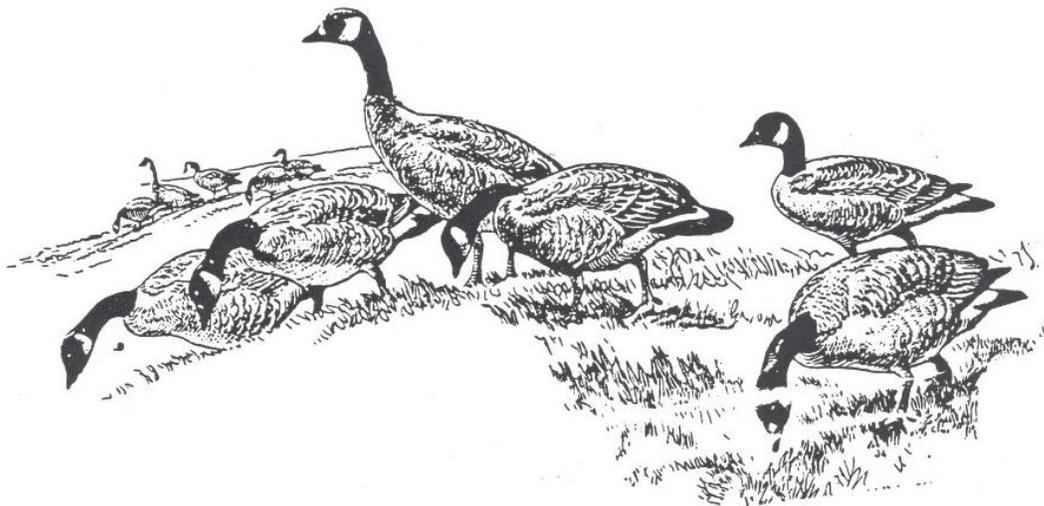


# SOUTH DAKOTA GIANT CANADA GOOSE ACTION PLAN 2026-2030



**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF GAME, FISH AND PARKS  
PIERRE, SOUTH DAKOTA**

**WILDLIFE DIVISION REPORT 2026-03**

**March 6, 2026**

This action plan will be used by South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) staff on an annual basis and will be formally evaluated at least every five years. Plan updates and changes, however, may occur more frequently as needed.

A supportive document to this action plan, the “Management of Giant Canada Geese in South Dakota”, provides a historical background, research, management surveys and monitoring, challenges and opportunities, and citizen involvement related to giant Canada geese and can be found at <https://gfp.sd.gov/management-plans/>.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This action plan is a product of substantial discussion, evaluation and input from many wildlife professionals, hunters, viewers, and other constituents. In addition, those comments and suggestions received from private landowners, hunters and those who recognize the value of giant Canada geese and their associated habitats were also considered.

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All text and data contained within this document are subject to revision for corrections, updates, and data analyses.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Giant Canada geese (*Branta canadensis maxima*) historically nested across the Midwest United States and northern Great Plains of North America. European settlers took Canada geese year-round and gathered their eggs in spring. Giant Canada geese were nearly extirpated from South Dakota by early-1900 and many believed the giant Canada goose was extinct by the 1950’s. However, flocks of the birds remained in the Fort Sisseton and Waubay National Wildlife Refuge areas of northeast South Dakota. Hanson (1965), in his book “The Giant

Canada Goose”, considered the birds in the Waubay area to be the "gold standard" of remaining wild giant Canada geese. Restoration efforts across its former range proved successful and efforts are now directed to manage this population. Giant Canada geese provide a valuable resource, highly sought after by hunters and viewers alike.

The goal for giant Canada goose populations in South Dakota is to manage for maximum recreational opportunity consistent with the welfare of the population, habitat constraints, and social tolerance. The South Dakota giant Canada goose population (three-year average spring index) objective range is 115,000-165,000 geese. The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks (GFP) will adjust season structure and daily bag limits to best maintain the goose population within the objective range. This population range was developed based on an analysis of past goose population data, private land depredation issues, and substantial input from a variety of stakeholders interested in goose management in South Dakota.

Population and harvest surveys for South Dakota’s giant Canada geese include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) May Waterfowl Breeding Habitat and Population Survey, the USFWS Parts Collection Survey, the federal Hunter Information Program survey, as well as GFP harvest surveys. Management direction for giant Canada geese will be based on a three-year average spring survey index number and other relevant biological and social data.

