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WHO BUSTS THE ILLEGAL DITCH MOWER?

Written by John Hult and re-printed with the SF Argus Leader’s permission.

A mowed ditch on Highway 19 near Parker is pictured on June 30, 2016. Photo: John Hult/Argus Leader

It's not legal to mow ditches along state highways in early summer, but that doesn’t mean people are getting in trouble for breaking the law.

The Department of Transportation rule requiring East River landowners to let the grass grow until July 10 is meant to offer cover for pheasant chicks, but it's not always the most popular rule with farmers.

Farmers would prefer to cut the grass much earlier to make hay, and some of them do.

Thomas Andrews isn't one of them, he said, and he called the Argus Leader this week to express his frustration as a farmer who abides by the rules. He saw ditches being mowed on Highway 11 south of Alcester this week.

"There's some of us who abide by the law, and we lose a little hay here and there," Andrews said. "There's no accountability right now."

Andrews called the DOT this week to ask who's responsible for enforcing the rule. The answer is often sheriff's offices, the DOT's Darin Bergquist said, although any law enforcement agency can respond to calls about unauthorized mowing.

"We get reports on it happening and we refer those to the local sheriffs, but we haven't gotten a lot of cooperation," Bergquist said. "I'm not aware of anyone being charged for mowing."

Lincoln County Sheriff Dennis Johnson isn't aware of charges, but he's not aware of a deluge of calls from the DOT about the issue, either.

"I can't remember ever receiving (a complaint) from the DOT," Johnson said.

Sheriff Mike Milstead also said it's rare to get a report about mowing, but that deputies respond to every manner of call.

Sometimes, however, a mowing complaint is handled with a warning or an explanation about the rules.

"We have no plan to haul a farmer to jail because they mowed a ditch too early," Milstead said.

The state's law enforcement officers have some responsibility, as well, said Major Rick Miller of the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

"If we see it, we address it," Miller said, but "it's not like we're driving around looking for it."

There's more to the enforcement question than who does the job, though. A violation of a DOT administrative rule is a class 2 misdemeanor, Miller said, which means an officer can't ticket a person unless they see the violation.

A ditch-mowing complaint is similar to a complaint about a reckless driver; he said - a trooper needs to see the reckless driving before he or she can write a ticket.

"It's just like speeding: If you don't do it in my presence, I can't charge it out," Miller said.

If someone admits to mowing a ditch, the officer, trooper or deputy could send the information to the State's Attorney. At that point, it would be up to the prosecutor to decide if a charge is necessary.

And then there's the issue of authorized mowing.

The rule is a compromise, Bergquist said, to balance the interest of two competing South Dakota interests: Farming and pheasant hunting. But safety is a factor, too.

"As part of that balance, there's a third piece, and that's safety," Bergquist said.

DOT mowers don't drive DOT vehicles when they cut for safety, though, so passersby might think there's a violation going on.

"Sometimes we’re out there mowing, and Joe Public doesn't know it's the DOT," he said.

When Sheriff Johnson heard about the possible issue on Highway 11 Thursday, he went out to take a look. He found some spots where authorized mowing took place and a few others he couldn't verify authorization for.

"I found a couple spots on Highway 11 where it has been mowed and baled," Johnson said. "We will look into that."

2016 SAGE GROUSE HUNTING SEASON FINALIZED

Pierre, S.D. - The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission voted to re-open the sage grouse hunting season at their July meeting.

The season has been closed since 2012 based on the number of male sage grouse counted on annual spring surveys. The GFP sage grouse management plan states that the season could open again if the spring lek survey count is over 250 male sage grouse on all leks. This year’s survey revealed a count of 278 male sage grouse.

The two-day season will run from Sept. 17-18 and allows 40 resident hunting permits with a limit of one sage grouse per hunter. If after the first drawing, permits are still available of the 40 limited, both residents and nonresidents are able to apply. Any leftover permits will be available first come, first-served.

