

# LANDOWNERS MATTER

## NEWSLETTER



# WOODY HABITAT FOR PHEASANTS AND DEER

**ANDY LINDBLOOM** | SENIOR BIG GAME BIOLOGIST

**ALEX SOLEM** | SENIOR UPLAND GAME AND FURBEARER BIOLOGIST

In South Dakota, where winter storms can bring extreme snow and sub-zero temperatures, providing high-quality winter habitat is essential for pheasant survival. Emergent wetlands, specifically cattail sloughs, are one of the preferred winter habitats for many wildlife species, including pheasants, by providing protection from inclement weather and escape cover. However, dense woody habitat can also provide shelter when those wetlands are filled with snow or not present within the local landscape. Well-designed shelterbelts, particularly those with dense, low-growing shrubs, provide a warm and secure habitat for pheasants during the winter if they are designed properly.

Woody habitat should be at least eight rows wide; narrow woody habitat (< 8 rows) may be attractive to pheasants but does not provide adequate protection during harsh winter storms. To maximize effectiveness, these areas should feature thick shrubs and other low-growing species that, unlike tall, deciduous trees, maintain their dense structure near the ground where birds need it most. Woody habitat should be placed in proximity to food sources to minimize the distance traveled for pheasants to feed. Placing food plots on the windward side of these plantings allows the woody habitat to act as snow catches, preventing the important food source from becoming snow covered.

Woody habitat is not always a necessary addition to a pheasant's habitat in the local area. Consulting with a South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Private Lands Habitat Biologist is very helpful as they will conduct an assessment of the available habitat on your property and surrounding properties. That assessment will determine if woody habitat is a limiting factor. If it is, they will also discuss and determine the appropriate location to maximize the winter habitat potential of the woody planting(s). In general, positioning of woody habitat should consider the prevailing wind to break the strongest, and coldest of winter winds.

Just as woody habitat plays a critical role in pheasant survival during harsh winters, it is equally important for big-game

species. Deer rely on many of the same woody features for food, thermal protection, and security, though their needs and patterns of use differ throughout the year.

White-tailed deer and mule deer, native to South Dakota, inhabit landscapes from open prairies to dense forests. While both white-tailed and mule deer species rely on woody habitats comprised of coniferous and deciduous trees and shrubs, the importance of this habitat varies by species, region, and season. In South Dakota, woody habitat such as the Black Hills or river bottomlands, act as biodiversity hotspots. Riparian zones, in particular, serve as the "baseline" of the ecosystem. Planted windbreaks in agricultural areas and natural river breaks provide essential habitat in otherwise open landscapes. Deer utilize woody habitat for three primary reasons: forage, thermal regulation, and security. Both deer species utilize woody habitat as browse, mainly feeding on twigs, buds, and some bark. In the Missouri River breaks, shrubs can comprise up to 88% of a mule deer's winter diet, which provides vital energy when other food sources are scarce. Thermal cover of evergreens and thickets act as insulators against extreme weather events. Woody habitat helps deer stay cool in the heat of summer and warm in the frigid days of winter. Dense woody habitat on the landscape creates bedding areas and travel corridors as well as escape cover. To benefit deer populations, landowners should prioritize plantings to provide adequate forage, thermal and escape cover. Strategic placement of woody habitat corridors that connect bedding and foraging areas can significantly reduce deer stress and exposure to predation and harsh environmental conditions.

Whether your primary desire is pheasants or deer, or maybe both, woody habitat is no doubt an important habitat factor to consider with your property's habitat management. The Department's woody habitat program continues to support landowners who invest in long-term habitat improvements across the state to benefit all wildlife species. Through this program, landowners can receive 75 percent cost-share, up to 20,000 dollars, for establishing new woody habitat plantings. GFP also offers 90 percent reimbursement for adding rows to

existing or new CRP plantings when needed to meet the program's eight-row minimum standard. For landowners who enroll their property in a public hunting access program for at least five years at the time of planting, we will provide full reimbursement of eligible project costs. Shelterbelt renovation projects, such as removing old, declining belts and replanting new designs that meet GFP woody habitat standards are eligible for 75 percent cost-share up to 30,000 dollars, including both equipment and planting expenses. In addition to this shelterbelt planting option, cost-share for planting shrub clumps in

riparian areas is also offered at similar cost share rates. GFP cost-share cannot be applied to trees funded through any other program or partner.

**Reach out to your closest Private Lands Habitat Biologist, which can be found on page 14, if you're interested in learning more about the woody habitat program.**

## SIGN UP FOR PRAIRIE DOG CONTROL PROGRAMS ENROLLMENT ENDS AUGUST 15

**MIKE KLOSOWSKI | REGIONAL SUPERVISOR**

**A**nother winter has come and gone in South Dakota—well, for the most part. South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks (GFP) staff and contractors have wrapped up another season of reducing forage damage caused by prairie dogs. Open winters like this are highly conducive to bait and poison applications using oats and zinc phosphide. These dry, open conditions reduce natural food availability, often making the treated oats a more attractive food source.

In 2025, GFP once again treated a large number of acres, exceeding the past decade's average of 9,800 acres and aligning more closely with the early 2000s, when more than 16,000 acres were treated annually. To ensure producers' needs are met, GFP again hired additional bait applicators. Workload was created through the web-based prairie dog request-for-assistance hub on the GFP website.

In 2005, the South Dakota Legislature passed legislation directing GFP to assist with prairie dog-related forage damage, with certain limitations. Generally speaking, there is a three-part test to determine whether a landowner qualifies for assistance in reducing prairie dog colony acreage.

**First**, prairie dogs must originate from public lands. This includes both state-owned or managed properties and federally owned or managed lands (with the exception of Bureau of Land Management properties, where no collaboration or buffer poisoning occurs from the property line).

**Second**, the colony size on private land must exceed 10 acres. As prairie dogs expand from public land, the colony must grow beyond 10 acres on the affected private property.

**Third**, the colony must be located within one mile of the public land from which the prairie dogs originated. Producers who meet these requirements should visit the GFP website at [gfp.sd.gov](http://gfp.sd.gov) and submit the required information. Once eligibility is confirmed, staff will contact producers who submitted a request and meet the criteria. The deadline to apply is August 15.

**Lastly**, producers who do not meet the eligibility requirements for the GFP prairie dog program can still contact GFP for technical assistance or reach out to the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources at 605-773-5559.

# GFP SEEKING ADDITIONAL

# PUBLIC ACCESS ENROLLMENT

**MARK NORTON | HUNTING ACCESS & FARM BILL COORDINATOR**

South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks (GFP) is seeking to lease additional private land for public hunting access through the Walk-In Area (WIA) and the Controlled Hunting Access Program (CHAP) to provide more quality public hunting opportunities and improve access to land-locked public land. In 2025, over 1.44 million acres of private land were enrolled in these programs by over 1,500 landowners across South Dakota.

