

MINNESOTA STATE REPORT

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DEI Efforts

Tribal Relations

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) has government-to-government relationships with eleven federally recognized Tribal governments (Tribes) whose ceded land created the State of Minnesota. In 2021, the Minnesota legislature passed a law requiring state agencies to proactively engage with tribes on matters that have tribal implications. MN DNR has been actively working to develop policy and procedures to support this legislative direction.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

The divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Parks and Trails partnered on a pilot training program to advance DEI competencies of staff. The “DEI champions” cohort training was designed to increase the cultural competence and cultural agility of participants, prepare participants to incorporate DEI practices into their own work, and champion DEI within the divisions. Each of the 26 individuals came to the program through self-nomination and investigated a DEI project of their choosing.

Translation of Regulations

People who speak Hmong, Karen, Somali, or Spanish can now access Minnesota’s hunting and fishing regulations in their language. The MN DNR translated the Minnesota Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping regulations booklets, deer permit area map, and the Minnesota Waterfowl Hunting Regulations booklets into the four most commonly spoken languages in Minnesota households next to English. The translated booklets are available in digital format on the MN DNR website and in print at some MN DNR offices, license vendors, and Minnesota state parks.

Conservation funding

Legacy Funding

Since 2008, three-eighths of one percent sales tax has been constitutionally dedicated to four Legacy Funds. One of these, 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, and in FY22 it was awarded \$23 million in project funding.

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 \$100 million has been appropriated to CPL, with \$9.45 million slated for 2022. This program has improved or protected over 250,000 acres of habitat with 900 grants, leveraging more than \$10 million in non-state funding from more than 200 conservation clubs and government entities in Minnesota.

New Funding Model

Minnesota's current natural resources funding system cannot sustainably support continued conservation, natural resource management, and equitable access to quality outdoor recreation. For example, user fees cannot reasonably keep pace with inflation while also ensuring the MN DNR can appropriately steward resources and provide open and affordable access to the outdoors for all people.

The MN DNR is embarking on an effort, in collaboration with Minnesotans, to identify a new funding framework. It is to ensure that MN DNR can serve new, returning, and long-time outdoor enthusiasts, and sustainably manage our natural resources for generations to come. Currently, the project is focusing on idea generation and public engagement to identify a future vision and possible funding solutions. By the second half of 2022, we will have an actionable framework that is reflective of research, best practices, and diverse public input.

Fisheries updates

Lanesboro State Fish Hatchery Construction

Major construction that started in 2019 at Minnesota's largest coldwater fish hatchery is now complete. The project cost approximately \$5 million and involved complete replacement of the hatchery headquarters building, electrical/utility upgrades, and the addition of a degassing tower. The new building includes incubation and nursery facilities, offices, and visitor services. The upgrades ensure the ideal water quality and rearing conditions for trout in their early life stages. Additionally, the new facilities have improved safety and security, are ADA accessible, and have improved air quality for employees and visitors.

Lower Mississippi River Walleye Strain

An egg collection operation was initiated at Sarah Lake due to the persistence of a recently identified Lower Mississippi Strain of Walleyes (LMS) in many southern Minnesota lakes despite decades of stocking northern-strain Walleyes. This suggested survival and reproductive advantages of the LMS fish in those waters and showed a possible performance advantage.

Initial results of this study indicated a generally higher survival of the LMS strain in the study lakes. Quantification of the costs of stocking of each strain identified that even though the LMS fry were more expensive to initially stock into the lakes, the higher survival of the LMS fry translated to a much lower cost per fall fingerling than that of the MIS strain. High natural reproduction was also identified in several of the lakes; the majority of which consisted of high levels of LMS ancestry.

Predator Diet Study

Muskellunge, walleye, northern pike, and largemouth bass are top predator fish in many Minnesota lakes. What and how much those predators eat, and how their diets compare, are the focus of an ongoing fisheries research project. We are using three approaches to examine consumption patterns of these top predators in Minnesota lakes.

Preliminary results indicate that muskellunge populations consume less food than the other predators in a lake, because they are typically much less abundant. They also consume different prey resources such as white sucker, northern pike, and bullheads. While not consistent in every lake, walleye and northern pike appear to have the highest amount of diet overlap, with yellow perch and sunfish being their favorite prey in many lakes. Lastly, largemouth bass prefer to eat crayfish and other invertebrates in most lakes when they are available, but sunfish were also important in some lakes.