Farmers- need a tax deduction this year? Consider donating some grain or land to the SDWF. You will get a tax break and your support of the SDWF will help protect the land and wildlife you love.
Executive Director's Update by Chris Hesla

SDWF to Ask the SD Supreme Court to look at the Day Co. Judge’s Decision

A recent circuit court decision by a Day County Judge allowed several adjoining landowners to prevent the public from using Duerre Slough in Day County. That decision could be applied to dozens or hundreds of other sloughs and lakes in South Dakota. This is just one of numerous attempts by landowners to extinguish the public’s right to access and use public waters. Other attempts to deny sportsmen/women (and children) the use of public lands and waters include vacating township roads that provide access to these lands and waters. For all practical purposes, when access is denied, public waters and lands essentially convert to private ownership.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation (SDWF) supports and agrees with the SD Game, Fish and Parks decision to file an appeal to judicially review the Day County Judge’s order prohibiting our members and the general public from accessing certain waters held in public trust. SDWF is prepared to file a brief with the South Dakota Supreme Court expressing our members’ concerns and arguments, primarily that water held in public trust should be accessible by the general public for recreational purposes.

Just as we strongly believe in the right of landowners to enjoy the benefits of their land, we also believe in the public’s right to use our public lands and waters. To unjustly deny the public use of our own property is no different than denying a private landowner use of his or her property.

SDWF is the ONLY non-governmental organization fighting for your rights to hunt, fish and recreate on YOUR lands and water here in South Dakota. We are asking you to do at least one of the following:

1. Please go to sdwf.org and join our organization. We welcome residents and non-residents to become members. For just $25 a year you can help us fight to keep most waters in SD open to the public’s recreation.
2. Second, we ask you for a donation to help aid us in our legal costs to fight the many battles we are facing.

PLEASE join today to help us protect our hunting and fishing heritage here in SD, not just for us, but for generations yet to come.

SDWF is asking each of YOU OUR MEMBERS to help us; please pass this on to your friends ask them to join SDWF we are also asking you to help fund us by buying our raffle tickets and donations directly to SDWF. You can also follow and like and share our facebook page and our website sdwf.org.

Now Is the Time to Sign Up For A South Dakota HuntSAFE Class

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) is currently taking registration for HuntSAFE classes. Classes are held statewide throughout the year. Registration for most classes is available online at gfp.sd.gov/hunt-ed.

Walk-ins are accepted if space is available, but pre-registration is recommended for most classes.

“Course availability is limited as hunting seasons draw closer, so signing up now is your best bet of getting into a class,” says South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks HuntSAFE coordinator, Patrick Klotzbach.

An independent study HuntSAFE class is also available.

“The independent study course allows students to complete the course online, at their own pace, and then attend a 4-6 hour field day,” said, Klotzbach.

“Not all cities offer this option, but those that do are listed on our website.”

Students interested in either the traditional classroom or independent study format must register online at gfp.sd.gov/hunt-ed.
President's Column by Rich Widman

Thank you to Camo Coalition President Bill Antonides for writing last month's column while I was attending the National Wildlife Federation’s 80th Annual Meeting in beautiful Estes Park, Colorado. He did an excellent job of explaining why we need both the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and SDWF Camo Coalition, not to mention why we need additional members and funds going forward to continue our fight for sportsmen/women in our state.

We also have a duty to protect the land, air, water, wildlife and people across our nation and world. Since 1970, we’ve lost more than 50% of our wildlife because of our greed and selfishness. It makes me wonder if God is saying, “I created humans to protect the earth and all its creatures, and you’re doing a horrible job! Soon, you will reap what you sow.”

What will the world look like in 50 years—if we’re still here? Will we have lost another 50% of our wildlife, or will people have stepped up and done something? A long time ago, Chief Seattle said, “When the earth is sick, the animals will start to disappear.” If we believe (and as a science-based organization, why wouldn’t we?) the 98% of scientists who have studied climate change since the 1970s, we know the Earth is sick and the animals are disappearing. I believe unless we reverse this course, humans are not far behind in the extinction process.

