

MINNESOTA STATE REPORT

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Agency and Division Response to COVID-19

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) is in the 15th month of managing natural resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many sections of this report highlight how we changed management activities to mitigate COVID risk, and we continue to evolve our response. First and foremost, our goal is to keep our staff and the public safe. In March 2020, most state employees were required to telework to the extent possible. Hatcheries and license center staff have consistently reported to work locations. For office-based work, we are preparing for a gradual return to work locations starting around Thursday, July 1, and we are using the learnings from virtual workplaces and meetings to adapt our work. We have adjusted some of our hiring practices and are exploring options for work locations given our experience teleworking. Field and office activities we undertake have been re-engineered to incorporate social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), and workflow changes to minimize viral spread.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

George Floyd's killing took place 11 miles from our state capital and the MN DNR headquarters. The event, coupled with strong desire by our governor and agency leadership, has fueled new efforts to improve our division's cultural competence and attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In the past year, we ensured all staff completed DEI training. Our division leadership team and another group of line staff will soon undertake personal intercultural development inventory (IDI). The IDI will foster the division's ability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences. This is a necessary skill as we become a more diverse state. We are also reviewing required qualifications for various job classifications, and removing unnecessary barriers to the application and hiring process. This summer, our division will host two interns that are in their second year of a program called IDEC: Increasing Diversity in Environmental Careers. The IDEC is a partnership between three state agencies and Conservation Corps of MN and Iowa. Each IDEC student learns about careers at natural resource agencies in the first year, and works as an intern at their chosen agency in their second.

Legacy Funding

Since 2008, three-eighths of one percent sales tax has been constitutionally dedicated to four Legacy Funds. The Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) receives one-third of these proceeds in order "to protect, restore, and enhance forests, prairies, wetlands, and habitat for fish, game, and wildlife." This funding must supplement, not substitute for, work funded through traditional sources. The MN DNR, along with other agencies and organizations, applies for these funds annually on a competitive basis. The Division of Fish and Wildlife (FAW) was awarded nearly \$55 million in OHF funds in FY20.

The MN 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, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local governments for habitat projects. To date, nearly \$90 million has been appropriated to CPL, with \$10 million slated for this year. This program has improved or protected over 250,000 acres of habitat with 850 grants, leveraging more than \$10 million in non-state funding from more than 200 conservation clubs and government entities in Minnesota.

Initiative for New Funding Model

The MN DNR is preparing to launch and lead a future-focused initiative to identify a new vision and framework for conservation and outdoor recreation funding in the state. Traditional funding sources have supported the outdoor opportunities available today, but user fees and general fund allocations are insufficient to meet the current demand for high quality and diverse outdoor experiences and properly steward and manage our natural resources.

Throughout 2021, the project will focus on research, interdivisional collaboration with staff, and public engagement to identify possible solutions. By the last half of 2022, we will have an actionable funding framework that is reflective of research, best practices, staff expertise, and diverse public input.

Ice Fishing

Ice fishing continues as the fastest growing sector of sport fishing in Minnesota. The last decade has seen a rapid expansion of wheeled fish houses. Wheeled houses, which function like hard-sided campers, are easier to transport than older permanent shelters, and this ease of mobility allows anglers to spend more hours on the lake each trip. Minnesota requires licenses for hard-sided fish houses, with over 58,000 licenses sold in 2020, which represents a 33 percent increase over 2019.

The MN DNR does not index ice-fishing pressure statewide but conducts creel surveys on important waters. The winter of 2020-2021 saw a combined 7.2 million hours of winter fishing pressure on Mille Lacs Lake, Upper Red Lake, and Lake of the Woods. While we do not have annual creel data on many of our smaller lakes, anecdotal information suggests increased winter activity across Minnesota. Overall fishing license sales in 2020 were the second highest recorded in the past 20 years.

Minnesota Driftless (MND) Brook Trout Strain

Brook trout are the only stream trout native to Minnesota, but their populations were thought to be extirpated by habitat degradation in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Hatchery-reared brook trout originating from hatcheries in the northeastern United States were used to reestablish populations. However, recent genetic testing in southeastern Minnesota identified brook trout in 37 streams that did not match any known hatchery source, with at least three unique sub-populations, likely representing a remnant “Heritage” population. The strain is referred to as Minnesota Driftless (MND). Genetic testing also revealed that the previous hatchery strain, Minnesota Wild (MNW), was mixed with an eastern strain.

