

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

2026-2028

Waterfowl Hunting Access Plan



Executive Summary

Waterfowl hunter numbers in South Dakota have declined since the mid-1990s, with limited access to quality hunting areas often cited as a key barrier. To address this, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP), in partnership with the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Waterfowl Association, developed this plan to expand and improve hunting access on both public and private lands.

As of January 2026, GFP has over 464,000 acres of private land enrolled in public hunting access programs east of the Missouri River and has enhanced opportunities on 118 Game Production Areas across 42 counties. By 2028, GFP aims to add another 25,000 acres of private land hunting access focused on waterfowl hunting in eastern South Dakota, develop waterfowl hunting access infrastructure at 10 new public sites, and maintain all existing waterfowl access sites annually. Lastly, GFP will continue to offer detailed maps through print or online interactive map platforms to the public, making them aware of all waterfowl hunting access opportunities.

Supported by Habitat Stamp, license dollars, and federal funds, these efforts will strengthen waterfowl hunting access, support hunter participation, and sustain South Dakota’s waterfowl hunting tradition.

Table of Contents

Background.....	3
The Need	3
Addressing the Need.....	4
Funding the Need.....	7
Marketing and Outreach Efforts.....	7
2023-2025 Plan Period Accomplishments.....	7
Literature Cited.....	8

Background

South Dakota has experienced a decline in waterfowl hunters since the mid-1990's. Many factors likely contribute to this decline, but adequate hunting access and opportunity in locations that hold waterfowl and have suitable cover is often cited as one important barrier to hunter participation. Public lands either owned or leased by state and federal agencies in South Dakota are very important to most waterfowl hunters who indicate they hunt on public lands much of the time. In a 2017 survey, 41% of respondents who hunt waterfowl in South Dakota indicated that a lack of public places for waterfowl hunting was a moderate, severe, or very severe problem. Similarly, 37% of survey respondents indicated that crowding at hunting areas was moderate, severe, or a very severe problem for them in South Dakota (DJ Case & Associates & U.S. Geological Survey, 2017).

This plan was developed with assistance and input from the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Waterfowl Association - both valuable partners with GFP in a combined effort to provide adequate and sustainable waterfowl hunting opportunities for both residents and non-residents. The purpose of this plan is to specifically address waterfowl hunting access opportunities in South Dakota through implementing strategies that support both current and future hunting access efforts and programs offered by GFP and other agencies and organizations.

The Need

Determining goals to provide adequate waterfowl hunting access can be difficult, as properly defining adequate is highly subjective. Not every location open to public hunting access will be a heavily used destination for waterfowl hunters, and likewise not every desirable waterfowl hunting destination will have public access. Public access to private lands and waters desirable for waterfowl hunting varies across South Dakota due to many reasons, not the least of which is controlled trespass by private landowners. Private lands once accessible with landowner permission have now become difficult to access where hunter competition and monetization of hunting access have become more prevalent.

Enhanced efforts by GFP to address waterfowl hunting access and opportunity needs to public and private lands have been underway for over a decade. These efforts are driven by requests from waterfowl hunters to ensure the sport of waterfowl hunting and access to waterfowl hunting opportunities remains a priority with GFP. This plan outlines department efforts going forward that can ensure adequate opportunities are available for both resident and non-resident waterfowl hunters while encouraging new participation in the sport.

As of January 2026, GFP has completed and is annually managing more than 1,000 contracts with landowners to provide over 464,000 acres of public hunting access to private lands in eastern South Dakota. These public hunting access opportunities are comprised of the following:

- Over 121,000 acres enrolled as Cooperative Hunting Access Areas (COOP) targeted specifically for waterfowl hunting access,

- Over 86,000 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in the James River watershed,
- Over 4,600 acres enrolled in the Big Sioux River Watershed CREP,
- 4,995 acres enrolled in the Controlled Hunting Access Program (CHAP),
- 25,787 acres enrolled in the Lower Oahe Waterfowl Access Program,
- Remaining 222,496 acres enrolled as general WIAs. While not all WIA enrolled acres provide waterfowl hunting opportunity, a vast majority do provide some level of over-water or field waterfowl hunting opportunities.

Across South Dakota, GFP has enhanced waterfowl hunting opportunities on 118 Game Production Areas (GPAs) in 42 counties through targeted efforts to improve hunting access. These projects have taken place during the last approximately 18 years with a vast majority in the last 8 years. Revenue being generated annually since 2020 with the enactment of the Habitat Stamp has accelerated efforts and project completion to improve waterfowl access on GPAs. These efforts include developing and annually maintaining boat ramps, roads, trails, parking areas, and equipment drop off sites near boat ramps and shorelines. Various boat ramps have also been developed, with many designed and put in place specifically for small boats used by waterfowl hunters. Finally, GFP has also developed waterfowl hunting access opportunities on five Game Production Areas specifically for disabled hunters, including restricted use vehicle trails and accessible hunting blinds. A complete list of areas with opportunities for disabled hunters for all game species can be found on GFP's website at <https://gfp.sd.gov/hunt-accessible-areas/>.