GFP manage wildlife and their associated habitats for their sustained and equitable use, and for the benefit, welfare, and enjoyment of the people of South Dakota and its visitors. This action plan is intended to guide wildlife managers and biologists and aid the decision-making process of the GFP Commission to ensure giant Canada goose populations and their habitats are managed appropriately, addressing both biological and social considerations. It also serves to inform sportsmen and women, landowners, and all others interested in giant Canada goose management in South Dakota.

### Population Status and Monitoring

Since restoration efforts ended in the mid-1990’s, spring population estimates have varied from a low of 112,416 from 2004-2006 to a high of 248,135 from 2011-2013 (Figure 1). Because giant Canada geese are highly dependent on wetlands for all phases of their life cycle, populations rise and fall in response to regional wetland conditions. The average annual spring population index of giant Canada geese in South Dakota for the 3-year period 2021-2024 was 227,137 and the most recent annual estimate is 133,818 geese, according to data from the USFWS May Breeding Habitat and Population Survey (Figure 1). Three-year averages are used for management triggers to mitigate against spurious estimates due to extreme weather or other extenuating circumstances. A statewide spring population index management range of 115,000-165,000 Canada geese should provide ample hunting opportunities and manageable agricultural conflicts, considering an operational GFP wildlife damage management program is in place to cooperatively work with private landowners.

Beginning in the summer of 2016, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma along with South Dakota began operational goose banding in the Central Flyway. As part of the banding assessment, it was determined that an annual quota of 1,500 geese, targeting family groups, would be the goal for South Dakota. GFP has been a strong contributor to this program, banding over 22,000 Canada geese since 2012 and documenting over 3,300 direct recoveries from hunters (Table 1). Harvest rate (recovery rate/reporting rate) analysis indicates harvest rates for banded giant Canada geese in South Dakota ranging from 14-22% during 2012-2024 hunting seasons (Table 1). This harvest rate is similar to what was observed in past research and highlights how populations have expanded under increasingly liberal regulations while hunter participation has declined. In addition, modeled survival rates for the 3 age-classes of Canada geese indicate low survival for a goose population, in large part due to observed high harvest rates (Figure 2). Further monitoring and analysis of band recoveries will aid wildlife managers and inform population dynamics of giant Canada geese in the Central Flyway. This long-term commitment will allow wildlife managers to better monitor vital rates of giant Canada geese into the future. Operational goose banding will be maintained and is a cost-effective method to obtain harvest information, movement data, and population vital rates for South Dakota’s Canada goose population.

Figure 1. South Dakota Canada goose 3-year average spring population index, 1998-2025.

