

**MINNESOTA  
STATE REPORT**  
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**Update on Constitutionally Dedicated Legacy Funding**

Since 2008, a portion of Minnesota's sales tax has been constitutionally directed to protect, restore, and enhance forests, prairies, wetlands, and habitat for fish, game, and wildlife through the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF). The funding must supplement, not substitute for, work done with traditional sources of funding. The DNR, along with other agencies and organizations, applies for these funds annually on a competitive basis.

DNR administers the Conservation Partners Legacy (CPL) small grants program, which awards competitive and non-competitive grants of \$5,000-\$400,000 to conservation groups, NGOs, and local governments for habitat projects. In the first 10 years of OHF, over \$67 million was appropriated to the CPL grant program, with an additional \$10 million slated for this year, the 11th. This program has improved or protected over 250,000 acres of habitat with 650 CPL grants, leveraging nearly \$10 million in non-state funding from 193 conservation clubs and government entities throughout Minnesota.

**Duck & Pheasant Plans**

DNR is updating its 2006 Long Range Duck Recovery Plan and 2015 Minnesota Pheasant Summit Action Plan, with partner and public input. The original Duck Plan had ambitious, long-term objectives of increased duck breeding populations, fall duck harvest, and fall waterfowl hunter numbers. The Duck Plan update will include short-term targets within the scope of DNR management. The Pheasant Plan targeted pheasant habitat. DNR and its partners recognize the multifaceted benefits of grassland and wetland conservation and management (pollinator habitat, clean water, carbon storage, etc.), and both updates will address these shared interests while continuing to support habitat for wildlife, using an annual "report card" to communicate progress.

**Marketing**

Division of Fish and Wildlife has entered into a marketing (professional technical services) contract with Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) to partner on their national "Take Me Fishing" branded marketing efforts, within the state of Minnesota. This national engagement opportunity allows Minnesota to leverage trademark assets and accomplish marketing synergy with a national effort, to increase license sales in MN. It also gives free access to marketing professionals to implement the campaign in Minnesota. RBFF is a non-profit organization whose goals and objectives match those of the state's – to increase license sales.

The contract runs November 2018-June 2019, with an option to extend. Marketing started start mid-February 2019. Total cost is \$60,000, which is within the budget of past marketing.

## Climate Change Website

Minnesota DNR introduced a revised [DNR climate change website](#) at the end of 2018, featuring these new tools and content:

- [Minnesota Climate Trends map](#): A tool people can use to view and download historical climate data for the state, including temperature and precipitation.
- [Impacts of climate change](#): Stories about how climate change is impacting people's outdoor experience in Minnesota.
- [What DNR is doing](#): Examples of DNR's climate adaptation and mitigation actions.

The Minnesota Climate Trends map is a powerful tool for exploring and visualizing climate trends. Users can select from a variety of geographic units, such as counties, watersheds, ecological subsections, or state parks, for which to retrieve a climate variable, and users can also specify the range of months and years for analysis. The mapping tool automatically generates a chart, visible right on the web page, and users may also download the data generated from their query.

## Wildlife Action Plan

Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025 is a statewide conservation strategy developed with and implemented by conservation partners under the leadership of DNR's Division of Ecological and Water Resources. The plan has three approaches to achieving conservation goals:

- A habitat approach with a focus on sustaining and enhancing terrestrial and aquatic habitats in the context of the larger landscape/watershed and a changing climate. Conservation actions focus on improving habitat quality and enhancing landscape-scale biological diversity by addressing stressors such as fragmentation, invasive species, and climate change within a mapped Wildlife Action Network.
- A species approach with a focus on 346 Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) identified in the plan as requiring the implementation of conservation actions directed at specific issues such as disease, deliberate killing, low reproductive capacity, or poor dispersal ability. The approach also addresses species for which information is needed to assess their conservation status or factors contributing to their decline.
- An engagement approach focuses on internal and external conservation partners and citizens. This approach will involve sharing data, tracking effort and accomplishments, interpreting work of this grant for a general audience, and further engaging citizens of Minnesota in conservation.

Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) are priority areas for working with partners to identify, design, and implement conservation actions that extend beyond traditional administrative boundaries. CFAs provide a framework for partners to leverage resources and expertise toward a shared conservation goal. Three CFAs are underway: Prairie Coteau, Root and Whitewater River Watersheds, and Brainerd Lakes. For each, SMART objectives are identified and implemented (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented and time-bound). Species-targeted work includes but is not limited to rare mussels, wood turtles, Richardson's ground squirrel, northern long-eared bat, rusty patch bumblebee, and Topeka shiner. Long-term monitoring focused on prairie plant and animal communities continues. Pollinators and integration of citizen science are two emphasized strategies for the upcoming year.

## **Change in Rainbow Trout Strain Stocked in Lake Superior**

Since 1976, DNR has stocked the domesticated Kamloops hatchery strain of Rainbow Trout in Lake Superior tributaries to provide a put-grow-and-take fishery in an effort to reduce pressure and harvest on declining naturalized steelhead populations. These declines continued into the 1990s, and in 1997 a catch-and-release-only regulation was implemented for wild unclipped naturalized steelhead. The adipose-clipped Kamloops continued to serve as the harvest fishery for Rainbow Trout in Minnesota waters of Lake Superior.

Since the 1990s, anglers have witnessed and been concerned by Kamloops spawning with naturalized steelhead in Minnesota tributaries and feared genetic introgression would negatively impact steelhead populations. Initial genetic studies were done in the mid-1990s, and no hybridization was found. Given vastly improved genetic analysis techniques, DNR initiated another genetics study on hybridization in 2016 and worked collaboratively with anglers and other agencies to obtain genetic material from Minnesota's North Shore tributaries, the Brule River, Wisconsin, and Michigan waters of Lake Superior.

Hybridization between Kamloops and naturalized steelhead was found to be widespread along Minnesota's North Shore as well as in other jurisdictions, yet at relatively low levels. Because of this, DNR made the management decision to change from the domesticated Kamloops strain to a genetically-screened Lake Superior wild steelhead strain. These "pure strain" Lake Superior steelhead will still be adipose-fin clipped and will be available for harvest. Initial stream stocking of the pure strain Lake Superior steelhead occurred in 2018 as pre-smolts, and DNR expects them to start to be available in the spring fishery by 2020 or 2021.

## **Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3)**

Rounds 1-3 of the capacity-building [Angler and Hunter Recruitment & Retention Grants](#) have been completed. Round 4 projects are underway, and Round 5 projects will be awarded in summer 2019. Total participants from the 35 projects completed to date is 11,365. The first 35 grants leveraged matching funds totaling \$654,941. In the first four rounds of the grant program, 124 applicants requested over \$1.8 million, and DNR awarded 45 grants totaling \$589,500.

The Minnesota R3 Advisory Council began in 2018, has met a few times, and is spearheading efforts to create a Minnesota R3 Plan and build a statewide mentor network. The Becoming an Outdoors Women program continues to flourish with two weekend workshops and more than 50 additional classes offered annually. Efforts have continued with the Division of Parks and Trails to place interns at nine different state parks to offer summer skills programs. DNR has expanded efforts to reach diverse and new audiences by hiring two community fishing and hunting skills liaisons to work with Latino and Karen communities, with a focus on building partnerships with community organizations to build capacity to provide fishing and hunting programming.

## **Strategic Planning**

The DNR's department-wide strategic plan (the Conservation Agenda) contains the mission and goals of the agency. Each DNR division plays a role in helping the agency succeed with that mission and its goals. The Divisions of Fish and Wildlife (FAW) and Ecological and Water Resources (EWR) developed strategic plans in 2018.

[EWR Strategic Plan 2018-2028](#) explains the most important challenges and trends affecting the division and its natural resources, describes how to address the highest priority challenges and trends, and provides strategies that can advance a vision for all Minnesotans. The 10-year plan identifies eight strategic issues: Water Resources, Biodiversity, Invasive Species, Climate Change, Communication & Collaboration, Data, Workforce Health, and Sustainable Funding, each with a goal for a desired future state. The plan also refreshes EWR's vision statement to be more inclusive – *Healthy Lands and Waters throughout Minnesota*. Progress towards these eight goals will help ensure the long-term sustainability for the state's natural resources, and ensure that we are an excellent organization serving all Minnesotans and connecting them to the outdoors.

