

Wisconsin DNR – State of State Report 2025
101 S Webster Street
Madison, WI 53703

Division of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

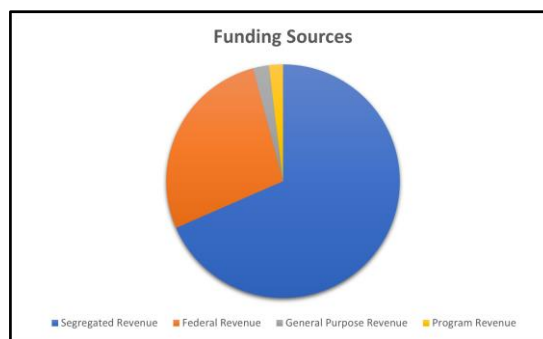
The division of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) plans and directs activities to protect, manage, conserve and wisely use the state's lands, plants, wildlife, fisheries, and recreational resources. This division's goals are accomplished by establishing objectives which include developing and maintaining game and nongame fish and wildlife populations; coordinating long-range programs of management and protection for natural heritage conservation; and providing necessary access, opportunities, development, and operations for statewide recreational and conservation activities within state parks, state forests, wildlife and fish lands, public water bodies, and state natural areas.

FWP Goals at a Glance

- Everyone feels invited and welcome to explore state lands, get involved in outdoor recreation opportunities, and invest in conservation.
- Use sound science and research along with advisory committee recommendations and public input, to ensure sustainable and responsible management of Wisconsin's resources.
- Maintain a professionally and culturally supported workforce through various belonging and engagement initiatives.
- Ensure financial security and manage impacts to work priorities by exploring alternative funding sources and creatively promoting existing funding sources.

FWP Budget

Funding Source	FTE Positions
Segregated Revenue	484.53
Federal Revenue	114.59
Program Revenue	10
General Purpose Revenue	2.5
Grand Total	611.62



Current Initiatives – Fisheries Management

Program Highlights

- 700 lake/stream surveys are conducted to assess fish populations
- Over 25 miles of Trout Habitat Projects are conducted annually
- Millions of fish stocked annually; 14 different species are stocked into both Great Lakes and hundreds of inland waters
- Administratively manages 1,076 Fisheries Properties
- Supports research on fisheries climate adaptation to strategically conserve fish population impacted by climate change

- Conducts public outreach to actively engage all stakeholders in fisheries management activities

PFAS

The detection of the emerging fish contaminant perfluoro octane sulfonate (PFOS), one of many per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), is one of the driving forces behind establishing fish consumption advisories. Joint advisories with DHS are being issued when results suggest that significantly stricter consumption advisories are warranted.

Ceded Territory Tribal Harvest

Fisheries works collaboratively through the Voight Taskforce, stipulations and the Technical Working Group (TWG) to sustainably manage fisheries resources in the Ceded Territory. Fisheries works closely with GLIFWC and Ojibwe Tribal Nations on safe harvest limits for walleye and muskellunge. Tribal harvest declarations are received by the DNR on March 15th annually. Secretary discussion is required for declarations that do not meet the designated criteria prior to the harvest season.

Brook Trout Reserves

In November 2024, Fisheries launched the Brook Trout Reserves program to protect Wisconsin's native brook trout populations in the face of climate change. The program identifies 205 sub watersheds that are most likely to persist as global temperatures warm. Fisheries staff will adapt management techniques and divert resources to prioritize the Brook Trout Reserves.

Fisheries Program Review

Since 2006, the Fisheries program has lost 51.5 positions. Fishing license and stamp fees have not changed, and costs to do business have increased significantly. There are fewer staff and the program has less money to do traditional and core Fisheries work. Currently, we are conducting a comprehensive program review to develop options to maximize the use of our limited resources to continue meeting program, division and department goals while also managing Wisconsin waters for sustainable fisheries.

Great Lakes Commercial Fishing

Fisheries works closely with the Lake Michigan and Lake Superior Commercial Fishing Boards.

- Lake Michigan Topics
 - Lake whitefish trawling regulation, lake trout commercial harvest scope statement, and upgrades to the electronic Fish Harvest Reporting System.
- Lake Superior Topics
 - Lake trout and cisco quota regulation updates, Lake Superior Fishing Agreement, collaborative agreement with Tribal Nations on fish harvest management and allocations.