Modified Unified Method

The Modified Unified Method (MUM) was a multi-agency collaboration that took place in Pool 8 of the Mississippi River in the spring and fall of 2021 and April of 2022. The USGS developed the MUM from a Chinese technique of driving fish from cell to cell using sound/electrofishers in conjunction with block nets from a large area to a more concentrated location to capture invasive carp in a commercial seine. The MUM had not been deployed in low-density populations before, so staff were interested in seeing how effective it would be without high densities present. In addition, each fish removed can help to curb the possibility of reproduction in Pool 8.

Collaborating partners such as MN DNR, WI DNR, USGS, and USFWS started in early April 2022 and worked for four consecutive days in four different sites to capture as many invasive carp as possible. The result was six Silver Carp captured. Five were captured at one location in a commercial seine and one silver carp that was captured at another site in a trammel net draped over a block net. The event was a success in terms of using and adapting this tool as an effective capture method and will be deployed in the future to remove Silver Carp.

Wildlife updates

Co-management of Farmed Cervids

The 2021 Minnesota State Legislature, in a special session ending in July 2021, issued direction to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Board of Animal Health (BAH) by amending Chapter 35.155 to provide concurrent authority to the Commissioner of Natural Resources and BAH to regulate farmed white-tailed deer.

Work accomplishments included the creation of a project plan and project team, which established deliverables including completion of at least 40 inspections of white-tailed deer facilities with BAH staff, development and implementation of data management and protocols, and engagement with the BAH on recommendations for policy and programmatic changes to reduce the spread of chronic wasting disease (CWD).

Wolf Plan Update

The MN DNR initiated an update of the 2001 Minnesota Wolf Plan in 2020 and is in the last stage of review before finalizing the plan later this summer. The process to update the plan has included significant tribal involvement, a recent assessment of public attitudes, and significant public engagement that included technical experts along with a variety of stakeholders. Remaining steps for finalizing the plan include ongoing tribal consultation and a public review and comment period. Our efforts to update the plan have focused on ensuring that Minnesota continues to have a robust wolf population and a management approach that is broadly accepted by the diversity of values that citizen's hold toward wolves.

Rare resources

Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan

We recently produced and released a Wildlife Action Plan 5-Year Report. This report summarizes accomplishments 2015 to 2020 and identifies gaps in need of further work. We continue to focus on conducting species prioritizations to assess where data may be lacking on SGCN populations throughout the state. Species response monitoring with respect to habitat management is on-going. The species monitoring approach is integrated, focused on surveying plant, insect, and bird response within the same timeframe to get a more comprehensive understanding of management effects on multiple taxonomic groups. Investments have also been made toward achieving increased engagement. We have recently added an outreach (social media) specialist and a community science coordinator, and both will assist in expanding public engagement and volunteering.

Outreach and R3

Outreach Grants and Education and Skills Programs

In 2021, our Fish and Wildlife Outreach Team continued administration of the “No Child Left Inside” grant program to support youth natural resource education and outdoor recreation, including fishing, hunting, and shooting. Based on the success of the first two phases in 2020 that supported 93 projects across the state, the 2021 Minnesota Legislature provided another \$900,000 over the next two years to continue the program.

The pandemic continued to limit our in-person programming throughout 2021, which allowed us to continue to develop new and additional online content and programming. Major activities included the development of a large amount of trout fishing content, including the development of a StreamFinder application, analogous to our popular LakeFinder app. Since it launched in April, our new trout and StreamFinder web pages have had over 200,000 page views with 137,000 users in 2021.

Despite the pandemic, our National Archery in the Schools (NASP) program was able to recruit seven new NASP Schools during 2021 for the basic archery income agreements and one 3D archery program that will potentially reach 2,200 students.

Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation

MN DNR Outreach started our weekly Outdoor Skills and Stewardship Series in March of 2021. Through the end of February 2022, this series has captured over 2,850 unique emails who have registered for our programs. These webinars have covered a variety of topics and will continue to explore hunting, shooting, and related activities moving forward.

The past year also saw Minnesota draft its state-wide R3 plan, currently undergoing revisions and editing, as well as the second iteration of the citizen advisory R3 Council formed following the completion of the initial council's two-year service commitment. Finally, in the spring of 2022, we saw a return to in-person programming after a two-year hiatus.