

NORTH DAKOTA STATE REPORT
June 2026

Jeb Williams, Director
North Dakota Game and Fish Department
100 N. Bismarck Expressway Bismarck, ND 58501

Highlights:

Received a \$6.5 million Outdoor Heritage Fund Grant to Initiate the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program

- Program enrollment opened in spring of 2026, interest exceeded funding
- Short-term contracts to convert unproductive crop acres to fast-establishing grass
- Broad support and innovative benefits (e.g. crop insurance credits)

The North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts has completed the first enrollment cycle for the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program. The program was launched through a \$6.5 million Outdoor Heritage Fund grant awarded in December 2025, with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department serving as a co-applicant. The program was developed with input from agricultural and conservation partners and is designed to support grassland restoration, soil health, and wildlife habitat across the state.

The program provides five-year agreements that include annual rental payments, cost-share for grass establishment, and a first-of-its-kind \$10 per acre crop insurance credit for unproductive cropland converted to grassland habitat. Producers who enroll acres into the department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program receive additional incentives.

Demand for the program was strong, with 458 applications submitted and nearly 20,000 acres offered for consideration, totaling approximately \$10.5 million in requests, well above the available grant funding. Interest in PLOTS was also high, with nearly 6,000 acres offered for walk-in public access. Following review and ranking, the highest scoring applications were selected, fully obligating all grant funds through more than 9,000 acres of habitat and access projects for 2026.

The response demonstrates significant producer interest in grassland restoration and soil health practices, as well as strong support for a state-led program. The Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program was developed following recommendations from the Game and Fish Department's 2024 Habitat and Access Summit, which identified the need for a state program to help offset ongoing losses in the federal Conservation Reserve Program.

The North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts and the department are working with partners to explore long-term funding options to continue and expand the program.

Record Crowing Counts in Spring of 2025

- Easy winters have been favorable to pheasant survival
- Though overwinter adult survival was high in 2024-2025, summer brood production was spotty due to untimely rain and storms
- 2025 pheasant harvest was down 4% from 2024, likely attributed to a lower juvenile:adult ratio and hunting access

The number of roosters heard during the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2025 spring pheasant crowing count survey was up 6% statewide from last year.

"We basically have had two really easy winters, especially for North Dakota standards, with not much snow and really nice temperatures," said RJ Gross, Department upland game management biologist.

The primary regions holding pheasants showed 31.1 crows per stop in the southwest, up from 28.8 in 2024; 21.3 crows per stop in the northwest, down from 21.5; and 18.6 crows per stop in the southeast, up from 16.2. The count in the northeast, which is not a primary region for pheasants, was 6.5 crows per stop, up from 5 last year.

North Dakota's 2025 upland bird harvests were down for pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge compared to 2024.

"We were not surprised by a decrease in pheasant harvest in the fall of 2025 based on decreases of chicks in our late summer roadside counts. Chick production was negatively impacted by the cool, wet nesting season and these juvenile birds are often what make up a significant portion of a hunter's bag. However, adult pheasant densities remain high due to good survival from the mild winter," said RJ Gross, North Dakota Game and Fish Department upland game biologist. Gross said given the number of roosters remaining on the landscape post-season, access was likely the most limiting factor for pheasant hunter success.

Last year, 53,008 pheasant hunters (down 4%) harvested 344,975 roosters (down 3%), compared to 55,401 hunters and 357,018 roosters in 2024.

Counties with the highest percentage of pheasants taken were Hettinger, Divide, Williams, Stark and McLean.

Bighorn Sheep Continue to Thrive

- The 2025 survey was the fifth record count in the past six years
- 2025 offered the first Department sheep tag issued in the MOA with MHA Nation
- In total, 10 Department tags were issued in 2025 (8 by lottery, one by auction, one by MHA), all hunters were successful

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's 2025 bighorn sheep survey, completed by recounting lambs in March, revealed a record 378 bighorn sheep in the badlands of western North Dakota, up 8% from 2024 and 10% above the five-year average. The 2025 survey was the fifth record count in the past six years.

Brett Wiedmann, Department big game biologist, said 104 rams, 234 ewes and 40 lambs were counted. Not included are approximately 40 bighorn sheep in the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and bighorns introduced to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in 2020.

The northern badlands population increased by 8% from 2024 and was the highest count on record. The southern badlands population remained near its lowest level since bighorns were reintroduced there in 1966.

"Adult rams were near record numbers, but the ewe count surpassed the previous record by an impressive 14%," Wiedmann said. "Lamb recruitment and winter survival of lambs were both unfortunately well below average."

Strong Gains for Hunting Access

- Continue to meet and exceed goals for PLOTS acreage to return to 1 million acres by 2030, fall 2025 had 880,000 acres enrolled
- Unveiled [HuntLink](#) – an online platform for connecting hunters and landowners primarily for depredation issues but available for most game species
- Offering options through electronic posting to open access for portions of the hunting season

[HuntLink](#) is a new, voluntary program designed to help North Dakota landowners easily connect with hunters and trappers. The program offers a simple way to allow managed access for antlerless deer, coyotes, turkeys, and other species. For landowners experiencing wildlife depredation or looking for additional management tools, [HuntLink](#) can help.

Landowners can enroll through their North Dakota Game and Fish [My Account page](#) and may remove their listing at any time once they've connected with enough participants.