**“One of the reasons I wanted to become a GFP Commissioner was to help my local Conservation Officer get more land enrolled in public access,” said GFP Commissioner, Dean Kirkeby. “The Walk-in Area and CREP programs have worked well for my family. One benefit that we really appreciate is that hunters know where they can go hunting on private land and it reduces the disruptions from them asking for permission to hunt during busy farming and ranching activities in the fall”.**

The WIA program annual payment rates range from less than \$1/acre to \$13/acre per year. These rates are determined by the land’s proximity to population centers, amount of undisturbed habitat, hunting opportunity provided, number of hunting seasons in the contract, and if the land provides access to otherwise inaccessible public land. Land in the WIA program is open year-round to all legal hunting by human foot traffic only. Restrictions like “No Hunting in Unharvested Crops” can be added to a WIA without a payment reduction.

There are also one-time upfront signing bonuses for multi-year WIA contracts that provide access to undisturbed habitat or priority big game hunting opportunities. New land enrolled for 10 years in WIA may also be eligible for an additional sign-up bonus from Pheasants Forever through the Public Access to Habitat (PATH) initiative.

Another type of WIA contract allows driving on harvested cropland for waterfowl decoy placement and

disabled hunters to hunt from their vehicles. These are called COOPs and work well for cropland in areas of the state that hold large concentrations of migrating waterfowl. The annual payment rate ranges from \$1.25 to \$3 per acre depending on if driving is limited to ATVs and how much noncropland undisturbed cover acres are included in the contract. Multi-year COOP contracts offer sign-up bonus payments of half the annual payment multiplied by the number of years in the contract.

The CHAP allows the landowner to limit the number of hunters that can hunt the land per day, the types of hunting that are allowed, what game species can be hunted, what seasons the land is open to hunt, and what days of the week the public can hunt it. It has a minimum annual payment of \$500 plus an additional \$20 per hunter that hunts the CHAP per day. A new CHAP bonus of \$1,000/year for up to a 5-year contract is available to landowners who put new land into CHAP that wasn’t in WIA or CHAP before. Multi-year contracts may also be eligible for a signing bonus payment.

Aquatic access opportunities are another option that can allow for added payments to landowners. If a landowner has a waterbody that contains or could contain a fishery as well as providing waterfowl or other hunting opportunities, they could qualify for an aquatic access lease. The lease base payment starts at \$500/year with increased payment opportunities for meeting certain criteria, such as access and fishery considerations. There is also an option for a multi-year longevity signing bonus payment.

If you would like to learn more about leasing your land to GFP for public hunting and fishing access in 2026 through the WIA, CHAP, or Aquatic Access, please contact your local conservation officer, private lands habitat biologist, or aquatic habitat and access biologist listed on page 14 and 15.

# SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH & PARKS' PRIVATE LANDS FOOD PLOT PROGRAM

**RYAN WENDINGER | HABITAT PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR**

Spring is the perfect time for landowners to partner with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) to enhance wildlife habitat on private lands. Through the Food Plot Program, participating landowners can establish high quality food sources that support pheasants, deer, and a variety of other wildlife year round.

For landowners with a signed 2026 food plot contract, corn, sorghum, Brood Mix, and Big Game Deer Mix seed should start to be available for pickup in April. Once seed arrives and is available, GFP staff will be in contact. GFP is also accepting new enrollments so if you don't have a 2026 contract, please reach out to your local biologist or officer which can be found on pages 14 and 15 if you're interested. The program offers flexible plot options, seed assistance, and technical guidance to fit your operation and habitat goals as well as an annual payment of \$20 per acre or \$80/acre if the food plot is enrolled in a public hunting access program.

Together, we can improve habitat, support wildlife populations, and strengthen South Dakota's outdoor heritage.



## WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

**JOHN KANTA | TERRESTRIAL SECTION CHIEF**

The GFP Commission recently adopted the wildlife damage management (WDM) plan. This plan will replace the previous plan that was developed in 2019. This plan was developed after the Governor's office at the time initiated a review of the wildlife damage management program in South Dakota. The review spurred program enhancements, including increased staff, improved equipment, and a strategic plan focused on regional administration, higher efficiency, and better communication to address livestock losses, with high customer satisfaction. The new plan has four goals:

**GOAL 1:** Support landowners in minimizing damage to livestock, crops, and property by delivering practical and responsive wildlife damage management services.

**GOAL 2:** Promote strong landowner and stakeholder relations through effective communication.

**GOAL 3:** Deliver excellent customer service and maintain program transparency.

**GOAL 4:** Strengthen and expand partnerships with landowners to promote habitat enhancement and increase public hunting access on private lands.

The success of the WDM program relies heavily on 28 wildlife damage specialists and ensuring they have adequate training and resources to address request for services from landowners. This plan outlines the tools, resources and programs available to make staff successful.

**Find your local WDS on page 15.**

# SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH AND PARKS

## PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT PROGRAM

The goal of GFP's Private Lands Habitat Program is to help landowners establish, restore, or manage habitat on private land to enhance reproduction, recruitment, and survival of wildlife. Several program options are available to support management practices that emphasize healthy working grasslands. All projects are subject to approval by a GFP private lands habitat biologist. Cooperators must allow some amount of reasonable public hunting.

### FOOD PLOTS

- » Food plots must remain unharvested/standing through March 15.
- » Annual payment of \$20 per acre for food plot acres (\$80/acre for food plots enrolled in a public hunting access program).
- » Free food plot seed is available from GFP each spring (corn, sorghum, brood mix, big game mix).
- » Maximum of 20 acres per quarter section and unlimited total acres per landowner.

### WOODY HABITAT

- » Shelterbelt plantings
- » Shelterbelt renovations
- » Riparian shrub clump plantings
- » Hardwood release program

### GRASSLAND ESTABLISHMENT

- » Native grass and forb seed mixes are the priority and plantings must be at least 10 acres.
- » Landowners are reimbursed 100 percent up to a maximum of \$125/acre for seed costs.
- » Cost-share is NOT available on CRP or WRP plantings or hay land.
- » Additional incentives available if plantings are enrolled into public hunting access program.

### BROOD/POLLINATOR PLOTS

- » Designed to provide high-quality, native perennial habitat for broods and pollinators.
- » Landowners are reimbursed 100 percent up to a maximum of \$150/acre for seed costs.
- » Individual plantings must be a minimum of 2 acres and a maximum of 9 acres.

### GRASSLAND/GRAZING MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- » To enhance grazing management opportunities and plant community health on working grasslands
- » Cost-shared practices include:
  - Perimeter and cross fence
  - Woven-wire fence replacement in pronghorn range (wildlife friendly fence design)
  - Water development - stock tanks, pipeline, rural water hook-ups, wells, solar pump units
  - Multi-purpose stock/wildlife impoundments
  - Wetland restorations
  - Grassland establishment
  - Riparian pastures
  - Habitat exclusion fencing

### RIPARIAN HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

- » One-time rental payment of 75 percent per year of the county NASS rate for pasture (10-year contract).
- » Cost share livestock exclusion and alternative water sources.
- » Minimum width 35 feet and maximum width of 240 feet.

