

2006 REVIEW

By Roger Rostvet, Game and Fish Department Deputy Director

When I talk to people who don't hunt, fish or trap, the inevitable question is: "What does the Game and Fish Department do and why do we do what we do?"

The guiding principles of our actions always come back to the Department's mission statement, which is "... to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for the sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive use."



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In review of 2006, we need to look at where our time, effort and money were spent. Did we accomplish what we said we were going to? Did we reach our goals? If not, what stopped us, and what adjustments are needed?

Some goals are pretty straight forward and largely under our control – for example, having 1 million acres enrolled in our Private Land Open To Sportsmen program by the end of the decade. Others are not so clear cut and are influenced by weather, economy, other agencies, and so on.

We are coming off yet another nice winter and populations of most wildlife species are at or above management objectives. North Dakota's fisheries resources are in good shape, but after a long period of wetter than normal conditions, things are changing in many parts of the state. With that said, let's jump into some 2006 highlights, and look at opportunities and challenges for the future.

Strong Financial Base and Growth

The Game and Fish Department is one of the few wildlife agencies in the nation to experience growth based on income generated by license sales. Nationwide, there is a downward trend in the number of active hunters and anglers, but not so in North Dakota. Many other wildlife departments, unlike North Dakota's, receive general tax monies to supplement operation of their agencies. Many of those states have experienced either stagnated budgets or cutbacks because of budget shortfalls.

In general, Game and Fish revenues have grown consistently over the past decade due primarily to increased sales of both resident and nonresident licenses, and increases in federal funds and federal excise taxes collected on a variety of products purchased by hunters and anglers. Maintaining revenue growth for the future may be difficult because significant reductions are imminent, based on natural climatic cycles. A preview of this was drying conditions in certain waterfowl areas in 2006.

It's difficult to envision much growth in the number of resident hunters unless there are significant gains in overall population trends in the state. In the case of future deer license sales, the Department's goals for deer populations will result in decreased deer license numbers from current record levels.

Our reserve is in excess of the legislatively mandated \$15 million minimum, and is slightly above the Department's planned goal of maintaining a reserve equivalent of \$25 million, or 50 percent of our biennial budget.

Upcoming Legislative Session

The 2005 legislative session was one of the busiest ever when viewed from a wildlife standpoint, and 2007 will likely be similar. The uses, ethics and values of wildlife are changing rapidly, as are the groups affected by decisions concerning wildlife.

It can now be said that the value and competing uses of wildlife are, more than ever, worth arguing over. Decisions made after public debate will not only set the direction of the Game and Fish Department, but will set the course for wildlife utilization for years to come. In past legislative sessions, the focus has been on how and who uses wildlife, which is a concern. However, little focus has been on the conservation or creation of wildlife habitat.

The following is a summary of the Department's proposed budget for 2007-09 and some of its major components:

- Total request – \$53,095,887
- Increase of \$1,755,019
- One additional fisheries technician
- One additional game warden investigator
- Bighorn sheep biologist
- \$2 million increase in PLOTS program
- Land acquisition decreased from \$750,000 to \$100,000
 - \$900,000 in lieu of tax payments moved to capital assets line from operating
 - Major increases in operating expenses for all divisions – \$2,900,000
 - \$680,000 to USDA Wildlife Services for animal damage control work
 - \$500,000 for shooting range grants
 - \$440,000 for Garrison Dam National Fish Hatchery operations
 - \$225,000 for an office addition at the Dickinson Game and Fish office
 - \$381,750 for North Dakota Parks and Recreation boat ramp maintenance and repair
 - Additional salary dollars to be added by legislature

Low water levels up and down much of the Missouri River System, Lake Sakakawea included, was an issue again in 2006. Even so, access around the big lake was provided and fishing was excellent for much of the summer.

PLOTS

More than one-fifth of the Department's budget is earmarked for PLOTS, making it our largest program. With this kind of investment of time and money, results need to be constantly assessed. The goal is to have 1 million acres enrolled in the program by the end of the decade. It appears we will reach that goal as more than 900,000 acres are enrolled as we head into 2007.