Unfortunately, unless something directly affects people today, it seems they don’t care about it until it’s too late—and it’s getting too late! I hope people realize we truly can’t be just hook-and-bullet guys/gals and without being environmentalists/conservationists also. We’ve got to have a healthy Earth to have what we love to do outside! Can I get an “Amen”?

There were not only good people at the NWF Convention; there were great people! Some retired, some still working, but all gave up their time to make NWF, the affiliates, and our country a better place for both humans and critters alike. I saw a lot of familiar faces from past conferences, but I noticed some new blood as well, which is needed to keep NWF the largest, and arguably the most influential, conservation/sporting organization in America.

People may not realize this, but NWF is our lobbying group in Washington D.C., and they use the resolutions we work on at the NWF Convention to tell our story, and our story to the folks at the national level make sure the affiliates are heard. I know the extinction process.

Don’t forget we are in a court battle to keep all our public trust waters open as intended. In case you missed it, a judge recently ruled against the people of South Dakota and closed a body of water in north central South Dakota. Please note: we are the only conservation/sporting organization that is fighting that ruling. If allowed to stand, it could be the precursor to all non-meandered waters being closed to any type of recreation and the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars to the state. If that doesn’t get your buddies who like to hunt, fish, boat, swim, etc. to join SDWF, they need serious mental health help. (*See previous comments on people who won’t do anything until it’s too late.*)

Please remember to send in a check to the SDWF Camo Coalition for the exceptional work they do across the state, territory and the District of Columbia.

Bipartisan Bill To Enhance Funding For Fish and Wildlife

Bipartisan bill is “a once in a generation opportunity to save thousands of at-risk wildlife species.”

Congressman Don Young (R-AK) and Congresswoman Deb-dingell (D-MI) have introduced the bipartisan Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (H.R. 5650) calling for $1.3 billion in existing revenue from the development of energy and mineral resources on federal lands and waters be dedicated to the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program to conserve a full array of fish and wildlife.

“We have a once in a generation opportunity to save thousands of at-risk wildlife species by investing in proactive, collaborative conservation. By modernizing how we fund conservation of the full diversity of wildlife, we will bolster our natural resources, strengthen our outdoor recreation economy, reduce regulatory uncertainty, improve public health, and bolster community resilience,” said Collin O’Mara, president and chief executive officer of the National Wildlife Federation. “We thank Congressmen Young and Congresswoman Dingell for their exceptional leadership on the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act.”

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America’s Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources, comprised of national business and conservation leaders, convened in 2015 to recommend a new mechanism to sustainably fund fish and wildlife conservation. In March 2016, the Panel recommended that a $1.3 billion trust fund be created using existing fees from energy and mineral development on federal lands and water to support implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans in every state, territory and the District of Columbia.

“As a strong supporter of conservation and sportsmen alike, I’m proud to take the lead on an important discussion regarding fish and wildlife conservation across the country,” said Congressman Don Young. “While we’ve seen many great successes in management and conservation projects in the past, this legislation takes a unique approach to allow states to make responsible management decisions at home. As someone who proudly supports the management of fish and game for all Americans—for sportsmen, subsistence purposes, and for future generations—I believe this legislation is a responsible first step in developing a path forward.”

“It has been proven over the decades that incredible gains in...
71st Annual Convention
Sept. 9, 10, 11, 2016 Schedule of Events

SDWF's 71st Annual Summer Convention is scheduled for Sept. 9-11, 2016 hosted by the Whetstone Sportsman Club in Milbank. The business meetings of the convention is going to be held at the Lantern Inn convention center. The Lantern Inn will be the sight of the action auction and Conservation Awards dinner on Saturday evening. This year’s Convention has no official business happening on Friday the 9th but there will be a social and snacks at the Lantern.