## CONTACT A GFP PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT BIOLOGIST

### ABERDEEN

Tom Mitzel | 605.626.3341

### BELLE FOURCHE

Michael Peyton | 605.391.1575

### BROOKINGS

Will Gallman | 704.689.9091

### CHAMBERLAIN

Jessica Thiry | 605.682.8476

### CUSTER

Tom Miklos | 605.416.4080

### FORT PIERRE

John Mayrose | 605.222.0867

### HOT SPRINGS

Ben Pucket | 605.786.8144

### MITCHELL

Alex Elias | 605.350.1725

### MOBRIDGE

Kody Conlon | 605.848.0980

### TYNDALL

Todd Crownover | 605.464.0647

### WATERTOWN

Dan Nelson | 605.303.4805

### WEBSTER

Calvin Meyer | 605.265.3510



Learn more: [habitat.sd.gov](http://habitat.sd.gov)



# PRIVATE LAND HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAMS

## WALK-IN AREA PROGRAM (WIA)

Leases hunting rights on private land for unlimited public foot traffic hunting. Annual payments range from less than a \$1 to \$13/acre depending on size, location in the state, habitat condition, and hunting opportunities. Multi-year contracts are eligible for signing bonuses if they provide priority big game hunting opportunity or access to habitat that isn't hayed or grazed in most years. Signing bonuses are up to \$5 or \$10 per acre per year the land is enrolled depending on your location.

## CONTROLLED HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAM (CHAP)

Leases public hunting rights on private land according to the limits the landowners sets. Limits may include the number of hunters per day, the type of game that can be hunted, the type of take (ex. Archery only), and the dates that it is open to hunting. Landowners manage hunter access via direct contact, self-service check-in box, or through an on-line reservation system on the GFP website. Annual payment is equal to a base payment of \$500 plus \$20/hunter that hunts the property. Multi-year contracts are eligible for a signing bonus based on the hunting opportunity that is provided. New contracts are eligible for \$1,000/year signing bonus for up to a 5 year contract.

## CO-OP WIA HUNTING ACCESS

Leases same hunting rights as a Walk-in Area, but also allows hunters to drive on harvested cropland to place and retrieve waterfowl decoys and allows disabled hunter permit holders to drive on harvested cropland and hunt from their vehicle. No hunting is allowed while farm machinery is working in the field. Annual payments range from \$1.25 to \$3/acre depending on if driving is restricted to ATV/UTVs and the amount of habitat that isn't hayed or grazed in most years. Multi-year contracts are eligible for a signing bonus of half the annual payment times the number of years in the contract.

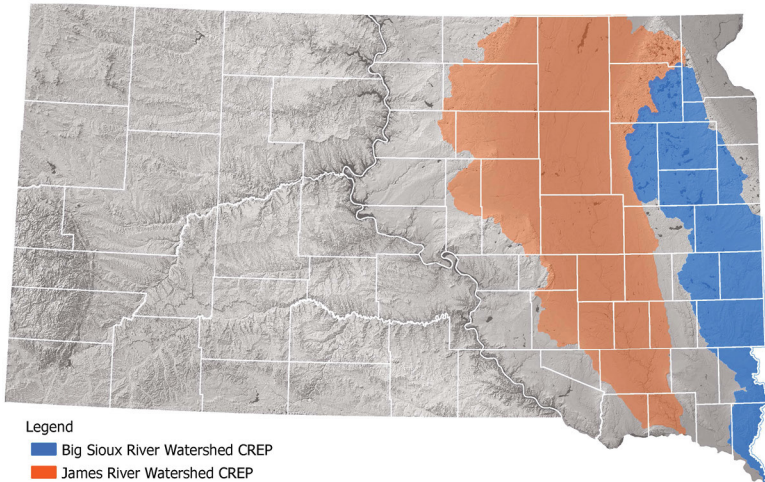
*State statutes (SDCL 20-9-12 through SDCL 20-9-18) protect landowners who enroll in these programs from certain liability.*



**Find contact information for your local Private Lands Habitat Biologist on page 14 to learn more about these programs.**

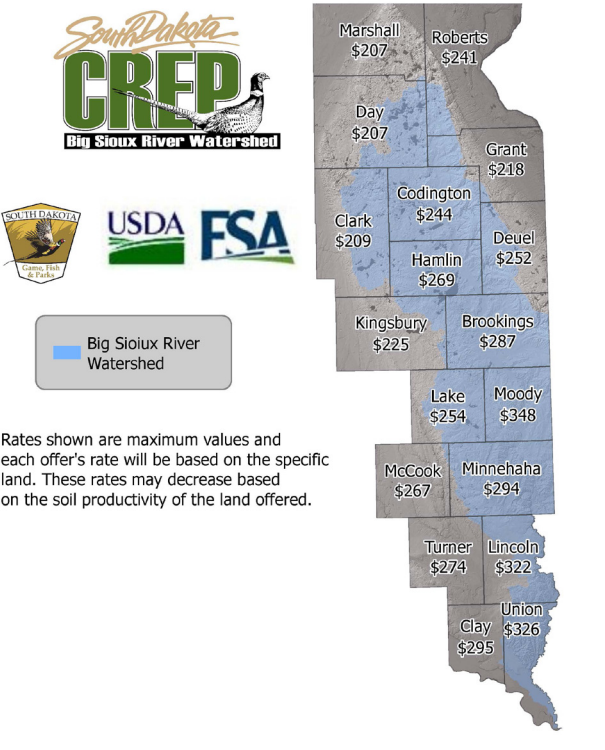
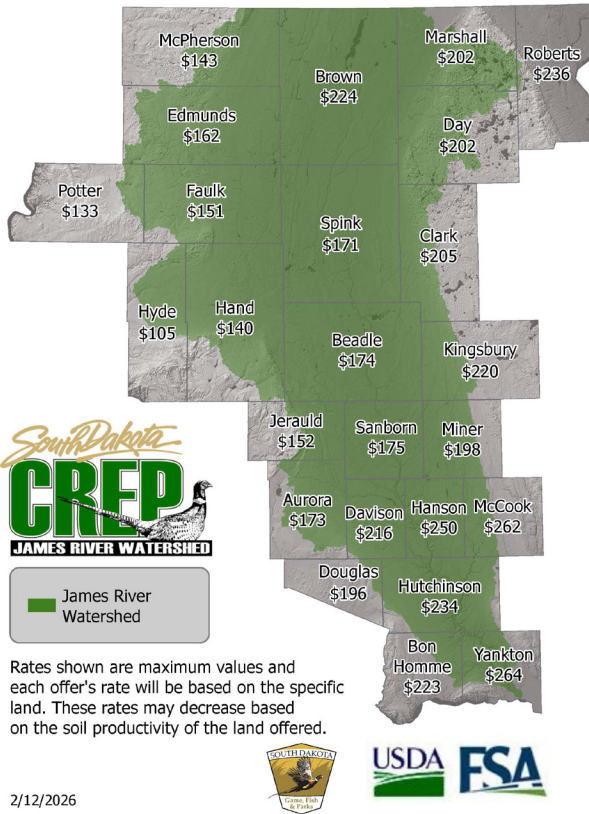
# ENROLL YOUR LAND

IN THE CONSERVATION RESERVE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM TODAY!



