**Wisconsin State of the State Report**

**June 7, 2017**

Cathy Stepp, Secretary

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

101 S. Webster Street

P.O. Box 7921

Madison, WI 53707-7921

**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 MANAGEMENT**

**Wisconsin Elk Translocation**

The Wisconsin Elk Translocation project experienced continued success in 2016 with the WDNR and several partner groups teaming up with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources for the second year to capture and introduce Kentucky elk to two locations within Wisconsin.  After a successful capture season and quarantine period in both Kentucky and Wisconsin, 50 elk were released in Jackson County in July 2016.  This completes the effort to bring up to 75 elk to the reintroduction site in Jackson County.  In 2017, the third year of elk reintroduction again started with a successful winter trapping effort, quarantine, and transfer of 28 elk to a new holding pen in the Flambeau River State Forest in Sawyer County, Wisconsin.  Those animals along with any newborn calves are expected to be released in the summer of 2017.  This location is near 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 2016-17, the Department completed its third full year of working with 72 County Deer Advisory Councils (CDAC) to assist with local deer management decisions.  The CDAC’s provide county specific recommendations on harvest quotas, permit levels, hunting and season options. The Department continues to see increased public interest and participation in the CDAC process and is pleased with the progress of this relatively new effort to involve the public in deer management decisions.

Another program, the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), began its third full year of operation in 2017.  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 1,100 property owners and has over 221,000 acres enrolled across the State.  DMAP cooperators are invited to get involved in the program by networking with local landowners, developing cooperatives with neighboring landowners, participating in citizen science opportunities, 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.

**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.

**Southwest CWD, Deer, and Predator Study**

In fall of 2016, the largest deer research project undertaken in Wisconsin began in the southwestern part of the state. The goal of this project is to comprehensively examine factors that could impact deer survival and deer population growth in southern Wisconsin. Those include Chronic Wasting Disease, predation, habitat suitability and hunter harvest. Simultaneous studies will take place in areas with differing rates of CWD infection, which will help the agency better understand how CWD may or may not be interacting with other factors that ultimately impact the deer herd. Uniquely, this study will directly estimate the abundance and distribution of deer predators (bobcats and coyotes) within the study areas, and will examine their impact on deer survival and behavior. Collaring incidentally trapped bobcat and coyotes from the study area began in the fall, with deer collaring starting in January 2017.

**CWD Surveillance**

Wisconsin has monitored chronic wasting disease (CWD) for 15 years.   Between 2002 and March 2017, we have tested almost 200,000 free-ranging deer, of which over 3,500 have tested positive. Wisconsin has two separate cores of disease infection, one in the southwest part of the state, one in the southeast (contiguous with a CWD area in northern Illinois).  During the 2016 surveillance season which runs through March 31st of 2017, we sampled just over 6,000 deer and had 447 positives with the majority in the southern farmland zone.  One positive was harvested in the central farmland zone in Portage County, four positives were harvested in the central forest zone in Adams County and the rest of the positives were harvested in the southern farmland zone.

CWD prevalence within the western monitoring area in Southwestern Wisconsin has shown an overall increasing trend in all sex and age classes. During the past 15 years, the trend in prevalence in adult males has risen from 8-10 percent to over 30 percent and in adult females from about 3-4 percent to nearly 15 percent. During that same time, the prevalence trend in yearling males has increased from about 2 percent to over 10 percent and in yearling females from roughly 2 percent to about 9 percent.

There are currently 43 counties designated as being CWD affected which also corresponds to a ban in baiting and feeding.  Per state statute, 29.336, Wis. Stats, the department is required to enact a ban on the feeding and baiting of deer in any county that is within 10 miles of any captive or free-roaming deer that tests positive for CWD or TB.   Twenty-nine counties are designated as such due to detections in wild deer and designations in 14 counties are due to CWD detections in captive cervid facilities.  In 2016 a captive cervid facility in Oconto County had a CWD detection and 2 new counties were designated as being CWD affected and new baiting and feeding bans enacted as a result.

