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FOR THE LOVE OF DOVE HUNTING - MAGGIE LINDSEY

We are so lucky in South Dakota when it comes to bird hunting. We have world class pheasant, and grouse, as well as ducks and geese. But we also have a great little game bird that is an absolute blast to hunt – the mourning dove. If you have not hunted Mourning Doves, you should give it a try. It is the first hunting season of the year, always starting on September first. Dove hunting is one of the most enjoyable and relatively easy hunts to experience.

Dove season is a tradition for me and I have declared September 1st as a personal holiday. I have fond memories of my father taking me as a young child in the only wheat field in Western New Mexico – I was his retriever and loved running through the field to pick up his downed birds. As I got older, I graduated from retriever to hunter shooting a single shot hammer 20 gauge that had quite a kick. I was lucky to get 1 – 2 doves per box of shells. When I turned 16 my dad presented me with his old side by side 16 gauge and suddenly my average doubled to 4 doves per box – I really thought I was on fire!

At 18 years old I moved to Alaska and spent the next 30 years there where there are no doves, so needless to say I was thrilled when I moved to South Dakota and discovered the abundance of my favorite little game bird. It has been an absolute joy to hunt doves once again. South Dakota is one of the top dove producing states with the birds nesting up to three times during the summer. Doves are actually the most popular game bird to hunt in the US.

Dove hunting doesn’t require much walking – in fact it is best to sit in spots where you see doves crossing. Most dove hunting spots are easily accessible with lots of public land that offers some good dove hunting. Start scouting about mid summer by taking a drive in the morning and evenings and look for concentrations of birds as well as crossing areas. In dry years sitting on a water source in the evening works well or finding a crossing area between a field and the water source. Try to pattern the birds – I hunted milo field years ago where the birds flew in at 4: pm and flew out at 4:20pm. If you got there early or late there were no birds to be had. Doves are quite abundant and feed in wheat fields, milo fields, kosha and absolutely love sunflower fields. They also like to sit in trees around a field – which makes a perfect place for you and hopefully a young hunter or friend to sit under and wait.

Be ready for lots of shooting. Doves are fast and hard to hit, and it usually takes lots of shooting to connect with the bird. This is a good learning experience for young shooters getting their shooting skills honed (as well as adult hunters). A good rule of thumb is to lead them by six feet – that seems to work on such fast-flying birds. Any gauge will work with this being a great game bird to use the smaller gauges with such as 20, 28 or 410 gauges. The best shot size is 7.5 or 8 game loads. Please check

regulations when hunting on public land as some areas require non-toxic shot.

Dove hunting isn’t complicated. It is better if the doves can’t see you, but all you really need is camouflage clothing (this is



one hunt where you can wear short sleeves!) or a simple blind. Some of us even take a five-gallon bucket to sit on – plus it doubles to carry ammo and water as you will need lots of water to drink. The nice thing is that you can talk and not scare the birds. It is much more fun to take a group of friends or young hunters. Young hunters don’t have to sit still for hours making it much more enjoyable for them.

If you have a bird dog, doves are a great way for a pre-pheasant season tune-up. My field bred English Cockers are great dove dogs. It is a perfect training opportunity to enforce steadiness. Dogs can be used to retrieve but are not necessary as in other upland bird hunts. Please

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FOR THE LOVE OF DOVE HUNTING

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be aware of the heat however and don't let the dog overheat – keep them wet and in the shade and carry lots of water for them. Some dogs don't like to retrieve doves as their feathers come out easily in their mouths.

Hunts can be short, a several hour evening or morning hunt works well – once again this is much easier on the young hunter. Decoys work well but are not necessary. I like to put a few on a tree limb I am sitting near and put up a mojo in front of me to draw the doves closer. Decoys are usually very reasonable priced and one package of a half dozen or so will do the trick. Powered decoys of course are a bit more expensive, but they really work well. The one drawback though is that Doves don't like cold weather so as soon as the fall nights become cool, they suddenly move out so the first two weeks of season are the best. By the second week of September grouse season is open so it is time to switch anyway.

The best part about dove hunting in my opinion is eating them as they are very fine table fare. There is some very tasty meat on those tiny little birds. They make the best poppers wrapped in bacon and cooked on the grill. I love them in stir fry and spaghetti sauce. After you get them home and breasted rinse them off then soak them in

a mild saltwater solution overnight in the refrigerator to draw out any excess blood. Afterwards rinse them off again and either get them ready for a meal or package and freeze them. The only drawback to eating doves is that they are small, so it takes quite a few to make a meal – but they are well worth it.



Bob Goodroad and his son, add winner of 29/90 Gun Raffle

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Fleet Farm.

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President,
Brad Johnson

President's Column *by Brad Johnson*

Lots of exciting things are happening as the South Dakota Wildlife Federation continues to grow stronger and more effective.

The last couple of years have been all about stabilization and laying the foundation for a strong future.

A couple of months ago, we submitted an application for strategic assistance from the National Wildlife Federation, our parent organization.

Earlier this month the NWF announced that we were one of three states selected to be part of the Affiliate Resilience Program (ARP), a pilot NWF program to create more effective and stable state organizations.

Utah and Indiana were the other two states selected.

A team of NWF staff members soon will engage with our executive director Dana Rogers and the board to do a deep analysis of how we operate and how we will become more effective.

The goal is to build a stronger and more sustainable organization. We have made great progress the past several years but we know much more needs to be done.

The NWF effort begins as we also are undergoing a visioning process.

First Vice President Emmett Keyser and Board Member Jayden Halsey are leading this process, and members will be asked to complete a survey.

The goals of this effort are:

1. **Identity and purpose.** What is SDWF uniquely positioned to do? What should it lead, what should it support, and what should it stop trying to do?
2. **The organization we want to become.** Instead of starting with today's staffing, board structure and budget, describe what a successful SDWF should look like in five to ten years membership, staff, geographic reach, influence, funding and partnerships.
3. **A small number of signature priorities.** Statewide conservation advocacy remains foundational. The process should determine where SDWF can have distinctive, measurable impact rather than accumulating programs. The Black Hills Conservation Initiative could be one. Youth leadership could be another.
4. **The organizational capacity to deliver.** This means examining the bylaws, board, committees, affiliates, staff, fundraising, communications, membership and volunteer structure. If the vision requires an organization substantially stronger than today's SDWF, the process needs to say what must be built.
5. **A realistic path from here to there.** The final product shouldn't simply be an aspirational vision statement. It should establish priorities for the next three to five years, identify who is responsible, determine what resources are required and provide measurable benchmarks.

The goal is bigger than simply growing the organization. We want SDWF to become a stronger statewide conservation convener capable of bringing people together around practical solutions for wildlife, habitat, water, outdoor recreation, and South Dakota's outdoor heritage.

A big part of this effort are plans to create a Youth

Conservation Council. Jayden also is leading this effort, which will be developed in conjunction with the Visioning process.

Our Youth Conservation Camp and a Youth Council should be viewed as complementary parts of a larger leadership pipeline.

The camp is already successful at introducing young people to conservation and the outdoors. A Youth Council answers the next question: What happens to those young people after camp?

Why create a Youth Council?

- It turns participation into leadership. Camp provides an experience. A Youth Council gives young people continuing responsibility—helping shape projects, speaking on conservation issues, participating in Federation activities and eventually serving in organizational leadership.
- It creates a pathway into SDWF. One of the challenges facing conservation organizations is keeping young people involved after an initial program. The progression could become: Youth Conservation Camp → Youth Council → volunteer/affiliate involvement → SDWF board and conservation leadership.
- It gives young people a genuine voice. Rather than adults deciding what will interest the next generation, SDWF would have young people helping answer that question themselves. They can influence communications, events, recruitment and conservation priorities.
- It strengthens the camp itself. Former campers could become counselors, mentors, recruiters and ambassadors. The Council could help maintain relationships with campers after they leave camp instead of starting over with a new group every summer.
- It broadens SDWF's reach. Council members can connect the Federation with schools, colleges, outdoor clubs, conservation programs and young people who may never encounter SDWF through its traditional affiliate structure.
- It develops SDWF's successors. The ultimate purpose isn't simply to have a youth program. It is to deliberately develop the people who will be conservation leaders in South Dakota 10, 20 and 30 years from now.

This is an exciting time for the federation. Please considering increasing your financial commitment to our organization. A major part of our budget comes from fundraising and supporter contributions. We need your time, talent – and financial support.



SDWF Executive Directors Column *by Dana R. Rogers*

Out and About: A Summer of Conservation Success and Policy Challenges

Man, does summer ever fly by.

We kicked off the season in June with another outstanding Youth Conservation Camp at Camp Bob Marshall. During that first week, our incredible camp staff hosted roughly 80 kids from five different states. Our fantastic camp directors—Jayden Halsey, Kemari Blumhardt, Bob Schaefer, and Mike McKernan—once again teamed up with KayCee Smith and dozens of dedicated South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks (SDGF&P) staffers to deliver an unforgettable experience for the next generation of conservationists.

Shortly after camp, President Brad Johnson, VP Emmett Keyser, and I traveled to Providence, Rhode Island, for the annual National Wildlife Federation (NWF) meeting. Joining NWF staff and delegations from across the country, we participated in excellent breakout sessions and informational programs. These meetings always provide a valuable perspective on how different states tackle their unique conservation goals. Every time I attend, I come away deeply appreciative of how truly blessed we are here in South Dakota.

With an eye toward our own long-term objectives, VP Emmett Keyser and Director Jayden Halsey have been developing a member survey that will be released very soon. We want to know what you like, what you don't like, and what goals you envision for our future. Keep an eye out for it.

The Power of Citizen Sportsmen

When citizen sportsmen unite on an issue, they truly make a difference. Recently, the Prairie Pothole region faced a severe threat from a USFWS proposal to set back drain tile easements, which would have accelerated land drainage. Thanks to hundreds of thousands of public comments flooding in against the move, the discussion has officially been tabled.

