

MIKE ANDERSON

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, right, said the Department loses some acres and then makes up for what was lost in the effort of maintaining 1 million acres of PLOTS. One of the things the Department strives for is increasing habitat quality.

PLOTS Challenges and Opportunities

By Ron Wilson

Driven by moisture, crop prices and farm bills, the face of wildlife habitat on the Northern Plains is often in flux. To keep pace, the direction of the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program adjusts accordingly to meet new challenges and opportunities.

You don't have to look very far, said Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, for examples of the ever-changing conditions that present these challenges and opportunities. "For several years, many wetlands in central and western portions

of the state were very low or completely dry, and many PLOTS tracts have wetlands like this," he said. "Some producers take advantage of these areas during dry years to hay or farm. However, these same wetlands can fill up quickly, as they did this year, making it difficult or impossible to farm."

The wet conditions, Kading said, create abundant food and cover for many wildlife species and provide an opportunity to enhance wildlife habitat. Programs like the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wetland Reserve Program



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and Conservation Reserve Program offer producers payments in exchange for conservation practices such as not draining or farming wetlands, restoring drained wetlands, removing sediment accumulated from decades of erosion, planting grass and other practices.

“The Game and Fish Department works with producers who enroll into these programs by providing incentives for additional conservation practices and public access through the PLOTS program,” Kading said.

The worth of quality wildlife habitat, which is found on many of North Dakota’s PLOTS tracts, was evident this past winter as near-record snows were recorded over much of the state. “Some of the tracts provided the winter habitat wildlife needed to make it through the toughest winter in more than a decade,” Kading said. “That quality habitat also aided populations trying to rebound by providing good nesting and brood rearing habitat.”

Traditionally, when commodity prices are high, there is less interest in conservation programs that are a boon to many wildlife species. However, Kading said, in today’s farming and ranching, farm bill programs have become an essential part of many operations. For example, technology has advanced and software now enables producers to map fields, indicating where the poorest and most productive areas are located.

“Having this information, producers can use farm bill programs, such as CRP, on less productive acres (wet areas, saline soils) in their operation while still

maintaining their most productive acres in agriculture production,” Kading said. “Less productive acres produce very little or low yields and are essentially a drain on profit since the producer has annual input costs like fuel, fertilizer, seed and chemicals.”

If these acres are enrolled in a program like CRP, the producer will not incur annual input costs, but receives a stable annual rental payment, while providing wildlife habitat. “Game and Fish Department private land biologists work with producers on these types of acres and enroll the land in PLOTS for additional cost-share and incentives,” Kading said.

Today, there are about 1 million acres in the PLOTS program, which continues to remain popular with hunters and landowners. “We lose some acres and then we make up for those acres lost,” Kading said of the goal of maintaining 1 million acres set by Governor John Hoeven in 2003. “One of the things we strive for is increasing the habitat quality on the poorer quality tracts.”

The struggle continues as CRP contracts expire or are headed that way. In 2007, North Dakota lost more than 400,000 CRP acres, while an additional 180,000 exited the program in 2008. While another 236,000 acres are set to expire in 2009, there is some optimism that fewer acres than that will be lost. Kading said producers of about 25 percent of those 236,000 acres are being offered three- or five-year extensions, mostly in southwestern North Dakota.

While PLOTS tracts are good places for hunters to start, Department officials encourage hunters to politely seek out other places to hunt on private land.

“From what we are hearing, a lot of producers are taking those options because there aren’t many options for them at this time,” Kading said. “If that happens, it will help to smooth things out a bit ... it won’t be a full 236,000 acres that expire, but a lot more needs to be done to maintain CRP in North Dakota.”

Where the losses are being felt most are in pheasant country in southeastern and southwestern North Dakota. “We are not only losing PLOTS acres, but we’re losing habitat because once these acres are out of the CRP program, there are limited opportunities for producers at this time to re-enroll,” Kading said.

About 450,000 CRP acres remain in the Department’s PLOTS program. “And those are important as they have longer term PLOTS agreements associated with them,” Kading said. “Even with the changes we are seeing, it’s safe to say that the PLOTS program is still in good shape. The challenges the program faces present new opportunities.”

One of the ways the Department plans to address these ever-changing conditions and new opportunities is by working with partners as the PLOTS program cannot go it alone. An example is the recent teaming with Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever to create and fund farm bill and habitat biologist positions. These positions will assist USDA with promotion, planning and implementation of farm bill programs such as CRP, Wetland Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and others.

“Many acres of habitat and conservation will be put on the ground by these positions. And much of that habitat may end up enrolled in the PLOTS program if the producers choose to do so,” Kading said. “These biologists help develop conservation plans and enroll producers in programs that benefit the producer’s operation and create wildlife habitat.”

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

PLOTS Guides Available

Private Land Opens To Sportsmen Guides can be found at most license vendors throughout the state in early September.

The PLOTS Guide will be similar to 2008 and feature about 1 million PLOTS acres. However, because the guide is printed in August and distributed in early September, there will be some PLOTS in the guide that have been removed from the program since the time of printing.

There will also be some PLOTS tracts that will remain in the program, but the habitat and condition of the tracts will have changed significantly.

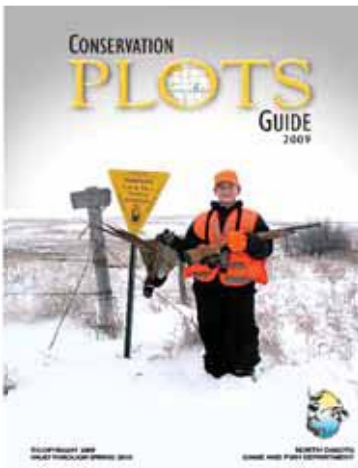
To minimize possible problems, the Department will update PLOTS map sheets weekly on its website at gf.nd.gov.

Hunters can also view the guide, and find a list of vendors where guides are available, on the website.

The PLOTS Guide features maps highlighting these walk-in areas, identified in the field by inverted triangular yellow signs, as well as remaining public lands.

The guides are free, and available at county auditor offices and license vendors in the state; by walk-in at the Game and Fish Department’s Bismarck office; and at district offices in Riverdale, Harvey (Lonetree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake.

The guides are not available to mail, so hunters will have to print maps off the website for viewing, or pick one up at a local vendor.



RESPECTING PLOTS

When hunting on Private Land Open To Sportsmen tracts, Game and Fish Department officials urge hunters to remember that the lands are private.

Considering that, hunters need to respect the tracts as if they were their own, said Kevin Kading, Department private land section leader. This means picking up trash and spent shells, and cleaning game elsewhere, not in road ditches near PLOTS signs.

“These tracts are privately owned and hunters must respect that,” Kading said. “Leave the land in the shape you would want it if it were your own.”

Kading also reminds PLOTS visitors to park their vehicles in places that will not block roads or approaches to farm fields. This has been an on again, off again issue for landowners who are enrolled in PLOTS and for those who are not.