned property. Projects of this nature include waterfowl access trails, road and trail improvement on and to get to these lands, primitive waterfowl boat launches, handicap access trails and access points, additional parking areas and other various access projects.
3. Opening private property up for public hunting and fishing access – Consist of private lands being enrolled in public access programs for hunting and fishing while promoting sound habitat management. Programs will include the James River Watershed and Big Sioux River Watershed Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs (CREP), which open lands up for hunting and fishing. The Walk-In Area (WIA) program will also be part of this category and opens private land up for public hunting.

### **Habitat and access staffing:**

Having staff dedicated to habitat and access is nothing new to GFP. However, with the addition of these funds, an increased emphasis was made by the Wildlife Division to staff the program at a level where revenue from the sale of Habitat Stamps could be efficiently and effectively translated into projects across the state that benefited wildlife habitat and user access.

### **Aquatics:**

A total of six Aquatic Habitat and Access Biologists (AHABs) are located across the state. To provide local support, an AHAB is located in each of the four administrative regions. Due to the large and diverse area that the western administrative region of GFP encompasses, two AHABs are located in this region. Additionally, to assist with the large number of aquatic resources found in northeast administrative region, a Wildlife Resource Biologist is located in Watertown.

### **Terrestrial:**

Each of the four administrative regions across the state have public lands habitat staff that are comprised of a program manager, resource biologists, conservation foreman, and conservation technicians. Annually, regions will also hire seasonal staff along with interns to assist with projects through the spring, summer and fall. These employees implement the development and management of habitat on Game Production Areas (GPAs). Historically, there have been few

changes in the number of full-time employees for habitat management on GPAs. However, approximately a decade ago GFP developed an agreement with Habitat Forever to begin establishing Habitat Specialist Teams. Habitat Forever is a subsidiary of Pheasants Forever who provide for hire full-service habitat assistance teams to private landowners and state agencies in several states across the country. These teams are made up of one full-time staff and one seasonal staff that are employees of Habitat Forever. In South Dakota their primary duty is to work directly with regional GFP habitat staff to develop, improve, and manage habitat and access on GPAs. These teams were originally stationed around the state with one in each region. This has since evolved over the years so that each of the four regions now have two teams working on GPAs. These eight teams are funded with GFP dollars. The addition of these teams has significantly increased the number of habitat projects that can be completed annually.

Outside of management of publicly owned lands GFP increased the number of habitat biologists working with private landowners from four to twelve during 2020. Each region has three Private Lands Habitat Biologists who work on habitat projects on private land but also spend a great deal of time working on hunting access. These staff deliver GFP's private lands habitat and access programs, promote the James River Watershed and Big Sioux River Watershed CREP, promote and enroll land into the Walk-In Area and Controlled Hunting Access Program, promote USDA conservation programs such as Conservation Reserve Program, and work closely with other conservation partners. These additional staff will continue to enroll private land into public hunting access across the state creating more opportunities for hunters.

#### *Partner biologists:*

GFP has partnered with several non-government organizations (NGOs) to support biologists within their organizations to work on private land habitat and access programs in South Dakota. Some of these include Pheasants Forever, National Wild Turkey Federation, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, American Bird Conservancy, along with others. In most of these cases, GFP is providing match dollars that the organization uses to acquire additional federal grant dollars to support the position. These positions collaborate with GFP staff to meet with landowners and enroll new lands in habitat and access programs across the state.

#### *Staff salary, travel and per diem:*

Expenses by GFP staff for salary, travel and per diem, directly connected to new habitat stamp project development and implementation, will be covered by Habitat Stamp funds. New time and expense codes have been created to accurately track these expenses. There are development and implementation codes for both aquatic and terrestrial staff to use to keep these expenses separated.

Development coding will be used for activities related to the planning/design of an approved terrestrial habitat stamp project such as meetings, scheduling and coordination. Coding of staff is generally related to office hours; however, it can include travel and per diem for site visits associated with planning.

Implementation coding will be used for activities related to the implementation/construction of an approved terrestrial habitat stamp project. This can include travel and per diem for picking up supplies and materials, onsite installation, site preparation, planting, construction, or assembly and general field work required for completion of a project.

In addition to development and implementation codes a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) code has been developed for terrestrial staff. This coding will be used for activities such as reviewing, approving, and sign maintenance on new or previously enrolled Big Sioux River Watershed CREP contracts.

These codes will only be used when working on projects that will be funded with the Habitat Stamp.

**Habitat and access project types:**

*South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks owned property:*

Projects terrestrial in nature will take place on or as part of access to GPAs, Water Access Areas (WAA), and State Parks and Recreation Areas. These properties are owned, operated, and managed by the GFP and are located across the state (Figure 1). Although smaller in size, GPAs and WAAs are more abundant east of the Missouri River creating opportunities for a greater number of projects in that part of the state. Projects will be considered on United States Forest Service property, School and Public Lands, Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs), and other publicly accessible properties across the state where public hunting is allowed and when the jurisdictional agency and GFP mutually agree on a project.

