

NDG&F July 18th Newsletter

Celebrated, but Waning Conservation Program Turns 25

The Conservation Reserve Program turns 25 this year. While there is much to laud about this conservation program that has benefitted ground-nesting birds and other wildlife while safeguarding millions of acres of marginal cropland, it's a bittersweet celebration.

Though North Dakota gained nearly 132,000 new CRP acres in a March-April signup, contracts involving about 387,000 acres will expire by fall, leaving the state 1 million acres poorer since 2007, when more than 3 million acres blanketed the landscape.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program was signed into law in 1985 to reduce grain surpluses to jumpstart commodity prices, and decrease erosion on marginal croplands. Lands enrolled in CRP are planted in grass and left mostly undisturbed for 10 years or more with periodic management, such as haying or grazing. Landowners receive rental payments and cost-share assistance to participate in the voluntary program.

"CRP pretty much did what it was supposed to do," according to Greg Link, assistant chief of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's wildlife division. "Commodity prices gradually improved and soil erosion decreased. We knew it would benefit wildlife if enough landowners enrolled enough acres. As wildlife populations flourished, interest from hunters grew. If anything, the program probably exceeded expectations."

CRP was at its peak in North Dakota in 2007 when the state had 3.4 million acres of mostly idle grassland. A reduced nationwide cap, cut from 39 million acres to 32 million acres in the 2008 Farm Bill, along with other factors like high commodity prices, high cash rents, and demands for more cropland for food and fuel production, have slowly reduced interest in the program in North Dakota and elsewhere.

With deliberations already underway on a new farm bill, feedback points to an even lower nationwide CRP cap in the future. Once a staple on North Dakota's landscape, some projections indicate the state will have fewer than 1 million acres by the end of 2013. If that happens, ground-nesting pheasant and duck populations will be hit the hardest.

In the future, Link said, finding places to hunt and finding game to pursue will be much more difficult. As a result, the number of resident and nonresident hunters most likely will decline.

"Unless something changes, the future for the program is not bright," Link said. "It's not just the loss of wildlife habitat, but CRP is a major ingredient in the department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, and that will likely shrink because there is no way to have the same quality habitat and the same amount of habitat available without CRP."

Special Missouri River Bottom Deer Hunt on Hold

Flooding along the Missouri River north and west of Bismarck has prompted the State Game and Fish Department to put an experimental deer herd reduction hunt on hold.

The agency was going to start issuing up to 200 special antlerless licenses on Aug.1, but Department officials have postponed that process due to uncertainties over habitat condition and deer availability after floodwaters recede.

“This experimental season was designed to reduce deer numbers on private land in a relatively small area,” Randy Kreil, Game and Fish wildlife division chief said. “We had good support from landowners who were committed to hosting hunters, but most of them are dealing with flooding issues. Our agency and the landowners feel it’s better to wait a year and hope that normal conditions will return.”

The experimental season was set up so Game and Fish could match interested hunters with participating landowners. Randomly selected hunters would need to secure written permission from landowners before Game and Fish would issue a special license. The special antlerless licenses would have been valid in all open seasons with the appropriate firearm or archery equipment within the designated unit.

The experimental hunt area included land west of River Road and State Highway 1804, north and west of Bismarck, with Wilderness Cover Road near Pioneer Park as the southern boundary and 149th Ave. NW (north of Double Ditch Indian Village) as the northern boundary. During the regular deer season, much of this area is not open to hunting with centerfire rifles.

While Game and Fish will not issue special licenses, the experimental hunt area is still open to archery and gun hunting for those with appropriate bow or firearm season licenses.

WSFR Celebrates 75 Years

State and federal natural resource agencies will celebrate the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program’s 75th anniversary in 2012. In recognition of this milestone, an art contest is in the works, with the winning submission used to create limited edition prints.

All submissions must be an original, hand-drawn creation, and must capture and illustrate the spirit of the WSFR program. Artwork should highlight one land and water dwelling species – wild mammal, bird or sport fish – found in the United States. Multiple submissions are permitted.

The design must be an original drawing or painting approximately 18 inches by 9 inches, drawn in any medium and either multicolor or black and white.

Artwork must be submitted before Nov. 14, 2011.

A complete list of rules for the art contest, including where to submit entries, is available at www.wsfr75.com.

WSFR provides grants to state fish and wildlife agencies for wildlife and fishery-related projects. The program is funded through purchases of firearms, ammunition, archery equipment, fishing equipment, and motor boat and small engine fuels.