Closer to home, a South Dakota proposal to allow Muskie harvest is a major topic of interest. The SDWF was recently approached by several concerned anglers regarding a potential rule change to remove the mandatory catch-and-release restriction on Muskies.

About eight years ago, I sat in the room at a commission meeting when Muskie fishermen submitted the petition that created the mandatory catch-and-release rule. It was surprising at the time to see the commission side with citizen sportsmen over a department recommendation, but it was a milestone moment. While this issue will likely be decided by the time this column goes to press, the SDWF Board of Directors has unanimously decided to support keeping Muskies catch-and-release only. These rare, revered fish have a massive following among dedicated anglers. They exist in only a handful of South Dakota waters, and their value is worth far more swimming to be caught again than on a stringer.

Backyards, Bowhunting, and Trails

One of our primary focuses during the annual meeting in Rhode Island was the NWF's Certified Wildlife Habitat Program. Even small suburban backyards can be intentionally manicured to provide incredible habitats for birds, bees, and butterflies. The SDWF has officially signed on to support this effort. If you are inclined to participate, you can visit our website for step-by-step details. My wife has long loved cultivating native flowers, water sources, and shelter around our Hill City home. She just registered our property and will receive her official certification soon.



On the hunting front, our friends at the South Dakota Bowhunters Association recently created and distributed a survey regarding ongoing deer license allocation discussions. Avid deer hunters will recall a major structural overhaul five years ago that limited firearm applicants to just two first-choice options in the initial draws. Word on the street is that a new effort may be underway to limit every South Dakota deer hunter to just two total licenses per year.

Opinions on this will certainly vary across the sporting community. For my part, I am deeply concerned that any future changes remain strictly science-based rather than designed to appease commercial interests. While there are valid concerns over deer populations in parts of the state, we should look at tweaking antlerless harvest and shifting season dates before we further limit resident sporting opportunities.

It is worth remembering that we already have an 8% non-resident quota allocated in the Black Hills, West River, and Refuge license draws. Past efforts to reduce non-resident archery permits were largely thwarted by commercial operators. Furthermore, the exact same number of "Special Buck" permits are currently allocated to residents and non-residents alike, with no reductions planned. South Dakota also offers youth and mentor permits to non-residents, though the overall biological impact of those is admittedly low.

Finally, if you've spent much time in the Black Hills National Forest lately, you've undoubtedly noticed the exploding popularity of UTVs and ATVs, particularly in the summer and early fall. As a Hill City resident, I hear and see the effects almost daily. Speak with almost any local resident who doesn't run a UTV rental business, and you will hear a similar, largely negative opinion.

Black Hills UTV misuse has become a real crisis. Marked trail systems, physical maps, and digital apps are readily available, but they are ignored by too many operators. Watch these small vehicles parade by in a convoy, and they are typically caked in Black Hills soil from tearing through mud holes and etching illegal, "new" trails into our slow-growing hills and meadows. We desperately need to find a solution, as enforcement by USFS personnel is currently sorely lacking.

A Bright Outlook

On a highly positive note for upland enthusiasts, we are receiving excellent field reports across much of the state's range indicating that this should be a phenomenal year for pheasants and grouse.

I hope this issue finds you well, please always remember our core values: respect the land, respect the landowners, and respect the wildlife.

YOUR VOICE COUNTS: SOUTH DAKOTA'S GROWING AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES CRISIS - *By Steve Charron*

A Warning Issued, and Ignored

In 2008, then-Governor Mike Rounds sounded an alarm for South Dakota. In a report of more than 70 pages, he warned state government and the public about the danger posed by aquatic invasive species (AIS) and called for a coordinated, statewide response. Committees were formed. Task forces were launched. Nearly two decades later, in 2026, South Dakota finds itself living out the very scenario he warned against.

Where We Stand Today

The numbers keep changing, and not for the better. At last count, 32 South Dakota bodies of water are infested with zebra mussels. Despite the scope of the problem, a single state agency, Game, Fish and Parks (GFP), now carries responsibility for nearly every element of the state's AIS response. That raises hard questions: What happened to the whole-of-government effort Governor Rounds called for? What happened to sustained funding? What happened to engagement from the legislature and the executive branch?

How the Crisis Unfolded

Lewis and Clark Lake became the state's first body of water confirmed to be infested with zebra mussels in 2014. From there, the spread continued across South Dakota. Because so much misinformation circulated about how the mussels were moving from lake to lake, SD Lakes and Streams began hosting speakers and seminars, bringing in researchers from across the country who had direct experience fighting AIS. A group of our members even completed a course through the University of Minnesota to better understand the science.

What we learned is sobering. Once zebra mussels filter and clear a lake's water, sunlight penetrates far deeper than before, fueling explosive growth of both native and invasive weeds. On our member lakes now in their sixth year of infestation, weeds are breaking the surface at depths of 16 feet. Cabin owners report that watercraft navigation has become difficult, with propellers regularly fouled and boats stalled outright. One sailboat was reportedly stopped in the middle of a popular lake by the sheer density of the weeds. When the wind blows, shoreline owners can find tons of weeds washed up within a matter of days. Shallow lakes have been hit especially hard, and in some cases fishing has become nearly impossible.

How AIS Actually Spreads

Like zebra mussels, invasive weeds are spread almost exclusively by watercraft moving between bodies of water. Can AIS travel between connected lakes? Absolutely. But what about wildlife, birds, turtles, and other animals sometimes blamed for spreading mussels or weeds over long distances? Study after study shows that pathway is possible but highly unlikely. DNA testing of zebra mussels can trace populations to their source, and the science does not support turtles crawling, or waterfowl flying, the many miles between infested lakes. On the lake where I live, our own infestation began the same way: a single adult zebra mussel found on each side of the public dock, and the weeds followed the same pattern.

Fighting for Action at the State Capitol

For the past six years, I have worked with state government to push for a real, coordinated plan to address AIS, introducing several bills with the help of committed legislators. This past legislative session,



we introduced House Bill 1157, requesting \$50,000 to bring together local stakeholders and representatives from neighboring states. We were especially eager to learn from Wyoming and Montana, neither of which has a single zebra-mussel-infested body of water, thanks to their prevention efforts.

The bill went before the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, where we were given 25 minutes to make our case and the opposition was given equal time. GFP testified against the bill for most of that opposition window, arguing that the agency was already handling the problem effectively and that a summit was unnecessary. The bill did not just fail; it was defeated decisively. The floor discussion made clear that many legislators did not fully grasp the severity of the crisis.

Measuring the Cost

SD Lakes and Streams is preparing to release the results of a three-year economic impact study, led by researchers from South Dakota and Montana and funded by more than \$100,000 in donated funds. When we presented this study during our committee testimony, we posed a simple question: who is responsible for safeguarding South Dakota's water resources, and who stands to be affected by the spread of weeds and mussels?

The answer is: anyone connected to surface water. This is not just a concern for recreational lake users. Whether it is a garden hose or a hydropower facility, zebra mussels can clog the system. According to Dakota News, Gavins Point Dam recently had to remove 25,000 pounds of zebra mussels from its power plant. Municipal water systems, irrigators, and anyone relying on groundwater are all at risk. Meanwhile, those of us living on already-infested lakes are contending with weeds and mussel shells sharp enough to cut swimmers, along with real harm to navigation, fishing, and property values.

Your Voice Counts

With the November elections approaching, South Dakotans have an opportunity to ask their legislators directly: what is your plan for aquatic invasive species? This question deserves a place in the Governor's debate as well. If we want to hand our children and grandchildren the same access to clean water and healthy lakes that we have enjoyed, our groundwater and surface water need our attention now.

TREMENDOUS CHANGES ON THE WATERFOWL FRONT

By Chuck Dieter

When you are getting ready for waterfowl hunting this fall, it would be wise to update yourself on changes in local waterfowl regulations throughout the central flyway.

One of the substantial changes in South Dakota is in the early fall Canada goose seasons. First, thankfully, most of the state has been removed from the August Management season. There are a few counties in northeast South Dakota which will still have the August season, but you better check the regulations to see where you can hunt. Another change is in the daily limit of Canada geese in both August and September seasons. The limit has been reduced to 8 from the original number of 15 in August. Throughout the September season, the limit will also be 8 per day.

There will also be some big changes for non-residents in Canada and some states. Here in South Dakota, the number of nonresident licenses available will be the same as last year. South Dakota has been a leader in preserving waterfowl hunting for state residents since the 1940s. If South Dakota had no cap on nonresidents, the state would be saturated with nonresident hunters and guides. Some states as well as several Canadian provinces have followed the lead of South Dakota in keeping resident waterfowl hunting alive.

After complaints by North Dakota residents there was a minor change in nonresident hunting. Instead of saving the first 7 days of waterfowl hunting for residents only, there will be 9 days for residents. This minor change allows the first 2 weekends open to only residents. This change will have a minuscule effect on nonresidents. Kind of like trying to drain Devil's Lake a spoonful at a time.

Last year, the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Alberta instituted some strict rules for nonresidents coming from the US. The following license options are available to non-Canadian residents wishing to hunt migratory game birds in Manitoba during the fall season:

1. Purchase a seven-day through a licensed Manitoba outfitter.
2. Enter the draw to become eligible for a seven-day license.

Non-Canadian resident migratory game bird hunters that wish to hunt on their own, without the use of an outfitter may enter a draw for a seven-day license, applicable for a period of their choosing and province-wide use. The licenses are only available once a year, with online draw applications accepted June 15 - July 15 of each year. There are only 1,800 licenses available for free-lance hunters.

Alberta has a limited number of non-resident licenses available and only allow nonresidents to hunt in certain zones. The agency is still working on final regulations, but it is so confusing, I gave up. If you are planning a trip to Alberta, check with a game warden in the province!

