

**MISSOURI
STATE REPORT**
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Financial Update

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 budget for the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) continues to represent less than 1 percent of the total state government budget in Missouri. The primary sources of revenue are the one-eighth of 1 percent Conservation Sales Tax, at about \$127 million, and permit sales and federal reimbursements, at about \$72 million. Total receipts for FY 2020 were \$202.7 million.

Conservation pays by enriching our economy and quality of life. In Missouri each year, more than 1 million hunt or fish and nearly 2 million view wildlife. In Missouri, the total economic impact of fish and wildlife recreation and the forest products industry is more than \$15.3 billion annually. Expenditures and retail sales from fish and wildlife recreation and forest products support over 111,000 jobs.

Organizational Update

Sara Parker Pauley continues as the ninth director of MDC. In July 2021, MDC fully implemented a new organizational structure to include a Statewide Resource Management Branch Chief, an Assistant Deputy Director – Resource Management with 8 Regional Administrators, a Relevancy Branch, and an Assistant to the Director for Inclusion and Diversity.

Highlights of Conservation Challenges and Successes

COVID-19 Response. Understanding the physical and mental benefits nature provides, conservation areas, nature center trails, and boat accesses remain open to the public with physical distancing requirements. MDC facilities were closed to the public, in-person programs became virtual, and telework policies were implemented to protect the health of the public and staff.

The Conservation Commission waived permit requirements for sport fishing and daily trout tags for anglers whose fishing privileges were not otherwise suspended. The fishing permit and daily trout tag waiver ran from Friday, March 27, through April 15, 2020. Anglers across the state took advantage of this opportunity. Many anglers continued to enjoy the outdoors even after the waiver ended as we observed an increase in permit sales over the previous year.

Implementing the Strategic Plan. The MDC strategic plan, *Missouri Conservation: Design for the Future*, was unveiled in 2018 and developed to guide MDC during FY19-23. The plan outlines 3 simple goals: take care of nature; connect people with nature; and maintain the

public trust. Through input from the public and conservation partners, MDC has identified 6 desired outcomes, 17 strategies, more than 150 specific actions, and 42 measures that will be used to track progress.

International Recognition for Sustainable Forest Management. MDC is proud to maintain its Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) certification for management of public lands. Managing forest resources in a sustainable manner is critical to providing habitat needed to maintain fish and wildlife populations.

Tree Seedling Program. The George O. White Nursery grows and distributes about 2.1 million low-cost seedlings every year to Missouri citizens. Each year, it processes nearly 13,000 customer orders. It provides free seedlings to approximately 90,000 fourth-grade students for Arbor Day and assists the Monarchs Collaborative with hundreds of milkweed root stock to be planted by Master Naturalist and Master Gardener groups.

Hatchery Program. MDC manages 9 fish hatcheries (5 cold water and 4 warm water). In the past year, approximately 1.3 million trout, 9 million warm water sportfish, and 5,000 Topeka Shiners that are federally listed endangered species were stocked to help maintain quality fishing and restore native populations.

Mobile Applications. MDC continues to use technology as a tool to connect people to nature, including its 3 free mobile applications. The MO Outdoors app enables users to find MDC conservation areas, fishing accesses, hiking trails, shooting ranges, and nature centers around the state by location or based on their desired types of outdoor activities. MO Fishing allows anglers to buy fishing permits and see fishing structures in Missouri water bodies. MDC's most popular app, MO Hunting, allows hunters to buy permits, view regulations, and check-in animal harvests, and app telecheck usage now exceeds traditional methods. At the end of FY20, the 3 apps had more than 811,000 lifetime installs.

