



Harsens Island Managed Waterfowl Area Summer Report - 2020

www.michigan.gov/wetlandwonders

Growing Season Conditions

The global coronavirus pandemic had a tremendous impact on everyone's lives this year and our farming operation was no different. Staff were not cleared to return to field work until June 1 and were on reduced schedules of 32 hours per week. This created an extremely tight timeframe to try and meet the agricultural goals for the area. Additionally, budgets were cut and there was no funding available from the State for seed, fertilizer or herbicide from. Two of our local conservation partners, the Harsens Island Waterfowl Hunters Association and St. Clair Flats Waterfowlers, Inc. generously combined to pay for nearly all input costs for the farming operations. Thankfully, the weather cooperated, and we only lost a day and half of farming during the month of June, so all corn planting was wrapped up before June 20th. We were able to get millet and sorghum planted close to schedule. A couple of big storms in July delayed buckwheat planting which was completed the second half of the month. After a lot of rain in April and May, we could have used more moisture in June and July to help the corn along, though we had lots of good warm nights.

Lake St. Clair remains very close to the record high levels set in 2019, setting a new high for the month of May in 2020. We had two dike blowouts this spring on high wind days while staff were working from home. These were quickly addressed once staff returned. The extremely high-water table is stunting crop growth in several low-lying areas. The lake level is over the top of the west marsh dike in places. Dikes around the cropped areas have held, apart from the two early leaks mentioned above, thanks in large part to efforts to build them up last summer. Public launches at the end of Anchor Bay Drive on the mainland and Snooks Highway on the island remain closed due to flooded conditions.

Planted Fields

Like in 2019, staff are happy with crop conditions given the challenges faced. The corn zones will generally have excellent to average cover, though several zones have been hit very hard by geese, deer and cranes and have poor to no cover. Small grains are doing well overall and should have average to above average yields in most zones. Due to shortages in staffing, fewer staff people were available to harass geese and cranes and keep them from wiping out fields.

West Side, zones 1-18: Corn averages six feet tall and cover will be average in most zones.

- Zones 1-4 have less damage than 2019 overall. Zones 1-2 look good and Zone 3 is okay, but Zone 4 is 3-4' tall and taking significant browse pressure.
- Zones 5-7 all look very good, though Zone 5 will have some areas of damage from deer.
- Zone 8, the single hunter zone, has taken significant deer damage and will have little to no corn cover this year.
- Zones 9-11 all look good, with corn around 6' tall and good small grain growth.
- Zone 12 was planted in 2020 but completely wiped out by geese, along with the buffer between 11 and 12. There is no cover available. Zone 12 may be eliminated for the year and incorporated into zone 11.
- Zone 13 has taken a tremendous amount of damage from geese. The west end of the zone is essentially

gone, but the refuge end of the zone should make average to below average cover.

- Zones 14-17 are right around average with corn between 5+ and 6+ feet tall.
- Zone 18 routinely had 150+ geese in it and the corn has been almost completely destroyed. There will be very little corn cover in this zone this year.

East Side, zones 21-27: Corn is doing well in all zones except 26 and 27.

- Zones 21-23 are excellent, with corn 7+ feet tall.
- Zones 24-26 are average to above average, with 6+ foot corn, though the eastern half of 26 has little cover.
- Zone 27 is worse than 2019, with corn only 4-5' tall at the refuge end of the field. The corn will hopefully add a bit more height before season, but hunters can expect below average cover here.

South Side, zones 28-30: Similar to 2019, these were the last zones planted due to the extremely high water table keeping the zones too wet to work. We had 300-500 geese in these zones daily for most of the growing season and the damage shows. All will have poor to below average cover. Additionally, a large storm at the end of July flooded out large portions of a couple buckwheat fields between 28 and 29. Zones 28 and 29 are both good, with 5-6 foot tall corn and limited areas of deer damage. Both should have excellent cover for the season.

- Zone 29 is the best of the three zones, but the corn is still only 4' tall.
- Zone 30 will have little to no cover, with corn that is only 2' tall now.
- Zone 28 may make below average cover, with corn 3' tall now.

Marsh Zones

Same as in 2019, due to the extremely high lake levels the marsh water control structures were kept open to lake level to minimize head pressure on the dikes and the likelihood of a major blowout. We are doing maintenance work on the east marsh perimeter dike now, but water levels remain too high to work on the west marsh dikes. Stretches of the west marsh dike between the refuge and the west bayshore dike are underwater. Both marshes will be extremely deep for hunting season, though if water levels drop as predicted by the Army Corps of Engineers many zones may be shallow enough to wade by the regular season. Hunters should plan on very deep water for the September seasons at the least.