**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 MANAGEMENT**

**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 are now finished and grantees are producing fish with their upgraded facilities.  Work is also substantially completed on the Departments’ infrastructure projects, and we are now using all of the upgraded facilities to produce fish for stocking.  The WWI stocked 797,815 fish in 2016.

**Trout Habitat and Fishery Management**

From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016 over 87 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 50 miles of habitat work. Beaver management on trout streams was ongoing throughout the fiscal year.

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 2016 and the regular season regulations went into effect on May 7, 2016.

**Fish Propagation**

Fisheries staff raised and stocked over 7.3 million fish this past year and that includes the rearing of a record number of large fingerling walleyes in 2016, the third year in a row we have had a record stocking year for walleye.  The program is currently in the predesign phase to rebuild the Kettle Moraine Spring Hatchery in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin.

**NATURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION**

**Proactive Monarch Butterfly Conservation**

In 2016 Natural Heritage Conservation staff were active in state and regional efforts to proactively recover the eastern migratory population of Monarchs and alleviate the potential need for federal listing. WDNR signed a memorandum of understanding with MAFWA to partner and provide match for a project to produce the Mid-America Monarch Conservation Strategy. In 2017 NHC staff partnered with representatives from agriculture, transportation and utility rights of way, urban and suburban landowners, and public and private conservation lands to plan and host the Wisconsin Monarch Summit and will later produce a Wisconsin Monarch Conservation Strategy to implement the state’s share of the goals established by the Mid-America strategy.

**White-Nose Syndrome (WNS) in Bats**

During the 2016-2017 hibernation season, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) staff made 75 site-visits for WNS surveillance and research. Wisconsin, now in its fourth year of infection, has seen severe declines in cave bat species with hibernating populations down from 70-100%. Twenty-four of 28 counties with known bat hibernacula are now confirmed to have bats infected with white-nose syndrome or the fungus that causes it. 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. Surveillance and monitoring remain vitally important to document population status and other impacts to bats that stem directly or indirectly from WNS infection. WDNR has continued to work with partners within the state of Wisconsin, including the U.S. Geological Survey’s National Wildlife Health Center, the U.S. Forest Service’s Northern Research Center and Eastern Regional office, and researchers at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, among others, to advance our understanding of the disease and work toward developing effective management strategies.

**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. Development of the Lake States HCP continues on schedule for a completion date in mid-2019.

**Urban Habitat Initiative**

A third new program to work with private lands will be launched this summer. This one will engage urban and nontraditional audiences in conservation at their homes and in their communities through education and outreach. The goal of this initiative is to create and expand available habitat for native wildlife in urban and suburban areas by providing technical assistance to K-12 schools, non-profits, neighborhood groups and municipalities.

**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 stream bank 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**

**Law Enforcement Consolidation**

WI DNR has gone through a core work analysis resulting in several significant changes within WDNR related to specialization and prioritization. As a result all law enforcement services, staff and functions within WDNR are being consolidated within Bureau of Law Enforcement – BLE – Conservation Warden Service). The consolidation will shift FTE resources from Forestry, Parks and Facility/Lands based on historical work and LE effort in forest protection and recreational property enforcement. The net change being 33 positions coming to BLE.

**Cloud-based/Plain-paper Licensing System**

In 2016 Wisconsin transitioned from traditional durable license and tag products to a plain paper license and carcass tag system. Based on customer feedback WDNR is making modifications to the carcass tag so to eliminate the need to carry a pencil to meet validation requirements.

**Birch Pole Harvest**

Wisconsin DNR sponsored a law enforcement meeting and information sharing session on the illegal harvest of birch pole timber from North West Wisconsin. Due to the ornamental market boom white birch sticks 100” in length less than 4” diameter have been highly sought after. Markets as far away as China have been confirmed. The meeting was attended by MN DNR, USFWS, USFS, Tribal, Sheriff’s Deputies from 5 counties, County Foresters and DNR Forestry staff. The group discussed education and enforcement strategies.