Friday – Sept. 9
Come out to the Lantern Inn
• 6:00 PM – No host bar with meals available in Lantern restaurant

Saturday – Sept. 10
• 7:30 AM – Registration at the Lantern Inn
• 8:00 AM – SDWF Board of Directors Pre-Convention Meeting
  ➢ Call to Order
  ➢ Consideration of Approval of Absence from meeting for any absent Officer or Director
  ➢ Approval of the Minutes of the Spring Governing Board Meeting
  ➢ Approval of the Treasurer’s Financial Report (see also below)
  ➢ Review and approve any Executive Committee action taken between meetings
  ➢ Review of any delinquent dues from affiliate clubs not received by July 31st and approval of seating of delegates from delinquent affiliates
  ➢ Any further business
  ➢ Adjourn
• 8:30 AM: First Session of the 71st Annual Convention Board of Directors, Affiliate Delegates and the public.
  • Call to Order
  • Invocation and Prayer
  • Pledge of Allegiance
  • Seating of the delegates
  • Welcome and opening remarks.
  • Report from the Executive Director
  • Approval of the Treasurer’s Financial Report
  • Committee Reports:
    ➢ By-laws
    ➢ Resolutions
    ➢ Budget and Finance
    ➢ PR and Development
• Nominations: Open positions for Sunday’s vote.
• Short Break
• 9 AM For the Ladies; A bus tour of local wildlife area and museum with a lunch
• 10:30 AM –Tony Leif, SD Dept. of Game, Fish and Parks, Sect.
  • Quick preview of afternoon programs and other options.
• Noon – Lunch will be served $15
• 1:00 PM – SD Sportsmen against Hunger, Director Ron Fowler will address the delegates and Affiliates.
• 1:30 PM – Russ Roberts, to talk about possible future deer management in SD.
• 2:00 PM – SD Attorney General and candidate for the Gov. of SD Marty Jackley is tentatively scheduled to talk.
• 3:00 PM – SD Rep. Mark Mickelson and candidate for Gov. of SD is tentatively scheduled to talk.
• 4:00 PM Biologist in charge of the introduction of Sturgeon into Bigstone
• 6:00 PM – Social, 2-meat Dinner buffet, Conservation Awards & Auction at the Lantern Inn

Sunday – Sept. 11
The Sunday Morning Session will be held at the Lantern Inn
8:30 AM Registration for newcomers
• 9:00 AM: CALL TO ORDER
• Invocation and Prayer
• Pledge of Allegiance and Conservation Pledge
• Seating of the delegates
• Affiliate reports and updates
• Committee Reports:
  ➢ Youth Conservation Camp (including Endowment Fund update)
  ➢ Any other updates
• David Ditloff, NWF Regional Representative and Outreach Coordinator
• Report from Dave Nauman and Chris Hesla on lobbying efforts/current issues
• Report on Camo Coalition
• Short Break
• Approval of last year’s financial statement
• Further discussion on and adoption of the budget
• Bids for 2017 Annual Convention
• Any further business
• Elections for open positions
• Oath of Office induction for newly elected directors and officers
• Any further resolutions- Bob Jacobson
• 12:00 Noon lunch break if needed, lunch on your own
• 2:00 PM: Adjourn

2:00 PM – SDWF Board of Directors Post-Convention Meeting (To include new officers.)
• Call to Order
• Consideration of Approval of Absence from meeting for any absent Officer or Director.
• Review and approve any Executive Committee action taken between meetings.
• Appointment of the Secretary-Treasurer and Approval by the Governing Board.
• Approval of the Bond for the Secretary-Treasurer.
• Approval of employment contracts for Executive Directors and Secretary/Treasurer
• President: appoint or reappoint Directors-at-Large with Approval of the Governing Board
• Act on any Application of a Past President within the last 10 years if received.
• Committee Appointments:
  ➢ Resolution Committee - consists of 8 members
  ➢ Articles and By-Laws Committee - consists of 5 members
  ➢ Endowment Fund Committee - consists of 5 members
  ➢ Nominating Committee - consists of 5 members
  ➢ National Affairs Committee - consists of 5 members
  ➢ Budget and Finance Committee - consists of 5 members
  ➢ Credentials Committee - consists of 5 members
• Appointment of the Legislative Lobbyists
• Appointment of delegate and alternate delegate to the NWF annual convention
• Set the fall meeting date, place and time.
• Any further discussion on budget, PR and development
• Any further business.
• Executive Session
• Adjourn

Prices and Fees
Delegate Registration Fee - $15.00
(No delegate registration fee to the general public.)
Friday: No Host Social, and food available in Lantern restaurant
Saturday lunch - $15.00 ● Saturday night 2 Meat buffet - $30.00

JUST ONE
MINER COUNTY — With his scratched arms cradled around the lively, belly-up bird, Rocco Murano clench his pliers down on a shiny, new band.