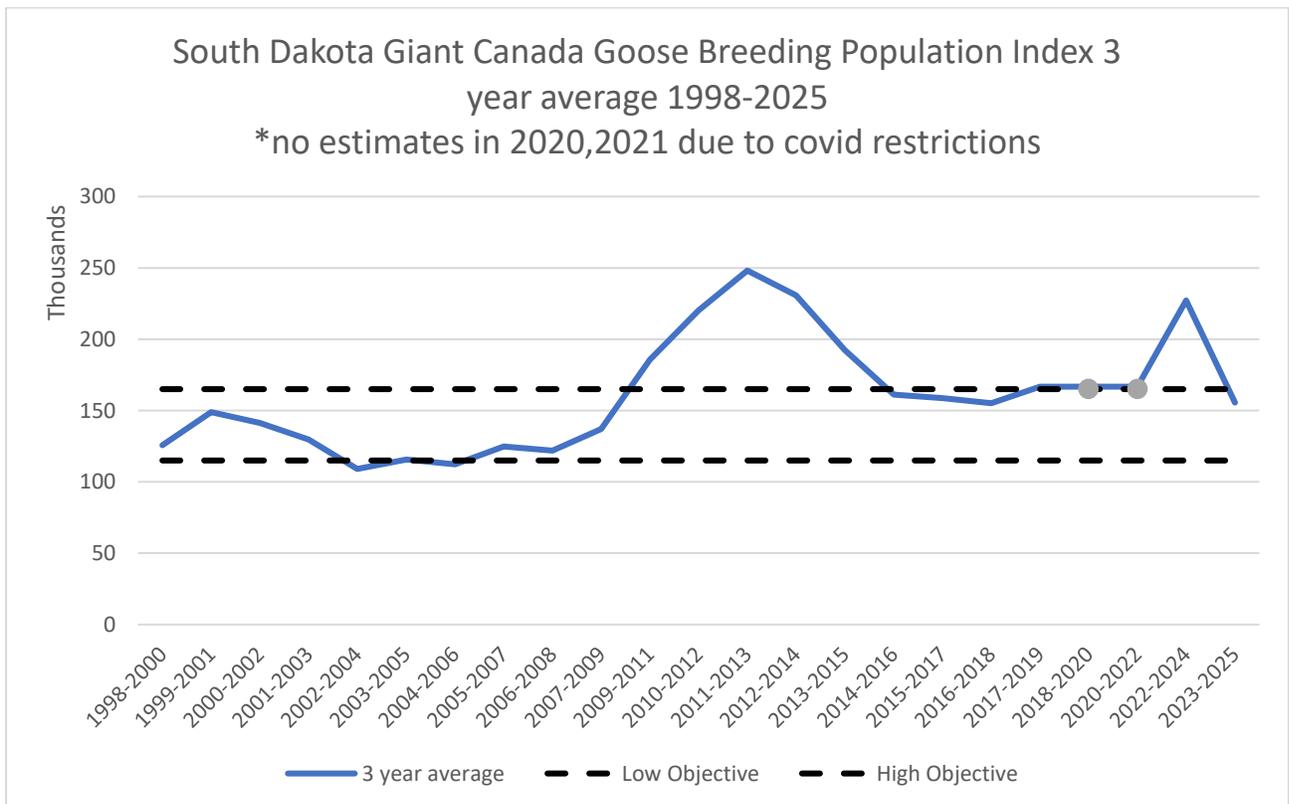
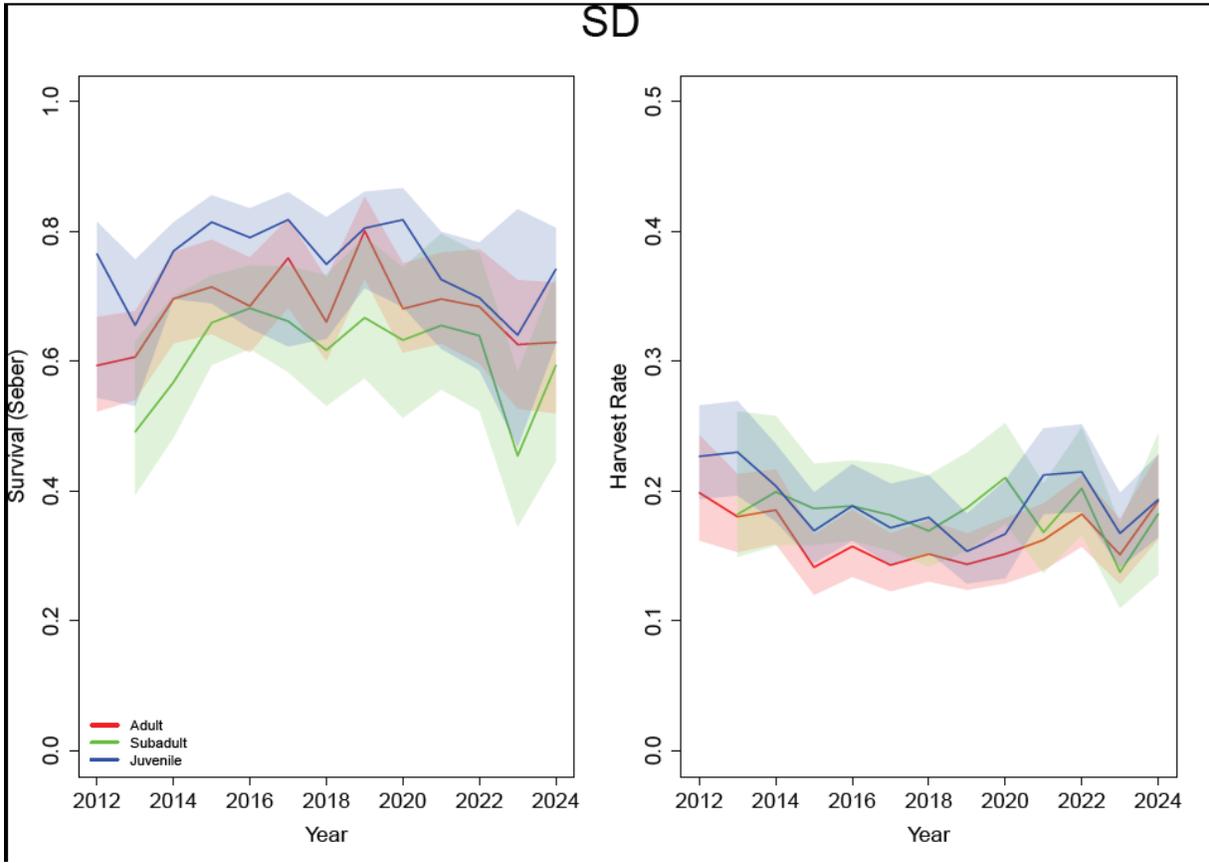


