

## Rebuilding South Dakota's Waterfowl Hunting Heritage

During the 2020 legislative session, the South Dakota Game Fish & Parks Department (GF&P) testified that the number of resident waterfowl hunters has plummeted over 60% or a rate of 600 resident hunters every year.

This flight of resident waterfowlers has consequences: it undermines the state's hunting heritage, reduces the department's revenues, squeezes the economies of small towns and cripples the political power of the outdoor community.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation (SDWF) and the South Dakota Waterfowl Association (SDWA) agree with the department that there have been significant cultural changes in the last twenty years and that competition for leisure time has increased. We strongly disagree, however, with the department's position that the collapse is unconnected with a loss in waterfowl hunting opportunity. We are all aware that the department's own studies, as well as national studies, identify "lack of opportunity/access" as the number one cause in the reduction in waterfowl hunters.

### The Way Forward

Stopping this downward spiral is achievable, but only if GF&P has the will to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan as well as the will to put resources into the plan's execution. The plan should include strategies to:

1. **Establish measureable objectives and an annual budget to meet them.** As in any successful plan, metrics are not optional, they are essential. The corollary is that it's impossible to meet objectives without adequate funds and resources. The plan's objectives and budget should be open to public review/comment annually.
2. **Maximize waterfowl hunting opportunities on state land and waters.** Conduct an inventory of all GPAs (Game Production Areas) and meandered lakes to identify locations at which the creation or improvement of access would increase opportunities for over-the-water waterfowl hunting. Create waterfowl access corridors that allow transportation of boats or wader-hunting equipment to a designated drop-off or launch area. Actions may include addition of rock, plank or landing mat combined with a small mowed "turn around" site at the water's edge. Develop specific strategies to improve marginal public waters including nesting cover, shoreline cover and vegetation attractive to waterfowl.
3. **Increase opportunity on Federal lands and waters.** Conduct an inventory of all US Fish and Wildlife Service WPAs (Federal Waterfowl Production Areas) and

National Wildlife Refuges to improve access for over-the-water hunting. Currently, numerous WPAs have outstanding potential for over-the-water hunting but have no vehicle access to the water's edge. Providing access to a drop-off or launch area would require involvement by our Congressional delegation to insure the cooperation of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) at the regional, state and local levels. Although several USFWS refuges across the nation have expanded hunting opportunities, opportunities on federal refuges in South Dakota have not kept pace— notably on the Sand Lake, Lake Andes and LaCreek refuges.

4. **Increase Field Hunting Opportunities on Walk-in Areas.** Allow waterfowl hunters to drive on WIAs that have been cropped to drop off decoys and gear with the requirement that hunters immediately return to a designated area or a public road to park.
5. **Create a program of Waterfowl Access Areas (WAAs) on private land.** Work with private landowners to create leased access to private sloughs exclusively for waterfowl hunting access. Unlike our WIA program, these sites would be for waterfowl hunting only. As with federal and state land, create an access corridor to a designated drop-off or launch area.
6. **Significantly increase waterfowl hunting information.** Create a map and digital database to identify areas open to over-the-water hunting. Identify and map the sites created by steps 1, 2 and 3 above so all waterfowl hunters could easily find, scout and hunt these new areas as well as all existing areas. Be more specific about the location of waterfowl acquired from the weekly flights that count birds on the Missouri River system.
7. **Develop a more accurate count of resident waterfowl hunters.** The current harvest survey doesn't reflect South Dakota waterfowlers who hunt but don't hunt every year. The separation of goose hunters from duck hunters also distorts the numbers. For example, for some duck hunters geese may not be their primary target, but few will fail to harvest them when given an opportunity.
8. **Develop a communication initiative focused on waterfowl hunting.** Identify specific target groups such as participants in high school trap teams, recent graduates of firearm safety classes and past waterfowl license holders. Topics could include local water conditions, migration patterns, etc. as well as waterfowl hunting tips and techniques.
9. **Engage private organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, and Delta Waterfowl.** Most private conservation associations are all heavily engaged with efforts to maintain and increase hunter numbers. Private conservation organizations have

staff, funds, expertise, experience and ideas they could bring to the table. Make them active participants and partners in this endeavor.

10. **Make use of volunteers to promote waterfowl hunting.** Establish a volunteer position to recruit and coordinate local volunteers to report on local water conditions, migrations, waterfowl numbers, waterfowl hunting opportunities, etc. Volunteers could also include GFP and/or FWS staff who are waterfowl hunters.
11. **Modify criteria for land acquisition.** Seek out and purchase areas that would be especially beneficial for outstanding waterfowl hunting/access opportunities. Areas might include access sites to meandered waters, expanded ownership of water on existing GPAs or WPAs for additional waterfowl hunting access. Long-term leases of sloughs or ponds that have good waterfowl use and access. Steal an idea from southern and “mid-latitude” states – purchase and create areas of flooded corn fields to attract and hold ducks for public hunting. Often smaller areas of flooded corn will provide significant duck hunting opportunities for a large number of hunters. Consider using a system currently in place on the Lower Oahe Waterfowl Access Area and other states where hunters gather and draw for hunting sites in flooded corn fields to maintain a high quality hunting experience.
12. **Finalize the review of refuges on the Missouri River.** Use a single standard for the determination of whether a waterfowl refuge on the Missouri should exist: Does it create new or promote existing hunting opportunities for the public? Since there is no scientific data to support the position that opening refuges will do damage to the resource or drive waterfowl south, the answer to that question should be the only determining factor in the decision.
13. **Conduct an updated survey of resident and non-resident waterfowl hunters.** It has been two decades since the department conducted a comprehensive survey of waterfowl hunters. Updated demographics information, and identification of hunters’ interests, concerns, needs and opinions is crucial in charting a path forward for SD waterfowlers.
14. **Create a waterfowl hunting heritage display at our outdoor campuses.** Establish a depository of waterfowl hunting memorabilia for display. Guns, decoys, gear, duck boats, photos, etc. Use and expand on SD’s rich and diverse waterfowl hunting heritage – to be passed on to existing and future generations.

GF&P has described the loss of resident waterfowl hunters as a crisis. Our organizations agree, and we recognize that this crisis is taking place in our house and on our watch.

To be specific, we pledge our time, resources and energies to the reestablishment of a rich, waterfowl heritage among South Dakota residents. In turn, we urge the department to respond with a similar commitment and the breadth of creative solutions that a crisis requires. If we come together, as we have often done in the past, there is a way forward.