

Northeast District Meeting
11/5/2024
Grove Lake Wildlife Management Area

Roll Call/Introductions:

Dale Davis, Law Enforcement Supervisor

Jeff Schuckman, Fisheries, Norfolk

Scott Wessel, Wildlife, Norfolk

Holly Schacht, Wildlife, Grove Lake WMA

Jeff Borchers, Wildlife, George Syas WMA

Brady Peterson, Parks, Ponca SP

Joe Cassidy, Fisheries, Grove Trout Station

Frank Novotny, Fisheries, Grove Trout Station

Landon Smith, Fisheries, Grove Trout Station

Becca Munter, Fisheries, Norfolk

Brian Gerken, Wildlife, Myrtle Hall WMA

Jim Conn, Wildlife/PF, Myrtle Hall WMA

Phil Chvala, Fisheries, Norfolk

Cassidy Wessel, Wildlife, Bloomfield

Jon Voelker, Parks, Lewis & Clark SRA

Josh Kounovsky, Wildlife, Grove Lake WMA

Leslie Donner, Parks, Lewis & Clark SRA

Jonathan Andreasen, Law Enforcement, Madison/Pierce/Stanton counties

Trevor Stahlecker, Law Enforcement, Antelope/Pierce/Knox counties

Kyle Schumacher, Wildlife, Grove Lake WMA

Jason Thiele, Wildlife, Norfolk

Lucas Negus, Wildlife, Norfolk

Mitch Johnson, Law Enforcement, Knox/Cedar counties

Russ Hamer, Wildlife, Oak Valley WMA

Grant Wiemer, Wildlife, Oak Valley WMA

Hanna Barnes, NPLT, Ponca SP

Annette Deering, Wildlife, Bassett

Jacob Polk, Wildlife, Bassett

Kelly Corman, Wildlife, Bassett

Collin Spence, Wildlife, Valentine

Individual updates were given by staff present. For ease of readability, reports are grouped by division.

Law Enforcement

Mitch Johnson

- Officers have been receiving a lot of reports of EHD in deer. The Northeast district seems to be affected the worst.

Trevor Stahlecker

- Reports of sick/dead deer have been frequent.
- Spotlighting complaints have been much higher this year.

Dale Davis

- Several officers were involved in the search for the missing boy in the Crofton area.
- The Law Enforcement Division recently hired a couple of full-time investigators.
- Turnover in the division has been significant, with more than half of current officers having under five years of experience. More retirements are coming in the next few years.

Parks

Brady Peterson, Ponca SP

- Thanks to everyone who helped with the Expo.
- Basements of some of the mini-lodges in the park will be remodeled to add two more bedrooms.
- The “Oldsen addition” is being fenced. This 150-acre property east of the town of Ponca was donated to the Game and Parks Foundation by Craig and Heather Oldsen to provide hunting opportunities for youth and disabled veterans as well as outdoor education opportunities.
- About 20 vehicles were at the North Addition on opening day of pheasant season. A few hunters had limited out, but overall hunter success was low.
- The Ponca Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 14.
- The park will be hiring a new maintenance specialist and event coordinator.

Tyler Wulf, Northeast Region Superintendent (report provided by Brady)

- The reservation system for campgrounds and cabins is up for replacement. Two new systems are being demoed to compare with the existing system. The new contract will start in July.
- The STAR WARS project for Niobrara is being scaled back. The group lodge at Niobrara SP is not going to be built, but a conference space is still planned if a site can be identified.

Jon Voelker, Lewis & Clark SRA

- The Weigand Marina STAR WARS project is essentially at a standstill. A meeting was held with the Army Corps of Engineers in May, but no progress has been made since then. There is no timeline for completion.
- Eight new electrical campsites will be installed.
- The SRA has an opening for a temporary supervisor.