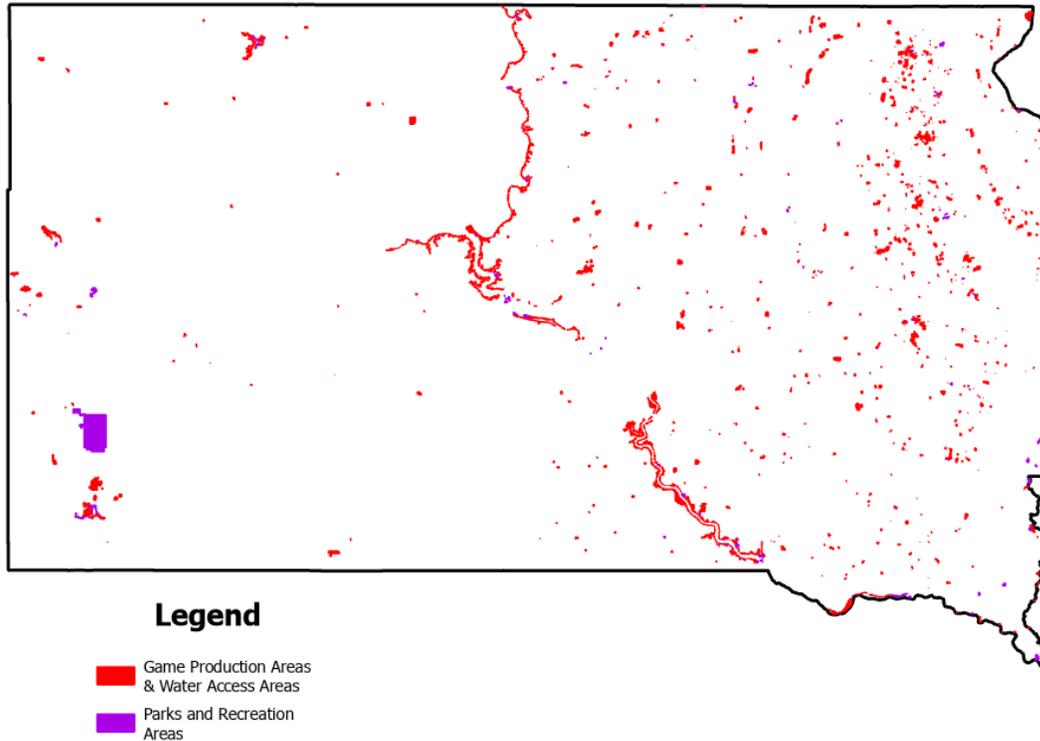


Figure 1. Distribution of South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks owned property.

*Private property:*

Access to private owned property for hunting and fishing will take place through GFP access programs. These programs include the James River Watershed CREP, Big Sioux Watershed CREP, Aquatic Access Leases, and WIA program. These properties remain owned and operated by the landowner and Habitat Stamp funds will simply be used as payment to lease these properties for public hunting and fishing access. All these programs are voluntary in nature with cooperating landowners.

Public waters:

*Impoundments (man-made lakes):*

Impoundments throughout South Dakota are reaching or have already surpassed their useful life expectancy. Most of these structures were constructed during the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) programs during the 1920's through the 1940's. South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks owns 77 impoundments and has an interest in approximately 82 additional that are owned by South Dakota School and Public Lands. Several of these impoundments are suffering from failing infrastructure such as control structures, spillways or the dam itself. These impoundments have high levels of sediment loading and in turn excessive nutrient loading that leads to algae blooms and low

dissolved oxygen levels, during both summer and winter. Studies have also shown that small impoundments play a significant role in people's quality of life, even in remote locations. Many of these impoundments are "aging-out" and are no longer considered productive. In situations like this, steps to mitigate reservoir aging can include dredging, aeration and placement of fish habitat structures.

#### *Natural lakes:*

Most of the natural lakes within South Dakota are in the eastern half of the state. Many of the larger natural lakes in the area are highly developed. These are destination lakes for many people, both residents and non-residents. Due to development, many of these lakes have lost their functioning shoreline habitat through conversion of native plant materials to highly manicured and landscaped yards. Examples of natural lakes with high percentages of development would include Lake Kampeska, Lake Poinsett, Pickerel Lake, and Lake Madison; to a lesser degree: Enemy Swim Lake, Roy Lake, Blue Dog Lake and Pelican Lake. With many of the larger natural lakes having limited land available for future development, development is trending to smaller, more marginal bodies of water. Shoreline development expedites the degradation of the water quality through erosion and excessive nutrients. To mitigate these factors, shoreline stabilization projects and planting of native vegetation are useful tools.

#### *Rivers and streams:*

Rivers and streams in South Dakota are very diverse. Most of the current work on rivers and streams in South Dakota has been focused in the Black Hills area. The Black Hills area is defined by numerous narrow valleys, high plateaus, and well-defined drainages. A lot of the streams in the Black Hills are highly modified with the construction of numerous small dams by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's and 1940's. They still provide excellent fisheries but are now faced with sediment, vegetation, structure, and stream warming issues downstream of the dams. Other issues facing streams is pollution, excessive nutrient loading, and loss of habitat (especially around urban areas).

Western South Dakota rivers make up 7 main drainages that are tributaries for the Missouri River from the west. These tributaries and the small rivers, streams, and intermittent streams that carve out the rugged terrain of the high plains are the basis for most of the aquatic habitat in western South Dakota.

Central South Dakota is dominated by the Missouri River, which is the longest river system in North America. The Missouri River is the most altered aquatic management area in South Dakota consisting of four major dams that have severely altered the form and function of the river and the associated aquatic species assemblages. Stretches of free-flowing river only exist below Fort Randall Dam and Gavin's Point Dam.

Eastern South Dakota rivers are defined by the most recent glacial event which left rolling plains and potholes. Three major aquatic ecosystems are the James, Vermillion, and Big Sioux River

drainages with their associated tributary creeks make up the bulk of the aquatic habitat found in eastern South Dakota.

#### Terrestrial projects on publicly owned property:

There are several types of terrestrial projects that will be funded with Habitat Stamp revenue. However, the vast majority can be grouped into the following categories.

##### *Native grass and pollinator plantings*

Grassland habitats are a critical on the landscape in South Dakota for many wildlife species. This habitat provides nesting cover important for the reproduction of pheasants, grouse, waterfowl, turkeys, and many other upland nesting bird species. These projects can have one of the greatest impacts on production of wildlife as well as providing quality cover for users to hunt and harvest game.

In general, these projects will consist of seeding down existing cropland to diverse stands of native grass and forbs or by converting unproductive old Smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass fields into diverse stands of native grasses and forbs. Projects of this nature usually required one to three years of site preparation time and one to two years for establishment once seed is planted. Seed mixes in most cases will be a diverse mixture of 40 or more species of native grasses and forbs. In some locations pollinator plantings will be completed that contain relatively few grass species and are dominated by flowering forbs that will bloom throughout the growing season. These pollinator plots serve as brood rearing habitat for species, such as pheasants, who's young require an abundance of insects as a food source. These projects will be completed by GFP staff, and through contracts with conservation districts and private land management contractors.

