

2008 FALL OUTLOOK

STORM WARNING

By Randy Kreil

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 Conservation 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 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 change 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 losses 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.

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