**Create wildlife habitat, improve water quality, increase livestock forage resources, and provide public hunting and fishing access on your land through enrollment in CREP in the Big Sioux River Watershed or the James River Watershed. Participants receive additional annual rental payments from GFP on top of the annual CRP rental payments. Contact a GFP Private Lands Habitat Biologist to learn more.**

**CREP County Average Rental Rate/Acre Total of Federal CRP and GFP CREP Payments**



# PRESCRIBED FIRE OPPORTUNITIES

**MARK OHM | REGIONAL SUPERVISOR**

On March 9, 2026, Governor Rhoden signed HB 1001 into law. This new statute gives state agencies the ability to allow private landowners who border state properties along the Missouri River to include those properties in prescribed fires to control woody encroachment.

Any landowner wishing to include state property in their burn plan must request permission from the agency who owns the property. Game, Fish and Parks has developed a simple request form that includes all necessary pieces of information for our agency to approve such a request.

Request forms can be found under the Landowner section of the GFP website or by contacting Mark Ohm at [mark.ohm@state.sd.us](mailto:mark.ohm@state.sd.us) or 605.734.4528 to request a copy.

# ELK MANAGEMENT

**MIKE KLOSOWSKI | REGIONAL SUPERVISOR**

Few experiences match the thrill of hearing a bull elk bugle on a crisp fall morning. This iconic sound marks the beginning of the elk rut, when mature bulls compete for breeding rights and defend cows from rival “satellite” bulls. For many South Dakotans, seeing or hunting elk is a rare and highly valued opportunity, with some hunters waiting nearly a quarter century to draw the coveted tag through the Game, Fish & Parks (GFP) licensing system.

Elk were once nearly lost from South Dakota due to unregulated hunting in the late 1800s. Thanks to successful reintroduction efforts, the state now supports a thriving population. However, maintaining that success requires careful management, as growing elk numbers can create real challenges—particularly for agricultural producers.

One of the most important aspects of elk management today is assisting landowners who experience crop and forage losses due to elk. In parts of western South Dakota, elk graze on haylands and agricultural fields, creating financial strain for producers. GFP has developed targeted programs such as elk food plots and hayland assistance designed to keep elk away from private lands and reduce damage. In 2024, GFP spent nearly half a million dollars in assisting landowners with elk depredation issues. These efforts are critical for supporting landowners, and also for maintaining tolerance for elk on the landscape.

To guide broader management decisions, GFP works with a stakeholder group of landowners, hunters, and conservation leaders. In the Black Hills, elk populations are managed within an objective range of 6,000–8,000 animals, depending on habitat conditions.

GFP continues working to balance healthy elk populations with the needs of landowners, hunters, and the public—ensuring elk remains a valued part of South Dakota’s landscape for generations to come.

# SOUTH DAKOTA RIPARIAN BUFFER INITIATIVE (RBI)

TANNER CLAUSEN | AG AND NATURAL RESOURCES (DANR)

The Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources' (DANR) Riparian Buffer Initiative works to improve water quality by increasing the use of riparian buffers and animal waste management systems (AWMS) on waterbodies across South Dakota. Initially started in 2021, the initiative continues to build momentum both on the ground and with policy makers and, to date, more than \$18 million has been dedicated to the program.

Riparian buffers, vegetated areas adjacent to streams, lakes and other waterbodies, improve water quality by filtering pollutants, capturing nutrients before they enter waterways, and stabilize shorelines which reduce erosion from runoff and wind and wave action. They also protect overall ecological health of aquatic resources. Riparian buffers are beneficial to not only fish and wildlife populations but also agricultural production through additional forage for livestock and an increased return on investment when installed on marginal cropland acres.

Eligible buffers must be 50–120 feet wide, maintain at least four inches of cover, and cannot be mowed or harvested between May 1–August 1. Grazing is restricted between May 1–September 30. Producers enrolled in RBI receive a direct payment of 250% of the county National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) rental rate to install and maintain buffers. RBI cost-share assistance includes 75% for alternative water development, 100% of fencing material to exclude cattle from enrolled pasture, and 100% for grass seed.

DANR is also partnering with the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks to provide an additional incentive for buffers enrolled in CRP or CREP, with payments equal to 120% of the federal weighted average soil rental rate. For example, if the CRP weighted average soil rental rate is \$100/acre for a 10-year contract, CREP would add another \$31-34/acre to that rental rate for public hunting & fishing access and RBI would add a \$1,200/acre one-time payment for a total combined average rental rate of \$251-254/ac on the buffer acreage. CRP offers additional incentives for water quality practices, so this example could end up averaging over \$300/ac/year.

The AWMS program provides cost-share for systems that help small and medium sized animal feeding operations (AFOs) manage waste. Systems must meet Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) specifications



September 1, 2023



September 1, 2024

*Photos by: Prairie Coteau Watershed Project taken on Blue Dog Lake*

and include a comprehensive nutrient management plan. Priority is given to operations within one mile of a qualifying stream or lake, though others may be considered. Producers must work with NRCS for AWMS construction and design. Payments are \$250 per animal unit, up to \$250,000 per system, and cost-share may also support feedlot relocation and reclamation when necessary to improve water quality.

If you would like more information about the South Dakota Riparian Buffer Initiative, please visit: [danr.sd.gov/Conservation/WatershedProtection/RiparianBuffer.aspx](https://danr.sd.gov/Conservation/WatershedProtection/RiparianBuffer.aspx)

Nathan Andersen: 605-394-683 | Tanner Clausen: 605-362-3559

# LANDOWNERS CAN PARTICIPATE!

## NEW COYOTE BOUNTY PROGRAM

**JACQUIE ERMER** | REGIONAL WILDLIFE SUPERVISOR

On March 6, 2026, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission passed a resolution to create two separate bounty related programs for 2026.

The Youth Trapping Recruitment Program focuses on increasing youth trapping participation while also helping to reduce localized populations of nest predators during the primary nesting season. This program opened for South Dakota youth age 17 and under on March 1 and will run through July 1, 2026, unless the \$200,000 limit is reached first. Eligible tails from raccoon, striped skunk, badger, opossum, and red fox will be worth \$10. Youth under the age of 18 do not need a license to participate.

