

## **MINNESOTA STATE REPORT**

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### **New Funding to Modernize Outdoor Recreation Facilities and Build Climate Resiliency**

During the 2023 legislative session, the transformative Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) initiative was approved by the legislature and signed by Governor Tim Walz. The \$149.9 million investment will help ensure Minnesotans of all abilities and interests enjoy a world-class recreation system, whatever outdoor experience they choose. Get Out MORE projects will center on five key areas: enhancing access and welcoming new users to public lands and outdoor recreation facilities; revitalizing camping and related infrastructure; enhancing fisheries and fishing infrastructure; modernizing boating access; and restoring streams and modernizing water-related infrastructure to support outdoor recreation.

Additional funding was approved during the 2023 legislative session to enhance grasslands and restore wetlands on more than 6,000 acres of public wildlife management areas for carbon capture and resiliency. By enhancing grasslands with native plants and restoring wetlands we can sequester more carbon, provide higher quality wildlife habitat, and improve water quality. Enhancement and restoration also increase water storage and groundwater recharge, thereby increasing resilience to both floods and drought.

### **Translation of Fishing and Hunting Regulations**

In 2023, MN DNR continued translating fishing and hunting regulations into Hmong, Karen, Somali, and Spanish to help diverse populations enjoy outdoor activities without encountering language barriers. In addition to distributing 20,000 printed copies, our translated regulations were downloaded 907,000 times, which is a 205% surge from the previous year. This constitutes 46% of the total downloads of the regulations in all five languages, including English.

### **Native Rough Fish Management**

The 2023 Minnesota legislature directed the MN DNR to develop a written report on necessary conservation measures and research needs for native fish currently designated as “rough fish”. The report was to outline recommendations for statutory and rule changes needed to protect Minnesota’s native rough fish, including a recommendation to amend statute to classify Minnesota’s native rough fish separately from invasive fish.

MN DNR engaged stakeholders through a public questionnaire, utilized feedback from an external work group, called on expertise from an internal technical team, and reviewed available data. The public questionnaire received 592 responses. Based on the responses, 81% believed native rough fish are a critical ecosystem component, greater than 75% wanted fish identification materials and other educational options on native rough fish, and approximately 50% supported

the establishment of bag limits. The external work group consisted of 14 individuals that represented bowfishing, commercial fishing, diverse anglers, conservation organizations, and rough fish interests. The external work group met five times in 2023 and developed four recommendations that were included in the legislative report: 1) provide more education about native rough fish, 2) increase environmental restoration efforts that benefit native rough fish, 3) hire specialized staff to advance native rough fish initiatives, and 4) conduct more research on native rough fish.

As a result of these efforts, two recommendations for legislative action were developed: 1) eliminate the current “rough fish” definition in statute and replace it with “native rough fish” and 2) grant MN DNR expedited authority to establish daily and possession limits for native rough fish. The remainder of the report identified research needs and activities, the need to evaluate the state’s wanton waste policy, the need for adding a bowfishing license, how to implement native fish educational and outreach activities, and habitat improvements that benefit native fishes.

### **Trout Stream Habitat Improvements**

Trout streams in the Driftless Area of southeastern Minnesota support excellent populations of brown trout, brook trout, and rainbow trout. However, historical land use practices severed access to natural floodplains and negatively impacted habitat on many of these streams. Nearly two miles of cold-water stream habitat was improved on eight trout streams by MN DNR’s southeast habitat crew in 2023. To reduce erosion, increase fish cover, and improve water quality on one of these eight streams (Pine Creek), crews used rip rap to stabilize 13 stream banks totaling 3,075 feet along with sloping and seeding 4,950 feet of stream bank. Crews also installed 12 grade control structures, 33 root wads, 20 cover rocks, and 10 stream deflectors to improve in-stream brook and brown trout habitat on Pine Creek.

### **Minnesota-grown Bait Fish Initiative**

As a result of increasing demand for live bait and variable harvests, there have been reports of seasonal minnow shortages in Minnesota for the past several years. MN DNR developed a report that was presented to the Minnesota legislature in 2023 with recommendations for ensuring a viable and stable Minnesota grown bait supply. Between October 2022 and October 2023, MN DNR staff met with angler groups and minnow producers, dealers, and retailers to receive input on minnow availability, engage stakeholders about minnow shortage issues, discuss potential causes of minnow shortages, and provide recommendations to create a viable and sustainable Minnesota-grown bait supply. Emails were sent to minnow dealers between each meeting to facilitate broader communications and receive recommendations from as many bait producers as possible. Discussions resulted in the following recommendations:

- Explore opportunities to utilize artificial ponds and other minnow rearing techniques to supplement wild harvest.
- Continue watershed-based VHS testing to maintain VHS-free zones and to facilitate minnow harvest.
- Increase licensed sucker producer access to white sucker eggs.
- Maximize minnow harvest while maintaining minimal zebra mussel transfer risk.

- Facilitate minnow-harvest access to areas that may have been previously restricted or underutilized, such as trout waters, wildlife management areas, or other units of the Outdoor Recreation Act.
- Remove non-target species from minnow ponds.
- Authorize novel gear for harvesting minnows.
- Establish and maintain regular communication between MN DNR and minnow harvesters and dealers.
- Research cause(s) of leech harvest decline.

