**Wisconsin State of the State Report**

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**Strategic Alignment Effort**

Over the last year, WDNR has embarked on a strategic alignment effort with the purpose of designing an organizational structure and allocating its limited resources to excel at delivering on all elements of the department’s mission while improving customer service and enhancing resource protection.

In July 2015, WDNR rolled out a new interim reporting structure to better align its functions and funding.  In August 2015 the department embarked on a Core Work Analysis effort to help the department focus its efforts on its highest priority work.  The department documented, analyzed, and prioritized its core work functions, identified opportunities for efficiency, and developed recommendations on the level of investment needed to accomplish its priority work. WDNR’s Department Leadership Team will be making final alignment decisions by the end of June 2016, and will be communicating final decisions in the summer of 2016.

**WILDLIFE**

**Wisconsin Elk Translocation**



A new chapter in the history of Wisconsin elk reintroduction was written in 2015 when WDNR and several partner groups teamed up with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources to capture and introduce 150 Kentucky elk to two locations within Wisconsin.  After a successful capture season and quarantine period in both Kentucky and Wisconsin, 23 elk were released in Jackson County in late August.  As of May 2016, 13 of those elk remain alive. The second year of elk reintroduction again started with a successful winter trapping effort, quarantine, and transfer of 39 elk to Wisconsin.  Those animals along with any newborn calves are expected to be released in July of 2016.  This completes the effort to bring up to 75 elk to the reintroduction site in Jackson County.  In the remaining 2-3 years of the project, all elk captured will be released in the area of the original 1995 elk reintroduction near the Town of Clam Lake in Ashland County.  These additional animals are expected to diversify herd genetics, more quickly fill quality habitat, and provide the herd with a population boost.

**Deer Management**

In 2015-16, the Department completed its second full year of working with 72 newly formed County Deer Advisory Councils (CDAC) to assist with local deer management decisions.  The CDAC’s first developed preliminary recommendations on antlerless deer harvest goals and permit numbers for each county.  This meeting was followed by a public comment period to solicit feedback on the preliminary recommendations.  The CDAC’s met again at the end of April to consider the public feedback they received and to provide final recommendations to the Department.  The Department advanced all recommendations to the Natural Resources Board, which set the 2016 deer season structure and permit levels.

Another program, the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), began its second full year of operation in 2016.  The program involves wildlife biologists and foresters working with private landowners and public land managers to improve habitat for deer and other wildlife on their properties.  The program is currently working with over 900 property owners and has about 221,000 acres enrolled across the State.  DMAP cooperators are invited to get involved in the program by networking with local landowners and attending DMAP workshops.  The program also provides DMAP cooperators the option to provide mentored hunting and trapping opportunities to novices by working closely with conservation organizations.

**Keep Wildlife Wild**

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In 2015-2016, the Keep Wildlife Wild campaign continued outreach through a variety of mediums, with the intent of expanding knowledge about young wildlife and the importance of observing these animals from a distance. We provided educational information to 180,000 subscribers of the WI Natural Resource magazine, not including pass-on readers. We distributed 72,000 Keep Wildlife Wild themed brochures and wild cards through programs around the state. We spread the Keep Wildlife Wild message through 135 different activities and programs at our wildlife conservation centers, and to 1.5 million attendees at large events in Milwaukee and Wausau. We organized 9 media pieces centered around our major metropolitan areas. We created a new Keep Wildlife Wild webpage, and received 17,173 separate visits to that webpage. We also reached out to over 3,600 participants through Facebook and online chats.

**Chronic Wasting Disease**

Governor Scott Walker announced a number of initiatives in May to address CWD. The initiatives include:

* Seeking input from hunters, landowners, farmers, and foresters in every county using County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs);
* Conducting a comprehensive study of deer population dynamics within high CWD prevalence area;
* Creating Best Management Practices for the deer farm industry;
* Conducting more frequent fence inspections for deer farms; and
* Developing quicker test results for hunters.