FAW Strategic Plan 2019-2021 relied on research and the voices of staff – on work teams, in an all-staff survey and through input opportunities – to clarify division objectives and develop implementation strategies. Many of its strategies should be completed during the plan's three-year timeframe, but intermittent updates will extend the utility of the plan. FAW's work contributes to the department Conservation Agenda by conserving and enhancing diverse fish and wildlife habitats, providing outdoor recreation opportunities for new and existing participants, contributing to a strong and sustainable natural resource economy, and demonstrating operational excellence. Five strategic issues were identified in the plan: Funding Innovation, Relevancy to New Audiences, Conservation and Management, Strategic Communication, and a Unified Division.

### **Ice Fishing Pressure**

Ice fishing is arguably the fastest growing sector of sport fishing in Minnesota. Over the past ten years, there has been a rapid expansion in the sales of wheeled fish houses, which are basically hard sided campers built for ice fishing (e.g. Ice Castle, Glacier, etc.) These fish houses, or shelters, as they are commonly referred to, have largely replaced the old "permanent" winter shelters that were transported to the lakes on trailers and moved onto the lake on wooden or metal skids. Previously, ice anglers had difficulty changing lakes or even fishing spots on the same lake. Wheeled houses commonly have generators, cooking facilities, satellite dishes, flat screen televisions, a biffy and comfortable beds. Ice anglers are increasingly mobile, spending many more hours on the lake each trip. Anecdotally, the comfort these fish houses afford has stimulated more participation by families, akin to a summer camping trip, albeit in the winter.

DNR does not index ice-fishing pressure on a statewide basis but does conduct lake specific creel surveys on a number of important waters. During the winter of 2018-19 (December 1, 2018-February 24, 2019), DNR documented approximately 6 million hours of winter fishing pressure on Mille Lacs, Upper Red Lake, and Lake of the Woods combined (roughly 2 million hours on each lake). Minnesota requires licensing for hard-sided fish houses. An estimated 54,000 fish house licenses were sold in 2018, most of which were wheeled fish houses.

### **Mille Lacs Lake Management**

Under the Consensus Agreement with 1837 Treaty Bands, the Walleye population on Mille Lacs Lake is managed based on spawning stock biomass (SSB) goals. The target SSB is 20 pounds per gill net lift from the fall assessment. In 2017, the assessment was just under target, and in 2018 the target was exceeded with almost 28 pounds of mature Walleye per gill net lift. SSB has increased as Walleye from the 2013 year class were recruited to the spawning population. Though this goal has been achieved, angler harvest could reduce SSB available to spawn in spring 2020.

DNR and the tribes agreed to a safe harvest level of 150,000 pounds of Walleye for the 2019 fishing year. The state allocation is 87,800 pounds, which includes harvest and hooking mortality. Due to the relatively high (for recent years) allocation, and the elimination of overage pay-back, due to low harvest in 2017, state anglers can harvest Walleye in summer 2019. A conservative regulation was enacted (21-23 inch harvest slot, harvest from May 11-31, catch-and-release the rest of the summer), primarily due to unknown, unpredictable angling pressure response. There is some ambiguity about when the Consensus Agreement expires, but the last SSB target identified in the document is for spring 2020. This suggests a new agreement must be in place by spring 2020, since SSB is evaluated based on the fall 2019 gill net assessment.

A management planning process for the state fish allocation has begun. The process will use the existing Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Committee and other sources for input. Questions designed to define angler preferences have been incorporated into the annual creel survey, and public meetings will be held locally (Garrison and Brainerd), as well as in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. It is anticipated that the management plan will be completed in winter 2019.

Two important programs were completed in 2018. The first was a Walleye population estimate, used to ground truth and tune the population model used to guide management decisions. The estimate of Walleye longer than 14-inches of 730,000 was very close to what the population model predicted, increasing confidence in the model. Additionally, the estimate of 730,000 Walleye was almost three times higher than estimates conducted in 2013 and 2014, which were the low point of Walleye population abundance, and is similar to estimates made in 2003 and 2008.