Table 1. South Dakota banded Canada geese, direct recoveries, recovery rate, and harvest rate, 2012-2024.

Year	# Banded	# Direct Recoveries	Recovery Rate	Harvest Rate (Recovery Rate/.84)
2012	1,824	307	17%	20%
2013	1,872	313	17%	20%
2014	2,503	404	16%	19%
2015	2,179	259	12%	14%
2016	1,938	311	16%	19%
2017	1,529	203	13%	16%
2018	1,625	252	15%	18%
2019	1,475	178	12%	14%
2020	584	90	15%	18%
2021	1,510	289	19%	22%
2022	1,716	283	17%	20%
2023	1,684	206	12%	15%
2024	1,657	275	17%	20%
2025	1,521	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available
Combined	22,096 (total)	3,370 (total)	15% (mean)	18% (mean)

Figure 2. Canada goose survival and harvest rates for three age classes, 2012-2024.



### Hunting Season Structure

The primary mortality factor for Canada goose populations in South Dakota is hunter harvest. Areas included in Unit 1 (September 1-December 16) are primarily managed for locally breeding geese while Unit 2 (Monday closest to November 1 through the Sunday closest to February 15) primarily targets staging dark geese later in the season. When populations exceed objective levels, GFP will follow a liberal harvest strategy, using all available days and daily bag allowed by the federal framework during Early Fall (September 1-30) and regular Canada goose hunting seasons in Unit 1 (October 1- December 16; Table 3, Figure 3). The maximum number of days allowed for hunting Canada geese is 107 days per the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. When populations are within the objective range of 115,000-165,000 a moderate harvest strategy will be recommended, using the full framework during the regular Canada goose hunting season in

Unit 1. Adjusting bag limits and season lengths during the August Management Take (currently the third Saturday in August through the end of the month) and Early Fall season may be warranted. If populations fall below objective levels, a restrictive harvest strategy will be followed (Table 3).

Like trends seen in other hunter groups, goose hunter participation has declined in recent years. Not only is hunter participation critical for the population management of Canada geese, but it is also an important funding source that benefits wetland conservation. GFP encourages hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) efforts of waterfowl hunters in various ways including free hunting equipment rental, aligning state and federal waterfowl hunting regulations, removing unnecessary barriers to participation such as overly complex regulations, public hunting access, and providing targeted outreach opportunities to recruit and reactivate hunters. Operational goose banding will be maintained and is a cost-effective method to obtain harvest information, movement data, and population vital rates for South Dakota’s Canada goose population.

Table 2. 2025-2026 Canada goose season structure.