Current Initiatives – Natural Heritage Conservation

E/T List

Endangered and threatened plants and animals are legally protected in Wisconsin per Wis. Stats. S. 29.604. NHC is responsible for maintain the state's equivalent of the federal list maintained by USFWS. Wisconsin's E/T list was last updated in 2014, and NHC is completing the work necessary to revise the list (ch. NR 27, Wis. Adm. Code).

Federal ESA

Numerous Wisconsin species are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act, and several others may soon be added to the federal list. The federal law is more complex and restrictive, so we have often facilitated work needed to comply with federal law (i.e., "Habitat Conservation Plans"). These require large amounts of resources, so we will need different approaches when new species get added to the federal list.

Wildlife Action Plan

Wisconsin's Wildlife Action Plan is a statewide plan to help rare and declining species, so they are sustained for future generations. The eight required elements of these plans allow states to receive critically important federal funding through the State Wildlife Grant program. The bureau is working on a revised plan due in fall of 2025. The plan involves many stakeholders and will provide information needed for updating the E/T list.

Invasive Species

The invasive species rule, Wis. Adm. Code ch. NR 40, makes it illegal to possess, transport, transfer or introduce certain invasive species in Wisconsin without a permit. The department is working with external stakeholders to prepare for an NR 40 revision in coordination with the Wisconsin Invasive Species Council. This work involves staff from several bureaus and divisions, with NHC responsible for overall coordination.

Strategic Planning

The bureau recently completed the first strategic plan for the State Natural Areas program since 1983 and is now working to implement the plan. Much has changed since the program was established, and new approaches are needed for modern challenges.

Similarly, NHC recently completed the first strategic plan for the bureau itself in more than 20 years. NHC will continue to prioritize its work using this strategy and the 2025 Wildlife Action Plan.

Emergency Measures

Sometimes Wisconsin species become so imperiled that more drastic measures are needed like reintroducing species to areas where they have been lost or intensive efforts to restore habitats. In one example, we even hand-pollinated a rare orchid species to prevent it being lost from the state forever. As costs continue to rise, we will need to make difficult decisions about how to best use limited funds for these projects while also trying to raise revenues like donations.

Current Initiatives – Office of Applied Science

Snapshot Wisconsin

Increase public engagement with Wisconsin's outdoors and the DNR while generating data necessary for wildlife management decisions through a statewide volunteer wildlife monitoring program using trail cameras. Thanks to nearly 2,000 volunteers, over 85 million photos (as of November 2023) have been collected so far!

Black Bear Litter and Diet Survey

Determine key reproductive parameters in each bear management zone, such as cub survival rates and litter size, and investigate a connection between human food sources and reproduction by surveying black bear dens across Wisconsin's bear range.

Northern Highland Fishery Research Area

The second longest continuous study of inland fisheries in the world. The NHFRA provides a greater understanding of Wisconsin's fisheries and lakes, and the information is used for inland water resource management globally.

Fish Community Production in Walleye Lakes

Determine how fish production is distributed in Wisconsin lakes where walleye populations are in decline and where they have held stable, increasing our understanding of how energy is distributed among communities and investigating which fish species take the place of declining walleye populations.

Muskellunge Age and Growth Study

Discover non-destructive means for determining muskellunge age and growth without the need for harvest. Over 20,000 young-of-year muskellunge have been tagged and stocked in 16 Hayward-area lakes, and fish are recaptured through annual surveys and angler or fishing guide participation.

Beaver Influences on Trout Populations

Understand beavers' effect on trout populations across the state. Stream habitat and fish metrics will be compared between streams with beaver present versus free-flowing streams. Results will inform future beaver management and may improve trout fishing and beaver trapping opportunities.

Current Initiatives – Parks and Recreation Management

LTE Hiring

The Wisconsin State Park System relies heavily on hiring a large, seasonal workforce to perform critical services for our visitors such as public safety, maintenance of facilities, and customer service. Historically, the PRM program hires over 400 LTEs annually. Over the past several years, the program has struggled to hire staff due to low pay and lack of affordable housing. These challenges have reduced hiring by 25%, resulting in 100 less LTEs to perform

needed basic services for the public. The solution is to provide additional budget to allow PRM to offer competitive wages and increase the candidate pool.

Capital Development Backlog

The current total capital development backlog for the Wisconsin State Park System is estimated at \$1.3 billion. Several factors led to this large backlog including inadequate funding, construction costs doubling or even tripling and recreation infrastructure and facilities reaching the end of their natural life cycle. The proposed program capital development budget for the 2025-2027 biennium is \$415 million, comprising 82% of the total agency budget.