New this year, Saskatchewan has implemented severe restrictions on nonresidents for 2026. Saskatchewan has introduced shorter term license limits for non resident waterfowl hunters to address concerns about illegal outfitting and to protect access for resident hunters. Season-long licenses for non residents are being replaced with three five day term licenses in total. You can have one five-day license in spring and 2 five-day licenses in fall. So, the total hunting days available to a non resident in a season is now 15 days (5 days × 3 licenses), compared to the previous unlimited season option.

The goal is to reduce opportunities for illegal outfitters who operate outside the regulated system, which can increase hunting pressure and undercut licensed outfitters and rural tourism. The fall licenses cost \$225 for the first one and \$150 for the second one.

Environment Minister Darlene Rowden said the province remains committed to its reputation as a world class hunting destination but wants to ensure wildlife is a shared public resource and that Saskatchewan residents benefit most. Saskatchewan guides support the change as a first step to closing the window for illegal outfitters to operate. The Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation applauds the move to protect waterfowl resources and resident hunting heritage.

In Kansas, they prohibit nonresidents from hunting migratory waterfowl on most public lands except Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays during the open season. Further south, Oklahoma has banned any non-resident guides from working in their state. There are likely more regulations coming down the line in other states.

Waterfowl hunting has changed so much since I started chasing ducks and geese as a teen. Commercialism has taken over in Canada and in the US. It seems as if nobody wants to figure out how or where to hunt anymore. They just want to pay someone to do all the work for them.

In some ways, this change is understandable. Many of the good hunting spots have been bought or leased by guides. The only way to hunt these spots is to hire someone to take you. In both Canada and the US, certain waterfowl hunting areas are controlled by outfitters and guides.

There is trouble brewing in the southern US. Louisiana hunters are outraged because the migration of ducks has been short stopped. In Arkansas and Missouri, there are large swaths of land which have been converted to cropland. Thousands of acres of land have been purchased or leased and have had corn planted. After the corn has grown, the land is then flooded, creating a magnet for ducks. None of the corn is ever harvested.

While this story needs further enlightenment, suffice it to say it is a problem. These areas are what biologists have called "moist soil management." In years past, the land was wet and native plants were there providing food for migrating ducks. Some hunters purchased this land and put out the corn. So now there are tens of thousands of acres which are only open to a few hunters who are willing to pay. And boy will they pay. One area charges \$20,000 for a 5-day hunt!

I have a big problem with this scenario. If you or I put out a bucket of corn in a field we are hunting, we will get a ticket for baiting. Yet these thousand-acre cornfields are basically a huge baiting scheme. Guides can make a fortune off other hunters, by guiding them to huge, baited fields. I am sure the hunting there is spectacular. The ducks have so much food, there is no reason to migrate further south.

I am collecting information on this concern and will address it in an upcoming issue. Be on the lookout and let me know if you have any useful information concerning this fight between Louisiana and states further north.

FLOODED CORN BY CHUCK DIETER

All is not well in the waterfowl world. There is quite a controversy concerning whether huge areas of flooded corn are interfering with duck migrations. In several states including Missouri and Kansas, outfitters have purchased large areas of farmland. The land has been planted to corn and then flooded. Hundreds or thousands of acres are then left standing throughout the hunting season and the corn is never harvested. The outfitters then charge large sums of money to guide other hunters on the flooded fields.

There is a vocal group of hunters down south, mainly from Louisiana, who are really upset about this practice as they believe it has caused the loss of duck migration in their area. They even got Senator John Kennedy (R, La.) to back them on their complaints about the current situation.

Senator Kennedy created a stir among waterfowlers when he called upon the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study the impact of what he called unfair “legal baiting” on North America’s duck migration. “In 1998, Congress enacted the Migratory Bird Treaty Reform Act, which repealed the strict liability standard that previously governed federal waterfowl baiting violations. In 1999, USFWS removed the enforcement mechanism that previously restricted the growth of hunting over intentionally flooded standing crops, particularly corn. As a result, Louisiana has witnessed a significant decline in annual waterfowl migration since the late 1990s,” Kennedy wrote in the letter. “Unlike rice, which requires flooding as part of its natural growth cycle, there is no agronomical justification for flooding corn,” Kennedy wrote. “Put simply, the intentional flooding of standing crops has enabled an unsportsmanlike practice, weakened long-standing protections for migratory birds, and adversely impacted waterfowl populations in Louisiana.”

Are these flooded areas of standing corn having any effect on ducks in our area? I believe they could be. Ducks have an uncanny skill called imprinting. They also have a marvelous skill of homing. We studied hen mallards that would come back to the exact same field every year, nesting within a few feet of where they had nested the previous year. Could ducks have imprinted on these flooded areas during earlier migrations? I believe they could have, and they may be leaving the Dakotas sooner than normal to get to these duck magnets.

The bottom line for me is if you or I put a bucket of corn in a wetland where we hunt, we would get a ticket for baiting. Yet these flooded fields allow commercial hunters to hunt over flooded cornfields of up to a thousand acres and its legal. Supposedly, the law reads you can only hunt areas with “normal agriculture practices.” Planting large fields with corn and then flooding it with no intention of harvesting the corn is not a normal farming practice.

It seems obvious something has impacted duck migration up and down the flyways. Every dad remembers those days, seeing flock after flock dropping down from the heavens, circling the decoys, the sound, the wings, the excitement in a little boy’s eyes. Looking up at his father, he thought dad was a super duck caller. That is what duck hunting was supposed to be. But now dads sit and watch empty skies trying to explain why the ducks do not show up anymore.

Meanwhile, thousands of ducks pile into flooded, unharvested corn fields behind locked gates, lease agreements, and membership signs. These places charge more for a three-day hunt than most men can afford. Yet somehow this has become the new norm. Today kids are being taught duck hunting is about social media posts, pile pictures, product sales, and sponsorships. It is always accompanied by guys wearing lanyards full of bands bought off e-bay pretending to be waterfowl legends. Many kids have never seen a real migration, watched a hard cold front send fresh birds south overnight, never heard dad whisper, “get ready, here they come. “



While hunters are arguing downstream, the breeding grounds have been disappearing at alarming rates upstream. The prairie pothole region has been losing wetlands and nesting habitat for decades. Not only do we have fewer ducks, but those left are becoming more concentrated than ever. That is how traditions die, not all at once but one empty sky, one discouraged dad, and one disappointed generation at a time. Every empty hunt is one less memory, one less sunrise, one less chance to pass something real down to the next generation.

Duck hunting was never supposed to belong only to the wealthy. It belonged to everybody. That is what made it so special, the heart and backbone of duck hunting. If we lose that, then we lose a lot more than ducks.

Years ago, ducks moved with weather, pressure, and habitat. It seems that it has become only a fading memory. Hunters keep asking why duck hunting is vanishing. The answer is right in front of them every time they look at their phone. Many ducks have lost their wildness since we turned migration into a billion-dollar food plot. They sit on flooded, unharvested crops so loaded with calories they rarely must move at all, and Joe Average hunting a small wetland is competing with these feedlots.

We allowed them to commercialize migration and engineer properties to become duck havens which can attract and hold ducks throughout the entire season. Just look online for photos showing piles of birds from private clubs stacked across tailgates, like it was during market hunting days. This hunting spot could be yours for \$2,000 dollars a day!

When cold fronts roll down from Canada, sending ducks south, when those birds hit the large acreage areas of unharvested fields, it is like flipping a switch. Migration slows or even stalls out completely. Ducks are built to manage bitter cold and snow if there’s food and open water. These properties farming strictly for ducks provide both, even in the harshest winters. The standing crops are a buffet of easy calories when everything else is locked up in ice. Birds will ride out the weather on the nearby rivers, and pile into the fields day after day.

The sight of standing, unharvested flooded corn is the ultimate magnet. Unlike cut fields or natural wetlands, corn does not get buried under snow or sealed up by ice. The stalks stand tall above the water, even when temperatures nosedive, the food stays accessible.

Ducks do not have to work for it. They can drop into those fields and feast, no matter how tough the winter gets.

For a duck, it does not get any easier. And for everyone watching the migration, it is proof that nothing holds birds in place like flooded standing corn.

SOUTH DAKOTANS CONDEMN ENDANGERED SPECIES RULE CHANGE AS STATE GOVERNMENT TAKES NO POSITION

Regulation rolls back former federal protections for habitat

By Joshua Haiar-August 3, 2026

The state of South Dakota did not submit official comments on a major change to the federal Endangered Species Act that will roll back protections for forests, wetlands, deserts and other habitats where endangered species live.

The new rule will open some landscapes to development, logging, mining, and oil and gas drilling, due to a more limited definition of “harm” as actions that directly injure or kill endangered species. A previous definition included harm to habitats where endangered species live.

Some South Dakotans blasted the rule change, which was finalized July 10. Their comments were among more than 350,000 submitted during the public comment period.

The South Dakota Ornithologists’ Union submitted comments saying the rule change will “wantonly put us on a path to massive loss of species.”

Lester Flake, a distinguished professor emeritus of wildlife at South Dakota State University, described the new rule as “a crazy move by President Trump that must be stopped.”

Caitilin Kane described herself as “a voter from South Dakota, where a large part of our livelihood depends on maintaining healthy ecosystems and protecting endangered species of all kinds, both plant and animal.”

“I beg you, please do the right thing, and strengthen and maintain regulations protecting our native species here in South Dakota and across the country!” Kane wrote.

John Weidler, a biologist for the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, submitted personal comments calling the move “incredibly harmful to wildlife.” He criticized the new rule’s more limited definition of “harm” as actions that directly injure or kill endangered species. The previous definition included harm to habitats where those species live.

“To define ‘harm’ as only directly harming a plant or animal is pretty stupid from a biological point of view, because no organism can survive without habitat,” Weidler wrote. “Destroy the habitat and the organism will eventually die.”

