

Why High-Grading Isn't Legal In North Dakota

By Doug Leier, Outreach Biologist NDG&F

Every winter, as pickup trucks venture onto frozen lakes and steam rises from the first pour of coffee, the world of ice fishing reminds us why it remains one of North Dakota's cold-weather joys.

Beneath the surface, though, the biology of our fisheries shifts into a slower, more fragile state. Oxygen levels dip, fish metabolism changes, and the margin for stress narrows. A few drilled holes and a handful of jigs may look simple from above the ice, but every tug on the line has a biological impact below it. It's exactly why winter angling carries a responsibility that's easy to overlook, especially when the conversation turns to high-grading.

High-grading, for those who may not know the term, is the practice of continuing to catch and release fish after you've already kept a legal limit, hoping to "upgrade" to bigger or more desirable fish. During winter, it becomes even more prob-



Leier

lematic, both biologically and ethically.

Let me be perfectly clear. High-grading is not legal in North Dakota. For the health of the fish and fishery, it shouldn't be.

Most anglers don't intend to harm fish. Almost everyone I talk with genuinely believes in conservation and wants our fisheries to remain healthy for the next generation. But even good intentions don't change biology. Fish simply don't handle extreme winter catch-and-release well. Cold air, even colder hands, and extended time on the ice can cause subtle but significant damage.

Take this common scenario: An angler catches a "keeper walleye," lands

it on the ice to unhook it, debates whether it's worth keeping, watches it flop around a bit, and then decides it's "not quite big enough." Back down the hole it goes. In January, after spending half a minute on ice crystals sharp enough to freeze-burn human skin, that same fish may swim away looking fine but never fully recover. Sublethal injuries from frozen gills or stressed internal organs often mean mortality happens hours or days later.

That's where the ethical part comes in. If your limit is five fish, but half a dozen more die after being released because you were looking for a thicker perch or a plumper walleye, you've unintentionally doubled your harvest. It's illegal in North Dakota, and it undermines the purpose of limits in the first place.

There's also the matter of time. Fish pulled from deep water during winter can experience barotrauma – swim bladder damage caused by rapid pressure changes. In warm weather, anglers have multiple techniques



High-grading, for those who may not know the term, is the practice of continuing to catch and release fish after you've already kept a legal limit, hoping to "upgrade" to bigger or more desirable fish. (Photo courtesy NDG&F)

to reduce those effects. On the ice, options narrow. The colder it gets, the quicker a fish's eyes, gills and fins begin to freeze. Decisions need to be made fast.

Some anglers argue that catch-and-release is the very heart of conservation. I'd agree – within reason. Catch-and-release only works when release means survival. Winter complicates that equation. The act of high-grading extends handling time, increases exposure to freezing air, and often leads to more deep-

hooking as anglers sort through fish. It's not difficult to see how quickly good intentions can fall short.

So, what's the solution? It's not complicated. Keep what you plan to keep, and release with purpose. If you're on the fence about a fish's size, make the decision quickly. Avoid laying fish directly on the ice. Keep your hands wet and your tools ready. And maybe most importantly, once you've kept your limit, consider switching to a different species or putting

the rod down for the day. Limits are meant to be limits, not goals.

High-quality fisheries don't happen by accident. They're the product of intentional management and ethical angler choices. If we all handle fish with the same care we give our augers, heaters, and ice houses, we'll continue to see strong perch, walleye and pike populations well into the future.

On a cold February afternoon, that's something worth warming up to.

North Dakota's growth continues with record population estimate of nearly 800,000

By Devils Lake Journal staff

BISMARCK, N.D. – On Tuesday, Jan. 27, Gov. Kelly Armstrong announced that North Dakota's population grew for the fourth consecutive year to a record high of 799,358 people as of July 1, 2025, according to U.S. Census estimates. State Demographer Nigel Haarstad said the state has likely since surpassed the 800,000 mark for the first time, based on current growth rates.

"North Dakota continues to see steady growth and attract new residents as one of the best places to live, work and raise a family," Armstrong said. "From historic property tax relief and reform to phone-free schools and robust economic development, our state made significant progress this past year to improve the quality of life for our citizens, which will always be our top priority."

According to the press release, the population estimate released on Jan. 27 exceeds the original 2024 estimate of 796,568 resi-

dents by 2,790 and represents an increase of 20,264 residents since the 2020 decennial census.

In the July 2025 estimate, North Dakota was just 642 people from crossing 800,000 for the first time, Haarstad noted.

"At current growth rates, North Dakota likely crossed this milestone in August 2025," he said.

After a brief COVID-era population dip in 2021, North Dakota has grown every year. Births continue to exceed deaths in the latest estimate, and total net migration was positive, both domestic and international. The state's working-age population also has grown for three straight years to 473,249, the highest since 2020, Haarstad noted.

North Dakota ranked 14th among the states for per capita population growth this year, growing about 50% faster than the national average. The state has grown nearly 19% since 2010. Forty-six states experienced positive growth this year.

NDSU

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the state's eastern border with Minnesota and from a proud network of alumni in the region. The university has about 9,700 undergraduate students this school year.

"There's going to be an increase, and it's going to be a significant increase, but we'll get it to a level where we can compete based on dollars in Fargo, North Dakota," Larsen said.

The Bison moved all of their athletic teams to Division I in 2004, after winning eight NCAA Division II football titles.

"The Bison bring a championship mindset and a bold vision for growth that aligns with the unwavering commitment to the excellence of the Mountain West. Their dedication to elevating the student-athlete experience — on the field, in the classroom, and throughout the community — will energize the Mountain West and help propel our football profile to new heights nationwide," Mountain West Commissioner Gloria Nevarez said in a statement distributed by the conference.

North Dakota State's move will take effect on July 1, mirroring the departure

Northern Illinois is making for football only from the Mid-American Conference. Texas-El Paso will become a full member for all sports starting with the 2026-27 school year, along with Hawaii, which was already playing football in the Mountain West. UC Davis, which will remain in the FCS, and Grand Canyon, which does not play football, will join the Mountain West for all sports except football.

The holdovers are Air Force, Nevada, New Mexico, San Jose State, UNLV and Wyoming. Departing the Mountain West for the rebuilt Pac-12 starting in 2026-27 are Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, San Diego State and Utah State, a move that has pitted the two conferences against each other in court over exit fees.

NDSU will immediately play a full eight-game conference schedule but won't be eligible for the Mountain West title game or the College Football Playoff until the 2028 season. For the next two years, they can only play in a bowl game if there aren't enough eligible teams to fill all the spots, as Delaware and Missouri State were able to do in 2025.


North Dakota State will remain in the Summit League in other sports for

now. The Bison spent 18 seasons in the Missouri Valley Football Conference, winning 12 titles in the most consistently competitive FCS league. The MVFC sent six of its 10 teams to the FCS playoffs in 2025, including Illinois State, North Dakota, South Dakota, South Dakota State and Youngstown State.

South Dakota State, which won FCS national titles in the 2022 and 2023 seasons, has played North Dakota State for the Dakota Marker Trophy since both programs moved to Division I in 2004. NDSU leads 12-10 in yet another college football trophy series that now has an unclear future. The Bison will play four non-conference games, but even some of the sport's most hallowed rivalries have vanished when schools wind up in different leagues.

NDSU will aim to play one team from a Power Four conference, two from the Group of Six conferences, and one from the FCS each season, Larsen said, leaving open the possibility to play at least one team from the current MVFC as the scheduling matrix allows moving forward.

"That's not something we would close the door on. I think we'd be open to playing just about anybody from an FCS perspective," he said.




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