In 2006, we surveyed both landowners and hunters about PLOTS and found that both groups were extremely satisfied with the program.

To capitalize on Conservation Reserve Program acres enrolled in PLOTS, we have submitted a request for an additional \$2 million to our budget. We are not anticipating a shortfall in our goal of 1 million acres, but want to enroll expired CRP contracts into new long-term deals.

The PLOTS program has been a great success, but there are concerns of creating a generation of hunters who hunt exclusively on public land in a state where 95 percent of all land is privately owned. We must keep in mind that PLOTS was never designed or intended to provide access for all hunting.



RON WILSON

Small Game

There's a good chance 2006 will go in the books as one of the best years for ring-necked pheasants since the 1940s. While extremely dry conditions in parts of the state hurt reproductive efforts, both pheasants and hunters had a good year.

With the dry summer it appears that even Hungarian partridge were in better shape than they have been for years. Sharp-tailed grouse also went into the 2006 fall hunting season with increased breeding populations in all districts.

North Dakota's upland birds and other wildlife have experienced increases in populations thanks to several mild winters and CRP. That is likely going to change, however, as CRP acres are expected to decline.

Waterfowl

If the wet cycle is over, then 2006 was a reflection of what the future may hold. Since 1993, the state has been in an unprecedented wet cycle and waterfowl and waterfowl hunters responded. The 2006 spring water index in North Dakota was down 14 percent from 2005, and just 3 percent above the 1948-2005 average. This survey was done in spring, and by fall many more areas were dry. In 2006 we saw a reduction in the number of nonresident waterfowl hunters in North Dakota, and we suspect the same will hold true for residents when those numbers come in.

CRP

CRP has been the most wildlife friendly farm program ever, converting more than 3 million acres of tilled ground in North Dakota to year-round wildlife habitat.

Unfortunately, more than half of the CRP contracts in North Dakota are expiring in the next few years. Most landowners have been offered some type of extension, or a new contract, which is the good news. The bad news is that most of the contracts in southwestern North Dakota are only for two to five years. In the rest of the state, average extensions offered were in a range of two to 15 years. This in itself is not all bad, but the per-acre payment will be little changed from what it was 20 years ago.

The fact that land values and rental rates in the private sector have increased substantially in recent years, and the increase in current commodity prices partially driven by the "corn craze" for ethanol stocks, will surely reduce the number of total acres in CRP in North Dakota unless we see changes to the farm program.



CRANG BIRHLE

Pheasant hunting in North Dakota in 2006 rivals some of the best years the state has had.

Big Cats and Bigger Tales

In 2006, Department personnel spent an inordinate amount of time dealing with mountain lion issues, not so much with the cats themselves, but concerns people have with cougars.

In 2005, the Game and Fish Department implemented the state's first lion season. Things went pretty much as expected. The limit of five mountain lions was met; two were taken during the deer gun season by deer hunters, and three by hound hunters after we received some snow. All the animals were taken in the badlands area, and good biological information was gained and some modifications were made for the 2006 season.

Things were different in 2006. Instead of all the lions harvested during or after the deer gun season, the five-lion quota was reached before deer gun season opened. Four of five were taken in the central part of the state outside the badlands, two at close range by pheasant hunters, and one hiding in a culvert near New Salem.

This created a debate as to where they came from, and the theories flew. One rumor had the Game and Fish Department stocking mountain lions, which is why they were showing up on the prairie.

It is human nature to fear the unknown, especially when it involves a large predator that, in rare cases, can cause injury to humans. It is a fact that there is a breeding population of lions in the state, and as lion populations in nearby states continue to grow and the big cats continue to disperse from these areas, we will have mountain lions in North Dakota. Probably the biggest debate, considering the state has very limited natural habitat for mountain lions, is how to manage animals in those areas where no suitable habitat exists.

Above: North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists for the first time were able to fit a mountain lion with a radio collar.

Right: The Conservation Reserve Program has been a boon to upland game birds, big game and other wildlife in North Dakota for two decades.