Hunters can view landowner requests across the state through the [HuntLink Map](#), but must contact landowners directly to obtain permission before hunting or trapping.

Landowners [interested in posting private land electronically](#) for the 2026-27 hunting season can [log into My Account](#) on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department website, [gf.nd.gov](#).

New this year, landowners have the option to electronically post their land from Aug. 1-July 31 (entire season); Aug. 1-Nov. 22 (through deer gun season); or only during deer gun season (Nov. 6-22).

Landowners who have a profile on the Game and Fish Department's mobile application have the option to communicate with hunters using their cellphone app. A link will be available for hunters to send a request to the individual posting the land.

Fishing Opportunity Remains Strong

- Currently managing over 450 fishing waters
- Walleye production and stocking frequently exceeds 10 million
- Ongoing tagging studies to evaluate and monitor angler utilization

During a time when the Game and Fish Department manages about 450 fishing waters in the state and interest from anglers to pursue walleye and other species remained high, Department fisheries personnel continued efforts in 2025 to increase angling opportunities into the future.

For example, Department fisheries personnel took the first eggs during the walleye spawn on April 29 at Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake. The spawning operations were shut down as egg goals were met at Devils Lake on May 5 and two days later on Sakakawea. Fisheries crews collected 41.2 million eggs at Sakakawea and 28.3 million at Devils Lake.

On another fisheries management note, a three-year walleye tagging study was started in spring 2025 on Devils Lake to gain a deeper understanding of how anglers are utilizing the state's most sought-after species. It had been nearly 20 years since Department fisheries personnel had initiated a study using marked walleyes on this popular fishery.

In addition, fisheries biologists from around North Dakota also initiated one-year walleye tagging studies on six other waters.

Challenges

Grassland and wetland losses continue to reduce habitat availability, population recovery and thereby opportunity for deer, waterfowl and some upland game

- 2026 deer season has lowest deer tag allocation since 1970's
- 2026 breeding duck index (2.4 million birds) dipped below the long-term average for the first time since 1993
- Sharp-tailed grouse down 38% in 2025 summer roadside brood counts and 2025 harvest was down 24%

North Dakota's 2026 deer season is set, with 39,100 licenses available to hunters, down 3,200 from last year, the lowest total in over a half century. Muzzleloader licenses were also reduced, and antlerless deer gun licenses are not available in several units.

The statewide deer herd continues to recover from the lingering effects of the 2022-23 winter and epizootic hemorrhagic disease outbreaks across a landscape with increasingly limited habitat. Additional measures to help encourage population growth were discussed at spring advisory board meetings. The Department will continue to engage stakeholders on these measures including limiting adult archery tags to antlered only in the upcoming year.

Conservative license allocations are intended to maintain hunting opportunities while encouraging population growth in the state, said Bill Haase, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief.

High quality deer habitat is not as abundant as in the past, particularly quality cover for fawn rearing and recruitment, limiting the potential for population recovery. This has been particularly evident in the eastern third of the state, where most gun license allocation reductions occurred for the upcoming season. In some parts of the state, deer gun harvest is down 90% from what was harvested in 2005, during the peak CRP years.

The department continues to emphasize habitat through existing voluntary landowner programs, new partnerships and innovative solutions, such as the Governor's Legacy Soil Health and Habitat Program, to bolster deer populations.

Zebra Mussels Found in Smishek Lake

- Adult Zebra Mussels detected in Smishek Lake in September 2025
- A treatment plan was developed as the lake poses a downstream threat to Lake Sakakawea

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has confirmed the presence of invasive zebra mussels in Smishek Lake, Burke County, after detecting zebra mussel veligers in routine plankton tow net samples.

Ben Holen, Department aquatic nuisance species coordinator, said subsequent follow-up sampling found additional adult mussels in the lake.

The 195-acre lake is a popular recreation destination located 4.8 miles north of Powers Lake.

Smishek Lake is now considered a Class I ANS infested water. Emergency rules will go into effect immediately to prohibit the movement of water away from the lake, including water for transferring bait.

During the week of Oct. 13, 2025, Game and Fish Department staff applied an EPA-registered copper-based molluscicide called EarthTecQZ. This product, when applied safely, will cause mussel mortality while sustaining other aquatic life.

The Department, in cooperation with state and federal partners and local stakeholders, plan to retreat Smishek Lake in May and June to eradicate the remaining zebra mussel population in the lake.

“This spring, at ice-out, we surveyed the mussel population in Smishek Lake to evaluate the effectiveness of last fall’s treatment” said Ben Holen, department aquatic nuisance species coordinator. “While the treatment significantly suppressed the zebra mussel population at the lake, live mussels capable of reproduction remain. This population poses a threat to the downstream waters of Lake Sakakawea and other lakes in the northwestern part of North Dakota, so we are doing what we can to achieve a full eradication.”

CWD Detected in two additional deer hunting units in 2025

- CWD prevalence remains relatively low statewide but continues to spread
- Disease management continues to be controversial and challenging
- New Department wildlife veterinarian hired in 2025

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department tested 1,224 animals for chronic wasting disease during the 2025 sampling season. Game and Fish confirmed 16 deer tested positive for CWD, all of which were taken by hunters. CWD was not previously detected in units 2B and 3D2.