The Coyote Bounty Program was also implemented to increase participation in youth trapping but also to assist with reducing livestock depredation and enhancing deer and antelope fawn survival during peak parturition season. The Coyote Bounty Program opened for all South Dakota residents on April 1 and will run through July 1, 2026, unless the \$300,000 limit is reached first. Eligible coyote tails harvested by participants will be worth \$30.

Landowners harvesting coyotes from their own land and youth under the age of 18 are not required to have a license to participate in

the coyote bounty program. All other participants or if harvesting coyotes from land other than your own, one of the following valid licenses to hunt or trap coyotes is required to participate: resident predator/varmint license, license to take fur-bearing animals, resident small game license, resident turkey license, resident big game license, or a resident youth small game license.

"Controlling the coyote population is critical for both our agricultural industry and wildlife populations," stated Department Secretary Kevin Robling. "The newly created Coyote Bounty Program will assist in the management of these predators to help protect newborn calves and lambs for agricultural producers and enhance fawn survival for deer and antelope."

Individuals wishing to participate in either of these programs may submit tails to their local GFP office during designated tail turn in opportunities. A list of dates and sites can be found at [gfp.sd.gov/bounty-program/](https://gfp.sd.gov/bounty-program/). Households are eligible to submit up to \$590 worth of tails in each program.

Both the Youth Trapping Recruitment Program and the Coyote Bounty Program will continue to focus on getting youth and their families outdoors.

# NONRESIDENT EAST RIVER LANDOWNER-OWN LAND DEER LICENSES

**CHAD SWITZER** | WILDLIFE DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Landowners play a vital role in providing wildlife habitat, hunting access, and for continuing our outdoor heritage here in South Dakota. The timing for a drawing process for some deer licenses has changed. In 2026, the first drawing for the Nonresident East River Landowner-Own Land Deer has been moved from March to September.

Qualifying nonresident landowners and "owner/ operators," and any "immediate family" living at home, who have not been issued a big game license that permits the harvest of a buck during the East River Deer season are eligible to apply for a Nonresident East River Landowner Own Land license to hunt their own land. There are 250 total licenses available. Applicants must choose between

an "any deer" or an "any deer and any antlerless deer" license in their application. The first application period is September 3 – 24, 2026, with draw results available by October 1, 2026.

Another option for nonresident landowners is the Landowner Free Antlerless Whitetail Deer Licenses. These licenses are only made available in certain open units to any qualifying landowner within the East River Deer season. Nonresidents must own and operate, for "agricultural purposes" at least 160 contiguous acres for East River Deer to qualify. These licenses are only valid on land owned/operated by the qualifying licensee. The "immediate family" of a qualifying applicant are also eligible are limited to a maximum of two license per farm/ranch unit.

# DEER LOSS IN LATE SUMMER: UNDERSTANDING EPIZOOTIC HEMORRHAGIC DISEASE (EHD) AND BLUETONGUE IN SOUTH DAKOTA

BYRON BUCKLEY, PH.D. | SENIOR WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

As the South Dakota prairies transition from the lush greens of June to the sun-scorched golds of August, a quiet predator can begin to stir. It doesn't hunt with teeth or claws, but on the wings of a microscopic foe. For landowners and hunters alike, the sight of a magnificent white-tailed buck found dead near a dugout is a heartbreaking hallmark of Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) and Bluetongue, commonly combined due to their similarities and called hemorrhagic disease (HD).

## A NEW CHALLENGE FOR THE NORTHERN PLAINS

In the grand timeline of wildlife biology, these diseases are relatively “new” arrivals to the state of South Dakota. Unlike deer in the Southeastern U.S., which have lived alongside these viruses for generations and developed high survival rates, our local herds possess a more “naive” immune system.

In the South, these diseases are endemic—meaning it is always present—and the deer there have adapted

to it. In South Dakota, however, the lack of historical exposure means the impact on survival is often more drastic. While some of our deer do survive and can pass on innate immunities to their fawns, building that kind of population-level resilience takes significant time.

## BY THE NUMBERS: TRACKING THE TOLL

While all ruminants are susceptible to HD viruses (Figure 1), white-tailed deer are highly susceptible to these viruses because they inhabit similar areas where the biting midges occur. The severity of these outbreaks can be a rollercoaster, shifting wildly with environmental conditions from year to year (Figure 2). The harder-hit areas are typically centered in the wetter southeast parts of the state, where moisture and muddy conditions create the perfect nursery for the biting midges that carry the virus (Figure 3).

## MANAGEMENT: WORKING WITH NATURE AND GFP

It is natural to want to intervene, but the hard truth is that there is no economically viable way to control HD