The population dynamics study will be designed to understand the effects of CWD on the deer population. It will be the largest and most comprehensive deer population dynamics study in Wisconsin history.

**Wolves**

In 2015-16, monitoring efforts detected an overwinter minimum wolf count of 866-897 and 222 packs - this represents a 16 percent increase from last year’s minimum wolf count of 746-771. Data available include the 2015-16 overwinter minimum wolf count and packs identified during the monitoring period. These data were collected through the assistance of over one hundred [volunteer trackers](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/volunteer.html) - these volunteers contributed almost half of the record 17,759 survey miles in 2015-16.

The 2015-16 minimum count represents the second year of growth and a record high for Wisconsin. Wolf count efforts are conducted in winter when the population reaches its annual low point. Wolf pups born in spring cause population increases, followed by reductions resulting from pup and adult mortalities.

**FISHERIES**

**Walleye Initiative -** The Wisconsin Walleye Initiative (WWI) was developed by the Department of Natural Resources and the Governor’s office to increase the number of walleyes in state walleye waters by expanding production of large fingerling walleye at state, private and tribal fish hatcheries for stocking in waters accessible to the public. This historic investment in Wisconsin’s walleye fishery will benefit all users and Wisconsin’s angling related economy.  Nine private/tribal groups were awarded funds to improve their walleye rearing infrastructure in the spring of 2014.  At this time the Department has reimbursed these grantees $1.974 million of the $2 million dollars available for construction and other eligible expenses.  These  projects should be finished up by the end of calendar year 2015 with final dispersements coming soon after.  Work also continues on the Departments’ infrastructure projects, design work and permitting was initiated during December 2014.  In 2015 the Department, Private, and Tribal groups stocked a total of 767,7703 large fingerling walleyes or 91% of the goal.

**Trout Habitat and Fishery Management** - From July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2015 over 100 stream reaches were improved or maintained with multiple partners and cooperators. These projects ranged from brushing and improving access to fixing eroded banks and restoring stream channels. These projects added up to over 40 miles of habitat work. Beaver management on trout streams was ongoing throughout the fiscal year.

Wisconsin’s current suite of trout regulations, which manages streams by regulation class or type attempting to focus on a balance between the stream productive capability and the angler desires, was last revised in 2003.  The Wisconsin fisheries program initiated an effort in 2011 to work with trout anglers across the state to conduct a thorough review of the trout management objectives and regulations, their effectiveness, and make recommendations.  A new regulation package was developed jointly by Department staff and stakeholders. The early catch and release season went into effect in January and the regular season regulations went into effect on May 7, 2016.

**Sturgeon Restoration on the Wisconsin River-** Wild Rose Fish Hatchery, Wisconsin Rapids, and Poynette fisheries personnel have been working to restore the lake sturgeon to the Wisconsin River from below Merrill Dam downstream to the Wisconsin Dells Dam since1997.  In partnership with Alliant Energy, they collect adult sturgeon and transfer them to tanks at Alliant’s Kilbourn Dam facility.  There they take eggs, fertilize them, and transfer them to Wild Rose State Fish Hatchery where they incubate and hatch.   Stocked fish have totaled 594,000 fry, 46,370 small fingerling, 175,275 large fingerling; and 2,900 yearlings which are tagged with uniquely numbered PIT tags to assist with long term monitoring.  Included in these totals are 1968 fall fingerling stocked in 2015 and 63 PIT tagged yearling lake sturgeon.   The river wide monitoring program which started in 2006 has been proven the success of the stocking program and has been an asset in tracking the progress of the restoration. The monitoring allows us to annually PIT tag hundreds of juvenile and adult  lake sturgeon throughout the restoration area.   Another indication of the success of the program was the discovery of mature male lake sturgeon below the dam in Nekoosa on the Wisconsin River, in spring 2016.  These efforts will likely produce mature female lake sturgeon within 3 to 5 years.