Wildlife Health. Through the process of reorganization in MDC, a Wildlife Health Program was formally established. This realignment was conceptualized to address the Department's increased prioritization of health across taxa and systems. In the first year, the Wildlife Health Program has increased response to reports of sick and dead wildlife and made progress on the development of a web-based wildlife health application. The new application will provide a platform for the public and staff to report wildlife health concerns and provide a data management system for tracking results and analyzing trends.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) remains a top wildlife health priority for MDC. New intrastate carcass transport regulations and disposal requirements for taxidermists and meat processors this year were an important step in reducing CWD transmission risks. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges, but core CWD surveillance and management actions continued. Total deer tested for CWD decreased from over 32,000 in 2019 to approximately 15,300 for the 2020 surveillance year. Cooperating taxidermists and meat processors were even more important than ever this year, contributing nearly 60 percent of the year's samples. Staff worked with willing landowners to collectively cull 2,695 deer after seasons closed in areas where CWD has been found, removing 18 CWD-positive deer. Overall, 44 CWD-positive deer were detected, including 3 deer in 2 new counties.

Invasive Species. MDC is actively engaged with and serving in leadership roles within key invasive species collaborations, including the Scenic Rivers Invasive Species Partnership, Missouri Invasive Plant Task Force, Missouri Invasive Forest Pest Council, and Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership. MDC's internal Invasive Species Coordination Team (InSCT) uses the principles of the Comprehensive Conservation Strategy (CCS) to prioritize invasive species to be addressed, locations of focus, and timing of actions. The emphasis and strategic approach, complemented by increased partnerships, will lead to successes in management, control, and eradication of priority invasive species.

Eliminating Feral Hogs in Missouri. MDC is part of a very productive network of federal and state agencies called the Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership (Partnership). All members of the Partnership are dedicated to total elimination of feral hogs from the state and removed 12,635 hogs from Missouri's landscape in 2020. The Partnership dedicated significant resources to greatly expand efforts to strategically scout for and eliminate feral hogs in and around the Mark Twain National Forest and Ozark National Scenic Riverways while still maintaining elimination efforts elsewhere in the state. The Partnership set up the first Incident Command Structure (ICS) in 2020. The ICS has integrated staff from various agencies and improved communication while ensuring accountability and improving efficiency. Missouri successfully applied for 3 Farm Bill grants to aid in the elimination of feral swine. Funding will be utilized to hire 4 private landowner outreach specialist positions through the University of Missouri Extension. Funding will also be utilized to purchase equipment that will aid landowners in repairing feral hog damage to their property. MDC also added 6 full time trappers during the summer of 2020. These trappers are now working with USDA full-time trappers and other Partnership staff.

Helping Missourians Discover Nature. MDC's Discover Nature Schools (DNS) conservation education curriculum is being used in 1,328 (44 percent) Missouri schools to help teachers engage students with hands-on, outdoor learning from grades pre-K to 12. In addition, the Discover Nature Fishing program helps children and families have fun outdoors by learning to fish. The statewide program provides lessons and events to help kids and families gain skills and confidence to fish on their own. MDC staff also provide formal nature-based educational programs to over 300,000 citizens yearly. These programs cover a diverse array of topics including, but not limited to, hunting, angling, hiking, birdwatching, kayaking, shooting sports, and native plants.

Archery in the Schools Program Builds Champions. MDC provides Missouri National Archery in the Schools Program (MoNASP) grants to schools for equipment, as well as free teacher and staff training for those administering the program. More than 100,000 Missouri students from over 800 schools participate in MoNASP. This year's MoNASP State Tournament was held in Branson with over 3,000 archers from 178 schools participating.

Protection. MDC's newest class of 16 conservation agent trainees started the academy April 1, 2020. The training is conducted through 6 months. The 1200-hour training academy is POST certified and consists of training in legal studies, criminal investigations, defensive tactics, boating operations, communications, and resource management. Protection Branch also initiated a canine program with 5 retriever-style breeds and five handlers scheduled to graduate the canine training academy in French Lick, Indiana on May 14, 2021.

Listening to Missourians. In the recent fiscal year, there were numerous public engagement opportunities, including open house meetings, annual hunter and angler surveys, conservation area plan comment periods, regulation committee comments, and Ask MDC contacts. MDC held open houses around the state to gather input on CWD management zones, proposed crappie regulations on 2 large reservoirs, the future elk hunting season, 2021-2025 waterfowl hunting season framework, and Missouri's black bear management plan. MDC also hosted its fourth annual Missouri Conservation Partners Roundtable event, this time a virtual gathering of over 500 partners representing more than 230 organizations. The event provided partners an opportunity to hear from MDC and strengthen collaborative efforts.