##### *Woody habitat plantings*

Woody cover and shelterbelts play an important role in South Dakota for wildlife, especially during severe winters. Like grassland, woody cover provides habitat for a broad range of species. This habitat provides wildlife cover, food, bedding and fawning area and travel corridors among other things. These projects involve a year of site preparation followed by planting. Once trees are planted establishment takes approximately three to five years before the planting can be selfsustained. Establishment methods include weed barrier fabric, tillage, mowing, and spraying in-between rows and trees to minimize competition. These plantings are a minimum of eight rows wide, and many times ten or more. A diverse mix of tree and shrub species will be used with consideration given to those that produce fruit, seeds, and nuts valuable to wildlife. Species with short maximum height will be placed on the outside rows with gradual increases in species height to the center of the shelterbelt. This design provides the best cover and protection for wildlife species.

These projects will be completed by GFP staff, and through contracts with conservation districts and private land management contractors.

### *Food plots*

Food sources for wildlife can have an impact on overall body condition and reproduction. Although there are many food sources found on the landscape, supplementing with food plots in strategic places can be beneficial. Food plots are typically located in protected areas near shelterbelts and other good cover. This setup reduces risks to wildlife and the travel distance between food and cover.

Food plots funded with Habitat Stamp revenue will include corn, sorghum, soybeans, sunflowers, small grain, and many other upland game and deer mixes. These plots will vary in size from as small as 1 acre up to 10 or more acres depending on the location and other factors. Beyond the benefit to wildlife many hunters seek out food plots as they tend to concentrate game and increase hunter success. These plantings are annual in nature and are replanted year after year. Using Habitat Stamp funds for this type of project will be primarily done under a contract with a local agricultural producer or private land management company.

### *Grassland and forest enhancement (i.e., undesirable woody species removal)*

Undesirable woody species have a significant impact on grassland and forest ecosystems. In grassland habitats, species such as Eastern Red Cedar, Green Ash, Elm species, and Buckthorn to list a few will self-seed and invade. As woody species continue to grow the grassland habitat availability required for upland nesting birds is degraded thus reducing their reproduction. Some grassland bird species will avoid grasslands with visual obstructions woody species create. Habitat stamp funding will be used to hire contractors to remove woody species from grasslands. Retaining these diverse upland grassland habitats will greatly benefit wildlife species and game species available to hunters.

Forests can be enhanced by removing undesirable and invasive woody species that tend to dominate and become monocultures. Examples of this may include removing invasive buckthorn from an understory allowing other native shrub and tree species to grow and regenerate. Another example would be the removal of pines or cedars from a forest understory to reduce competition for a regenerating young oak or aspen stands. These young, desired tree species will be the forest of the future that wildlife is dependent upon. Additionally, a diverse understory provides browse important for ungulates and other species.

This type of project will usually involve a cut, stack, and burn or a grind-mulch in place method. In most cases it will require forestry equipment, however some handwork may also be done. Herbicide treatments may also be required to keep undesirables from growing back. These projects will be completed by hiring a contractor with required equipment to complete the work.

### *Access roads and trail improvement*

With over 720 GPAs scattered across the state and various other publicly owned property retaining good access routes to all areas is important to users. Some roads and trails are requiring improvements to open them back up for vehicle access to these public areas. Funds will be used for culverts, reshaping, and graveling roads and trails. In some instances, a new

road or trail will be created where no road or trail historically existed. In these cases, this new road or trail will create access to a property the public previously maybe had no or limited access. With both a road improvement or development, GFP will work with and complete an authorized agreement with the jurisdictional owner (State, County, Township) of the road. This however will be unnecessary if the road or trail is located on property owned by GFP.

These projects will usually require up to a year of preparation to meet with local entities, engineers, and contractors to develop a final project scope and plan. Most of these projects will be completed by local contractors and coordinated by GFP staff.

#### *Waterfowl access trails and ramps*

Waterfowl hunting can include a fair amount of equipment such as decoys, small boats, etc. The effort to get these items out onto a small wetland or a body of water can be demanding. Habitat stamp funding will be used to install trails and small rock boat ramps to improve and increase opportunities to get on the water with waterfowl hunting gear. These trails will allow vehicles to drive out onto the GPA to drop decoys off near water or launch small boats. In some cases, it will involve improving a trail that already exists or adding a rock ramp at the end of a vehicle trail for launching boats.

These projects can vary in size and can be completed by GFP staff or local contractors. Waterfowl access project are generally multi-use projects as they often benefit other types of aquatic related activities. South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks will partner to install these types of projects on federal WPAs and other property open to the public that is not owned by GFP when opportunities exist.

#### *Grassland management infrastructure*

Healthy grasslands are more productive for wildlife and improve opportunities for hunters to harvest game. Managing grasslands to keep them healthy, diverse, and productive can be completed in several ways however grazing is one of the best tools for managers. Grazing is commonly used on GFP property with a prescription that will achieve desired goals and objectives. These typically include reducing invasive cool season grasses, rejuvenating plant vigor, reducing duff, recycling nutrients, promoting native species, diversifying plant community and many others. Grazing infrastructure is needed to complete this management practice. Habitat stamp funding will provide livestock watering resources and cross fencing to develop paddocks to concentrate livestock in desired locations. Watering structures will also provide water resources for wildlife. Installing this infrastructure will allow managers to develop a management plan for rotating livestock around in future years to enhance all grassland on the property.

GFP staff will work with contractors to install this infrastructure and then with local landowners to implement a grazing plan to improve habitat.

## Access projects on private land for public hunting and fishing access:

### *James River Watershed CREP*

The South Dakota James River Watershed CREP Project began October 23, 2009. The project is a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency and GFP. This voluntary program allows landowners within the watershed to enroll in the program under a 10 or 15-year agreement. Following enrollment land is seeded down primarily to native grasses and forbs. The landowner will receive annual payments from the USDA on a soil based rental rate and other practice incentives. In addition to these annual payments, GFP provides the landowner annual payments that are equal to 31% of the base soil rental rate. This GFP incentive payment opens the property for public hunting and fishing. The acre cap for this CREP project is 100,000 acres. Habitat Stamp dollars will be used to provide the GFP 31% on the approximately 25,000 acres that remain to be enrolled to reach the acreage cap. This watershed project is located in east central South Dakota and includes Aurora, Beadle, Bon Homme, Brown, Clark, Davison, Day, Douglas, Edmunds, Faulk, Hand, Hanson, Hutchinson, Hyde, Jerauld, Kingsbury, McCook, McPherson, Marshall, Miner, Potter, Roberts, Sanborn, Spink, and Yankton counties. At full enrollment this project creates 100,000 acres of perennial habitat open to the public for hunting and fishing. It also improves water quality, reduces soil erosion, enhances wildlife habitat, creates nesting habitat for pheasants and ducks, as well supports big game, pollinators, songbirds, and other non-game species.