**Fish Propagation-** Fisheries staff raised and stocked over 7.8 million fish this past year and that includes the rearing of a record number of large fingerling walleyes in 2015, the second year in a row we have had a record stocking year for walleye.  The program is also working to submit a renovation plan for the Kettle Moraine Spring Hatchery in Sheboygan County to the State Building Commission.

**NATURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION**

**Wisconsin Bat Program:** The Natural Heritage Conservation Bureau team conducts statewide projects to investigate status, trends and current threats, and monitor bat population health. The goal is to prevent extinction, monitor bat health, status, and trends, while implementing adaptive management actions to sustain or recover one of Wisconsin’s greatest natural resources for the benefit of future generations. While the disease, white-nose syndrome, has been detected in many parts of southwestern Wisconsin, the WDNR continues to use a strategic monitoring approach for WNS that incorporates effective disease surveillance (minimizing disturbance to sensitive populations) and containment of the fungus and WNS. One main goal of the WI Bat Program is to disseminate information that is responsive to a broad audience regarding the importance of bats and managing for WNS; which includes creating, delivering and updating communication products to inform the general public about the benefits of bats and how to minimize the spread of WNS.

**White-Nose Syndrome (WNS) in Bats:** During the 2015-2016 hibernation season, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) staff made 74 site-visits for WNS surveillance and research. Over 1000 samples were collected by WDNR and various partners (US Geological Survey-National Wildlife Health Center [NWHC] and University of California-Santa Cruz) as part of WNS surveillance. The rampant spread of WNS in Wisconsin, while expected, has heightened the need for WDNR to continue working with partners and stakeholders to in education/outreach to minimize the human-assisted transmission of the disease, while identifying and implementing effective control and management practices based on the best available information.

**Northern long-eared bat listing**: The WDNR continues to monitor bat hibernacula, support landowners in their efforts to protect cave bat species and to participate in White-nose syndrome related research. Wisconsin supported the recent federal listing decision as Threatened and the species has been listed as Threatened at the state level in Wisconsin since 2011.  WDNR also has been working closely with other states to provide input regarding guidance for this species. In 2014, WDNR conducted a pilot project to understand roost tree use by maternity colonies of northern long-eared bats. The goal was to develop guidance based on data collected that can protect the remaining population while allowing for sustainable forestry and other land management to activities which can be beneficial to cave bat habitat. As populations decline due to WNS, having a greater understanding of summer habitat use of the northern long-eared bat is critical to guide science-based management as well as development of sound conservation measures. Further research toward effective conservation will include gathering additional information on the known roosting areas of the northern long-eared bat and whether these bats are more dependent on roosting areas than on the roosts themselves.

**Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership** - 2016 marks the 15th year in the effort to reintroduce a flock of migratory whooping cranes into the eastern US.  The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is a state, federal, and private partnership. WCEP partners have released 250 birds since the beginning of the program, and the current population stands at about 100 individuals. In 2015, releases took place on state managed property for the fifth time in the history of the project. The year also marked record levels of free-ranging nest and chick production; however, low levels of fledging continued to occur. After partner meetings in early 2016, WCEP is embarking on a revised rearing and release plan that will emphasize pre-release learning in chicks from adult whooping cranes to try to improve upon overall reproduction levels.

**Habitat Conservation Plan**: Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are working collectively on the Lake States Forest Management Bat Habitat Conservation Plan (Lake States HCP), which is designed to provide a framework for the protection of federally listed bat species and the continuation of forest management activities. Completion of an HCP will streamline the permitting process under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The purpose for developing the Lake States HCP is to obtain a federal incidental take permit pursuant to ESA Section 10. The State DNRs will request authorization for the incidental take of Indiana bats, northern long-eared bats, little brown bats, and tricolored bats for forest management activities.

**Bird Atlas**: 2015 marked the first of a five year project to update the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas. First completed 20 years ago, the atlas is simultaneously the most comprehensive source of data on all birds that breed in the state, as well as the largest citizen science effort in the state’s history. Information gathered in the first season by more than 700 volunteers found an impressive array of birds, including eight species nesting here that weren't found 15 years ago and range shifts in others such as the wild turkey.