The state’s senior waterfowl biologist loves this time of year, despite the annoying “goose hickies” that come with the work. “They can getcha,” said Murano, referencing the lacerations where Canada goose feathers jammed his hand during hunting seasons.

During a recent June morning, Murano and 10 other South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks Department employees corralling a gaggle of geese on a wetland in Miner County.

As part of collaborative research in the Central Flyway, GF&P staff have increased efforts to track Canada geese through banding since 2012. In that time, GF&P has banded 8,375 Canada geese in South Dakota, and Murano said his department will band about 1,500 more this year.

Banding is the process of capturing a bird and putting a metal band — which has a tracking number — around its foot. Murano and GF&P staff conduct banding efforts from late-July until mid-September on different species of birds, and the purpose is to calculate survival and harvest rates, along with determining population estimates.

To coordinate these banding efforts is quite a treat for Murano, as it was about 20 years ago that Canada goose numbers were down significantly, a time the bird was in a “restoration phase.” “Since the late ’90s, we went out of restoration phrase, and now the population has increased very dramatically,” Murano said. “Things have changed a lot in a relatively short period of time. It’s a great success story.”

The process of banding

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates there were 155,000 resident Canada geese in South Dakota in 2015, and that number was as high as 270,000 in 2012.

While this year’s population estimate will be available later this month, 50 geese were slowly pushed toward an area of caged netting on June 22 in Miner County on one of many days Murano conducted banding work.

To do it, GF&P employees surrounded a large wetland and enticed the geese toward a funnel of nets that were set up and led to a trap.

Murano said it’s this time of year adult geese drop their flight feathers during an annual molting, and that’s when banding occurs. He explained Molting rotates across the US so the adult birds are growing their new feathers out as the baby geese get bigger and feathered, and they’re learning how to fly.

To push the geese toward the nets, there were people in boats, others were in kayaks and some were hiding along the shore. Then, when the birds reached the netted area, the geese were fished in.

Then, banding started.

Hannah Leeper, 22, of White Bear Lake, Minnesota, was hired this summer as a seasonal employee with GF&P. The only woman of the group, Leeper said the hands-on style of work was what she loved about her third day on the job. The previous day, the group banded about 180 geese.

“Get a lot of practice really fast,” she said. “And I feel really comfortable handling wildlife.”

Property banding the geese meant first determining the sex and age of the bird. Murano split the birds into four categories, immature male and female, to track with differing numbered bands.

“Those are really far along this year,” Murano said. “We had an earlier hatch, which is good for banding.”

With a Canada goose cradled and the wings tucked back, the bander holds a leg and squeezes a loosely fit band to the bird’s leg with pliers. Then, the goose is released back to the wetland after noting its age and sex.

American Band Company in Kentucky makes the bands, but they’re ordered by age and sex; banding lab in Laurel, Maryland, put the bands on and lucky hunters who harvest a banded goose calls to report its numbers.

“That’s where all the data goes,” Murano said.

To report a band, hunters call 1-800-327-BAND or go online at www.reportband.gov.

Early hunting seasons

When Murano graduated from high school in Huron in 1997, it was not legal to shoot a Canada goose in Beadle County because there were so few.

That’s changed dramatically, as the past several years there have been extremely liberal bag limits and early hunting seasons to help control populations.

In 2010, GF&P initiated an attempt to alleviate local agriculture depredation issues and reduce giant Canada goose populations by starting a special August Management Take. At the time, there were in excess of 200,000 Canada geese in South Dakota, well beyond the population objective of 80,000 to 90,000 breeding birds.