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks did not submit an official departmental comment on the rule; nor did the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Game, Fish and Parks spokesperson Nick Harrington replied to South Dakota Searchlight with a written statement, but he did not address Searchlight’s questions about the department’s position or whether the department has the staffing and funding to adequately protect endangered species under the new rule.



“Our department maintains a list of state threatened and endangered species, but also tracks those on the federal list as some can overlap,” Harrington wrote. “Conservation efforts for all wildlife is the responsibility of GFP and biologists and managers of multiple disciplines engage in these conservation activities.”

Some other states expressed concerns about the proposal, saying it would threaten their plans to safeguard endangered species.

At least one state contradicted itself.

North Dakota’s Game and Fish Department submitted comments against the change, saying “there is clear consensus that habitat loss, destruction, and fragmentation are significant contributors to species declines” and “there can be no doubt that the loss of habitat-focused programs and strategies for species recovery would ultimately lead to further declines.”

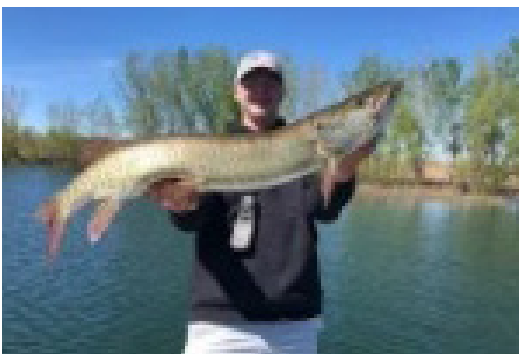
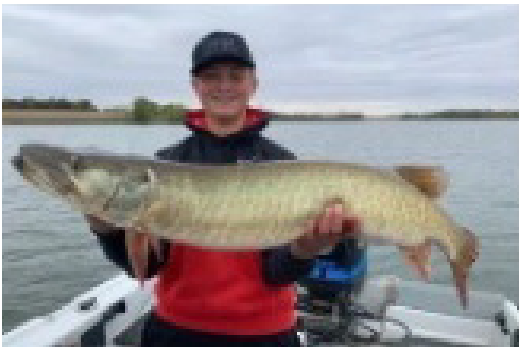
But North Dakota’s Department of Agriculture submitted comments in favor of the change, especially the narrower “harm” definition. Doug Goehring, North Dakota’s agriculture commissioner, wrote that the new definition “will restore and protect private property rights and further positive land development.”

Federal officials described the rule as a move to give state leaders freedom to manage wildlife without burdensome federal regulations. States that wish to continue protecting habitats can do so under state law, the Interior Department and other federal agencies wrote in their new regulations.

But some legal experts and many wildlife veterans say that almost no states have endangered species laws on the books that allow state officials to prevent habitat destruction in the name of saving wildlife. Many states have laws to stop poaching, but the protection of nesting trees, spawning streams and other resources has long fallen to the federal Endangered Species Act.

Portions of this story were written by Alex Brown and originally published by Stateline, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network that includes South Dakota Searchlight and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.

PROTECT SOUTH DAKOTA’S TROPHY FISHERY



Why Keep Catch-and-Release on Muskies?

An overview opinion

South Dakota should keep the catch-and-release rule for muskies because the state’s low-density population relies entirely on stocking and cannot handle the removal of trophy-sized fish.

Low Population: South Dakota manages only a few waters for muskies and tiger muskies (such as Lynn Lake and Lake Sinai), meaning overall fish numbers are very thin.

No Natural Reproduction: Muskies in South Dakota do not reproduce on their own; every single fish is the result of costly, periodic stocking by the GFP

Slow Growth to Trophy Size: A 45-inch muskie takes a decade or more to grow. Once removed, they cannot be easily replaced.

Economic Value: Protecting large fish turns South Dakota into a premier destination for specialized anglers, boosting local tourism and spending in nearby communities.

Modern Alternatives: High-quality fiberglass replica mounts make harvesting a rare trophy fish obsolete, allowing anglers to preserve the memory without killing the fish.

SE SD BROOD SURVEY

By Charlie Rokusek

Here are two brood routes which I established in 1985 in Southeast South Dakota, and I have collected the data along these routes for the past 42 years. They are called my Northern and Southern routes, they are each 30 miles long, and they are anywhere from 15 – 20 miles apart from each other. The landscape is constantly changing as the landowners make financial decisions about their operations. I have seen many shelter belts removed, so they have a few more acres to plant along with the removal of old farm steads. I have also seen some land return to grasslands from signing up for one of the following programs like CRP, CREP or Water Bank, and I have seen a few new shelter belts being established along these routes. However, the major land use changes have come from the conversion of grasslands to crop land and the reduction of small grain fields to either corn or soybeans.

After comparing my data to 2025, here’s my findings for the Northern Route – up 19.8% and the Southern Route – up 17.2%. There are several factors which impact these figures, and they include hailstorms that hit parts of these routes and the extreme heat conditions which occurred this summer. (See attached data table)

	Northern Route Up 19.8%	Southern Route Up 17.2%
Overall % change compared to 2025	3.13	3.77
PPM Pheasants Per Mile for 2026	4.93	4.82
Average brood size for 2026	14.10%	15.30%
10 Year average (2017 - 2026)	13.70%	14.60%
LTA Long term average (data for 42 years 1985 - 2026)		

ROUNDS ANNOUNCES BILL TO ENCOURAGE CONVERTING CROPLAND BACK TO PASTURE

By Joshua Haiar - August 19, 2026

MITCHELL — Republican U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds unveiled a bipartisan bill Wednesday at Dakotafest that would pay farmers to convert less-productive cropland back to grass and allow the acres to be grazed by livestock all season.

The Rebuilding America's National Cow Herd Act, or RANCH Act, would create a voluntary federal program with an enrollment cap of 20 million acres. Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota co-sponsors the legislation.

Under the proposal, eligible land would need to have had crops planted on it in at least four of the previous six years or have history of being cropped, according to a bill summary from Rounds' Office. Farmers would sign 10- to 15-year contracts and establish and maintain perennial grasses or non-woody vegetation like wildflowers, buckwheat or radishes.

The program has additional incentives for beginning farmers and ranchers, and would prioritize contracts for poorly performing and highly erodible cropland.

A South Dakota State University study estimated the state lost about 1.8 million acres of grassland between 2006 and 2012, predominantly to cropland conversion. Across the Great Plains, 32 million acres of grassland were converted from 2012 through 2021, with row-crop expansion identified as the leading cause, according to a World Wildlife Fund analysis.

Under Rounds' new bill, participants would receive annual payments equal to 75% of their county's average cropland cash rental rate. The



Cattle in a pasture near Saint Onge, South Dakota. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

program would also pay 50% of the cost of establishing grass, increasing to 75% for beginning farmers and ranchers. Producers are still eligible for other federal cost-share programs that help establish things like fencing.

The federal government has a program that permits livestock grazing while paying landowners to maintain it as grassland, called the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program. In April 2024, nearly 1.5 million South Dakota acres were enrolled in that program, totaling \$23.67 million in payments; the average annual payment per acre was about \$16.

The existing program, however, pays to preserve existing grass. Rounds' bill would pay to convert cropland back to grass, and it does not include seasonal grazing restrictions like the current program. It would also pay landowners at a rate based on the land's cropland value, rather than its pastureland value, which would amount to larger payments.

Rounds said the legislation's cost has not yet been calculated. Its supporters await a congressional budget estimate that accounts not only for the new payments, but also the savings that would come with removing up to 20 million marginal crop acres from federal subsidized crop insurance programs.

"You might very well save money on the insurance side of it," Rounds told reporters.

Rounds said he hopes to add the proposal to this year's farm bill, which has not yet advanced out of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Rounds shared the news of the proposal during a panel discussion held by South Dakota Farm Bureau that also included U.S. Congressman Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, and Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-South Dakota.

All three agreed that getting the 60 votes in the Senate needed to pass the farm bill — which would require some Democrats to support it in an election year where they're assumed to gain more control — was unlikely.



U.S. Senate Majority Leader John Thune and Sen. Mike Rounds, both Republicans from South Dakota, speak with an attendee of Dakotafest in Mitchell on Aug. 19, 2026. (Photo by Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FUNDS CONSERVATION IN SOUTH DAKOTA WHILE CUTTING THE PEOPLE WHO DO THE WORK

By Brad Johnson

The federal government has found a strange way to practice conservation: put billions of dollars on the table, then cut many of the people needed to turn that money into work on the ground.

That is the disconnect South Dakota's congressional delegation should be concerned about, because right now the two policies are moving in opposite directions.

The latest example is the America the Beautiful Act. Sen. Mike Rounds cosponsors the Senate bill, and Rep. Dusty Johnson cosponsors the House effort. It would renew the Legacy Restoration Fund and provide nearly \$2 billion a year to repair deteriorating infrastructure in national parks, wildlife refuges and on other federal lands.

There is good reason to support it. South Dakota has Badlands and Wind Cave national parks, Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Jewel Cave National Monument, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site, five national wildlife refuges and hundreds of waterfowl production areas.

If the federal government owns these places, it ought to maintain them. But Congress cannot keep applauding the money while ignoring the missing people.

The National Park Service lost about 24% of its permanent workforce last year. The Trump administration's fiscal 2027 proposal would take staffing from about 16,000 full-time-equivalent positions to roughly 13,100 — about 20% lower. Fish and Wildlife Service staffing would fall about 25%.

So, Congress may spend billions repairing yesterday's backlog while shrinking the workforce needed to prevent tomorrow's.

A big appropriation can rebuild a park road. It cannot inspect the culvert next spring. Congress has not yet figured out how to issue a press release that clears a clogged drainageway.

The disconnect is even larger on farms and ranches.

Congress has pushed conservation spending to historic highs. The Inflation Reduction Act added \$19.5 billion over five years for programs administered largely by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act signed by Trump last year repealed the remaining IRA conservation funding but shifted much of that investment into the regular farm bill baseline, boosting major conservation programs through 2031.