### *Big Sioux River Watershed CREP*

The South Dakota Big Sioux River Watershed CREP Project got underway in November 2022. Modeled after the James River Watershed CREP the guidelines remain the same; however, GFP will provide annual incentive payments of 34% of the base soil rental rate. This cost will be funded by habitat stamp dollars. This watershed CREP has a cap of 25,000 acres located in eastern South Dakota. The watershed includes all or parts of Brookings, Clark, Clay, Codington, Day, Deuel, Grant, Hamlin, Kingsbury, Lake, Lincoln, Marshall, McCook, Minnehaha, Moody, Roberts, Turner, and Union counties. Habitat Stamp funds used to assist in enrolling acres into this program will create 25,000 acres of perennial habitat. These acres will be open to the public for hunting and fishing. This CREP watershed is in a portion of the state that is densely populated and in need of more public places for users to recreate. As with the James River Watershed CREP, this watershed project will also have abundant positive environmental impacts on the landscape and waters in the area.

### *Walk-in Area program*

The WIA program was initiated in 1988 and has been a very successful program ever since. This voluntary program allows landowners to enroll their lands with quality habitat and hunting opportunities into the program. Enrollment into this program opens the land to public hunting in exchange for an annual lease payment provided by GFP to the landowner. Annual lease payments range from \$1 to \$15 per acre. In 2025 over 1.4 million acres were enrolled in the program and open to public hunting. GFP will continue to seek out new enrollments into this

program to add more acres of public hunting access. Annual payments for new contracts may be funded with Habitat Stamp funds. In an effort to enroll tracts for multiple years, GFP has been providing a signing bonus. This bonus can be up to \$10 per acre per the number of years of the contract and is paid upfront. In the southwestern part of South Dakota this bonus payment can be up to \$5/acre/year enrolled. Bonus money is only eligible on multiyear contracts meaning two or more and only on permanent habitat that is undisturbed (not hayed, grazed, burned, etc.) or lands that offer priority big game hunting opportunity. If the cooperator backs out of the contract prior to its expiration, they must repay the entire signing bonus to GFP.

Historically, GFP has sought out the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program Grant (VPA-HIP) and used awarded funds to cover the cost of signing bonuses made on WIA contracts. South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks will continue to seek out these federal grant funds in the future. When grant dollars are not available GFP will use Habitat Stamp funds to cover the cost of WIA contract signing bonuses. This will allow GFP to offer consistent program options to all interested landowners regardless of availability of grant dollars.

#### Aquatic projects on public waters:

##### *Infrastructure improvements*

Maintenance and improvement of infrastructure, such as dams, spillways and boat ramps, is an important component of the Aquatic Habitat and Access Program. Many of the dam and spillway structures are over 80 years old and work is needed to keep them in an operating condition to ensure that fisheries can exist. Maintenance and improvements of structures, typically done by contractors, can vary in scale from small crack sealing to complete replacement.

##### *In-stream habitat diversification*

Many rivers and streams across the state have been modified in some shape or fashion, which has decreased the amount of habitat diversification. Some modifications like dams have changed the species composition of drainages. Efforts have been made to provide more habitat diversification back into rivers and streams. Much of the existing work has taken place in the Black Hills management area for the benefit of trout species. The modifications have not only changed the number of different habitats present but also the hydrology of the stream and average water temperature is higher. The primary objectives are to create deep water, remove sediment by flushing, add cover for fish, or add woody structure and food for other organisms. Techniques include channel blocks, boulders, cover logs, root wads, bank cribs, wing deflectors, channel constrictors, revetments, and wedge dams.

## *Aeration*

Aeration is a technique used in lake management to increase the amount of dissolved oxygen content of the water. Aeration is accomplished by several different types of systems for either injecting air, mechanically mixing or agitating the water, or even injecting pure oxygen. By increasing the amount of dissolved oxygen, lakes can see an increase in fish and other aquatic animal habitat, prevent fish kills, improve the quality of domestic and industrial water supplies, and decrease industrial treatment costs. In some cases, aeration has also been observed to reduce nuisance algal blooms and/or have a shift to less objectionable algae species. However, when not used properly, aeration can cause more harm than good. It is important to understand the limitations of aeration and use appropriately.

## *Fish Habitat Structures – Natural and Artificial*

Lakes and impoundments across the state are aging and most are lacking in-lake habitat. Deploying either artificial or natural structures has occurred throughout South Dakota. Natural structures include gravel beds, rock piles/reefs, and submerged/felled trees. Conifers have been submerged by anchoring with cable or cement to create spawning structure for yellow perch and as fish attractants around fishing piers. Other types of trees have been submerged as well, but hardwoods and cedars persist longer. This is a cost-effective technique, as trees can be collected from multiple sources. Some waterbodies have ample shoreline woody habitat, while other waters are lacking nearshore structure.

Gravel bed and rock piles/reefs are more costly but equally effective and much longer lasting. The best time for deployment is during maintenance or drawdowns, with heavy machinery. If this option is not available, they can be deployed off boat/barges equipped to handle the weight. These are also used as offshore habitat as well as fish attractors near shore or fishing piers.

Artificial structures can be commercially built or constructed by staff/groups. Constructed fish habitat can vary in shape and size and can be made from several different materials like plastic pipe or fencing, pallets, or wood. Some examples of more popular artificial structure designs include Pennsylvania porcupine crib and crib Jr., Pennsylvania post clusters, Georgia cube, Pennsylvania black bass nesting structures, Mossback™ fish cities, modified spider blocks, Porcupine Ball™, or Honey Hole™.

## *Aquatic Access Improvements*

Numerous management actions can be taken to improve access to fisheries located on public property. To improve shore fishing opportunities, emergent vegetation has reduced shoreline accessibility, requiring removal of this vegetation to restore shore fishing opportunities. Additionally, the placement of fishing piers and nodes can improve access, including that which meets Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

To improve access to fisheries by watercraft, improvement or installation of boat ramps is the primary approach. Ramps can vary in size from a multi-lane concrete ramp to a primitive

gravel ramp. Location and potential use are primary drivers used in determining the proper size boat ramp for a fishery.