Conservation Volunteers. COVID-19 affected many Missourians, including MDC volunteers. However, in spite of the pandemic, people continued to volunteer their time on conservation projects. In calendar year 2020, Master Naturalist volunteers contributed 49,893 hours of service to conservation projects and activities in their local communities. In addition, 2,843 volunteer members of the Missouri Forestkeepers Network contributed 10,455 hours monitoring forest health and taking care of trees. Volunteers at nature centers, interpretive sites, and shooting ranges, along with hunter education instructors and fishing education instructors, recorded 26,357 hours in 2020. Stream Team volunteers contributed 74,878 hours during calendar year 2020.

Communicating with Missourians. All MDC social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, continue to increase followers and engagement. Facebook is MDC's largest social media channel with more than 309,000 followers. MDC's website has 6.86 million unique visitors annually. MDC utilizes email communications to reach 788,653 subscribers, and the free *Missouri Conservationist* and *Xplor* magazines, mailed to more than 770,000 individuals, to share the value of fish, forest, and wildlife resources. The MDC Wild Webcast series highlights key conservation topics and provides a unique opportunity to ask live questions of MDC experts. MDC launched a new podcast, Nature Boost, in late spring 2020 to connect more youth and young adults to nature.

Comprehensive Conservation Strategy (CCS). MDC is being proactive with habitat and species conservation programs by integrating the conservation priorities of our agency and conservation partners into a common framework, which includes the identification of a prioritized network of lands and waters. The focus of the habitat-based portion of the work will be within Conservation Opportunity Areas and subset landscapes called Priority Geographies that have specific objectives to accomplish measurable goals at a landscape level. The CCS integrates the Missouri State Wildlife Action Plan, Forest Action Plan, and other conservation priorities into a comprehensive plan meeting the requirements of both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service.

Community Conservation. The Green City Coalition, a partnership between the City of St. Louis, MDC, Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District, and St. Louis Development Corporation, addresses social, economic, and environmental issues surrounding vacant properties by working with member organizations and residents to convert vacant land to community green spaces. Over 200 vacant, publicly owned parcels (23 acres) have been reimagined by neighborhood residents

and students through community events. A Community Land Trust is being developed to help pursue acquiring additional vacant lots and managing those as green space.

Private Land Partnership Programs. MDC has matching fund agreements with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for the Audubon Conservation Ranching-Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the Regional Grassland Bird and Grazing Land Enhancement RCPP, and the Restoring Glade and Woodland Communities RCPP. The Conservation Ranching RCPP annually provides \$80,000 of MDC match for \$290,000 of financial assistance from NRCS. The Regional Grassland Bird RCPP helps cattle producers implement grazing practices that provide habitat for grassland birds while providing quality forage for cattle. MDC provides approximately \$100,000 annually to match NRCS' annual financial assistance contribution of \$192,000. Through the Restoring Glade and Woodland Communities RCPP, MDC provides approximately \$64,000 annually, in combination with NRCS' annual financial assistance contribution of \$272,000, directly to private landowners to assist in management and restoration of glades, woodlands, and forest habitats. MDC received new RCPPs, funded by NRCS in FY23, for a total of \$2.3 million in additional funding. The funding will be in the form of landowner financial and technical assistance and determining the conservation and economic outcomes of buffer projects. The Sand Prairie Restoration project will focus on restoring and protecting sand prairies in southeast Missouri. The Precision Farm Data and Buffer Placement project will target conservation activities to unprofitable cropland acres and leverage existing voluntary carbon and other ecosystem services market opportunities.