Fisheries

Jeff Schuckman, Norfolk

- The Grove Lake fishing access project is complete. There is a new north boat ramp, an updated south ramp, and a new floating fishing pier.
- Sediment was removed from the basin Gracie Creek pond at Calamus SRA. The Department of Transportation took some of the spoil. The remaining spoil area has been seeded and mulched. Weeds were sprayed on the dike to allow better fishing access.
- Fall fish surveys are complete. Walleye and sauger recruitment and growth rates in Lewis & Clark Lake look very good.
- Stockings of “advanced” walleyes in four different lakes have been doing well.
- Fisheries is using a new program for data analysis. All data are now being collected electronically on tablets.
- Paddlefish snagging season was very poor, although archery success was good. Conversations with the Army Corps of Engineers about changing their release schedule during snagging season have been unsuccessful.
- As part of the STAR WARS project, it has been decided that the boat ramps at Niobrara will remain primitive, but a new boat ramp is planned at Verdel Landing.

Joe Cassidy, Grove Trout Station

- Lake Ogallala was stocked with 15,000 cutbow trout (rainbow x cutthroat hybrid) in October. This was the first stocking of cutbows in the state. Another 10,000 will be stocked in spring and more in fall 2025. Some of the fish are electronically marked to study their movements. Colorado has seen good success stocking this hybrid.
- Fisheries has released a survey to get input from anglers on their opinions about put-and-take trout stockings. Consideration is being given to stocking smaller numbers of larger trout with a possible reduction in bag limit.
- During this fall’s trout stockings, a few “jumbo” fish approaching 3 lb. were included.
- Ponds at the station will be cleaned soon and staff will be doing disease inspections. New fish are arriving this week.

Wildlife

Jeff Borchers, Management Section, George Syas WMA

- The pheasant releases for the youth season were popular. Many people came both Saturday and Sunday.
- Hunters harvested a decent number of quail at Syas WMA and wild pheasants at Wilkinson WMA. Water is still being pumped at Wilkinson. Hunters harvested a few teal during the early season but other waterfowl haven't pushed through in numbers yet.
- Pheasants will be released again around Thanksgiving.

Jim Conn, Management Section/PF, Myrtle Hall WMA

- Jim helped check pheasant hunters at Pressey WMA.
- The current workload involves fire break preparation and fall spraying. Cover crop plantings mostly failed due to the drought conditions.

Scott Wessel, Partners Section, Norfolk

- A Greater Prairie-Chicken research project involving researchers from the Nebraska and Kansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units is planned to begin in spring 2025. There will be three study areas in Nebraska (two in the Northeast district and one in the Southwest) and two sites in Kansas. Study areas are still being determined but will likely be in the eastern Sandhills and in Knox/Cedar/Dixon counties. About 30 GPS collars will be deployed on hens in each study area. Assistance from NGPC staff with scouting leks, trapping birds, etc. will likely be needed.
- Several very large tree removal projects are underway in Cherry County, including about 62,000 acres on a private ranch as well as portions of Merritt Reservoir WMA, the Valentine NWR, and the McKelvie National Forest.

Cassidy Wessel, Partners Section

- Brady Pike recently started in the fire ecologist partner position with the Santee Sioux Nation. He has been mostly working with the fuels reduction team on tree cutting projects.
- Interviews for the Verdigris-Bazile BUL coordinating biologist position will be held later this month. The position will be housed at the NRCS office in Bloomfield.
- Drought conditions have put a pause on burning, and many planned fall burns may not occur. The workload for spring could be substantial.
- A basic prescribed fire workshop will be held in O'Neill on January 28.
- Cassidy attended process-based stream restoration workshop in Wyoming in October, with a focus on prairie streams. Much remains to be learned.
- A new "America the Beautiful Challenge" grant proposal has been submitted to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. This proposal is focused on the Missouri River.

Kelly Corman, Management Section, Bassett

- Due to drought conditions, machine work has been limited to early mornings.
- A burn is planned at South Pine this fall if conditions allow after deer season.
- Nonresident permit caps have been met in some units.
- There was a report of a possible feral hog on a game camera in the area. More cameras have been deployed next to bait stations, but no further evidence has been produced.

Collin Spence, RAI Section, Valentine

- Collin started work as a mountain lion biologist in late August.
- Mountain lion scat surveys were conducted earlier this year. Results of DNA testing have not yet come from the lab, but they should help get better population estimates.
- There should be more opportunities for lion trapping/collaring after the firearm deer season closes.

Jacob Polk, Management Section, Bassett

- Some complaints of elk damage have been coming in since corn harvest started. Most landowners are not asking for depredation permits but would like to be added to the elk management zone.
- Jacob has been doing some drone flights to survey for damage.