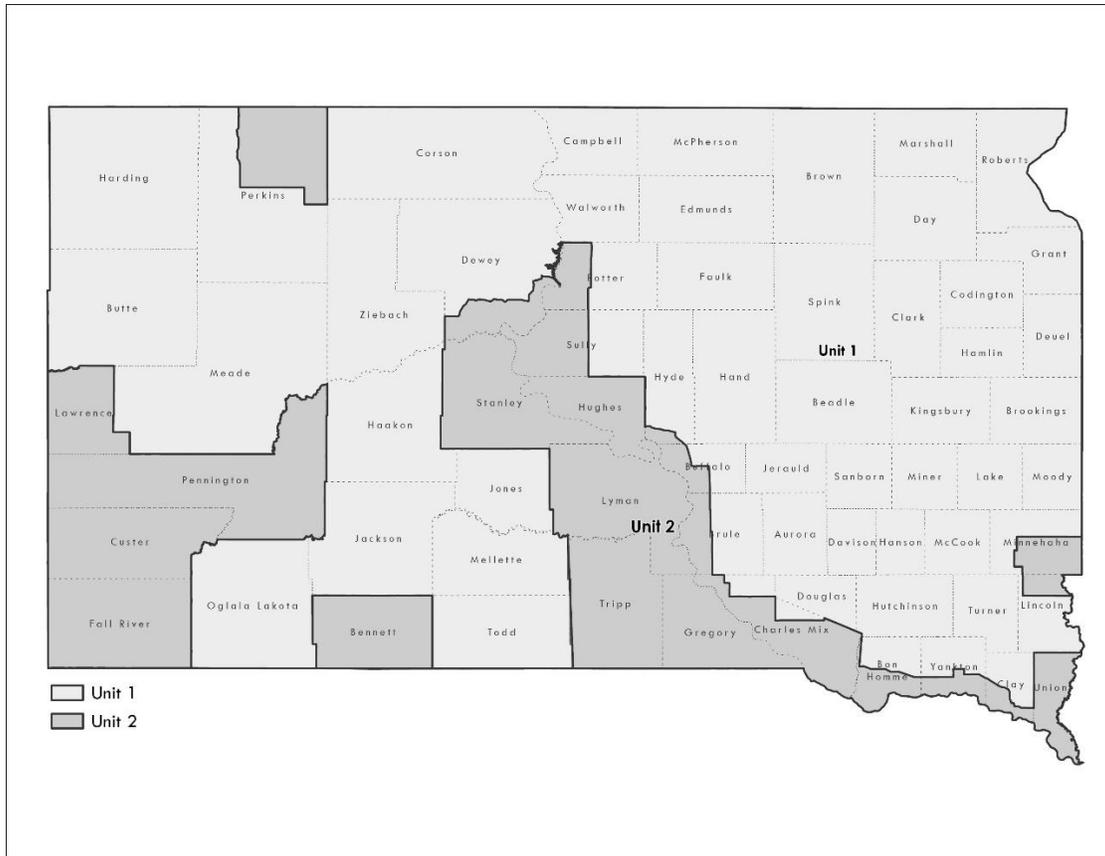
<b>Season</b>	<b>Open Area</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Residents</b>	<b>Nonresidents</b>
August Management Take	2 counties WR; 13 counties ER	Aug 16 – 31	Unlimited	Not Available
Early Fall	Unit 1	Sep 1 - 30	Unlimited	Limited Draw
Regular	Unit 1	Oct 1 - Dec 16	Unlimited	Limited Draw
Regular	Unit 2	Nov 3 - Feb 15	Unlimited	Limited Draw

\*WR=West River  
ER=East River

Table 3. Canada goose management decision table.