### *Fisheries renovations*

In certain cases, a renovation of a fishery is needed for restoration. This may include a chemical renovation where a piscicide (e.g., rotenone) is used to eliminate the current fish community and then desired species are stocked to re-establish the fishery. Draining of the waterbody is also another approach for a renovation. Many times, dredging of sediments is often associated with the draining as material may be accessed more easily when the system is dry. Regardless of the kind of renovation, this process usually requires a substantial amount of planning and permitting. However, many systems are in need of this effort as reservoir aging and sedimentation have created scenarios where other management actions (e.g., in-lake habitat placement) are not likely to have desired results.

### Aquatic projects on private lands:

#### *Shoreline restorations*

The Aquatic Shoreline Restoration Program allows private landowners to partner with GFP to restore sections of shoreline to native plants. In many cases, shoreline property is manicured, and the vegetation component lacks complexity (e.g., Kentucky bluegrass). Restoring to native vegetation allows for increased filtering of above ground run-off and bank stabilization.

#### *Access agreements*

In many cases access to public waters can be created or improved by working with private landowners. Multiple different options exist to provide public access on private property to public surface waters of the state. One way is through the Fisheries Management Agreement. This program would allow a landowner to receive fisheries management advice and activities by GFP. Additionally, stockings of fish may occur on the waterbody. A financial component also exists and would allow the landowner to be compensated annually. In return, open public access is allowed to the fishery. Another example would be a Aquatic Access Lease where GFP would lease a portion of property that would allow for users to access a waterbody. When available, the addition of a Voluntary Public Access component may allow for certain financial incentives, such as a signing bonus.

### **Project Identification and Resource Planning:**

#### *Terrestrial*

In 2018 and 2023 GFP habitat staff completed a statewide GPA assessment. These assessments included evaluating and ranking every GPA and WAA on a scale of 1 to 10 for habitat quality and public use. During this process staff identified potential projects that would improve these areas to bring them to their full potential. Once the Habitat Stamp was enacted staff started and continue to work through each area making improvements. These improvements may include

projects identified during this 2018 or 2023 assessment or any that have been identified since that exercise. Habitat Stamp funds will be used to improve habitat quality and access to these areas above and beyond normal management and projects that would typically be completed. Outside of these assessments experienced habitat staff, along with others throughout GFP, have been identifying opportunities for improvement on these areas for wildlife and users.

### *Aquatics*

Annually aquatic staff, along with staff in GFP, have been meeting regionally to identify aquatic habitat and access projects. This process was something that took place prior to the Habitat Stamp. This process allows input from a broad spectrum of staff including the parks division. Lists of projects continue to be developed and prioritized. Many larger aquatic projects take substantial engineering and preparation before work can begin and be completed. Staff will continue to meet and identify projects to improve habitat and access on public waters.

### *Resources and partnerships*

Projects involve a broad range of people and entities. Beyond GFP staff, these include private contractors, conservation districts, land management companies, engineers, NGO's, federal and state partners, counties, townships, municipalities, landowners, and many others. GFP staff will seek out and work with all entities and partners to provide the best quality project for both users and wildlife. This may be a complex process to navigate, but in the end, it creates a project everyone who's involved with it can support.

## **Habitat and Access Project Reporting:**

### *Online*

The GFP website has a section identified as "Where the Money Goes": <https://gfp.sd.gov/where-the-money-goes/>. A Habitat Stamp dashboard has been set up through this section so the public can view a map showing locations of Habitat Stamp projects, with many projects containing photos. They can also view an itemized list of projects along with their cost. This public reporting method provides clear transparency on how Habitat Stamp dollars are being spent. The map will be updated throughout the year as projects are completed.

### *Government Operations and Audit Committee (GOAC)*

Annually, GFP staff will develop and present a report to GOAC following the end of a fiscal year. This report will include a general overview of the number of various types of projects completed, a detailed itemized project list including cost, and a map of project locations across the state (Figure 3).

### Aquatic, Terrestrial, and Private Lands Hunting Access Habitat Stamp Project Locations

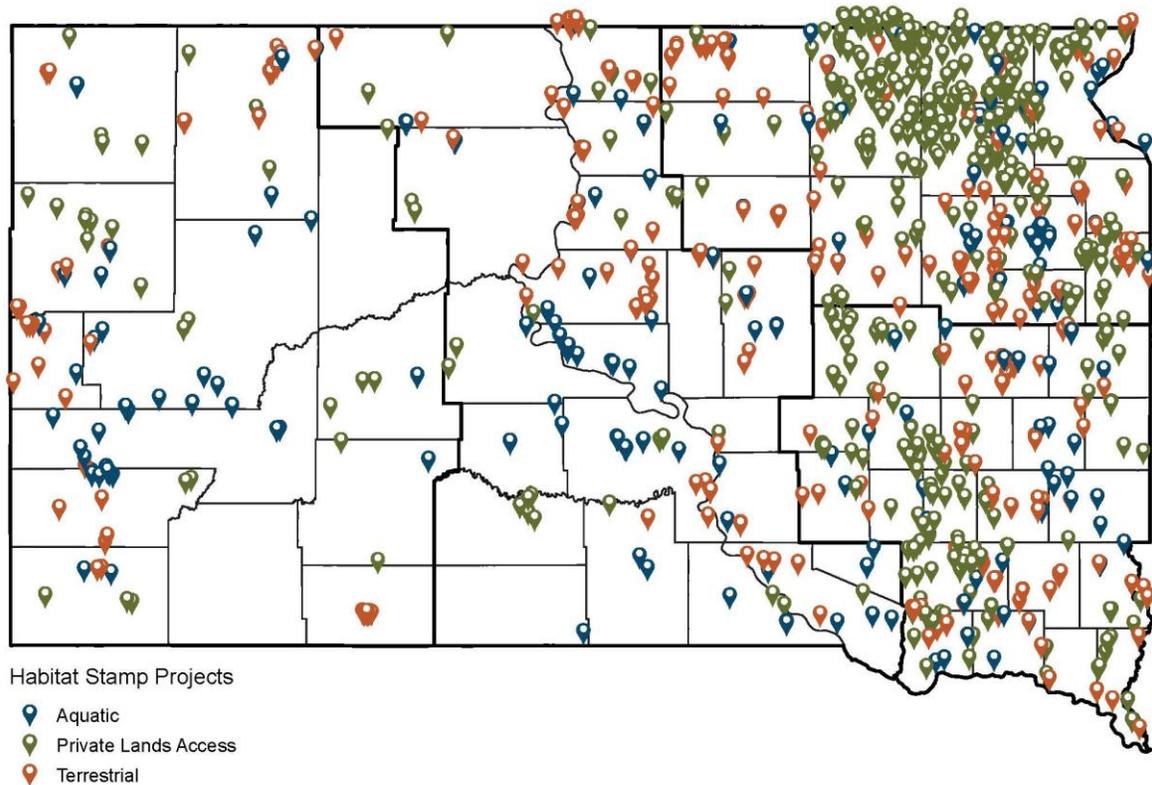


Figure 3. Locations of completed project across South Dakota using Habitat Stamp funds through July of 2025.