Budget Concerns

Funding is key to the long-term success of the PRM program. The amount of funding the program is authorized to spend has not kept pace to fund the basic operations or allow the program to meeting the basic needs of visitors. The PRM program submitted several budget paper requests for the 25-27 biennium to address high priority needs of the program, which include additional FTE positions, increased funding for LTEs, maintenance equipment funding, increased utility costs, and technology upgrades.

Camping

Camping remains of the best ways to connect with nature. With over 6,500 campsites in the State Park System, this is one of the most popular recreation activities managed by the agency. Demand continues to increase with approximately 600,000 camping nights in 2024. In summer of 2024, weekend occupancy for campsites was over 90% and almost 100% for campsites with electricity. Admission and camping are the primary revenue sources and account for over 80% of revenue for the system.

Maintaining Relevancy

The program works with internal and external stakeholders to ensure we remain relevant to our visitors and meeting their needs. This includes continuing collaborative programs such as Check out Wisconsin State Park at Your Library, Ride Across Wisconsin, and Pollinators in the Parks; and expanding our outreach with new efforts including universal equipment offerings like all-terrain and beach wheelchairs. Construction of new MTB trails, interpretive exhibits and all-season facilities work to offer properties new recreation opportunities where demand from visitors is high. In a post-pandemic world, individuals are seeking outdoor recreation as a way to meet their physical, emotional, social, and mental wellbeing.

Revenue Enhancements

As WI State Parks are self-funded, the balance between increasing revenue and providing outdoor recreation opportunities for all is even more important. The PRM program continues to look to enhance and create new opportunities for revenue with initiatives like:

- Recreation Passport – admission linked to license plate registration and other admission fee increases
- Demand-based camping rate increases
- Adding additional electronic kiosks and expanding the online sales products

Current Initiatives – Wildlife Management

Changes to Wisconsin's Deer Management Units

Over the last year, the Wisconsin DNR has been working through a review of our deer management units (DMUs). The agency does this every few years, and this year's review focused on the units in the Northern and Central Forest Zones. DNR staff proposed a change in unit boundaries within these zones which focused on developing habitat-based boundaries versus the existing county-based boundaries.

The DMU proposal was approved by the Natural Resources Board and will go into effect for the 2025 season. The agency is working on several communications to spread the news and ensure hunters know about these unit changes come fall.

Wolf Advisory Committee

In April, the department began accepting applications for our next Wolf Advisory Committee. Interested organizations and individuals had until May 4th to apply for one of ten open spots on the committee. These open spots are divided into five stakeholder categories (each with its own unique perspectives on wolves), with up to two seats per category. The categories included 1.) hunting and trapping, 2.) agricultural and ranching, 3.) environmental, 4.) conversation science and education, and finally, 5.) at-large, unaffiliated interests.

The goal of developing the wolf advisory committee is to select diverse stakeholders that can work together collaboratively regardless of differing views. Ultimately, the desire of the committee is to have meaningful discussions and provide thorough recommendations regarding sustainable wolf management.

Beaver and Turkey Management Plans

The agency is also in the early stages of updating two species management plans, one for wild turkey and one for beaver. The department spends a large amount of time on these species management plans to ensure that the plans are well-informed by the current research, sensitive of the societal acceptance of the species and reflective of the biological requirements to maintain a sustainable population.

The agency plans to offer plenty of public input opportunities as these plans are developed. More information about these plans will be released in the coming months.

CWD Summary

The department recently wrapped up its 2024 deer hunting and CWD sampling seasons. In 2024, the DNR focused efforts on increasing sample collection in designated priority areas based on proximity to new detections and areas with the highest need for additional samples for proper surveillance. In 2024, a total of 17,399 deer were sampled throughout the state, and 1,786 samples tested positive. Most of these detections were in the CWD endemic area, where CWD was first detected in the early 2000s. Additionally, 242 sampling locations were available throughout the season, as well as 154 disposal sites (including carcass disposal dumpsters).

Staff are currently working on developing our 2025 surveillance plan and selecting the priority areas for this fall.

Avian Influenza/HPAI

Similar to other states, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) has been a hot topic of late. Wisconsin has seen isolated cases of affected birds over the last six months. A couple cases were around highly populated areas in the south, which drew a lot of news interest on HPAI. Overall, HPAI detections in wild birds have remained relatively low in Wisconsin, and staff remain diligent in monitoring reports of sick wildlife. As the spring migration continues, staff are expecting to see more cases of HPAI pop up in the state.