In evaluating what constitutes sufficient waterfowl hunting opportunities, consideration must be given to the balance between waterfowl populations and the number of hunters competing for those opportunities. Overall waterfowl populations, both nationally and in South Dakota, have maintained or increased in the past two decades, while the number of licensed waterfowl hunters continues to decline, particularly the number of South Dakota resident waterfowl hunters. During the same period, South Dakota has seen an increase in public lands available for waterfowl hunting through both purchase of additional public lands by GFP and leasing of private lands through various GFP programs. Given this simultaneous increase in waterfowl populations, added access opportunities, and decreasing hunter numbers it seems imperative to reexamine barriers to participation. This plan, however, acknowledges that a lack of adequate access opportunities remains a primary barrier, and as such, works to address opportunities where GFP has influence and available resources.

Addressing the Need

Providing adequate public access for waterfowl hunting is a challenging endeavor but is a priority for GFP in its efforts to address overall dwindling hunting participation through initiatives to recruit, retain, and reactivate (R3) hunters. Issues specifically affecting adequate and sustainable waterfowl hunting access in South Dakota include funding for access programs, continued loss and degradation of waterfowl habitat, and changing waterfowl hunter and landowner demographics.

To help address waterfowl hunting access needs, the following objectives and accompanying strategies were developed with input from the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Waterfowl Association:

Objective 1: By December 2028, increase and improve waterfowl hunting access opportunities on private lands by an additional 25,000 acres.

Strategy 1.1: Enroll new lands and renew expiring contracts in the James River Watershed CREP (100,000 acre cap).

Strategy 1.2: Enroll new lands the Big Sioux River Watershed CREP (25,000 acre cap).

Strategy 1.3: Identify opportunities to lease additional waterfowl hunting access acres on private land through existing program efforts such as the WIA program, CHAP, COOP areas, or targeted efforts like the Lower Oahe Waterfowl Access Area.

Strategy 1.4: Identify opportunities on existing and new WIAs that in addition to other hunting opportunities also accommodate waterfowl hunters to drive on marked trails and harvested crop fields for decoy and gear drop off.

Strategy 1.5: Identify opportunities to acquire, via lease or easement, exclusive waterfowl hunting access routes across private lands to public water bodies, including designated vehicle access corridors for decoy and gear drop off.

Objective 2: By December 2028, increase and improve waterfowl hunting access opportunities and infrastructure at an additional 10 sites on public lands and waters.

Strategy 2.1: Inventory Game Production Areas and other water bodies to identify opportunities to improve and develop waterfowl hunting access via vehicle and/or foot travel corridors to allow transportation of boats and gear to designated drop-off sites and/or launch area, including opening shorelines, placement of rock, plank, or landing mat ramps combined with mowed turn around sites at the water's edge.

Strategy 2.2: Coordinate with local US Fish and Wildlife Service units to inventory Waterfowl Production Areas and National Wildlife Refuges to identify opportunities to improve, develop, and maintain waterfowl hunting access via vehicle and/or foot travel corridors to allow transportation of boats and gear to

designated drop-off sites and/or launch area, including opening shorelines, placement of rock, plank, or landing mat ramps combined with mowed turn around sites at the water's edge.

Strategy 2.3: Promote GFP's Public Hunting Land Recorder portal as a means of allowing hunters an opportunity to suggest specific public lands and waters where waterfowl hunting access improvements and development could take place.

Strategy 2.4: Conduct outreach and engagement programs targeted at local waterfowl interest groups (e.g. sportsman's clubs, Ducks Unlimited Chapters, Delta Waterfowl Chapters, etc.) to promote waterfowl hunting access strategies for private lands, assist with identifying local public lands and waters where waterfowl hunting access improvements and development could take place, and to assist GFP financially and through volunteer workdays with developing waterfowl access improvements on public lands.

Strategy 2.5: Support acquisition of additional public lands as Game Production Areas and Waterfowl Production Areas where waterfowl habitat and waterfowl hunting opportunities can be emphasized.

Objective 3: Annually, maintain existing waterfowl access points, trails, decoy drop points, and ramps.

Strategy 3.1: Annually mow waterfowl trails, ramps, decoy drop points, and parking lots to ensure adequate access by the public.