**FACILITIES AND LANDS**

**Land Acquisition and Public Access for Hunting and Fishing:**  From May 2015 to April 2016 the DNR Real Estate program assisted in acquiring 8665 acres in fee title at ~$5.8 million and 187 acres in easements at ~$678,000. 97% of the easement acquisitions were processed through the Stream Bank Easement Program with 30 streambank easements placed on 167.5 acres in 14 counties at a cost of $659,150. Fee and easement acquisitions were funded entirely or in part through the state Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, Environmental Protection Agency and US Fish and Wildlife Service as well as acquired through public gift.

**LAW ENFORCEMENT**

**Staffing -** DNR had our first joint recruitment for law enforcement limited term employees (LTE) with Parks and Forestry. Over 100 applications were received resulting in 40+ officers hired for the summer boating and camping season.

**Cloud-based/Plain-paper Licensing System -** Wisconsin recently transitioned from traditional durable license and tag products to a cloud-based system where customers can display their WI driver’s license or DNR Conservation Card (similar to a credit card) after purchasing fish/game licenses. Wardens utilize smart phones during field checks to scan the products and then connect to the licensing system to verify purchases. Customers no longer need to carry additional licenses in their wallets.

For species that require carcass tags, these products are now printed on plain paper and can be generated at any DNR agent or at the customer’s home. From the customer perspective, this system transition allows them to complete DNR transactions from their home, quickly, without the need to travel to a DNR licensing agent or wait for carcass tags to arrive in the mail. Overall, this system improves the customer experience and improves access to conservation activities—changes requested by a customer base that is accustomed to the convenient and instantaneous style of major online retailers.

The new system named “Go Wild” is also available at more than 1, 100 private vendors statewide and offers improved access through mobile devise at GoWild.WI.Gov. More than 7.3 million customer records have been successfully imported into the new system, and more than 110,000 Go Wild Conservation Cards have been purchased and mailed already, just months into the inaugural year. On-line sales results have exceeded initial projections. The DNR will continue to monitor the trend.

**Operation Upper Miss & Operation Open Water (Lake Michigan) -** In 2010, the USFWS began a 3-yr probe on four waterfowl hunting guides in reference to illegal hunting activities and Lacey Act violations committed during migratory waterfowl hunts on the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan. The probe included undercover hunting activities by USFWS agents. In February of 2015, four federal search warrants were executed on these guides to gather further evidence. Federal felony charges are pending and additional follow-up interviews (50+ clients) will be conducted in 2016 for potential charges of Wisconsin waterfowl hunting violations.

**Tribal Night Hunting -** In the fall of 2015, the federal court system allowed the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians to hunt deer at night within the ceded territory of Wisconsin; roughly the northern third of the state. The inaugural season began on November 1st with minimal participation. State Wardens have been working closely with GLIFWC Wardens to enforce safety requirements for the hunt.

**Mississippi River Joint Effort -** Wisconsin works cooperatively with the bordering states of IA, MN, and the USFWS Refuge Officers to address the many cross jurisdictional activity on the Mississippi River. Wardens continue to combine forces to focus on recreational boating enforcement saturation efforts during summer months. Train cooperatively with MN DNR for winter airboat operation, hold Wisconsin Waterfowl School in cooperation with the USFWS Refuge Staff. WDNR Wardens assisted the USFWS investigators with a Waterfowl Guiding Investigation. State and the USFWS meet bi-annual at a tri-sate meeting to address cross jurisdictional enforcement related issues.

**Tribal Enforcement Training -** In March of 2016, approximately six DNR field wardens and supervisors attended a two-day training session, which was hosted by the Ho-Chunk Nation, on Public Law 280.  Public Law 280 is federal legislation which regulates the authority of non-tribal law enforcement agencies on tribal lands.