A Democratic administration sharply increased conservation funding. A Republican Congress and Trump kept much of it going while cutting the workforce needed to deliver it.

Between January 2025 and January 2026, NRCS lost about 23% of its workforce. USDA's own budget documents brought the issue home. They projected NRCS technical-assistance staffing in South Dakota falling from 113 full-time-equivalent positions to 40.

Those were projections, not evidence that 73 positions disappeared. But a nearly two-thirds reduction needs explaining. At some point, calling that efficiency starts to resemble admiring the emperor's new suit.

The South Dakota Farmers Union warned U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins that NRCS staffing losses were increasing workloads and reducing the agency's ability to process applications.



The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building in Washington, D.C., pictured on Dec. 18, 2017. (USDA photo by Preston Keres)

NRCS work does not happen by mailing a check. Someone has to walk the land, examine soils, design the grazing or water system, complete engineering, prepare contracts and inspect finished work.

Cut enough people, and historic conservation funding can produce a historic waiting list.

That is where Senate Majority Leader John Thune, Rounds and Johnson could speak up.

Johnson said early in 2025 that USDA cuts and layoffs would not affect farmers. Given what has happened since, he should say whether he still believes that. Rounds supports nearly \$2 billion a year for public-land repairs. Good. Then he should explain how cutting Park Service and Fish and Wildlife staffing protects that investment.

And Thune is not a spectator. As Senate majority leader, he helped Congress maintain historically high agricultural conservation funding. Now he should insist that enough people remain to put it to work.

The administration says fewer employees, more contractors and greater efficiency can make this work. Fine. South Dakota's delegation should ask for the proof: How many NRCS field employees remain in the state? Are producers waiting longer? How many Park Service and Fish and Wildlife positions have been lost here?

Those answers would tell us whether Washington is becoming more efficient or simply creating the next backlog.

These are not partisan questions. They are basic management questions anyone running a farm, ranch or business would ask before putting more money into an operation after sharply reducing its workforce.

What Washington has created is not a temporary mismatch. It is a structural contradiction.

Congress can appropriate billions. But somewhere between the press release and the finished project, somebody still has to show up and do the work.

SOUTH DAKOTA CONSERVATION UPDATE SNAPSHOT

Recent conservation developments in South Dakota reveal a landscape shaped by contradiction: more federal conservation money is flowing into the state, even as the agencies responsible for delivering that work are losing staff, while wildlife managers grapple with disease outbreaks, contentious elk policy, toxic algal blooms, and ongoing debates over predator control.

Federal conservation funding is rising, but staffing is shrinking

The federal government continues to direct substantial conservation funding into South Dakota through voluntary, incentive-based USDA programs used by farmers and ranchers to improve soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat while diversifying farm income.

One of the biggest examples is the Conservation Reserve Program. USDA accepted 2.2 million acres into CRP for 2026 nationwide, further expanding a program that remains capped at 27 million acres under the 2018 farm bill. Grasslands CRP, which allows managed haying and grazing while keeping land under conservation contract, has become one of the program's most widely used categories. More broadly, producers enrolled nearly 70 million acres in conservation practices now classified as regenerative in 2023.

But the funding story has collided with a workforce problem.

Regional reporting has highlighted steep staffing losses across the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Between January 2025 and January 2026, NRCS reportedly lost about 23 percent of its workforce. USDA budget projections have also raised concern in South Dakota, where NRCS technical-assistance staffing was projected to fall from 113 full-time-equivalent positions to 40.

The result is a growing implementation gap: the money may be there, but the people needed to design plans, process contracts, and help landowners put conservation practices on the ground may not be.

Hemorrhagic disease is affecting deer populations

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks is urging the public to report sick or dead deer as hemorrhagic disease spreads through local herds.

The outbreak has already affected wildlife management decisions. Officials have reportedly pulled at least 62 hunting licenses in response, aiming to reduce pressure on deer populations as the disease moves through parts of the state. The situation underscores how quickly disease events can force midseason adjustments in wildlife policy.

Eastern elk policy shifts toward eradication

One of the most controversial recent developments is the state's approach to elk east of the Missouri River.

Game, Fish and Parks commissioners voted unanimously to authorize unlimited elk hunting tags in that region, with the stated goal of eliminating elk there entirely. State officials have justified the move by pointing to agricultural conflicts, including crop damage and broken fencing. At the same time, the state continues to support elk populations in other parts of South Dakota.

The decision has drawn backlash from many hunters and conservation-minded residents, especially because polling has indicated strong opposition to eradication among local hunters. Critics see the policy as an overly aggressive response to a manageable conflict, and one that may undercut public trust in wildlife governance.

Toxic algal blooms are returning to state waters

Late-summer heat has once again contributed to toxic blue-green algae blooms in South Dakota waters.

The South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources has issued high-risk advisories for some lakes, including Wall Lake. These blooms can threaten pets, livestock, wildlife, and human health, and they have become an increasingly familiar seasonal issue during hot, stagnant conditions.

Predator bounty programs remain controversial

South Dakota's predator bounty system continues to generate criticism from wildlife professionals and conservation groups.

Biologists with the South Dakota Wildlife Federation argue that broad bounty spending has not been backed by strong scientific evidence showing meaningful gains in pheasant production. In their view, the state is spending money on a politically popular tool without clearly demonstrating that it works, raising broader questions about how conservation dollars should be prioritized.

Ways landowners and residents can get involved

Despite the policy fights, several active programs give landowners and residents practical ways to participate in conservation work.

Shoreline restoration

Landowners on South Dakota lakes can work with Game, Fish and Parks biologists and access funding through the Shoreline Restoration Program to replace hardened or degraded shorelines with native vegetation and reduce erosion.

Habitat Pays

This initiative connects producers with advisors who help improve wildlife habitat while identifying grant support through the Second Century Habitat Fund.

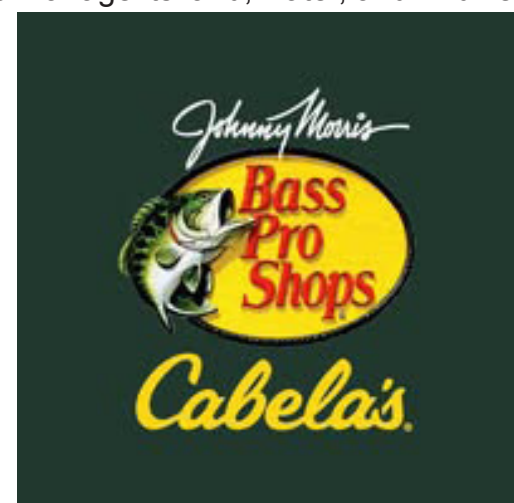
Grasslands CRP

Landowners continue to make strong use of Grasslands CRP, which offers rental payments for conservation planning while still allowing managed haying and grazing.

Local conservation events and reporting

Residents interested in prairie tours, educational events, or citizen observation opportunities can find local programming through the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts.

South Dakota's conservation picture is becoming harder to summarize with simple political talking points. Funding is up, but staffing is down. Wildlife protections are expanding in some places and shrinking in others. And across all of it, the same question keeps surfacing: whether the state's conservation system still has the capacity to manage its land, water, and wildlife effectively.



SOMETIMES THE BEST CROP IS GRASS

By Brad Johnson - President, South Dakota Wildlife Federation



South Dakota farmers are sending Washington a message with their acres. It deserves attention.

This year, producers offered nearly 290,000 South Dakota acres for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollment. About 54,000 acres were renewals and 237,000 acres were new land. USDA accepted about 209,000 acres.

Those numbers suggest something plain: many South Dakota landowners are deciding some of their acres make more sense as grass than as another crop.

That comes at an interesting time in the farm bill debate.

The Senate Agriculture Committee failed to advance its bill Aug. 6 amid disputes over food assistance and Republican absences. Chairman John Boozman says he will try again.

For farmers and ranchers who have waited years for a new farm bill, another delay is hardly welcome. But the conservation provisions are not necessarily finished.

South Dakota has some ideas already on the table.

Sen. John Thune has proposed changes to CRP that are included in the Senate bill. They would restore cost-share assistance for mid-contract management such as prescribed fire, help pay for fencing and water development, improve grazing and haying flexibility and raise the annual CRP payment limit.

Those changes may sound technical, but they matter. Grazing, prescribed fire and other management can improve forage and rejuvenate habitat for pheasants and other wildlife.

Sen. Mike Rounds has proposed something different.

His bipartisan RANCH Act would give willing producers an option to take marginal cropland, restore it to perennial grass and continue using it for livestock production.

The distinction is the point. The proposal is not about idling farmland.

The land could be grazed throughout the season. Producers would enter 10- to 15-year contracts, receive annual payments tied to county cropland rental rates and get help establishing grass. Highly erodible and poorly performing cropland would receive priority.

The program could eventually cover as many as 20 million acres nationally.

South Dakota already has experience combining grass and agricultural production.

By 2024, about 1,800 South Dakota landowners had nearly 1.5 million acres enrolled in Grassland CRP. Those acres remain in grass while supporting sustainable livestock grazing.

Grassland CRP generally helps keep grasslands intact.

Rounds is proposing the other side of the equation: helping willing producers turn some marginal cropland back into grass.

Researchers examining U.S. land-use changes from 2008 through 2016 found that 88% of newly expanded cropland came from

grasslands – and nearly 70% of those acres produced below-average yields.

South Dakota was among the places where grassland conversion was particularly significant. Nationally, millions of acres went from grass to crops, much of it becoming below-average cropland.

That raises a practical question.

If many acres converted from grass to crops proved to be relatively poor cropland, why should federal policy make continued cropping the most attractive option?

Crop insurance remains an essential part of the farm safety net. South Dakota producers know better than most what drought, excess moisture, hail and other weather risks can do to crops.