Rearing of MNW brook trout ended in 2015 when all brood fish in the hatchery were depopulated due to disease. Since then, Minnesota hatcheries have not had a strain of brook trout suitable for stocking into streams where genetic origin is of importance. After ten years, two streams tested clean for three consecutive years and it was finally possible to collect gametes in

southeastern Minnesota in 2019 and 2020. The MN DNR plans to rear offspring from the wild fish to develop captive brood stock of wild brook trout genetics.

Mille Lacs Lake Management

The draft Mille Lacs Lake Management Plan identifies the following goals for the walleye fishery: maximize fishing opportunity, eliminate unplanned fishing closures, and allow harvest when the state share of the harvestable surplus allows. Using these goals, state and tribal fisheries managers agreed to a harvestable surplus of 150,000 pounds, of which 87,800 pounds is the state's share for the 2021 fishing year. The harvestable surplus, and the state's share, have remained unchanged since 2018. Lower than expected winter harvest, and relatively high forage abundance suggest that angling success for walleye will be slower in May and June than it has been for the past several years. These factors allow for some walleye harvest opportunity during the open water season, though most of the season will remain catch-and release.

Smallmouth bass fishing has become popular on Mille Lacs Lake as the population expanded following the invasion of zebra mussel and the development of a high quality size structure. Anglers targeting smallmouth bass comprise about 33 percent of the angling pressure, which is up from 3 percent in 2011.

COVID-19 Field Guidelines

Early in the pandemic, the Section of Fisheries assembled a team to develop guidance for fish sampling and water-based field activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Team members developed protocols that allowed staff to safely complete fieldwork in a COVID environment. This work helped lay some of the groundwork for the agency's guidance documents.

Forest Management and Coordination

The MN DNR continues to implement the Sustainable Timber Harvest (STH) initiative. FAW participates in management of over five million acres of state forestlands, for a full spectrum of ecological and economic values. Staff coordinate at the local level on timber stand development and contribute to the creation and maintenance of management opportunity areas allowing for site-specific management for moose, deer winter areas, small block management areas, old forest complexes, and other diverse habitat needs. Timber harvest policy incorporates alternative guidelines for species-specific harvest rotation ages and reserve patch allowances to enhance future habitat. Sustainable timber harvest uses ecological section level analysis to ensure harvest is distributed across the landscape. FAW participates fully in the development of the STH Midpoint monitoring project to help evaluate forest conditions to ensure overall forest health and sustainability of wildlife habitats throughout the forested portions of Minnesota.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

During the fall 2020 hunting season, CWD surveillance took place across five areas of the state. Three of the five were designated as management zones, as CWD had been found in wild deer; the remaining two zones were newly created in response to recent detections of disease on captive deer farms. Due to COVID-19 safety concerns, only voluntary surveillance was conducted and resulted in poor participation from hunters. There were 27 new detections of CWD in wild deer in fall 2020-winter 2021. A dumpster program was in place for hunters to dispose of butchered remains for deer harvested in all management and control zones where carcass

movement restrictions existed. The dumpsters were well used; 41 dumpsters collected more than 200 tons of deer waste that went to lined landfills or incinerators.

White-tailed Deer Projects

Over the past year, the MN DNR has been conducting deer research in three areas of the state. In the forest zone, research is focused on enhancing wildlife managers' ability to prescribe forest manipulations that support deer population goals. Locations from 89 collared deer are allowing fine-scale measurements of habitat use and selection at the stand or cover type level under varying winter conditions and deer densities. In the southern farmland region, the MN DNR used an unmanned aerial vehicle with thermal imaging to determine the efficacy of using drones to locate fawns for capture in wildlife management areas (WMAs) and to validate performance of expandable GPS-collar components on free-ranging neonates. We identified 122 fawn thermal signatures in 2020. We flew the drone for 41.1 hours and covered 1,640 hectares (40 hectares per hour). In southeast Minnesota, deer were captured and collared to better understand dispersal, movement patterns, and survival, particularly in and around the CWD management zone covering Houston, Fillmore, Olmsted, and Winona counties. About 51 percent of males and 24 percent of females dispersed from their natal range on average about 20 km. Average annual survival for females and males was 0.73 and 0.54, which spanned the yearling and young adult age classes.