"MANAGEMENT TOOLS"	RESTRICTIVE MANAGEMENT	MODERATE MANAGEMENT	LIBERAL MANAGEMENT
	<i>Increase Population</i>	<i>Maintain Population</i>	<i>Decrease Population</i>
Justification	<p>Canada goose population below objective based on available biological data. Also consider hunter survey comments, landowner comments public comments, and field staff observations.</p> <p>Goose depredation on row crops is expected to be limited and should be adequately addressed through the wildlife damage management program.</p> <p>Non-lethal tools will primarily be used, including the promotion of alternative vegetation near wetlands; however, unique situations may be addressed using nest work or kill permits.</p>	<p>Canada goose population at objective based on available biological data. Also consider hunter survey comments, landowner comments, public comments, and field staff observations.</p> <p>Manageable Canada goose depredation on row crops is expected and should be adequately addressed through wildlife damage management program.</p> <p>Non-lethal tools will primarily be used, including the promotion of alternative vegetation near wetlands; but chronic depredation issues may be addressed using nest work or kill permits.</p>	<p>Canada goose population above objective based on available biological data. Also consider hunter survey comments, landowner comments, public comments, and field staff observations.</p> <p>Goose depredation on row crops is expected to be above desired levels. The wildlife damage management program has difficulty addressing requests in a timely manner. Non-lethal tools will be used, including the promotion of alternative vegetation near wetlands; but nest work and kill permits may be used more frequently to row crop damage.</p> <p>Indicators for this category would be moderate to overabundant populations causing moderate to major depredation issues.</p>
Spring Population Index (3-Year Average)	Below 115,000	115,000-165,000	Above 165,000
Regular Season Days	Full Framework	Full Framework	Full Framework
Regular Season Daily Bag	Daily Bag: Unit 1: 4 Units 2: 4	Daily Bag: Unit 1: 8 Units 2: 4	Daily Bag: Unit 1: 8 Units 2: 4
Early Fall Season (Unit 1)	Yes (Evaluate Season Length) Daily Bag: 4	Yes Daily Bag: 8	Yes Daily Bag: 15
August Management Take	Available only for human safety concerns.	Available in areas with unacceptable levels of crop depredation or human safety concerns.  Daily Bag: 8	Available in areas with unacceptable levels of crop depredation or human safety concerns.  Daily Bag: 15

Figure 3. Current Canada goose unit boundaries.



### Canada Goose Damage Management

GFP's Canada goose depredation abatement program and services are multi-faceted and designed to prevent or reduce crop damage caused by Canada geese. GFP's non-lethal abatement techniques include permanent fence, temporary electric fence, temporary and permanent vegetative barriers (i.e. wheat or grass buffer strips), food plots, and various hazing techniques (i.e. propane cannons, cracker-shells, kites and flagging, coyote decoys, and harassment). GFP also utilizes Special State Canada Goose Permit. Canada goose take permit, obtained from the USFWS, which allows GFP and its sub-permittees to conduct resident Canada

goose population management and control activities through egg addling, trapping, and lethal take of Canada geese. These population control activities take into consideration human health and safety, and protection of personal or public property, in accordance with all conditions specified in 50 CFR 21.26. This permit allows GFP the annual take of up to 9,000 Canada geese and 2,500 nests. Use of this permit varies due to the number of local birds, overall population levels, effectiveness of non-lethal techniques, severity of crop damage, and the history of crop damage at certain locations.

### Canada Goose Habitat and Access Management

GFP will support wetland and grassland habitat conservation efforts across South Dakota by providing technical, financial, and program delivery support to landowners through various programs and practices designed to meet habitat goals and objectives outlined in the South Dakota State Tactical Plan – a state specific stepped down wetland and grassland habitat conservation plan component of the 2017 Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Implementation plan. GFP will also play a critical role in the enhancement, restoration, and protection of wetlands and grasslands through its advocacy efforts and contributions to shaping Farm Bill conservation program opportunities that provide ecosystem services beneficial to South Dakota, the Prairie Pothole region, and the Northern Great Plains.

GFP owns approximately 725 Game Production Areas (GPAs) in fee title with over 286,000 acres in South Dakota. The USFWS owns 1,000 Waterfowl Production Areas in South Dakota totaling nearly 150,000 acres. Beginning in 2009, GFP began a groundbreaking habitat and access program in partnership with USDA called the James River Watershed Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). As of the fall of 2025, over 86,000 acres were enrolled into this highly successful habitat and access program. In 2022, a second CREP was launched by GFP and USDA in the Big Sioux River Watershed creating more targeted habitat and public access in South Dakota. As of the fall of 2025 this CREP has over 4,500 acres enrolled. South Dakota GFP leases roughly 1.4 million acres as part of its Walk-In Area (WIA) program, including 121,000 waterfowl COOP acres that allow field hunting opportunity prime Canada goose hunting areas. GFP also currently leases over 25,000 acres of private land in Hughes and Sully Counties as part of the Lower Oahe Waterfowl Access Program. This unique mixture of decoy and pass shooting opportunities provides public access to late-season Canada goose hunting on private land adjacent to Lake Oahe.