Some counties in South Dakota have held an early September Canada goose hunting season each year since 1996, but then populations exploded to kick off the August take.

“Those birds have very high survival rates for a game bird, and they have four to six goslings annually,” Murano said. “Populations of any species can increase quickly with those factors.”

Murano explained this is the first year since 2010 that eastern South Dakota will not hold an August Management Take for Canada geese.

From 2010 to 2015, hunters have harvested 145,500 Canada geese during the August Management Take, which is only for counties in which Canada geese have proven to be nuisances on crops, mainly eastern and northeastern South Dakota.

“Harvest and hunting participation were low last year, and they had been declining for the past three years,” Murano said. “We heard a lot of negative comments from hunters, which is one of the main reasons the department called to bring it forward to eliminate it. We’re going to find out through efforts such as banding whether we actually see a reduction in harvest or if it stays the same. There’s a possibility the harvest rate stays the same because folks will only shoot so many geese, whether it’s August or September.”

Instead, South Dakota hunters will begin to hunt Canada geese starting on Sept. 3 this year.

A coordinated effort

While Murano and his GF&P banding crew are on the latter half of their efforts with Canada geese this year, they’ll continue on other species for several weeks.

Geese are typically banded in late-June through July; mourning doves are banded in July; and ducks are banded in mid-August until early-September.

Last year, GF&P banded 1,279 ducks in South Dakota and Murano said the goal each year is to band “as many as we can get.”

“Some years we’ll band 500 and some years 1,800, and we target primarily mallards,” he said. “It makes for a full summer.”

This is the fifth year in a coordinated effort across the Central Flyway to band Canada geese. The Central Flyway includes 10 states — ranging north from Montana and North Dakota south to New Mexico and Texas — and some Canada geese cross provincial borders.

Murano said it’s the first time ever there’s been a coordinated banding effort in the Central Flyway. Once completed, the analysis of band recoveries will aid in the understanding of an indirect population estimate of the species in the Central Flyway along with learning regionalized survival estimates.

“We want to see if South Dakota has a lower survival rate, which it likely does, because we have a lot of hunting pressure up here,” Murano said. South Dakota is also reconsidering its objective population goal of Canada geese to be increased from 80,000 to 90,000 resident birds to 125,000 to 175,000, a range that was agreed upon by a stakeholder group through research and population estimates.

“The stakeholder group was sportsmen, farming groups, GF&P agencies, and we all came together because we recognized the old objective was probably unattainable,” Murano said. “Hopefully this fall, we’ll get it finalized for the next five years.”

GF&P commissioners, the governing body of the department, will discuss the objective goal at their August meeting. They could finalize the objective in September.

The point of the objective is to help determine hunting limits, whether they should be liberal or conservative. It’s also to find a compromised number of Canada geese for sportsmen and landowners, Murano said.

That’s where banding comes in.

“ This is an operational thing and dif a commitment moving forward,” Murano said. “We may not band at this level, but we’ll band geese each year. I always look forward to it. It gets me out of the office.”
SD Wildlife Federation Donors

Thank you to the following donors for their contributions to the SDWF. Please consider becoming a member of the Wildlife Legacy recognition of the people who support SDWF above and beyond their membership and raffle donations.

May 2016
- LEVEL V EAGLE
  - O'REILLY, LARRY - MO (Level V Eagle)
- LEVEL IV BUFFALO
  - DENISON, LARRY - VA (Level IV Buffalo)
- LEVEL III ELK
  - LEVEL III ELK

June 2016
- LEVEL V EAGLE
  - O'REILLY, LARRY - MO (Level V Eagle)
- LEVEL IV BUFFALO
  - LEVEL IV BUFFALO
- LEVEL III ELK
  - LEVEL III ELK

December 2015
- LEVEL V EAGLE
  - LEVEL V EAGLE

November 2015
- LEVEL I PHEASANT
  - LEVEL I PHEASANT

October 2015
- LEVEL II DEER
  - LEVEL II DEER

September 2015
- LEVEL IV BUFFALO
  - LEVEL IV BUFFALO

August 2015
- LEVEL I PHEASANT
  - LEVEL I PHEASANT

July 2015
- LEVEL II DEER
  - LEVEL II DEER

June 2015
- LEVEL IV BUFFALO
  - LEVEL IV BUFFALO

"Just One" New Member Program

The SDWF has approximately 3,000 members. We are constantly fighting to keep our outdoor heritage and to conserve our natural resources. We can’t continue without our members and we can’t keep fighting unless we grow our membership.