But risk protection and land-use flexibility do not have to be competing ideas.

Rounds' proposal would give a producer another choice: establish perennial cover, graze cattle, reduce erosion and still earn an economic return from the property.

Wildlife would benefit as well. Perennial grass provides nesting cover for pheasants and waterfowl, holds soil in place, slows runoff and improves water infiltration.

The coalition behind the RANCH Act is notable: cattle producers, wildlife groups and conservation organizations backing a proposal that restores grass while keeping land productive.

That coalition challenges the usual assumption that agriculture and conservation belong in separate camps.

A productive cornfield should remain a productive cornfield. The same is true for good soybean ground.

But South Dakota also has wet spots, saline soils, eroded slopes and marginal fields where grass and cattle may make more economic sense than another crop.

The state's congressional delegation is well positioned to explore that possibility.

Thune has already shaped the Senate's CRP provisions. Rounds has proposed a new working-grasslands option. Rep. Dusty Johnson serves on the House Agriculture Committee, and the House has already passed its version of the farm bill.

As Congress takes another run at the bill, those ideas belong on the same table.

South Dakota farmers have already shown they will use conservation programs when those programs fit their operations and make economic sense.

Not every acre that can carry a planter necessarily should be planted. Better farm policy may be to give producers another economically sensible choice for those acres.

Sometimes the best crop is grass.

SOUTH DAKOTA WILDLIFE FEDERATION GIFT MEMBERSHIP

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The Legacy Council consists of five different donation levels. These donation levels were revised October 2011 to: Level V Eagle \$1,000 & above; Level IV Buffalo \$401-\$999; Level III Elk \$301-\$400; Level II Deer \$201 - \$300; and Level I Pheasant \$100-\$200.

JUNE 2025 – AUG 2026

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ELMEN FAMILY FOUNDATION - SD
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BOB BUCHOLZ – SD
JOHN COOPER – SD
RYAN ROEHR – SD
MARLIN STAMMER – SD
MARK WIDMAN - SD
HERBERT WISWALL - SD
TERRY & LAREE MAYES – SD
CHARLIE ROKUSEK - SD

LEVEL III ELK

BEADLE CO. SPORTSMAN'S CLUB – SD
29-90 SPORTSMAN'S CLUB – SD
LAKE CAMPBELL WILDLIFE – SD
JONES COUNTY SPORTSMAN'S CLUB – SD
JIM DAHLBERG - SD
BOB BUCHOLZ - SD

LEVEL II DEER

JERAULD CO FISH AND GAME – SD
CHUCK DIETER – SD
MICHAEL DOUGLAS - SD
CHUCK LABEDA - SD
DICK AND SUE BROWN - SD
HECLA COMMUNITY SPORTSMEN -SD
JAY'S BODY SHOP - SD
JOHN GORS - SD
LYNN D BENNETT - SD
JOHN PRANGER – SD
RON PESEK - SD
MINNEHAHA CHAP. #73 – SD
PHEASANTS FOREVER Inc – SD
MACKENZI GINITHAN - SD
NICK LIPP - SD

JUNE 2025 – AUG 2026

LEVEL II DEER

DANIEL LOVELAND - SD
SPORTSMAN'S CLUB Brown Co
DICK MILLER - SD
29-90 SPORTSMAN'S CLUB – SD
BOB BROWN - SD
HARRY CHAPMAN - SD
DUANE DIVICH - TX
HIGH PLAINS WILDLIFE ASSOC – SD
ZACH HUNKE – SD
BRAD JOHNSON – SD
JOHN SIMPSON - SD

LEVEL I PHEASANT

ZACH HUNKE – SD
DAVE DITLOFF – MT
ALLYN DUKES – TX
BRAD JOHNSON – SD
JEFF OLSON – SD
29-90 SPORTSMAN'S CLUB
JUDY LEWIS – SD
DAVID GROMMERSCH – MN
JOHN SIMPSON – SD
JAY DEBOER – SD
AL THOMAS – SD
MARK WIDMAN – SD
JEFF SOHOLT – SD
RICH ANDRESEN- SD
JIM BARNETT - SD
JEFF BICKEL – SD
RYAN BIEL – SD
CURT BISGARD – SD
KEMARI BLUMHARDT – SD
GREG BODDICKER – SD
KENDALL BURNS - CO
BILL CLAYTON - SD
JEFF CLOW – SD
SCOTT DRAPER - SD
FORREST FLINT - MN
LARRY FREDRICKSON – SD
DAVID GROMMERSCH – MN
DAVID HOWARD – SD
JIM HUMMEL – SD
BRAD JOHNSON - SD
LAWRENCE KRONDINGER –
JEFF LIDDELL – SD
FRANK MCGOWAN – GA
LARRY MILLER - SD
MIKE RILEY - MO
RON SCHAUER – SD
KEN SCHOULTZ – SD
JOHN SIMPSON – SD
MARGARET SKOOG – SD
LEONARD SPOMER – SD
JOHN STOKES – CO
THOMAS TIEDEMANN – SD
SCOTT WEHRKAMP – SD
RICH WIDMAN – SD
KEN ZOELLNER - SD

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE DUCK HUNTERS GONE?

By Brad Johnson

President, South Dakota Wildlife Federation

Duck hunting has never been the easiest way to spend a fall morning. It means a 4 a.m. alarm, frozen fingers, muddy boots, decoys, dogs, boats and weather that sends most sensible people back to bed.

For generations, South Dakotans did it anyway.

Fewer of us are doing it now.

The decline is national. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data show roughly 2 million Americans hunted waterfowl in 1970-71. In the 2024-25 season, participation was about 1.26 million. Federal Duck Stamp sales tell the same story: more than 2.4 million stamps were sold in 1970-71, compared with far fewer today.

Those stamps have helped conserve more than 6 million acres of wetland and grassland habitat since the program began, so declining participation matters far beyond the number of people sitting in a blind.

South Dakota mirrors the broader trend. GFP estimated 14,579 active resident waterfowl hunters in 2015. By 2024, the number had fallen to 12,614—a decline of about 13.5 percent.

That should get our attention.

It does not mean the solution is more nonresident pressure on our marshes. The South Dakota Wildlife Federation has long supported limits on nonresident waterfowl licenses because quality hunting for residents is essential to keeping residents in the field.

Recruitment without access and a quality hunting experience is not much of a recruitment program.

Why are hunters disappearing?

There is no single reason. But several stand out.

Access is getting harder.

National hunter-participation research repeatedly identifies access as a major barrier. Development, changing land ownership, posted private property and competition for available hunting ground can all make it harder for hunters—especially newcomers—to find a place to go.

For waterfowl hunters, that can be particularly important because ducks tend to concentrate hunters around a finite number of wetlands, public hunting areas and accessible private lands.

A young hunter can buy a shotgun.

They cannot buy a wetland.

The economic barrier is real.

Waterfowl hunting can also look expensive to someone trying it for the first time.

A shotgun, ammunition, waders, decoys, calls, clothing, gasoline and perhaps a boat can make the sport appear far more complicated—and costly—than it needs to be.

For a young adult paying rent, raising a family or just starting a career, waterfowl hunting can easily look like a luxury hobby.

Time is scarce.

Hunting also competes with work, school, family responsibilities and a growing list of other ways people spend limited free time.

Waterfowl hunting asks a little more. It often means an early alarm, a drive to the marsh, setting decoys before daylight and several hours in the field.

That can be a difficult commitment for someone who has not yet discovered why we think it is worth doing.

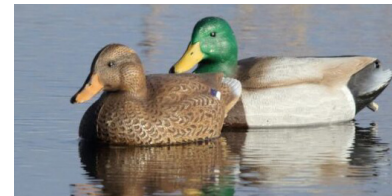
The learning curve is steep.

Then there are the regulations, bird identification, decoys, calling, concealment, firearm safety and retrieving birds.

If you grew up around duck hunting, much of that seems second nature.

If you did not, it can look like graduate school.

And fewer people have someone to teach them.



That may be the most important barrier of all.

Duck hunting traditionally has been passed from one person to another—father to daughter, uncle to nephew, neighbor to kid down the road.

When that chain breaks, advertising alone will not repair it.

That is why mentoring has become such an important part of hunter-recruitment efforts around the country.

Some programs show what works

Delta Waterfowl's First Hunt initiative has introduced more than 100,000 people to waterfowl hunting through instruction, field days and mentored hunts. In 2025 alone, chapters conducted 280 First Hunt events involving 7,651 participants.

Delta is also reaching a group the hunting community has often overlooked: college students.

Tomorrow's wildlife managers should understand firsthand why hunting is tied so closely to wildlife management, habitat protection and conservation funding.

GFP offers youth and mentored waterfowl hunting opportunities, and the Walk-In Area program provides access to private land in a state where most land is privately owned.

But programs alone will not reverse this trend.

Hunters will.

Our challenge is closer to home

The most important question facing South Dakota duck hunters is not how many ducks we shoot this fall.

It is who will be sitting in our blinds 20 years from now.

Protecting wetlands, maintaining healthy duck populations, preserving public hunting areas and expanding quality access are part of it. So is managing hunting pressure so South Dakota residents continue to believe the experience is worth preserving.

Then there is something much simpler.

Take somebody hunting.

Teach them why the pothole matters. Show them how to identify a bird before pulling the trigger. Explain why hunters buy Duck Stamps and why generations of sportsmen and women have fought to protect wetlands.

Then take them again.

The decline of duck hunting will not be reversed by one organization, one government program or one advertising campaign.

It will be reversed one hunter at a time.



USFWS PAUSES PLANS TO MODIFY DRAIN TILE SETBACKS

The **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** has paused plans to modify its rules on drain tile setback calculations around federal wetland easements in the Upper Midwest's **Prairie Pothole Region (PPR)**.

The agency announced on August 14, 2026, that “at this time, no further action is planned” while it reviews an unprecedented influx of more than 200,000 public comments.