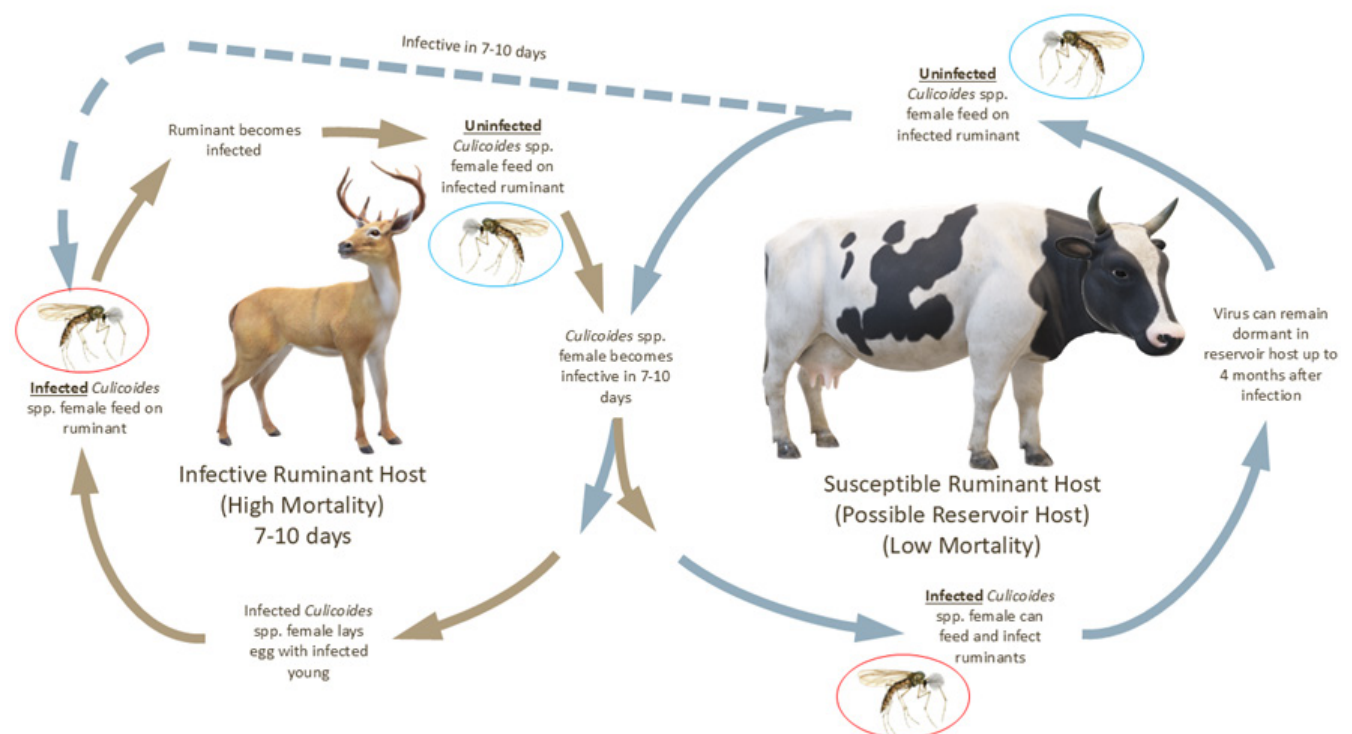


Figure 1. Hemorrhagic disease life cycle

## Hemorrhagic Disease Reports South Dakota 2009-2025

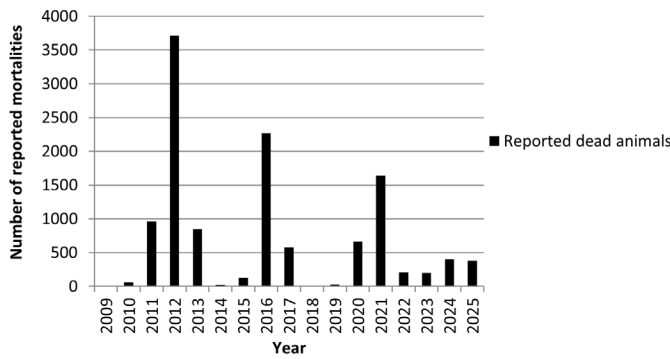


Figure 2. Individual mortality reports across South Dakota from 2009 – 2025.

across the vast South Dakota landscape due to the random nature of the virus. Currently, there is no “silver bullet” spray or vaccine for a wild herd for our predominant serotypes of these viruses (EHDV-1, EHDV-2, and BTV). In addition, attempting to “treat” an area that has midges does not guarantee that all water sources within an area do not house virus-infected midges, nor prevent them from moving between water sources.

Instead, the most powerful tool in a landowner’s arsenal is habitat resilience. By ensuring your land provides high-quality food, clean water access, and robust cover, you are giving the surviving deer the best possible chance to recover and pass those immune genes to the next generation.

An additional management option involves providing information on deer mortalities to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) reach out to a local wildlife biologist or conservation office in your area. Biologists at GFP incorporate this information into their population models and can alter tag allocations to ensure that deer populations remain healthy and maximize

the likelihood of rebound after these outbreaks. Deer populations generally recover in a few years after an HD outbreak.

### THE FROST IS COMING

The peak of the “outbreak” usually mirrors the peak of the heat. However, there is a definitive finish line. These viruses rely entirely on biting midges for transport, and those tiny insects cannot survive the cold. The first hard freeze of autumn acts as a biological “reset button”, killing the midges and bringing an immediate halt to new infections.

Until that frost arrives, we must continue to be good stewards of the landscape, ensuring that our deer herds have the habitat they need to slowly build the immunity required for the future.

## South Dakota EHDV/BTV 2023-2025

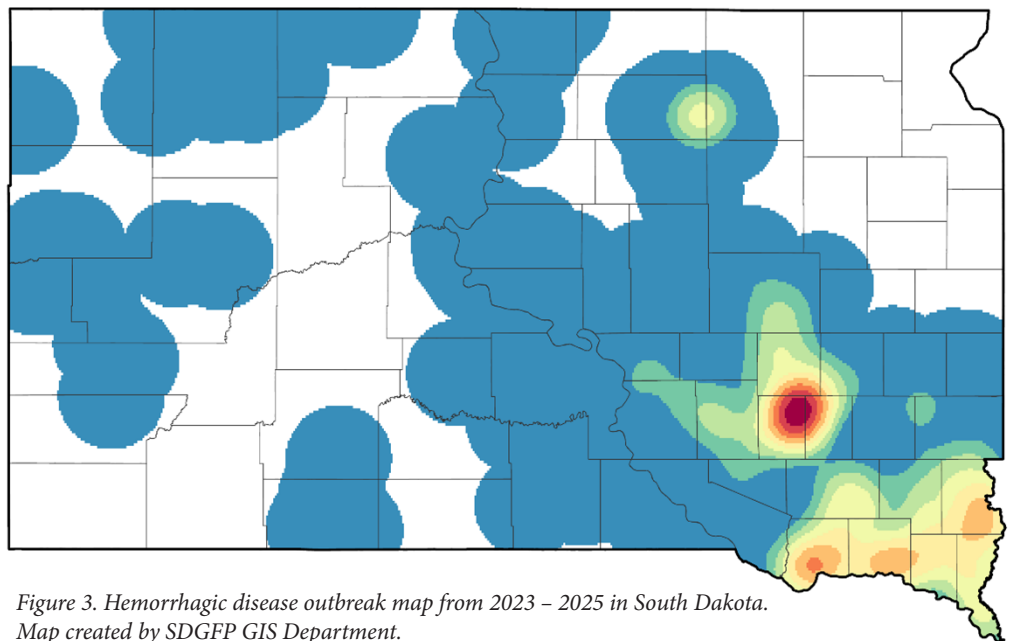
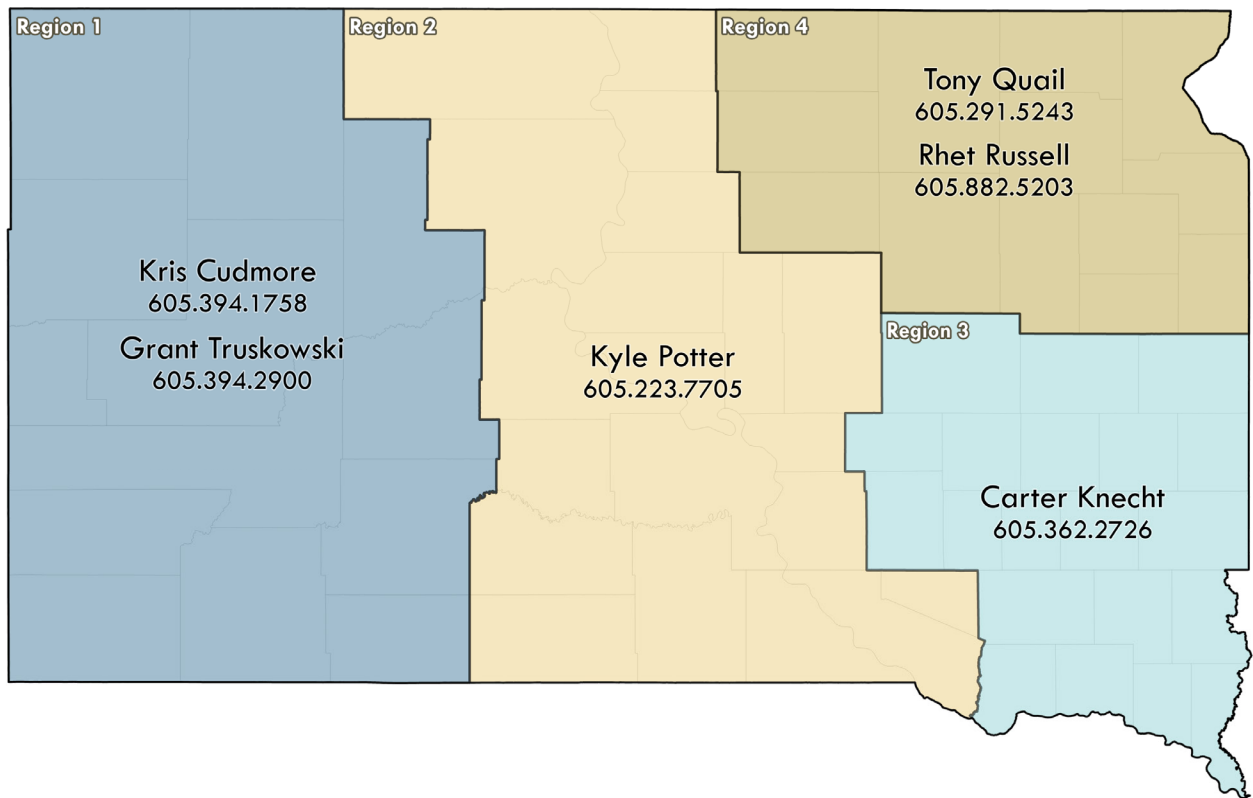