### **Adopt-a-WMA Program**

The Minnesota legislature initiated the Adopt-a-WMA program in 2011 to encourage and recognize citizen assistance with improving and maintaining wildlife management areas (WMAs). In 2023, MN DNR increased efforts to promote and facilitate participation by individuals, groups, and businesses in the program. MN DNR's southern region established nine new Adopt-a-WMA agreements in 2023, which resulted in the adoption of 77 WMAs. MN DNR's central and northwest regions continue to utilize no-fee contract models to facilitate WMA adoptions at larger scales by local chapters of conservation groups, including Pheasants Forever and the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association.

### **Expanding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Efforts**

The DEI Champions Cohort is a voluntary training program for MN DNR employees to develop their cultural competence. Now in its third year, this approximately year-long program begins with each participant completing an Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessment (exploring the capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonalities). The cohort meets monthly to discuss DEI topics and encourages individual projects for employees to explore concepts shared in the training. Example projects from Division of Fish and Wildlife staff include angling accessibility for all abilities, responding to intolerance from the public, and Ojibwe cultural values of wild rice. This program begins to address agency culture and capacity as referenced in AFWA's Relevancy Roadmap.

MN DNR also continues to participate in the Increasing Diversity in Environmental Careers (IDEC) project, which provides a college-to-workforce pathway for underrepresented students (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities) who are pursuing STEM degrees at state and tribal colleges and technical schools. Through a strategic partnership between MN DNR, MN Pollution Control Agency, MN Board of Water and Soil Resources, and Conservation Corps Minnesota and Iowa, this project intends to reduce barriers that inhibit underrepresented students from completing STEM degrees and obtaining environmental employment. During the first summer's paid internship, students learn about careers at the state agencies noted above. During the second and potentially third summer, the student selects an agency's program or division to work for as a paid intern. IDEC also offers a mentorship program, pairing students with professionals to foster productive conversations about careers in natural resources. MN DNR's Division of Fish and Wildlife recently hired an IDEC graduate to a full-time position and is hosting additional students as interns this summer.

## **Moose Habitat Planning**

Moose are an iconic species and particularly important to the tribal nations in northeastern Minnesota; however, Minnesota's moose population has declined about 50% in the past 20 years. Although a number of issues are impacting moose, including parasites, predation, and climate change, habitat decline is a contributing and compounding stressor. With the support of tribal, federal, county, and non-governmental organizations, MN DNR applied for and was awarded a grant by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's America the Beautiful Challenge program to fund a collaborative planning effort focusing on large-scale moose habitat restoration. This project, launched in June 2023, is bringing together over 15 organizations to identify strategies to address and overcome the challenges facing moose habitat restoration efforts. These organizations will then apply the strategies by developing an implementation plan for three project areas (up to 50,000 acres each) to accomplish treatments across ownership boundaries over the next 5-10 years. The resulting plans will enhance moose habitat and inform long-term moose habitat management.

## **Elk Restoration**

Elk in Minnesota have been categorized as a special concern species since 1984 due to susceptibility to catastrophic events and other vulnerabilities associated with low population levels and limited range in northwest Minnesota. According to current statute, elk are managed to maintain the same population goals established in 2016. During the 2024 legislative session, MN DNR proposed language to remove a statutory tie between elk herd populations in northwestern Minnesota and agricultural damage payments – this would allow MN DNR to increase elk populations after demonstrating public support for expanding the elk herd. In addition, the Red Lake Nation asserted off-reservation 1863 treaty rights and hunted elk in northwest Minnesota in 2022 and 2023. MN DNR understands that the tribe plans to conduct annual hunts, and the MN DNR is in conversations with Red Lake Nation to determine how to support more elk hunting.

With support and direction from the Minnesota legislature, MN DNR has partnered with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa on the band's proposal to restore elk to the Fond du Lac Reservation and surrounding area in northeastern Minnesota. The 2023 Minnesota Legislature provided \$2.3 million in funding to the Fond du Lac Band and MN DNR to expand Minnesota's elk population and range from existing herds in northwestern Minnesota to the area surrounding the Fond du Lac State Forest and the Fond du Lac Reservation. MN DNR is working on elk management broadly across Minnesota and is supporting Fond du Lac's restoration proposal by providing staff support (e.g., hiring an elk coordinator funded by 2023 legislative appropriation) and exploring the expansion of elk. MN DNR has initiated discussions with tribal leaders, local landowners, agricultural producers, legislators, and local government officials to discuss the possibility of increased elk populations.

## **Heritage Brook Trout Reintroductions**

In the early 2000s, MN DNR staff sampled over 175 streams to determine if any native brook trout populations remained; 37 of those streams contained brook trout with remnant heritage genetics. Staff used eggs and milt from these wild populations to create a resilient strain of brook trout with heritage genetics known as the MN Driftless strain. These fish were reared into adulthood at the Peterson Hatchery and produced fingerlings, which were stocked for the first time in August 2023 in 14 southeastern Minnesota streams where these fish likely existed in the past. Staff also began stocking MN Driftless strain brook trout fingerlings into suitable streams in the

western Twin Cities metro, Duluth, Fergus Falls, and Little Falls areas. These stocking efforts enhance populations in streams lacking brook trout reproduction and increase opportunities for people to fish for Minnesota's only native stream trout species.