## **MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES**

### **Objective 1: Provide a Comprehensive Wildlife Damage Management (WDM) Program**

#### **Strategies:**

- A. Respond to all Canada goose depredation concerns on private land in a timely manner.
- B. Annually evaluate effectiveness of GFP WDM staff depredation techniques and services such as: non-lethal abatement techniques including permanent fence, temporary electric fence, feeding sites, vegetative buffers, and various hazing techniques (i.e. propane cannons, crackers shells, flags, coyote decoys, and harassment).
- C. Continue to obtain and utilize the USFWS Special State Canada Goose Permit to address Canada goose depredation issues in areas deemed appropriate.
- D. Continue to work with municipalities and other entities to address human safety and health concerns regarding Canada geese.
- E. Continue to use hunting opportunities where and when possible, to address Canada goose depredation and other human conflicts.
- F. Continue to refine and investigate techniques that can minimize agricultural damage to private property.

### **Objective 2: Promote the Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) Efforts of Goose Hunters in South Dakota**

#### **Strategies:**

- A. Continue to reduce regulatory barriers to goose hunting participation by simplifying regulations where possible.
- B. Provide the maximum, sustainable goose hunting opportunity consistent with federal frameworks and population status.
- C. Continue to provide educational and mentorship opportunities through programs like Outdoor Campus hunting classes, Becoming an Outdoor Women, and youth/novice hunting events.
- D. Continue to provide waterfowl hunting equipment loaner trailers to hunters across the state.

### **Objective 3: Continue to Provide Access Opportunities for Hunter Access in South Dakota**

#### **Strategies:**

- A. Continue to promote, utilize, and target enrollment in GFP's private lands hunting access programs, specifically for Canada goose hunting opportunities.
  - a. Annually enroll an additional 500 acres in the Co-op Walk in Area program to increase waterfowl field hunting opportunities.
  - b. Enroll new lands and renew existing expiring contracts in the James River Watershed CREP (100,000 acre cap).
  - c. Enroll new lands in the Big Sioux Watershed CREP (25,000 acre cap).
- B. Continue to provide up-to-date private land hunting access and public hunting land maps and other materials.
- C. Continue to develop, improve, and maintain waterfowl access trails and ramps on Game Production Areas to improve access to the water with boats, decoys, and hunting equipment.
- D. Promote the use of the online Waterfowl Hunting Access map to locate waterfowl access trails, primitive boat ramps, and decoy drop points on public lands.
- E. Continue to utilize social media and other effective communications methods to promote and encourage hunters to ask permission to hunt private lands.

### **Objective 4: Cooperatively Monitor Canada Goose Breeding Population and Harvest**

#### **Strategies:**

- A. Continue to use and support operational monitoring programs including the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey, federal parts collection survey, Harvest Information Program, and GFP harvest surveys.
  - a. Assist where possible at the annual Wing Bee where waterfowl parts are sexed, aged and identified.

- b. Continue GFP staff representation on the Central Flyway Council and Technical Committee. These meetings facilitate the exchange of information between member states and USFWS on survey techniques and provide a venue to advocate for federal operational monitoring programs.
- B. Continue to conduct annual harvest surveys for August Management Take, Early Fall, and the Regular Canada goose seasons.
  - a. Use harvest data, hunter effort information, and hunter satisfaction data to inform potential regulation adjustments.

**Objective 5: Use Operational Goose Banding to Monitor Harvest Rates and Survival**

**Strategies:**

- A. Band a minimum of 1,500 Canada geese annually across eastern South Dakota as part of the Central Flyway cooperative banding program.
  - a. Use Canada goose recoveries for harvest rate and survival analysis to inform season structure and bag limits.

**Objective 6: Promote the establishment, restoration, and enhancement of Canada goose habitat on public and private lands**

**Strategies:**

- A. Continue active involvement in the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) through participation on both the management board and technical committee.
  - a. Continue to support and implement PPJV wetland restoration, enhancement, and protection through the PPJV state tactical plan.
  - b. Continue to restore and enhance wetland and grassland habitat on private lands through GFP's private lands habitat and access program.
  - c. Continue to provide technical assistance on private lands that support Canada goose populations.

- d. Advocate for wetland friendly policies on a state and national level through the PPJV Policy Committee, Natural Resources Conservation Service Technical Committee, and other venues.