Russ Hamer, Management Section, Oak Valley WMA

- Russ is part of a committee tasked with redefining the novice hunter orders. There has been high demand to add a special rifle deer hunt outside of the regular November firearm season, and several locations have been identified for a possible hunt. However, this proposal has received significant pushback as well, and it is hoped to operate within the existing season and permit structure. Another consideration would be to incorporate novice deer hunts with the depredation season orders. Please contact Russ if you have any input.

Hanna Barnes, NPLT, Ponca SP

- Noxious weed control season is wrapping up and now it is time to prepare fire breaks.
- Fall spraying of smooth brome is planned at Ponca SP and Niobrara SP.
- A small population of Caucasian bluestem was found at Ponca SP. The plan is to dig up the plants and burn them soon.
- Woodland burns are being considered in the Wiseman WMA area.
- An oak woodland workshop for women is being planned at Ponca SP in spring 2025. Contact Hanna if you know of students, conservation professionals, or landowners who might be interested in attending. Mentors are also needed.

Josh Kounovsky, Management Section, Grove Lake WMA

- If conditions allow, oak woodland burns are a possibility in December.

- Fall spraying of smooth brome and leafy spurge has been spotty since a lot of vegetation is brown.
- Fencing projects are planned along neighboring properties.
- Phragmites control efforts are ongoing around Niobrara. This fall, a number of Wetland Reserve Easement properties between Niobrara SP and Verdel were sprayed. Ideally, some of the NGPC and private properties will get burned to remove the dead material. Next year, the goal is to target smaller upstream populations of Phragmites.

Grant Wiemer, Management Section, Oak Valley WMA

- In addition to typical invasive/noxious weed control, more effort is being put into controlling invasive understory trees and shrubs such as bush honeysuckle and buckthorn.

Kyle Schumacher, Partners Section, Grove Lake WMA

- October was a month of trainings and meetings. NRCS held a training in Norfolk to provide guidance on strategies on managing woody encroachment. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Conference was held in North Platte. The Nebraska Section of the Society for Range Management held its annual meeting in Norfolk, with field tours on private rangeland in Stanton County and at Wood Duck WMA.
- Acoustic monitors will be deployed soon in the Niobrara River valley to examine bat use in woodlands that have been thinned/burned/etc. compared to unmanaged woodlands.
- District biologists are considering proposals to revise the boundaries of some Biologically Unique Landscapes (BULs) for the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project update.

Jason Thiele, Partners Section, Norfolk

- Pheasant hunting success was mostly quite good on opening weekend. Virtually all hunters encountered on opening day in Cedar and Dixon counties had either bagged birds or had opportunities to do so, and the consensus was that numbers were up over recent years.
- A reservation-based access program is being planned for rollout in fall 2025. This is meant to provide additional public access opportunities by giving participating landowners the ability to limit the number of hunters and the dates for access. Landowners will receive a base payment for providing a minimum number of acres and days of access, and they will receive additional payments based on the actual number of user-days. Reservations would be made through the NGPC permitting system. This program will be largely focused near population centers, but other opportunities may be considered in situations where Open Fields and Waters is not a good fit.

Lucas Negus, Management Section, Norfolk

- Some big game research projects will be happening in the district. GPS collars will be deployed on white-tailed deer in the east as well as elk in Unit 7.

Deer Check

Lucas provided an update about deer check for the 2024 rifle season.

- Hunters will have the option to telecheck their deer. It is preferred that they use the website rather than calling the phone number.
- With the exception of O'Neill, all check stations will be staffed by just one worker. With fewer permits issued, low deer numbers, and the telecheck option, traffic is expected to be low.
- CWD samples will be collected for the Missouri, Elkhorn, and Loup East units. We will not be focused on mature bucks this year but will take lymph nodes from any adult deer. Write the seal number on the sample bag.
- Some hunters will telecheck their deer and still request a metal seal. They are advised to call the Norfolk office after the close of the season.
- Note that if a hunter gets a reprint of his/her deer permit, it will have a different permit number than the original.
- A cow recently tested positive for bovine tuberculosis in Madison County. This disease can infect deer (and, rarely, humans). Listen for reports of deer with lesions on the lungs and rib cage.