Duck and Pheasant Plans

In 2019, the MN DNR updated its 2006 Long-range Duck Recovery Plan and 2015 Minnesota Pheasant Summit Action Plan, incorporating agency expertise and input from partner agencies, NGOs, and the public, and producing the Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. Instead of long-term objectives that are often hard to operationalize, both plans focus on shorter-term goals within the MN DNR's management scope, through both habitat and human dimensions issues and strategies. The plans recognize the multifaceted benefits of grassland and wetland conservation and management, such as pollinator habitat, clean water, and carbon storage, while continuing to support wildlife habitat.

Specific to Duck Action Plan objectives, the MN DNR led an extensive review of waterfowl harvest regulations in the last year with the goals of simplifying regulations and increasing recruitment. FAW is implementing a new Roving Crew model that will streamline reporting and, hopefully, lead to increased habitat restoration and enhancement work on both grasslands and wetlands in the long-term. We are also refining our mapping efforts to identify strategic or focal areas across the farmland/prairie pothole region of the state. Last, we continued outreach to partner agencies and NGOs on a range of topics related to these plans, especially around the areas of climate change.

Wetland Management Program

Using Outdoor Heritage Fund dollars and modeled after Minnesota's successful Shallow Lakes Program, the new Wetland Management Program will assess and implement management on small wetlands, with initial work focused on wetland complexes in the prairie region. Initially, two wetland specialists were hired to establish assessment protocols and pilot management processes. Funding has been obtained to add two additional wetland specialists, still focused on prairie wetland complexes, and create a dedicated supervisor to oversee the program's implementation in the field and guide anticipated growth.

Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan

The Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025 is a statewide conservation strategy developed with and implemented by conservation partners under the leadership of the MN DNR's Division of Ecological and Water Resources. The goals, which are focused around habitat, species, and engagement, include the following: sustaining and enhancing terrestrial and aquatic habitats within the context of the larger landscape/watershed and a changing climate; conservation actions directed at issues like disease, deliberate killing, low reproductive capacity, or poor dispersal ability for the 346 species in greatest conservation need (SGCN) identified in the plan; and engagement with conservation partners and citizens that involves sharing data, tracking efforts and accomplishments, and other opportunities.

Outreach Grants and Education and Skills Programs

In 2020, our Fish and Wildlife Outreach Team wrapped up the remaining open grants of the capacity-building Angler and Hunter Recruitment and Retention Grants and pivoted to administering the new "No Child Left Inside" grant program to support youth natural resource education and outdoor recreation, including fishing, hunting, and shooting. We had an overwhelming response to the No Child Left Inside grants, with over \$6 million of requests in two short grant phases, and we were able to fund 93 projects distributed to six regions of the state totaling \$872,996.30.

COVID-19 shut down most in-person fishing and hunting programming for much of 2020; however, our National Archery in the Schools (NASP) program was able to recruit seven new NASP Schools during 2020 that will potentially reach 2,200 students. Our Becoming an Outdoors Woman (BOW) program was able to host several events in early 2020 that were attended by 821 total participants. In response to the pandemic, BOW developed an on-line newsletter to both provide resources for women to learn outdoor skills and provide social support for women. The newsletter has been well received with a distribution list of over 3,253.

Our Latino and Karen Fishing and Hunting Skills Liaisons, who are both multi-lingual, served as a regular resource for Latino and Karen community members by responding to questions in their native language. Additionally, we were able to organize a pre-pandemic Firearms Safety Class for Karen, expand our online content in Spanish, and provide several translated fishing factsheets and other virtual content to these communities.

Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3)

The Minnesota R3 Advisory Council has continued to meet and develop a statewide R3 plan to be released in 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all of our MN DNR and partner-led Learn to Hunt programs and mentored hunts were canceled. We quickly shifted our attention to presenting our Learn to Hunt series to an online format. We had a successful two-part series on Learn to Hunt Turkey in April that was well received. In the fall, we launched an 11-part lunch hour series on Learn to Hunt Deer, which had 300 individuals representing eleven states and provinces, and five different countries—including participants from Finland and New Zealand. In addition, we have had over 3,500 people view the recordings after the event. Due to the success of this online programming, we have started a weekly webinar series titled Minnesota Outdoor Skills and Stewardship Series, which officially launched in early 2021. We are continuing to update and develop our Mentor Network to include more virtual opportunities. We are looking forward to serving even more Minnesotans in the future with a combination for both virtual and in-person trainings as we move forward.