Big Game

For the last several years, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has set aggressive harvest rates for antlerless white-tailed deer. The result is reduced deer numbers in the northwestern and southeastern corners of the state, and stable to increasing deer numbers along a band running diagonally from southwestern to northeastern North Dakota. In 2006, Game and Fish made available 143,500 deer gun licenses. The all-time high of 145,600 licenses was in 2005.

The long-term goal is to reduce overall deer numbers so that about 100,000 licenses will maintain a relatively stable deer population. To get there, the majority of licenses made available in recent years have been for antlerless deer.

With the increasing popularity of electronic applications over the Internet (about 47 percent of hunters applied this way in 2006) license processing is becoming faster and more efficient. Hunters with second and third (or more) doe licenses were able to use these licenses during the archery and muzzleloader seasons with the appropriate bow or firearm in the designated hunting unit.

Although we do not yet have the total fall deer harvest for 2006, the assumption is that success rates were high as hunting conditions across the state were ideal.

The mule deer population in North Dakota's badlands remains higher than average. Mule deer have also increased in southwestern North Dakota hunting units adjacent to the badlands. As a result, the number of any-antlered and any-antlerless deer licenses have increased in these units.

North Dakota's elk, moose and bighorn sheep populations are also doing well.

Fishing

In 2006, more than 160,000 adults bought a North Dakota fishing license. There probably isn't any recreational activity that depends more on weather than fishing. For example, during the drought of 1988-92, the number of fishable waters in North Dakota dwindled to about 100. However, following unprecedented wet conditions between 1993 and the early 2000s, the number of fishing lakes neared 350. These new lakes were created via rainfall and snow melt that filled sloughs and meadows; in turn, tremendous

new northern pike and yellow perch fisheries developed. Seemingly overnight, many shallow or dry duck marshes became 20-foot deep lakes, thousands of acres in size. Such is life in a prairie state – weather extremes often drive the feast or famine of fishing.

Although some lakes across the state are not in need of any more water, that is not the case for large portions of southwestern and south central North Dakota. There is a real need for some winter snow and significant runoff in these areas. Most other lakes should be in good shape, and though fish populations may be down a bit in some lakes (especially compared to historic highs in the early 2000s), good numbers of walleye, pike, perch, crappie, bass and other species can be found across the state.

With the exception of Lake Oahe, which has essentially dried up due to drought and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers water management policies, the big fisheries in North Dakota are also in respectable shape. Good to very good walleye and pike populations await the angler in Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake, and white bass populations are still relatively high in Devils Lake.

*Right: Continued dry conditions in 2006 made it more difficult for waterfowl hunters to find places to hunt.
Below: The push for several years now has been to lower the state's deer population in many areas.*



RON WILSON



Although weather is the driving force in determining fish populations and fishing opportunities, fish management efforts assist in improving fishing during periods of drought, and extend the highs during periods of good fishing. The North Dakota Game and Fish Departments fisheries division structure is sound. From field crews working on fish surveys, to a boat ramp crew, to fish haulers, to staff working on lake rehabilitation projects, the division has a strong framework to address the state's angler access, fisheries management and fish production needs.

Lake Sakakawea Boat Access

Spring water level projections for Lake Sakakawea are dismal, with record or near-record levels expected (around 1,805 feet above mean sea level). The goal of the Department is to have most access sites open by Memorial Day weekend. With that in mind, and given that little run-off could be the standard again, it will take around \$1.1 million to extend and/or relocate most of the ramps.

Keeping Devils Lake Carp Free

Efforts continue to find a permanent solution to eliminate the potential drainage overflow from the Pembina River drainage, where carp are present, to the Devils Lake watershed, where carp are not present.

Chemical fish retardants were used in spring 2006 in Snowflake Creek (a tributary of the Pembina River) to keep carp away from the divide separating the two drainages. However, manpower and other costs are prohibitive for this to be the long-term solution. The Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board continues to work on this problem and hopefully a permanent earthen berm will be constructed, thus eliminating this threat to Devils Lake.

Aquatic Nuisance Species

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department, with help from federal and other state agencies, monitored approximately 50 of the state's waters in summer 2006 for aquatic nuisance species.