#### *Social media platforms*

The GFP communications team will also share Habitat Stamp funded projects, photos, information, and success stories across various platforms. This effort will continue to share with the public how this money is positively impacting public land and waters and ultimately their experience hunting, fishing, and trapping.

#### *Signage*

Signs have been developed for the field as another way for users to identify Habitat Stamp projects. Signs 12” wide by 18” tall will be installed on metal posts next to completed Habitat Stamp funded projects where applicable (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Signage posted at locations of completed projects using completed Habitat Stamp funds.

### **Challenges:**

#### Terrestrial:

##### *Site preparation*

Various projects that will be funded with Habitat Stamp dollars require site preparation. These projects will include, but are not limited, to native grass seedings, woody habitat plantings, and food plots. These types of projects require soil bed preparation for up to three years in advance. This can create a challenge in the ability for staff to implement projects quickly forcing projects to sit in the planning phase until sites are ready. Staff will diligently plan and start this preparation phase of these types of projects as soon as they are identified. Staff will also consider the overarching volume of projects scheduled and funding available to ensure project success.

##### *Weather*

Weather conditions will play an enormous role in the volume of projects that can be completed and the success of those projects. Some projects that include planting or seeding require soil conditions conducive for implements and equipment to function. Other projects such as road and trail improvements will also be highly impacted. Unfavorable conditions like flooding, drought, cold, snow, or prolonged rainy seasons will delay projects weeks, months or even until the next year.

##### *Contractors*

Habitat Stamp projects are above and beyond the very aggressive workload staff are normally scheduled to complete and maintain. This requires staff to heavily rely on outside contractors to

complete most of the Habitat Stamp projects planned. Many times, contractors have a very full schedule and are unable to fit this work in, so staff are forced to delay the project. Staff's available time to manage contracts and contractors' availability will determine how long it may take to get some of these projects completed.

### *Permitting and agreements*

All federal and state policies and permitting procedures will be followed. Prior to any work being completed by GFP or assigned contractors on property under the authority of another entity such as a township, county, etc. an agreement authorizing work will be completed. Other permitting and clearances such as cultural, State Historic Preservation Office, and those required by the Clean Water Act require additional time to be approved before some projects can begin.

### *Opportunities*

In the world of habitat and access things are always changing and plans need to remain fluid. As plans are developed and site preparations begin to take place opportunities may arise that were unforeseen during the initial planning phase. Staff will take advantage of these when they present themselves. It's best to take this approach even if it adds to the overall time to complete the project. An example could be improving an access road and then determining there is an opportunity to add in a waterfowl access point or small boat ramp by expanding the trail further or altering its path.

### *Establishment phase*

Many of the projects that involve planting require an establishment phase. Projects such as native grass, trees, and pollinator plantings require multiple years to establish. Once established they will provide their full potential to the wildlife and users of the area. Unpredictable weather such as drought and flooding can extend this process. Users' expectations of projects in the establishment phase should be less than fully established seedings.

### Aquatics:

#### *Aging infrastructure*

South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks owns roughly 77 dams around the state. Most of these dams were built by the Civilian Conservation Corporation (CCC) in the 1930's and 40's. Deferred maintenance in many cases resulted in aging infrastructure that saw little to no maintenance during its lifetime.

#### *Sedimentation*

Erosion is a common problem in most waters in South Dakota. Erosion is not only a source of sedimentation and turbidity but also reduces suitability of riparian habitat for vegetation and wildlife. Riparian zones may provide suitable habitat for aquatic vegetation growth, but wave energy and currents severely limit density, diversity, and distribution on unprotected shorelines.

### *Nutrient loading*

Shallow basins, combined with surface water run-off associated with land-use practices has resulted in many systems in South Dakota to be eutrophic and hyper-eutrophic. This can complicate fisheries and habitat management. In many cases, few options exist other than to try and reduce the amount of nutrients entering system or that are currently bound within it. Numerous water quality issues associated with aspects such as dissolved oxygen levels or temperature can result.

### *Contractors*

Securing reliable and affordable contractors has proven to be a challenge in certain instances. Many of the habitat and access projects occur in remote areas of the state, which can increase costs of certain aspects of a project, such as mobilization.

### *Permitting*

Depending on the scope of work, multiple layers of permitting may be required prior to initiating a project to ensure that all approvals have been secure. Permitting occurs at multiple levels and can include additional effort and in some cases, specific engineering to ensure that clearances are given.

### *Engineering*

Professional engineering is often necessary for projects to secure necessary clearances and permitting. While engineering may be done internally, high volumes of workload often limit the number of Aquatic projects that can be evaluated. Utilizing outside contracts to accomplish additional engineering requirements has increased the number of projects that can be accomplished.

### *Water levels*

While often outside of staffs control, water levels often impact the ability of staff to accomplish habitat and access work. In some cases, low water facilitates easier working conditions but may complicate fisheries management. Conversely, high water can create increased angling opportunity but may reduce access and complicate scheduled projects.

### *Identifying partners (e.g., municipalities)*

In most cases, any aquatic habitat and access project will involve more than GFP staff. Depending on the scope of the project, these partners may be participating from a regulatory (i.e., permitting) standpoint or they share a common goal for the project. At times, identifying these external partners can be difficult. Additionally, other partners and interested parties may exist, but no line of communication has been established.

## *Ownership*

Similar to identifying partners, land ownership around surface waters of the state can complicate aquatic habitat and access.