Love the outdoors and need a tax deduction this year? If you have a car, van, truck, ATV, or boat that’s in reasonably good shape and you aren’t using, donate it to the SDWF. You’ll get a nice tax break and will feel great knowing you helped our great organization protect South Dakota’s outdoors.

888-OVERBAG

Gone but not forgotten hunting friends:

In honor of:

- Chuck McMullen

Dec. 2015

Gone but not forgotten our special companions:

In honor of:

- Buddy

Dec. 2015
These funds will be used to develop a State Wildlife Action Plan that assessed the health of wildlife within the state and outlined the conservation actions necessary to sustain them. Collectively, these State Wildlife Action Plans form a nationwide strategy to prevent wildlife from becoming listed under the Endangered Species Act. Through the course of this planning process, the program has been able to bolster 12,000 species of greatest conservation need. While the State and Tribal Wildlife Grant program has been appropriated $50-100 million dollars each year, the program is funded at only a fraction of what states need to conserve these species. A summary of all the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants is to determine what it would cost to implement 75 percent of every state’s plan. Based on average funding from annual appropriations, current funding is only 4.65% of what is necessary to conserve our nation’s species of greatest conservation need. As a result, states are forced to focus only on just a very few species, with many more at-risk and heading towards becoming endangered. Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (H.R. 5650) The Recovering America’s Wildlife Act is the solution we need to address Conservation and Restoration Account – $650 million to provide existing revenues fromscript the state and federal trust funds, the Conservation and Restoration Account, and the Fish and Wildlife Service to address the needs of imperiled fish and wildlife. The members agreed that pro-active conservation is cost-effective and can save wildlife and taxpayer dollars well before listing becomes necessary. The pro-active strategies identify actions and determine that using funding from existing revenues from the use of our non-renewable natural resources was a pragmatic and logical solution that would mutually benefit America’s industries and agencies as well as our shared fish, wildlife, and economic heritage.

A Proven Mechanism - By allocating funds to the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration account within the Pittman-Robertson-Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Fund, the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act takes advantage of an existing funding mechanism that has been shown to work for wildlife restoration for over 75 years. The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration account channels revenues paid by sportsmen when they purchase hunting gear back to state fish and wildlife agencies. These agencies have a proven track record of using these funds wisely and effectively, having restored native population numbers around the country. The Wildlife Conservation and Restoration program provides funding to each state, Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia based on a formula of land area and population; states will receive between 1 and 5 percent of the total amount. States must provide a 25 percent match, leveraging these federal funds even further.

Accountability through State Wildlife Action Plans - These plans will be used by each state to safeguard wildlife and their habitat as laid out in their existing, congressionally mandated State Wildlife Action Plans. These plans provide accountability and oversight because states can only use these funds on work that is identified within the Action Plans. These plans must be updated every ten years with the input of the most recent scientific and management information. Once approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Conservation efforts could include reintroduction of imperiled species, conserving and restoring important habitat, fighting invasive species and disease, and more. States also can use a portion of the funds for wildlife-related recreation such wildlife viewing, nature photography, and trails. In summary, these plans serve as a framework for conservation education efforts to engage the next generation of our nation’s wildlife stewards.

Pheasant Experts: Planned Habitat Vital, Worth The Effort

The pheasant is not only important in South Dakota for its cultural value, but also for what it contributes to the economy. In 2015, more than 150 thousand hunters harvested more than one point two million pheasants in South Dakota. Nearly 85 thousand hunters came from out of state. They poured millions of dollars into local economies. South Dakota isn’t a pheasant destination by accident.