Technical Assistance for Landowners. MDC provides landowners with technical assistance to benefit fish, forest, and wildlife conservation. Over 20,000 contacts were made last year helping landowners with \$2.4 million in funding for conservation practices and program cost-shares. MDC's Missouri Outdoor Recreational Access Program (MRAP) enhances habitat management and public access to outdoor recreation opportunities on private land. Currently, 64 property owners have signed agreements to provide recreational access on nearly 18,000 acres. The MRAP is funded through the USDA Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program. Missouri's Call Before You Cut program provides information to forest landowners who may be contemplating a timber sale. Since inception, over 4,300 landowners who own over 480,000 acres have received a free packet of information.

Helping Communities One Tree at a Time. In FY21, MDC funded 40 Tree Resource Improvement and Maintenance grants totaling \$394,234. This funding helps communities with urban forestry projects, such as master plans, tree inventory, education, hazard tree removals, pruning, and planting. MDC continues its partnership with Beyond Housing in north St. Louis by providing funding to employ a community forester who assists underserved communities with community forestry needs, including outreach and education, technical assistance, grant writing, and management plans.

Assisting Communities Improve Wildfire, Prescribed Fire, and Emergency Response. MDC awarded \$402,768 in Volunteer Fire Assistance grants to 148 rural fire departments to purchase wildfire clothing, small equipment, and provided vehicles and emergency response equipment through its Federal Excess Property programs. Federal Hazard Mitigation aided in training and equipping 3 Prescribed Burn Cooperatives for habitat restoration on private lands.

MDC funded 47 grants to volunteer fire departments to purchase workman's compensation coverage, protecting 928 volunteer fire fighters.

Missourians for Monarchs Collaborative. MDC is working with Missourians for Monarchs, a collaboration of more than 40 conservation and agricultural organizations, state and federal agencies, utility companies, agribusinesses, academia, volunteer organizations, and cooperatives, to carry out a collaborative monarch and pollinator conservation plan for Missouri. To date, the collaborative has been successful at creating or improving over 435,000 acres of new pollinator and monarch habitat. Current focus of the collaborative is on monitoring milkweed numbers on these acres to ensure that milkweed population goals are being met.

Agriculture Partnerships. In partnership with MDC, the Missouri's Corn and Soybean Associations, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, a position was established to develop and oversee efforts that promote soil, water, and wildlife conservation approaches to Missouri corn and soybean farmers. A similar position has been established with the state's largest landowner cooperative, MFA. The position is instrumental in piloting precision conservation using the cooperatives crop consultation to analyze ag producer yield and determine areas of the farm that would be more profitable to convert to conservation buffers for pollinators and bobwhite quail. Agreements were implemented with MFA and University of Missouri Extension to promote native grass forage systems through workshops and demonstrations resulting in hundreds of livestock producers being trained on native grasses forage establishment and management that would not otherwise come to MDC for assistance. MDC partnered with the University of Missouri to open a Center for Regenerative Agriculture to promote practices that improve soil health and biodiversity.

Kansas City Community Conservation Partnerships. Deep Roots is a network of more than 60 private, public, and nonprofit organizations in the Kansas City Metropolitan area that have a shared vision – a future of beautiful, native landscapes connecting heartland communities where nature and people thrive together. The partners are expanding their efforts to engage the communities surrounding MDC's Anita B. Gorman Discovery Center and increase program attendance. A subset of these partners in Kansas City is developing a Green Jobs Corps aimed at under-represented youth that will help maintain public access to nature and promote native plants.

Inaugural Black Bear Hunting Season. The Conservation Commission recently established the state's first black bear hunting season. The limited and highly regulated hunting season was established to provide opportunity for Missourians to participate in the sustainable harvest of this valuable natural resource. Conservative permit and harvest quotas were established for the state's 3 Black Bear Management Zones (BMZ) to provide for sufficient hunter opportunity while allowing for continued growth of the bear population. The inaugural season will open on October 18, 2021 and run for 10 days or until the BMZ-specific harvest quota is reached. Hunters will be allowed to use firearms or archery. The use of bait or dogs is prohibited.

First Elk Season. Missouri's first elk-hunting season was held in October and December 2020. A random drawing was conducted to select 5 permit holders, from more than 19,215 permit applications, including 33 for a single resident-landowner antlered-elk permit and 19,182 for 4 general permits. All 5 hunters were successful during the December firearm season.