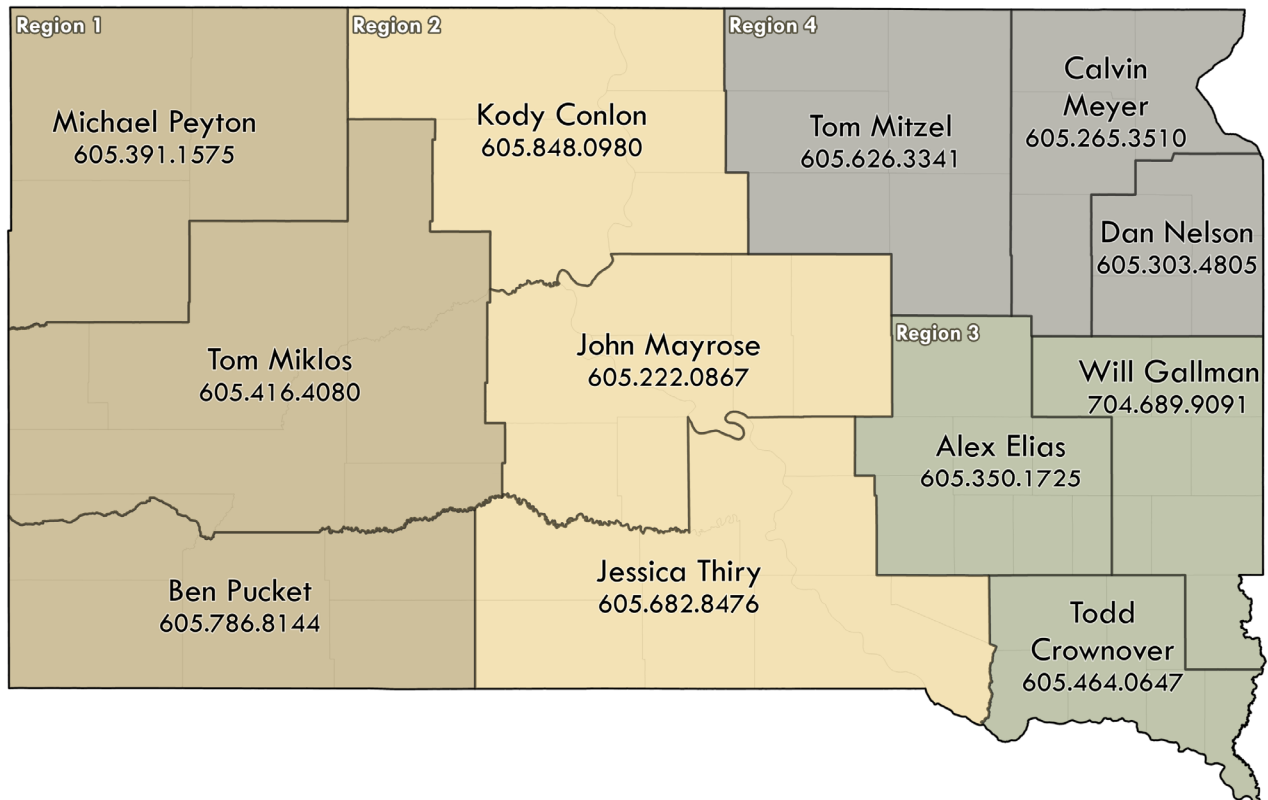
Figure 3. Hemorrhagic disease outbreak map from 2023 – 2025 in South Dakota. Map created by SDGFP GIS Department.



## AQUATIC HABITAT AND ACCESS BIOLOGISTS SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH & PARKS



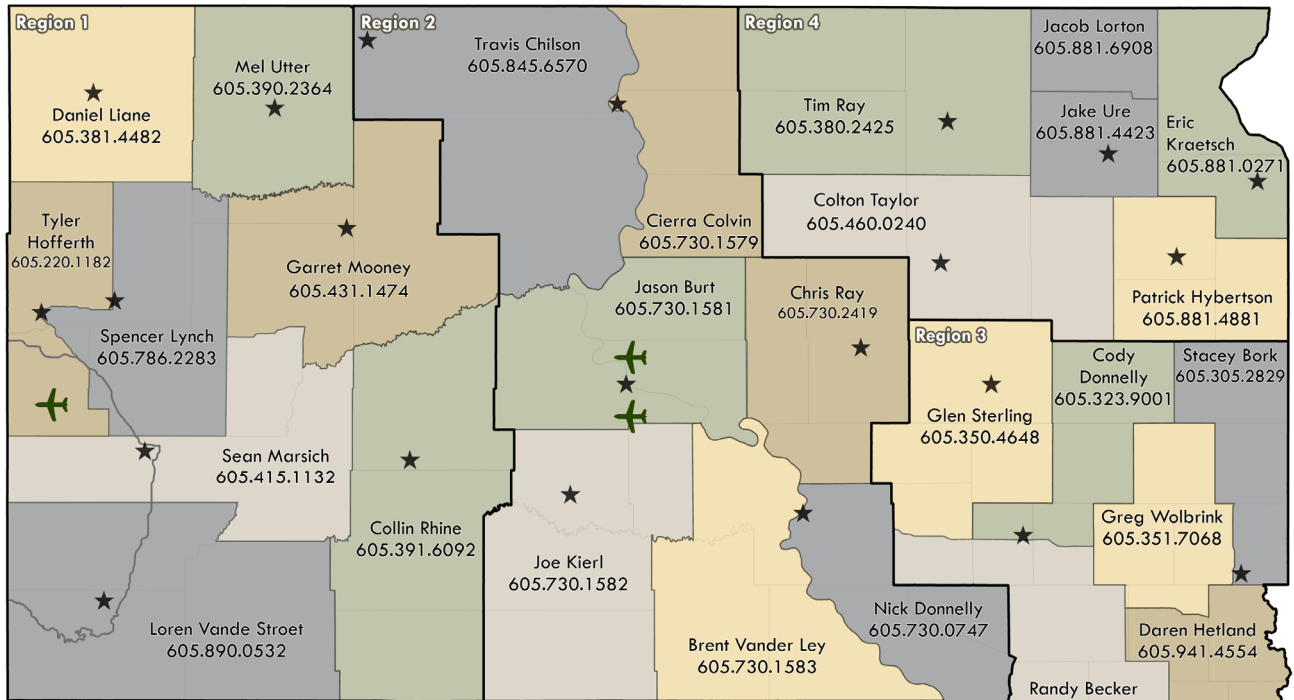
## PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT AND ACCESS BIOLOGISTS SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH & PARKS