Identifying if there are ANS infestations is the first step in preventing their spread and ANS prevention is much easier and cheaper than treatment. If an infestation occurs, ANS can eventually ruin angling and impair recreational boating opportunities.

Unfortunately, North Dakota already has some ANS in its waters. Eurasian water milfoil was found in Dead Colt Creek Reservoir near Lisbon in 2005. In an attempt to control or eliminate this ANS problem, the reservoir's level was dropped approximately 10 feet to freeze out the plants in winter 2006.

In less than 10 years, curly leaf pondweed has spread from an isolated bay to much of Lake Sakakawea, Lake Audubon, the Missouri River below Garrison Dam, and McDowell Dam near Bismarck. Recent monitoring found Eurasian water milfoil and curly leaf pondweed in the Sheyenne River near Valley City. While only a few plants were found, it takes only one tiny fragment to grow into a plant and infest another water body. Cleaning and draining your boat before moving to waters elsewhere is the best way to prevent ANS from being moved.



CRAIG BIRHLE

SUMMARY OF VIOLATIONS – JULY 1, 2005 TO JUNE 30, 2006

BIG GAME (GUN)

Hunting without a license	24
No general game license and habitat stamp	2
Using another's license	4
Failure to carry license on person	15
Failure to sign or affix stamp	2
Shining (using artificial light)	22
Illegal possession/taking	48
Unlawful transportation	1
Aiding in concealment of unlawful game	5
Exceeding limit	9
Hunting in closed season	17
Hunting in wrong unit or closed area	7
Failure to tag game	35
Kill wrong species or sex	8
Use of motor vehicle off established trail	31
Harassing game with motor vehicle	1
Hunting on posted land without permission	23
Hunting before/after legal hours	3
Failure to accompany/transport other's game	13
Failure to wear fluorescent orange	13
Gratis hunter hunting off described land	4
Other big game violations	36
Total	323

BIG GAME (BOW)

No general game license and habitat stamp	1
Failure to carry license on person	3
Shining (use of artificial light)	1
Illegal possession/taking	1
Unlawful transportation	1
Failure to tag game	1
Use of motor vehicle off established trail	3
Hunting on posted land without permission	2
Hunting before/after legal hours	3
Failure to wear fluorescent orange during gun season	1
Gratis hunter hunting off described land	1
Other big game (bow) violations	1
Total	19

UPLAND GAME

Hunting without small game license	6
Using another's license	1
Failure to carry license on person	18
Failure to sign or affix stamp	1
Using gun holding more than three shells	43
Illegal possession/taking	2
Exceeding limit	12
Hunting in closed season	5
Hunting in closed area	2
Failure to leave identification or sex of game	40
Kill wrong species or sex	5
Use of motor vehicle off established trail	8
Hunting on posted land without permission	20
Hunting before/after legal hours	4
Failure to accompany/transport other's game	2
Other upland game violations	7
Total	176

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Hunting without small game/nonresident license	9
No general game license and habitat stamp	1
Failure to carry license on person	47
Failure to sign or affix stamp	7
Using gun holding more than three shells	14
Illegal possession/taking	3
Unlawful transportation	1
Aid in concealment of unlawful game	3
Exceeding limit	41
Hunting in closed season	8
Hunting in closed area or zone	4
Failure to leave identification or sex	50
Wanton waste	10
Hunting on posted land without permission	9
Hunting before/after legal hours	11
Steel shot violation	19
Hunting without federal waterfowl stamp	6
Other migratory bird violations	27
Total	270

FURBEARER

Hunting/trapping without license	3
Failure to carry license on person	2
Shining (using artificial light)	4
Illegal possession/taking	2
Hunting/trapping during closed season	7
Motor vehicle off established trail during deer season	2
Harassing furbearers with motor vehicle	2
Hunting/trapping on posted land without permission	1
Other furbearer violations	1
Total	24