### **Priorities, Goals and Strategies:**

**Priority # 1:** Increase and improve terrestrial and aquatic habitat to sustain healthy populations of fish and wildlife species for current and future generations.

**Priority #2:** Increase user opportunity and experience through enhancement of habitat and access, both terrestrial and aquatic, on and to public lands and waters, and by providing additional public access to private lands.

### **Terrestrial:**

**Goal 1:** Annually seed 400 acres of native grass and pollinator plots.

**Strategy 1.1:** Identify non-native grasslands dominated by smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass and implement site preparations and reseeding plans.

**Strategy 1.2:** Identify acres of cropland not needed for food sources and reseed to native grasses and forbs.

**Strategy 1.3:** Identify mixed medium quality grass stands that would benefit from inter-seeding additional species of grasses and forbs.

**Strategy 1.4:** Identify areas lacking early succession, brood rearing, and pollinator habitat to install pollinator plots.

**Goal 2:** Annually plant 15 acres (approximately 7,000 trees and shrubs) of woody habitat.

**Strategy 2.1:** Identify areas lacking adequate winter cover to install shelterbelts

**Strategy 2.2:** Identify marginal shelterbelts for replacement or enhancement with additional rows of woody habitat.

**Goal 3:** Annually plant 250 acres of annual or perennial food plots.

**Strategy 3.1:** Recognize areas lacking food sources to establish food plots.

**Goal 4:** Enhance 300 acres of grassland and forest annually.

**Strategy 4.1:** Remove invading woody species from key grassland habitats found on GPAs.

**Strategy 4.2:** Evaluate forest habitats for opportunities to promote, with management, critical woody species stand regeneration including removal of invasive undesirables while keeping forest diversity in mind.

**Goal 5:** Each year improve or develop road and trail access to six GPAs or other publicly owned property.

**Strategy 5.1:** Identify GPAs lacking vehicle access that would increase opportunity for users while maintaining user experience.

**Strategy 5.2:** Work with and develop agreements with the jurisdictional owner of the road if not located on state property.

**Goal 6:** Annually improve or develop five waterfowl access sites.

**Strategy 6.1:** Determine GPAs with wetlands or bodies of water conducive to waterfowl hunting.

**Strategy 6.2:** Of those GPAs evaluate how additional trails, primitive rock boat ramps, or decoy drop locations might increase opportunity, use, and user experience.

**Strategy 6.3:** Evaluate existing waterfowl access sites for ongoing upgrade and maintenance needs to ensure quality access for the public.

**Goal 7:** Annually improve or develop grassland management infrastructure on eight Game Production Areas.

**Strategy 7.1:** Inventory tracts of grassland to identify those that may be improved by grazing management where other management methods (e.g. fire, haying) are not possible.

**Strategy 7.2:** Identify infrastructure needed to accomplish grazing management.

**Strategy 7.3:** Partner with neighboring or local producers with livestock to develop a long-term grazing management plan that would enhance or improve these tracts of grassland habitat.

**Goal 8:** Promote and enroll land into the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs in the James River Watershed to reach 100,000 acres and in the Big Sioux River Watershed to reach 25,000 Acres.

**Strategy 8.1:** Direct GFP Private Lands Habitat Biologists to promote access programs.

**Strategy 8.2:** Continue to support partner positions with organizations that will promote enrollment.

**Strategy 8.3:** Engage all GFP staff in conversations with landowners about access programs.

**Strategy 8.4:** Increase outreach via all methods to share access program opportunities.

**Goal 9:** Annually secure multi-year Walk-in Area contracts on 20,000 acres of undisturbed habitat or priority big game hunting property.

**Strategy 9.1:** Direct GFP Private Lands Habitat Biologists to promote the access programs.

**Strategy 9.2:** Continue to support partner positions with organizations that will promote enrollment.

**Strategy 9.3:** Engage all GFP staff in conversations with landowners about access programs.

**Strategy 9.4:** Increase outreach via all methods to share access program opportunities.

**Aquatics:**

**Goal 1:** Annually, improve access or habitat at a minimum of three urban/community fisheries.

**Strategy 1.1:** Identify urban/community fishing opportunities with the state.

**Strategy 1.2:** Identify specific actions to be taken to improve habitat or access.

**Strategy 1.3:** Engage potential stakeholders associated with management actions.

**Strategy 1.4:** Secure funding/resources to accomplish management actions.

**Strategy 1.5:** Evaluate impacts of work on both fish populations and users, when possible.

**Goal 2:** Annually, improve access to a minimum of ten fisheries.

**Strategy 2.1:** Communicate with internal staff to identify waters in need of access improvements.

**Strategy 2.2:** Communicate with internal staff to identify what actions are needed to improve access.

**Strategy 2.3:** Engage all interested parties and stakeholders.

**Strategy 2.4:** Identify if work can be completed internally or externally.

**Strategy 2.5:** Implement and complete identified actions.

**Goal 3:** Annually, improve aquatic habitat in a minimum of five standing water fisheries.

**Strategy 3.1:** Communicate with internal staff to identify waters where habitat work is needed.

**Strategy 3.2:** Engage all interested stakeholders.

**Strategy 3.3:** Identify actions needed for improvements.

**Strategy 3.4:** Implement and complete identified actions.

**Strategy 3.5:** Evaluate impacts of work on both fish populations and users, when possible.

**Goal 4:** Improve instream habitat at a minimum of three locations by 2028.

**Strategy 4.1:** Communicate with internal staff and external partner to identify location where in-stream habitat improvement could benefit either cold or warm/cool water fishes.

**Strategy 4.2:** Communicate with staff to engage external partners and identify funding sources for project(s).

**Strategy 4.3:** Identify what actions are needed to achieve desired improvements.

**Strategy 4.4:** Complete all necessary clearances and permitting required for identified project(s).

**Strategy 4.5:** Implement and complete identified work.

**Strategy 4.6:** Evaluate impacts of work on both fish populations and users, when possible.

**Goal 5:** Annually, conduct one large-scale project.

**Strategy 5.1:** Identify fishery where renovation work is required on either the infrastructure and/or fish community.

**Strategy 5.2:** Engage all interested stakeholders and potential funding sources.

**Strategy 5.3:** Identify work needed for desired improvements.

**Strategy 5.4:** Complete all necessary clearances and permitting required for identified project/actions.

**Strategy 5.5:** Implement and complete identified project.

**Strategy 5.6:** Evaluate impacts of work on both fish populations and users.

**Goal 6:** Annually, improve infrastructure at impoundments to address state-owned dam inspection report findings.

**Strategy 6.1:** Utilize dam inspection reports conducted by engineering firm.

**Strategy 6.2:** Engage internal engineering staff to determine regional groupings of dams for discussions with staff.

**Strategy 6.3:** Coordinate meetings with regional staff to discuss cost estimates and priorities, based on work needed and current/potential use by public, within groupings.