# WILDLIFE DAMAGE SPECIALISTS

## SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH & PARKS



**Regional Program Managers**

- 1 - Vacant
- 2 - Tyler Bartels, 402.921.0948
- 3 - Brad Baumgartner, 605.941.1578
- 4 - Nick Rossman, 605.881.8404

**Regional Terrestrial Resource Supervisors**

- 1 - Trenton Haffley, 320.224.3572
- 2 - Nathan Baker, 605.280.1468
- 3 - Julie Lindstrom, 605.214.1779
- 4 - Dan Sternhagen, 605.695.3718

**Regional Supervisors**

- 1 - Mike Klosowski, 605.880.1175
- 2 - Mark Ohm, 605.680.4389
- 3 - Kip Rounds, 605.222.5503
- 4 - Jacquie Ermer, 605.265.0140

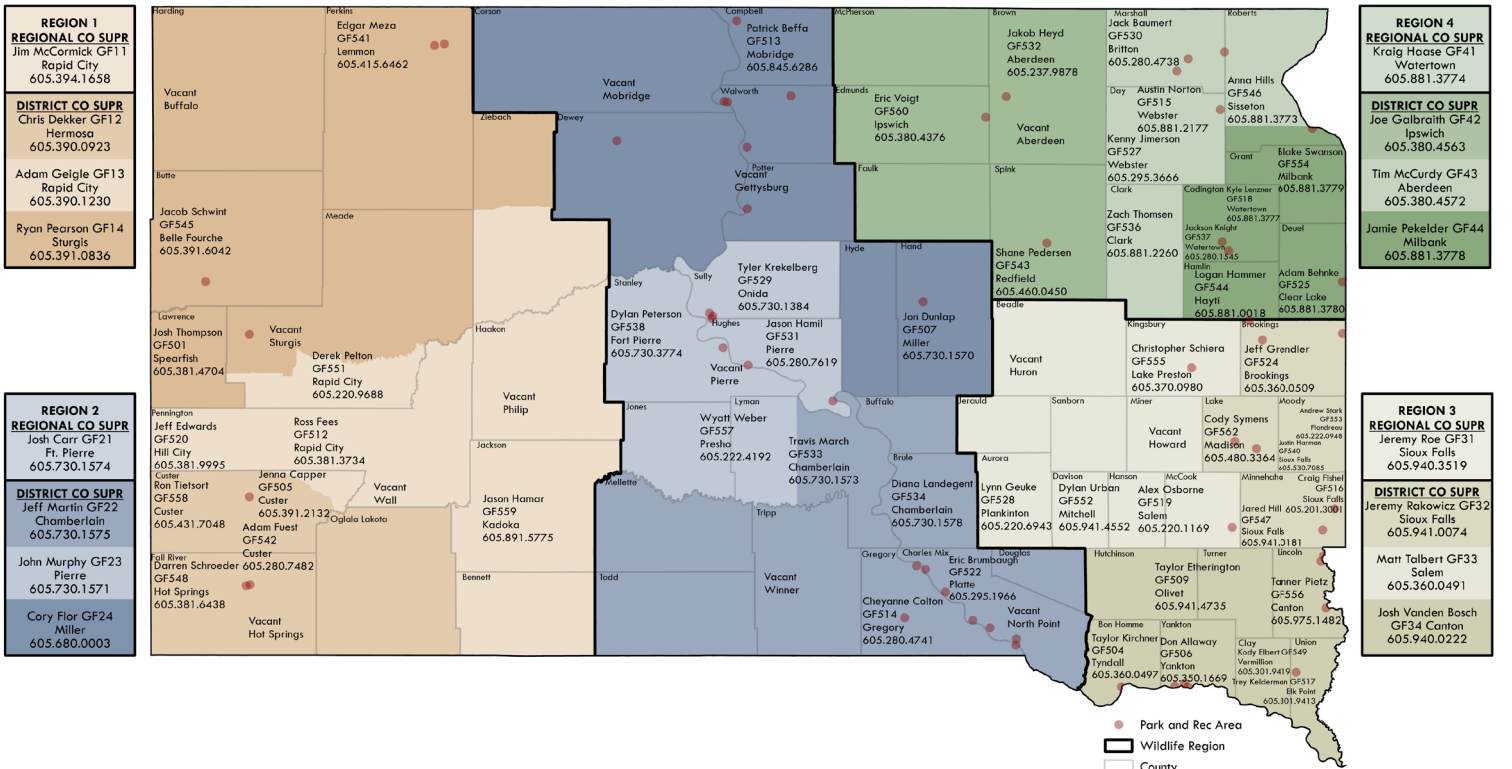
- ★ WDS duty station location
- ✈ USDA-W.S Plane Location

Houndsman & Black Hills  
Wildlife Damage Specialist  
Chad Sebade, 605.381.9996



# LAW ENFORCEMENT

## SOUTH DAKOTA GAME, FISH & PARKS



# LANDOWNERS MATTER

GAME, FISH AND PARKS | 523 EAST CAPITOL AVE | PIERRE, SD 57501



TO MAKE CHANGES TO YOUR ADDRESS FOR THIS PUBLICATION,  
PLEASE EMAIL [ALLIE.ELLINGSON@STATE.SD.US](mailto:ALLIE.ELLINGSON@STATE.SD.US)

*South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks serves and connects people and families to the outdoors  
through effective management of our state's parks, fisheries, and wildlife resources.*

## THANK YOU, LANDOWNERS!

Thanks to you, 1.6 million acres of private land are now open  
for public hunting in South Dakota.