The second program completed in 2018 was a three-year experimental stocking of oxytetracycline (OTC) marked Walleye fry. The purposes of this program were to assess if DNR could capture enough adult Walleye to provide eggs to stock Mille Lacs Lake, fine tune techniques to support adequate hatch rates, and to evaluate the number of fry produced naturally in the lake. The program was successful with the first two goals, and it was found that current levels of SSB were far more than adequate to produce enough natural Walleye fry to maintain a fishery.

### **Legislative Update**

The Legislature adjourned on Monday, May 20 without a two-year budget in place. Budget targets were agreed to, and conference committees worked on bills for ultimate passage during a special session. Details of the bills are not available as of this writing.

CWD continues as a focus. More than 50 wild deer tested positive in the past three years, with the majority from a small “core area” in the southeast. In January, a wild deer was found dead in proximity to a CWD-positive deer farm in north-central Minnesota and tested positive. The farm, one of eight that tested positive for CWD, was depopulated in April, and seven of the 89 testable deer were positive. Thirteen non-testable dead deer were discovered on the farm. House and Senate held CWD hearings, proposed restrictions on cervid farms (e.g., animal tagging requirements, moratorium on new farms, fencing requirements, mandatory depopulation of positive farms, inspection requirements), and discussed funding for live test research, increased enforcement of cervid farm regulations, and for surveillance and response efforts. There was strong support for using General tax dollars; the Governor sought \$4.57 million for the agency response. Finally, a ban on the importation of hunter-harvested cervids replaces that restriction in rule.

As carryovers from 2018, DNR again sought to allow landowners who obtained an elk hunting license the ability to sell the license to a Minnesota resident at no more than the cost of the license. Landowners may not have the time to hunt or not be hunters, and providing the opportunity to a family member or friend may improve how elk are viewed. Anglers will again be able to use cast nets on certain waters to harvest bait when the bill becomes law. A three year cast net trial was popular with catfish and sturgeon anglers, with no issues related to moving bait from one water body to another. The repeal of the crossbow stock length requirement, authority to use shotguns smaller than 20 gauge for turkey, and use of drums to bait bear on public lands round out provision expected to become law.

### **White-tailed Deer**

The winter of 2018/19 was again mild throughout most of the state and, coupled with previous mild winters, deer populations have increased significantly under relatively conservative management. Portions of northern Minnesota experienced moderate-to-severe winters and substantial snowfall, which will require more conservative seasons in 2019. Statewide, numerous deer permit areas are once again above population goals following several years of relatively conservative antlerless deer harvest. The 2019 deer season will see increased opportunities to harvest antlerless deer throughout most of the state. Additionally, a growing proportion of deer permit areas will fall within the disease management zone, requiring more liberal harvest management and additional requirements (e.g., limited carcass movement) of hunters in those areas.

In 2018, DNR finalized its first-ever statewide deer management plan. A public committee is being formed to advise on the plan's implementation.

### **Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)**

Fall 2018 marked the second year of surveillance in both the north-central and central portions of Minnesota, where two captive cervid farms were found positive with CWD in early 2017. The CWD management zone deer permit area (DPA) 603, created in fall 2016, continued with sampling all adult (>1 year of age) deer harvested during all hunting seasons in fall 2018, along with 3 additional operational phases in winter 2019. From fall 2018 thru March 2019, 8,009 samples were tested for CWD, confirming 34 additional positive deer. Of these positives, 24 were from DPA 603, four from DPA 346, two from DPA 347, and one from the north-central surveillance area in DPA 247. Minnesota has confirmed 52 total positive wild deer in five counties.

DNR is in the process of updating the CWD response plan to include components related to persistent and endemic infection. Due to the discovery of additional wild positive deer near captive cervid facilities in Crow Wing (northcentral) and Winona (southeast) counties, DNR is in the process of creating CWD management zones and regulations that align with the response. Over the same time period, DNR has conducted extensive public engagement with the public, partners and stakeholders about the disease, future direction, and the revised plan. Finally, human dimensions survey of deer hunters and landowners in southeastern Minnesota was conducted to assess attitudes towards the disease and management response. Additional human dimensions work is slated for 2019-2020 across a larger area of Minnesota.