

Hunters advised to scout public access sites

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While Nebraska upland bird hunters can find excellent habitat across the state, some may find Open Fields and Waters program public access sites lacking suitable habitat. The emergency haying and grazing authorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture was due to the extreme drought conditions.

Open Fields and Waters provides public walk-in hunting and fishing access to more than 275,000 acres of private land.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission recommends hunters scout sites as the Oct. 27 opener of the statewide pheasant, quail and partridge season approaches.

Of the hayed or grazed Open Fields and Waters sites, most will have 50 percent habitat and few may have no habitat remaining. Because of the production schedule, the 2012 Public Access Atlas does not reflect hayed or grazed lands. Payment will be adjusted or withheld if landowner haying or grazing results in significant loss of wildlife cover.

Most of the haying or grazing occurred following the nesting season, which is typically early May through mid-July. Nest success should not have been affected, but the lack of habitat could have had a negative effect on chick survival. In addition, upland game birds only need a small percentage of the total habitat in the form of winter cover for survival.

The reduction of habitat can be detrimental, but haying and grazing also have positive effects, such as removal of unwanted trees and disturbance of thick grass stands, which promotes plant diversity for better nesting and brood rearing habitat. Haying and grazing also can be a great pre-treatment for habitat upgrades such as disking or interseeding.