Pheasants aren’t pheasants by accident. There have been years of conservation efforts to improve the environment for pheasants. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department. He says there aren’t be pheasants in the fall if their nests don’t survive the spring. Some grassy areas are better than others. Take, for example, this 12 acre patch of land just outside of Huron.

Some of the grasses here will grow six feet tall, which Pauly says is great for cover. Some will bloom throughout the summer, punctuating the vibrant green with patches of white, yellow, pink, and purple. Pauly says this grassland restoration project contains 30 to 40 different species of native plants.

“It’s an ever changing environment as different species start to bloom, and different species of grass start to grow,” Pauly says.

That diversity is important, because it helps ensure a steady diet of insects as pheasant chicks grow. Pauly says people in his office can help promote technical guidance and support for projects like this. There’s a variety of programs landowners can access to help put or keep grassland on the ground. Another example near Huron: state funds paid for part of the fencing materials around a portion of land in exchange for an agreement from the landowner to not grow crops there for ten years. The farmer is still allowed to use it for grazing and haying. Pauly says the idea is to farm the best and leave the rest.

“Almost every producer has some acres on their property that don’t produce as well as the others,” Pauly says. “But those are often the acres that perform best for growing grass. And so it can be a real symbiotic relationship between conservation and farming practices. It doesn’t have to be just one or the other type of scenario.”

Day County farmer Jamie Reetz is putting that idea into practice. He’s got food plots and a pollinator habitat. He also has land in the Conservation Reserve Program. When enrolled in CRP, farmers take land out of production and in return receive federal payments to improve the environment on the land. The farmer is still allowed to use it for grazing and haying. Reetz says he loves wildlife and wants his sons to experience the benefits that come with ample habitat. But, he says, it’s work. Farming is a business. He says sometimes high commodity prices make it more difficult to sustain practices that benefit wildlife, but he continues to do so because he believes it’s important for the long-term health of his land and the wildlife that depend on it.
CRP, for idle lands. It’s finding those right spots that maybe aren’t ideal to farm. “Back in 2007 we had about 1.5 million acres on the ground. Right now we have about 950,000 acres,” Runia says. “And our pheasant population has declined over the last five years as some of these CRP acres have declined.”

Reetz says when commodity prices are lower it makes sense economically to put the poorer ground into CRP because it carries more income in the long run.

“At the time of the high com, especially, so many of these CRP acres which is the poorer ground got takenout and put into production which probably never should have happened,” Reetz says. “But I don’t blame people for doing it. They saw the big dollars with the seven, eight dollar com. Now we’re back in check with the three dollar com, that I think a lot of this poorer ground is going to go back into a CRP program, or some type of program.”

Reetz says when commodity prices are lower it makes sense economically to put the poorer ground into CRP because it carries more income in the long run.

“Anything we can do whether it’s an acre or a hundred acre is still going to be beneficial,” Lardy says. “CRP for pheasants is king for habitat there. It’s a significant amount of money for these communities as a whole.” Pauly says. “So not relying on that as a major boost to their local economies,” Pauly says. “This is hindering the presence of CRP land in South Dakota.

“If this trend continues we’re going to see CRP acreage decline by probably another 150,000 acres here over the next two to three years, which is extremely alarming and very much concerning for the future of pheasants in South Dakota,” Runia says.

Experts say there are two main reasons why all of this matters. First, the pheasant is the state bird, and an icon of South Dakota. And second, pheasants bring the state money. Game, Fish and Parks statistics show pheasant hunters spent over170 million dollars in the state in 2015. More than 140 million came from out of state hunters. Biologist Brian Pauly says that’s a good reason for all South Dakotans to care about pheasant habitat.

“A lot of that money is going to some of our small communities that really rely on that as a major boost to their local economies,” Pauly says. “So not only are we talking about a significant amount of money economically, but it’s a significant amount of money for these communities as a whole.”

Experts add there’s at least one other reason to care about pheasant habitat in South Dakota: what’s good for the state bird is also often good for other animals, like butterflies, bees, and deer. They say good habitat can positively impact water quality and soil health as well.

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