Why the Setbacks Were Under Review

The Conflict: In July 2026, the USFWS issued a Request for Information (RFI) to evaluate whether to move away from its science-based 2024 setback rules and potentially adopt looser, fixed-distance guidelines used by the USDA.

The Landowner Perspective: Landowners and lawmakers in states like North Dakota argued that the 2024 calculation standards were overly restrictive, locked up valuable farmland without adequate compensation, and complicated agricultural production.

The Conservation Backlash: Waterfowl organizations (including Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl), outdoor industry groups, and an immense coalition of duck hunters launched a massive public campaign to save the “Duck Factory”. Critics noted that loosening the rule to match USDA standards would expand water drawdowns from a strict limit of 1.2 inches over 14 days up to a destructive 12 inches, effectively drying out critical breeding habitats funded heavily by sportsman dollars.

Current Status

Because of intense pushback from conservationists and prominent bipartisan lawmakers, **the 2024 final rule remains fully in effect** for now. Under this current system:

Setback distances continue to be custom-tailored based on localized soil characteristics, topography, and tile diameter.

Farmers who fully comply with the custom USFWS guidelines maintain a **legal “safe harbor” shield**, protecting them from prosecution if the adjacent federal wetland accidentally drains anyway.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SOUTH DAKOTA PHEASANT POPULATION MANAGED BY POLITICIANS WITHOUT CONSIDERATION OF OUR PHEASANT/PREDATOR BIOLOGY RESEARCH RESULTS.

By Larry Fredrickson former Pheasant/Furbearer Research Biologist.

South Dakota charges both residents and non-residents for a habitat stamp but a former governor took away our scientific 78 year- long yearly state-wide pheasant brood survey. This survey is needed to evaluate the success of this money spent for pheasant habitat. What were they thinking?

The Tail Bounty Program we proved was a waste of money because not enough predators were taken to benefit pheasants (only a portion of the yearly reproduction). This was worse when a bounty was included for coyotes. Never has a bounty controlled any predator in North America, especially coyotes. The only way coyotes can be controlled on a long-term basis is with the poison 1080 which kills other animals also. This ½ million should be spent on CRP habitat since predator control for pheasants is also not economical. (our study results).

It is incorrect to use the pheasant harvest survey from the previous year to set seasons because the current year is a different population of birds (new reproduction). The Game Harvest Survey is not verifiable or scientific since the hunters just say how many birds they harvest.

Besides they added the take on game preserves to the harvest survey results to inflate the wild birds harvest to lure non-residents into the state. These figures are “fake news”. The wild pheasant numbers should always be kept separate from any tally of game preserve pheasants. The loss of the brood survey from 1919 means we have no accurate information on South Dakota pheasant populations for seven years. I hope the state gets the brood survey back soon. The South Dakota Wildlife Federation (three thousand three hundred members) is also working to get South Dakota pheasant management out of the dark ages.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pheasant Harvest Survey - Fake News??

My opinion, by Larry Fredrickson, Former SD Pheasant Research Biologist

South Dakota pheasant management is now based on this non-scientific survey which polls hunters on how many birds they shot this year with no way to verify this information. They put down any number they wish.

The scientific brood survey was discontinued in 2019 by the Governor. It was used successfully for 76 years and provided the basis for all our management decisions. We need to reinstate this survey to document any results of habitat improvements in the pheasant population with our new money from the required Habitat Stamp. This survey can be done again by our Conservation Officers.

The graph in the Mitchell Republic on October 15 shows an increase in pheasant harvest from 2019 to 2024 which I believe should be a decrease each year because of the progressive loss of CRP lands in the main pheasant range, especially in Lyman County. This idea was verified to us by the progressive smaller number of pheasants we saw when hunting and

the progressive loss of Walk- In Areas for us to hunt in.

No way did wild bird hunters harvest 9 birds per hunter last year. My friend and excellent American Brittany pointing dog hunted 50 days and got 10 pheasants. Very few hunters hunt that many days.

We think they may be including tame birds shot on game preserves in these figures. Game farm bird data must always be summarized separately.

South Dakota has data to prove the Predator Bounty Program does not help the bird population. They spent one half to 1 million on this program per year which could have been better spent on habitat improvement. Our studies on predator populations show that you need to kill better than 80% of all predators to benefit pheasants. The first year I divided the number of tails by the number of square miles in the pheasant range and only got one predator killed per square mile. (Not even one of each species killed per square mile).

Larry Fredrickson

WILDLIFE THOUGHTS ON THE 250TH - CHUCK BERRY



Thirteen colonies declared their independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1776. They won the war of independence in 1783 and in 1887, the united colonies adopted a Constitution "in order to form a more perfect union." In this 250th anniversary year, many people are rereading that Constitution to rediscover what it actually says about how the people would rule with democratic ideals to insure liberty and equality. No other country had tried democracy; America was thus, exceptional.

Where does nature fit into the ideals expressed in those founding documents? Nature wasn't mentioned, but the citizens of the new country did have one important demand – in the USA there would be no king or kingly ownership of wildlife. One of the early decrees from the judicial branch of the new government was that property that once belonged to the king passed to all the people. This meant that the fish and wildlife belonged to all the people – democracy in hunting and fishing. With this privilege came responsibility.

I'd like to revisit what I think is the fundamental way we have accepted the responsibility of wildlife ownership, and that way is stewardship. Responsible stewardship didn't begin immediately. For example, settlers in South Dakota thought that the game was free and inexhaustible. Wildlife was needed for man to subsist and the prairies provided it in abundance. However, there was "tragedy on the commons" as over-harvest reduced wildlife. In the early 1900s, the term "conservation" became known. Since then, wildlife conservation has evolved in two areas, 1) the role of government, and 2) the role of the users - the hunter and angler.

My history of government's role might send government scholar Dr. Bob Burns "tisking" all the way to the library, but here goes...one of the democratic ideas in this new country was that hunting and fishing would be regulated by law rather than privilege, wealth or land ownership. It was called the Public Trust Doctrine, which means that governments act as trustees, holding animals and natural resources in trust to protect and manage for the benefit of the people, including future generations.

The Public Trust Doctrine was upheld in Supreme Court cases in the 1800s, and by other rulings since. The Public Trust responsibilities mostly fall to the states to implement. In South Dakota, the protection and management of fish and wildlife began when the Territorial Legislature passed laws setting hunting seasons and bag limits for some game. The Territorial Legislature was putting the Public Trust Doctrine into practice. Sheriffs and deputies had the power to enforce the laws, however, the laws were "winked at."

For example, the Brookings newspaper in 1890 has this: "Notwithstanding the laws which strictly prohibit the catching of fish in our lakes by means of net and seines, hardly a day passes that nets are not drawn in Lake Campbell. This open defiance of the law ought to be punished."

South Dakota became a state in 1889 and attention was soon given to fish and wildlife conservation measures because "the game and fish were at dead zero." The GFP Department was created "because of the desire of the people to have once again the wildlife that had been lost through drought, blizzard, changing land use, and unbelievable slaughter." (quotes from GFP 1959 Ann. Rept. titled Looking Back 50 Years)

The Public Trust Doctrine is one of the keystones of what is now called the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. The model is based on revolutionary ideals for sustaining wildlife populations and the right to hunt and fish. One principle of the Model is that wildlife can only be killed for good reasons like food and population control - commerce in dead wildlife is against the law.

An 1880 edition of the Brookings Register had an editorial about

market hunters. The editor wrote about market hunters at Lake Campbell: "From reliable sources we learn that they are making a business of shipping game out of state in direct defiance of our state laws. Look this up, somebody and stop this market hunting."

The North American Model acknowledges that some wildlife species cross international borders and can best be managed by international treaties. Another principle is that managing wildlife should be based on science done by professional wildlife and fisheries biologists. Regulations are made based on scientific data. Yes, a politician might say (correctly) that science is only one of the things considered when making policy, but policies should foster sustainable wildlife populations.

The role of hunters and anglers in wildlife conservation is as important as government's role. Their role has two parts: money and ethics. Hunting and fishing are "user-pays" activities. Hunting and fishing licenses and tags directly support state conservation agencies. Hunters and anglers pay Federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment. Two landmark pieces of legislation, named after congresspersons (Pittman-Robertson Act, Dingle-Johnson Act) require Federally-collected excise taxes to be returned to the states, and can only be used for conservation. South Dakota receives about \$30 million yearly. Again, user pays.

The actions of the outdoor enthusiast in keeping the right to hunt and fish are as important as funding. To keep the opportunity to hunt, the hunter must remember wildlife belongs to all of the people. In South Dakota, most wildlife is on private land. Landowners form their opinions when they see how outdoorsmen behave. Nature writer Aldo Leopold wrote:

"A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than by a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact."

Fundamental to a hunting ethic is the idea of fair chase, which means that the hunter must earn their success while giving the animal a reasonable chance to escape. Fair chase means developing hunting and fishing skills and ecological knowledge rather than relying on technology or artificial advantages. South Dakota requires hunters to take the HuntSafe Course that teaches hunting safety and ethics.

In summary, my broad brush has highlighted four principles related to wildlife conservation: Public Trust Doctrine, North American Model of Wildlife Management, user-pays, and fair chase ethics. These principles are idealistic just like the constitutional words about freedom and liberty. What the words really mean can be/has been challenged, and it is tough to live up to ideals of what society should be. However, such ideals give us goals to work toward for a "more perfect union," and better stewardship of natural resources.



TURN YOUR SPACE INTO A CERTIFIED WILDLIFE HABITAT

Turn Your Space into a Certified Wildlife Habitat

Wildlife Habitat Matters in South Dakota

South Dakota is home to a remarkable variety of wildlife and habitats, from native prairie and wetlands to forests, rivers, and the places where people live and work. Protecting and improving these habitats is an important part of maintaining healthy wildlife populations and the natural resources we all enjoy.