Strategy 3.2: Inspect and add gravel or other aggregate material where needed on trails and ramps.

Strategy 3.3: Replace missing signage, including trail markers, to guide public use of waterfowl access areas.

Objective 4: Annually, prior to the hunting seasons, update GIS map layers with any additions or changes to enhanced waterfowl access sites, trails, and features while continuing to provide mapped sites to users in an interactive online map format.

Strategy 4.1: Update the authoritative water access point layer and access trails line layer to add any missing or undocumented access points and trails. Evaluate and update existing points to determine suitability as a waterfowl access site. Map any undocumented enhanced waterfowl access sites. Evaluate existing access trails and map any undocumented access

trails. New access sites or trails will be entered by field staff or supervisors as soon as they become available.

Strategy 4.2: Offer the public mapped sites, trails, and features via an interactive online public map product(s). Products may include the public hunting atlas, public water access guide, standalone web maps, or static print and/or digital maps for distribution.

Funding the Need

Current hunting access efforts managed and operated by GFP (e.g. Game Production Area operation, maintenance, and development activities and private land hunting access programs) are funded using a combination of hunting license funds and Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration grant funds. Additionally, the Habitat Stamp provides funds directed towards hunting access improvements on both private and public lands. While these same funding sources may also be limited in their scope and application based on the specific improvements and developments being proposed, ownership of the lands involved, available delivery capacity, and long-term operation and maintenance of such improvements, GFP will continue to direct resources to developing and maintaining waterfowl hunting access opportunities to both public and private lands. Rather than identifying a specific amount of time and resources to devote to enhancing waterfowl access opportunities, GFP remains committed to putting enough resources forward to address the needs and opportunities identified jointly by GFP staff and the waterfowl hunters whom such developments benefit most.

Marketing and Outreach Efforts

Ensuring awareness of waterfowl hunting access opportunities created through efforts outlined in this plan is critical for its success. Communication efforts will be directed specifically to waterfowl hunters but also include other outdoor users and GFP staff using social media and targeted emails.

See strategies 2.3, 2.4, and 4.2

2023-2025 Plan Period Accomplishments

This section reviews the 2023-2025 plan period objectives and provides information as to what was completed to meet those objectives.

Objective 1: By December 2025, increase and improve waterfowl hunting access opportunities on private lands by an additional 25,000 acres.

Accomplishments -

Staff enrolled and added approximately 54,000 acres of hunting access in eastern South Dakota during the last plan period. This was over double what was set for an objective.

Of those additional acres that were added, 31,000 acres were added to the COOP access program that is focused on field hunting opportunities for waterfowl. Approximately 6,000 acres were added to the James River Watershed CREP bringing that program's total enrollment acreage to 86,000. In the Big Sioux River Watershed, 3,600 acres were added to that CREP program which now has 4,600 acres enrolled. Acres enrolled in the CREP program in both watersheds offer wetlands and other waterfowl hunting opportunities.

Objective 2: By December 2025, increase and improve waterfowl hunting access opportunities and infrastructure at an additional 20 sites on public lands and waters.

Accomplishments – During the 2023-2025 plan period 23 different areas were developed for waterfowl access opportunities in 15 different counties. This included adding 24 primitive rock ramps for small watercraft to launch. A large majority of these sites had gravel access trails and parking areas developed as part of the project. Additional projects included leasing private land for a public water access on the James River with improved access feature development as well as improvement of a township road to allow vehicles to travel to a GPA that provides good waterfowl hunting.

Objective 3: By the start of the 2023 hunting seasons, map all existing enhanced waterfowl access sites and trails, and provide mapped sites to users in an interactive online map format.

Accomplishments – Staff updated and added any missing or undocumented waterfowl access features to the GIS authoritative water access point layer and access trails line layer. They evaluated and updated existing points to determine suitability as a waterfowl access site. Any new waterfowl access sites, trails, and features were entered in this layer by field staff or supervisors as soon as they became available.

Using the GIS authoritative water access point layer and access trails line layer, GIS staff created an online interactive waterfowl access map that is available to the public that can be found at <https://gfp.sd.gov/maps/>

Other notable accomplishments with marketing and outreach included social media posts on new projects that were completed. Annually, just prior to the waterfowl hunting season, a GFP email is distributed on the seasons that includes information about the waterfowl access sites and a link to the online interactive map. Including this information in the email is an effort to promote those waterfowl access sites, so all hunters are aware of those opportunities.

Literature Cited:

DJ Case & Associates, & U.S. Geological Survey. (2017). 2017 survey of waterfowl hunters in South Dakota. Report submitted to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, October 2017. Mishawaka, IN: DJ Case & Associates.