FISHING

Fishing without a license	86
Failure to ID unoccupied fish house	2
Failure to carry license on person	90
Failure to sign or affix stamp	2
Using more than legal number of hooks per pole/line	3
Illegal method of taking fish	9
Exceeding limit	77
Fishing in closed area	1
Taking undersized/oversized fish	7
Possession/use of illegal trap, seine, net, set line	1
Failure to remove fish house	2
Depositing fish/fish parts on shore	2
Possession/fishing with illegal bait	11
Failure to attend lines	16
Fishing with excessive lines	80
Selling fish/bait without a license	1
Paddlefish/pallid sturgeon violations	7
Other fish, frog, turtle, clam violations	9
Total	406

BOATING

Use of unlicensed or unnumbered boat	186
Unlicensed boat rental	3
Operating without lights at night	35
Inadequate number of personal floatation devices	147

No observer while towing skier	77
Failure to report boating accident	1
Operating vessel under influence/when intoxicated	17
Reckless or negligent operation	5
Other prohibited/hazardous operations	26
Other boating violations	85
Total	582

MISCELLANEOUS

Failure to register snowmobile/ATV	8
Shining wildlife	4
Loaded firearm in vehicle	121
Fleeing	3
440 yard violation	37
Killing/possession of harmless birds	4
Wildlife management area violation	61
Minor in possession of alcohol	97
Possession of controlled substance	16
Possession of drug paraphernalia	13
No guide/outfitter license	52
No taxidermist license	2
Misrepresentation in license application	38
Purchasing hunting license without safety course	2
Failure to appear on citation	2
Littering public areas/waters	69
Violation of suspended child support	3
Failure to carry guide license	1
Criminal trespass	14
Other ND Game and Fish violations	46
Non-ND Game and Fish violations	43
Total	636

TOTAL CITATIONS STATEWIDE 2,436

2006 SPECIAL BIG GAME LICENSES		
	Licenses Available	Applications Received
Moose	129	12,573
Elk	259	11,839
Bighorn	6	8,931

FINANCIAL STATEMENT	
July 1, 2005 to June 30, 2006	
Income	\$31,840,081.31
Expenses	\$24,220,142.66
FUND BALANCES, FIXED ASSETS AND LONG-TERM DEBT	
Game and Fish General Fund	\$28,510,126.57
Habitat and Depredation Fund	\$145,155.93
Nongame Wildlife Fund	\$108,154.44
TOTAL ALL FUNDS	\$28,763,436.94
FIXED ASSETS	\$23,405,684.59
DEPARTMENT NET WORTH	\$52,169,121.53

2005 LICENSES AND PERMITS ISSUED		
	Resident	Nonresident
Fishing	42,351	6,350
Husband/Wife Fishing	13,618	1,970
Senior Citizen Fishing	10,754	
Disabled Fishing	475	
Short-Term Fishing		
7-Day		6,882
3-Day		15,407
Paddlefish Tags	2,219	452
Commercial Tags	35	
Retail Bait Vendor	232	
Wholesale Bait Vendor	45	5
Fish Hatchery	3	
2005 Boat Registrations	45,469	
(First year of 3-year decal)		
Boat Rentals	135	
General Hunting	59,367	48,424
Small Game Hunting	28,790	30,479
Combination License	46,236	
Waterfowl Hunting		25,455
Furbearer Hunting/Trapping	15,061	1,989
Fur Buyer (2004-05)	31	3
Nongame Hunting		1,259
Deer Gun Hunting	127,424	4,907
Deer Gun Hunting (Gratis)	14,202	139
Deer Bowhunting	14,396	1,974
Pronghorn Gun Hunting	4,711	
Pronghorn Gun Hunting (Gratis)	805	
Pronghorn Bowhunting	1,498	85
Moose Hunting	112	
Moose Hunting		
(Preferential Landowner)	17	
Elk Hunting	180	
Elk Hunting		
(Preferential Landowner)	35	
Bighorn Sheep	4	
Turkey Hunting (Spring)	5,794	
Turkey Hunting (Fall)	8,737	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Spring)	419	
Turkey Hunting (Gratis Fall)	594	
Habitat Stamp	107,791	
Shooting Preserve	28	
Fishing/Hunting Guide	315	31
Taxidermist	198	
Falconry	6	
Scientific Collector	55	