Habitat loss and fragmentation can make it more difficult for wildlife to find the food, water, shelter, and places they need to survive. While protecting larger natural areas is essential, smaller habitat spaces can also play an important role — especially when they are connected across neighborhoods, communities, and rural landscapes.

That's where you can help.

By planting native species, providing water and shelter, and using sustainable practices, South Dakotans can create wildlife-friendly spaces right where they live. A backyard garden, schoolyard, community space, or other outdoor area can become part of a larger network of habitat that benefits birds, pollinators, and other wildlife.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation, as an affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation, supports conservation efforts that help protect South Dakota's wildlife and natural resources. The Certified Wildlife Habitat® program gives individuals and families another opportunity to take part in that work — one habitat at a time.

Wildlife needs places to live, find food, raise young, and take shelter — and those places can be right outside your door. Whether you have a large yard, a small garden, or another outdoor space, you can make a difference for wildlife by creating habitat where you live.

Through the Certified Wildlife Habitat® program, you can take the next step by creating a wildlife-friendly space and having it officially recognized by the National Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.

Creating habitat doesn't have to mean completely changing your landscape. By adding native plants, providing water and shelter, and using sustainable gardening practices, you can create a welcoming place for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife.

The Five Essentials of Wildlife Habitat

Food

Provide wildlife with natural sources of food, including native plants that produce seeds, berries, nectar, fruits, and other foods throughout the seasons.



Water

Offer a clean source of water for wildlife. Birdbaths, ponds, streams, and other water sources can provide valuable habitat for birds, insects, amphibians, and other wildlife.

Cover

Give wildlife places to shelter from weather and predators. Native trees, shrubs, grasses, brush piles, and other natural features can provide important cover.

Places to Raise Young

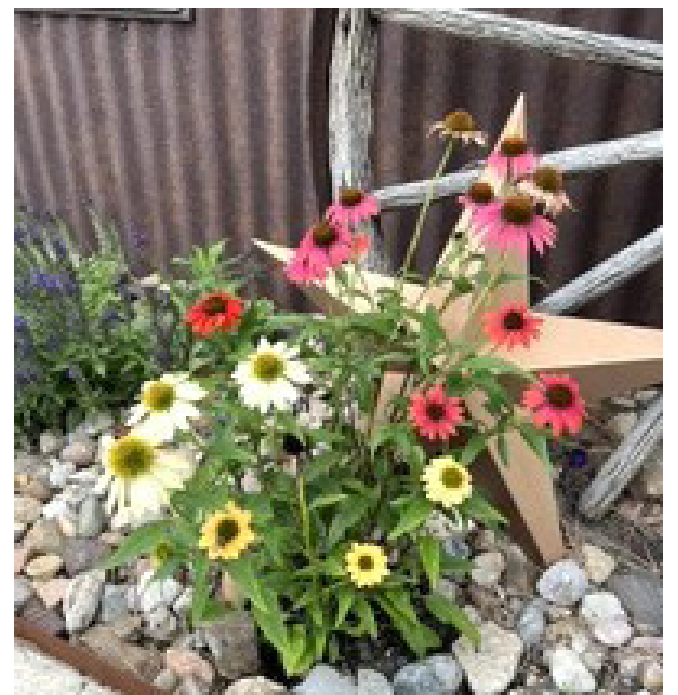
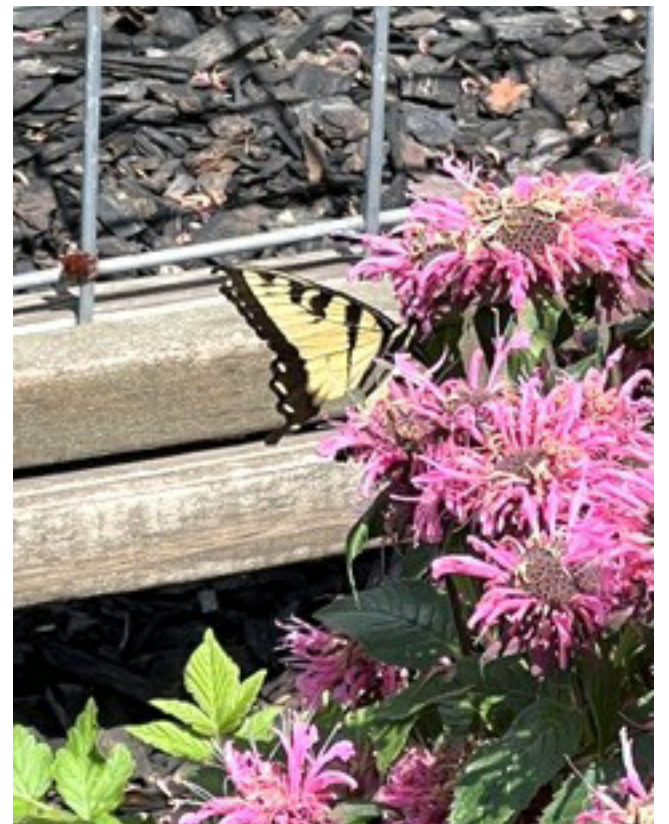
Provide safe places where wildlife can nest, reproduce, and raise their young. Native vegetation and natural features can offer nesting and breeding habitat for a variety of species.

Sustainable Practices

Use gardening and landscaping practices that benefit wildlife and the environment. Choose native plants, reduce or eliminate pesticides, conserve water, and maintain healthy soil.

Why Become Certified?

By creating a wildlife-friendly space, you are helping provide important habitat for wildlife while supporting the broader Garden for Wildlife® movement. When you certify your space, your habitat is recognized by both the National Wildlife Federation and the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.



USDA PROPOSES ROADLESS RULE RECISSION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has formally proposed rescinding the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule in its entirety, a move that could remove federal protections from more than 44 million acres of national forest land across 37 states.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins framed the proposal as a necessary shift in authority, saying it would give local forest managers greater flexibility to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk. Environmental groups, however, have denounced the move as a sweeping attack on public lands that could open some of the country's most intact national forest landscapes to roadbuilding, logging, mining, and other industrial activity.

In announcing the proposal, Rollins said the current rule has become an outdated, one-size-fits-all restriction that limits the Forest Service's ability to respond to worsening forest conditions. She argued that overgrown stands, insect outbreaks, and disease have turned many forests into wildfire-prone landscapes, and that existing restrictions have blocked the kinds of treatments needed to reduce those risks.

The USDA says the rule has constrained management across inventoried roadless areas for 25 years. Those areas now cover more than 44 million acres of the 193-million-acre National Forest System. Under the proposed rescission, decision-making would shift away from a uniform national rule and back toward local land managers, who the administration says are better positioned to respond to regional conditions.

Deputy Secretary Stephen A. Vaden called the rollback a long-sought policy goal dating back to the first Trump administration, arguing that meaningful forest management begins with physical access to these landscapes.

That is the administration's case. And for many people in the conservation, hunting, and fishing world, it is deeply unconvincing.

To them, removing the Roadless Rule would place some of the nation's most unfragmented and ecologically valuable public lands at risk. When a similar rollback effort was floated last summer, more than 625,000 public comments were submitted, with overwhelming opposition.

It would be easy to stop there and call the proposal an obvious mistake. But doing so risks ignoring the strongest argument made by its supporters. If you want to challenge a policy effectively, you first have to understand the most rational case for it.

The rational case for rolling back the Roadless Rule

Supporters of the rollback argue that the Roadless Rule has made active forest management too difficult in places where wildfire danger is growing more severe. In their view, rigid national restrictions can prevent crews from creating access, reducing fuel loads, and carrying out projects designed to make forests more resilient.

The USDA, along with industry groups such as the American Forest Resource Council, argues that many roadless areas face substantial wildfire risk but have seen relatively little fuels-reduction work. Their position is that strategic access routes and more management discretion would help foresters and firefighters respond more effectively.

That argument deserves to be taken seriously, even by people who ultimately reject it.

The conservationist case against rescission

Opponents counter that the Roadless Rule does not prevent all management activity. They note that the Forest Service already has tools to conduct targeted fuel reduction, forest restoration, and fire



suppression in roadless areas without eliminating the rule altogether.

From that perspective, the proposal is less about wildfire safety than about expanding industrial access to public lands. Conservation groups argue that once roads are built into previously undeveloped forest, the ecological consequences can be long-lasting and difficult to reverse.

What could change if the rule is rescinded

If the rollback is finalized, the effects could extend well beyond administrative procedure.

Fire risk could increase, not decrease.

Opponents point to research showing that human-caused ignitions cluster near roads. Expanding road networks deeper into wildlands may increase access for management, but it can also increase the number of ignition sources.

Water quality could suffer.

Roadless areas protect important headwaters and stream systems. New road construction often increases erosion and sediment runoff, which can degrade fish habitat and raise water treatment costs downstream.

Wildlife habitat could become more fragmented.

Roads divide habitat, disrupt migration patterns, and increase pressure on species that depend on large, undisturbed landscapes. For backcountry hunters, anglers, climbers, and hikers, those changes also threaten the qualities that make these areas valuable in the first place.

Taxpayers could absorb more long-term costs.

The Forest Service already struggles to maintain an enormous road network. Critics argue that adding more roads, especially in remote areas, could deepen maintenance backlogs and create liabilities that timber revenue is unlikely to offset.

What happens next

The proposal is now moving through the public review process, and the outcome will likely be shaped by both public comment and litigation.

The USDA's Draft Environmental Impact Statement is open for comment through September 21, 2026. The proposal applies across 37 states, while Idaho and Colorado remain under separate state-specific roadless rules.

If the administration finalizes the rollback, lawsuits are almost certain to follow. The original 2001 rule was built through an enormous public process and has survived years of legal challenges, making this latest fight part of a much longer battle over how America's national forests should be managed.

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2026 SDWF 21 Gun Giveaway Ticket

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Grand Total.....		Total \$ _____