

PLOTS Conditions are Always Changing

Preseason Scouting is Important

Many changes have occurred in the last year that may affect conditions on some PLOTS. At today's high gas prices emotions may run high when you get to a piece of land you have hunted in the past and it isn't what you expected. However this year you may need to do a little more preseason homework than previous years. Due to producers opting out of the CRP and the PLOTS program, dramatic changes to both programs could occur.

A new federal Farm Bill and high commodity prices have influenced producers to convert Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres to annual crops. Many of North Dakota Game and Fish Department's PLOTS agreements piggyback federal CRP contracts. In cases when a producer cancels his/her CRP contract, the PLOTS agreement is cancelled as soon as settlement is received by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Hunters could find a wide variety of habitat conditions and scenarios when they arrive at tracts identified in this PLOTS Guide:

- Some PLOTS may have had a portion of the CRP broken for farming, but still remain as PLOTS. In this case, some CRP may still remain, along with wetlands, native prairie, and other habitat. The producer in this situation has repaid the Department for the portion they are farming.
- Others may have cancelled their CRP contracts and are farming the entire tract. In this situation the

producer has repaid the Department and agreed to leave the tract open for access until the end of the 2008 hunting season. In some cases little to no habitat may exist on this tract of land, even though the tract is still posted as PLOTS.

- Or the PLOTS tract simply doesn't exist and the PLOTS signs have been removed from the tract. Some PLOTS tracts will be included in this Guide that unfortunately were cancelled by the producers after printing. The Department has an online version of the PLOTS guide that will be updated as often as possible. You can find the updated online version of the guide at <http://gf.nd.gov/maps/plots.html> or <http://web.apps.state.nd.us/hubexplorer/gamefishinfo/viewer.html>.

Along with the conversion of habitat, some areas of North Dakota are experiencing a drought, with the worst area being the south-central and southwestern regions of the state. Hunters may see the effects of the drought this fall on some PLOTS due to emergency haying and grazing of CRP lands. Hunters should be aware that portions of some PLOTS may be hayed or grazed when they arrive to hunt this fall. Some producers with CRP PLOTS tracts are allowed to hay or graze a portion of these acres as part of their contracts. They may have exercised this option in order to supplement their loss of forage due to drought conditions. If a producer does hay or graze on these tracts, no more than fifty percent of the CRP can be harvested.

2008 Fall Outlook

Storm Warning

Writing the 2008 fall hunting outlook isn't easy. I feel like a local television weather forecaster interrupting regularly scheduled programming with a warning that crawls across the bottom of the screen: "Don't be fooled. You may see clear skies overhead, but there is serious trouble over the horizon."

This year's hunting season will be excellent for many species, but we have to be honest about changes on the landscape that will mean substantially fewer animals and decreased hunting opportunities in coming years.

For the last three years the Game and Fish Department has reported in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* and other media that the impending loss of Conserve Reserve Program acres will have a devastating effect on wildlife in North Dakota. In 2007, we saw the first signs of this historic landscape change with more than 400,000 acres of conservation land converted to cropland. In 2008, the loss of more CRP acres and many favorite hunting spots will provide a stunning wakeup call for us all.

The meteoric rise in agricultural commodity prices and stagnant CRP rental rates leave the state's farmers and ranchers little choice but to convert erodible grassland habitat into corn, soybeans and wheat.

You cannot blame landowners for doing what makes economic sense for their families, but you can ask why national policy makers have not learned the lessons of history that dictate the pendulum will swing back to a time of overproduction, lower prices, and economic stress in the farm community.

If the new farm bill would have been written and implemented in a way as to give those producers who wanted conservation lands as part of their operation a viable and competitive financial opportunity, we

would not be facing the catastrophic habitat likely to come over the next couple of years.

To put this change into perspective, Game and Fish Department biologists have provided an outlook that not only offers an idea of what to expect this fall, but also in future years as CRP incrementally vanishes from the North Dakota landscape.

In writing their species reports, biologists revisited 1988, a time before CRP was much of a factor in wildlife populations and providing hunting opportunities. The numbers will make you think. For example, 64,000 deer licenses then versus nearly 150,000 today. Pheasant harvest stood at about 120,000 birds compared to more than 900,000 in 2007.

Take note of not only wildlife harvest statistics, but also hunter numbers. Today, we have far more resident and nonresident hunters than two decades ago. Will all these people continue to hunt as wildlife populations decline? Where will they hunt as CRP and native prairie tracts go under the plow?

If you're a hunter, no matter if your passion is upland game, waterfowl, deer, or all of the above, you may have a successful 2008 season. However, the loss of CRP will be evident when you venture afield this autumn.

And it won't get any better in 2009, when continuing loss of habitat and disappointing declines in wildlife populations will likely become more evident. As the next few years unfold, our state's landscape and wildlife bounty will be far different than what we have known the past two decades.

*By Randy Kreil, Chief, Wildlife Division
North Dakota Game and Fish Department*