**Strategy 6.4:** Select locations and timelines for infrastructure improvements.

**Strategy 6.5:** Utilize the updated internal dam inspection and work request form to annual address small and inhouse type maintenance/improvements.

## **Appendix A. South Dakota Codified Law 41-6-85.**

### **41-6-85. Habitat stamp--Fee--Requirements--Promulgation of rules--Violation as misdemeanor.**

Except as provided in § 41-6-10.2, a person eighteen years of age or older shall purchase a habitat stamp when applying for or purchasing a hunting or fishing license. The fee for the habitat stamp shall be ten dollars for residents and twenty-five dollars for nonresidents. A person is not required to purchase more than one habitat stamp within a license period as provided by the applicable license and rules promulgated by the commission under chapter 1-26. Any person required to possess a hunting or fishing license may not fish and hunt, or trap without a stamp validation. A purchase of the habitat stamp is not required for the one-day hunting or fishing license, youth hunting license, private shooting preserve license, hunt for habitat application fee, or landowner hunting license. A violation of this section is a Class 2 misdemeanor.

**Appendix B. Projects completed in fiscal year 2021 through 2025 using Habitat Stamp funds reported to the Government Operations and Audit Committee.**

**Terrestrial:**

**2021:**

Grassland and pollinator plantings: 1,345 acres | 30 GPAs

Food plots: 128 acres | 10 GPAs

Woody habitat plantings: 123 acres | 20 sites

Grassland and forest enhancement: 1,092 acres | 9 GPAs

Access roads and trail improvement: 8 miles | 9 GPAs

Grassland management infrastructure: 11 GPAs

**2022:**

Grassland and pollinator plantings: 1,628 acres | 31 GPAs

Food plots: 220 acres | 10 GPAs

Woody habitat plantings: 28 acres | 10 GPAs

Grassland and forest enhancement: 1,521 acres | 11 GPAs

Access roads and trail improvement: 22.4 miles | 26 GPAs

Waterfowl access trails and ramps: 11 sites | 10 GPAs

Grassland management infrastructure: 18 GPAs

**2023:**

Grassland and pollinator plantings: 1,492 acres | 34 GPAs

Food plots: 584 acres | 29 GPAs

Woody habitat plantings: 140 acres | 21 GPAs & replants at 6 GPAs

Grassland and forest enhancement: 397 acres | 9 GPAs & 1 State Park

Access roads and trail improvement: 6.75 miles | 10 GPAs

Waterfowl Access Trails and Ramps: 3 sites | 3 GPAs

Grassland management infrastructure: 8 GPAs

**2024:**

Access roads and trail improvement: 5.8 miles | 7 GPAs

Grassland and pollinator plantings: 25 acres | 1 State Park

\* Majority of terrestrial funds put toward CREP payments this year.

**2025:**

Grassland and pollinator plantings: 120 acres | 5 GPAs

Food plots: 190 acres | 1 GPA & 1 State Park

Woody habitat plantings: 14.7 acres | 3 GPAs

Grassland and forest enhancement: 90 acres | 3 GPAs

Access roads and trail improvement: 2.16 miles | 4 GPAs

Access parking lots: 3 miles | 3 GPAs

Fence removal: 3.66 miles | 4 GPAs

Grassland management infrastructure: 6 GPAs

**Access:**

**2022:**

James River CREP: 8 contracts | 584 acres

**2023:**

James River CREP: 78 contracts | 6,318 acres

Walk-In Area Signing Bonuses: 188 contracts | 82,183 acres

**2024:**

James River CREP: 51 contracts | 6550 acres

Big Sioux River CREP: 7 contracts | 733 acres

Walk-In Area Signing Bonuses: 25 contracts | 14,693 acres

**2025:**

James River CREP: 98 contracts | 9,847 acres

Big Sioux River CREP: 32 contracts | 2,189 acres

Walk-In Area Signing Bonuses: 48 contracts | 55,855 acres

**Aquatics:**

**2021:**

Dam infrastructure improvements: 3 dams | 3 counties

Trail/access improvements: 3 miles | 5 trails

Shoreline plantings: 1 project

Boat ramp development: Long Lake – Codington County

**2022:**

Dam infrastructure improvements: 9 dams | 7 counties

Docks/piers: 4 docks | 4 piers | 8 waters

Access roads and trails: 2.45 miles | 3 waters

Access improvements/engineering: 26 projects | 16 counties

Boat ramps: 5 projects

Habitat structures: 13 projects | 12 counties

Habitat improvements: 2 aeration | 1 dredging

**2023:**

Dam infrastructure improvements: 19 dams | 10 counties

Habitat structures: 7 projects | 6 counties

Docks/piers: 9 docks | 3 piers | 10 Counties

Boat ramps: 4 projects

Access Improvements/engineering: 25 projects | 2.9 miles | 14 counties

Habitat improvements: 1 dredge | 1 aeration | 1 fencing

**2024:**

Dam infrastructure improvements: 2 dams | 2 counties

Habitat structures: 7 projects | 6 counties

Boat ramps: 9 projects

Access improvements/engineering: 21 projects | 6.85 miles | 12 counties

Aquatic access leases: 121 acres to open 8,345 acres of water and 80 river miles

Habitat improvements: 2 aeration | 1 permitting | 1 dam rebuild

**2025:**

Dam infrastructure improvements: 3 dams | 2 counties

Habitat structures: 13 projects | 11 counties

Boat ramps: 13 projects

Access improvements/engineering: 17 projects | 1.25 miles | 13 counties

Docks/piers: 5 docks | 6 piers | 10 counties

Habitat improvements: 5 engineering/permitting | 2 restorations | 2 dredging | 1 outlet | 1 native planting

Aquatic access leases: 3 contracts | 11.75 acres to open 1,215 acres of water