



DNR Response to

Citizen Oversight Report on
Game and Fish Fund Expenditures
Fiscal Year 2014

November 2015

DNR Response to Top Recommendations in Citizen Oversight Report on Game and Fish Fund Expenditures Fiscal Year 2014

Recommendations coded “F” came from the Fisheries Oversight Committee and recommendations coded “W” came from the Wildlife Oversight Committee. The Budgetary Oversight Committee accepted the set of top recommendations.

F-1 We recommend that the DNR further evaluate the processes used in acquiring easements and fee title to determine whether further improvements can be made to expedite the processes, produce measurable reductions in time, and increase the number of overall acquisitions.

The DNR shares the BOC’s interest in improving the efficiency of DNR land acquisition processes, and has undertaken two process improvement events—one in 2012 and one in 2014—examining how to acquire lands more efficiently. We reduced the number of required signatures to approve a parcel for acquisition, implemented regional meetings for review of acquisitions, changed the regional review for trout stream easements to regional notification (a five-day savings), and eliminated handoffs/duplicative documents. Some of the delays in acquisition are the result of actions required by landowners for an acquisition to proceed (e.g., quit claim deed by a relative, provide documents, etc.) as well as title issues that arise after a parcel has been optioned. For acquisitions where we are confident the landowner will accept our offer, we are conducting title review to identify potential issues earlier in the process, allowing us to work on parallel tracks instead of a more linear process. We do intend to measure time savings once we have sufficient data from completed projects where we implemented the process improvements. The number of transactions and/or the acres acquired is a function of funding allocated for acquisition.

The DNR will continue to implement changes where we can gain efficiencies without losing sight of the diligence required when acquiring lands.

F-2 We recommend that the DNR resume its former practice of requesting bonding dollars and other traditional sources of funding for the development of new or replacement fishing piers, platforms and other developed shore fishing areas. We recommend that additional dollars above and beyond Legacy funds be aggressively pursued by the DNR to reduce the backlog of projects and to provide additional piers and developed shore fishing opportunities statewide.

The DNR agrees that the rehabilitation and replacement of fishing piers, platforms and other developed shore fishing areas is a high priority. Development of new fishing piers and shore fishing areas will not be a priority until we have funds available to take care of existing piers and platforms. Parks and Trails will continue to pursue funding sources and collaborate with partners to achieve these goals.

The DNR included fishing piers in the DNR’s request for asset preservation bonding in the FY 2017 legislative session. We are also considering other funding sources.

No Legacy funds were allocated to the fishing pier program in FY 2016. The Parks and Trails Division has no new or replacement fishing pier projects planned for 2016; only periodic inspection and maintenance are funded.

The Fisheries Section currently supports some fishing access development and enhancements with the game and fish fund. Several small projects are in the works this year.

F-3 We recommend that the DNR ask the legislature, and the legislature approve, an increase in the fees paid to the DNR by private fishing contests in order to substantially narrow the gap between DNR expenditures related to managing these events and revenues collected from the event organizers.

The 2007 legislature directed the DNR to collect a permit fee beginning in 2008. The permit fee was set at \$120 for small contests and \$400 for large contests. However, in 2009 the legislature cut the permit fee in half (Minn. Stat. sec. 97C.081). Fishing tournament revenue over the last five years has ranged from about \$43,000-\$46,000, while expenses have ranged from \$93,000-\$144,000. The DNR will consider addressing this issue with the legislature and encourages stakeholders to communicate their concerns regarding this issue with their respective legislative representatives.

F-4 We recommend that funds from the trout and salmon management account, especially the large balance being carried forward over the past few years, be utilized for trout stream easements whenever opportunities for acquisitions in priority watersheds are available and might otherwise be lost due to interruptions in other funding sources.

Historically and as recently as 2010, trout and salmon stamp funds were used to acquire trout stream easements. In recent years, stamp funds were used only for management and restoration activities. Outdoor Heritage Fund appropriations to fund aquatic habitat protection and restoration have included dollars for trout stream easements. The DNR will consider purchasing trout stream easements with trout and salmon stamp funds in context with the other needs and priorities we have for those funds.

W-1 We strongly support the partnership of conservation leaders to implement the Prairie and Grassland Conservation Plan in concert with the priority recommendations that came out of the 2015 Pheasant Summit. Integral to this effort is stringent enforcement and expansion of buffer requirements to improve water quality and wildlife benefits throughout the agricultural zone.

We strongly agree. Implementation of the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan has been a priority. The recent Pheasant Summit called for by Governor Mark Dayton resulted in strong support for pheasant habitat and direction to develop the Pheasant Summit Action Plan, which was unveiled in September 2015. Governor Dayton's landmark buffer initiative was signed into law recently as well, designating an estimated 110,000 acres of land for water quality buffer strips statewide. The law establishes new perennial vegetation buffers of up to 50 feet along rivers, streams, and ditches that will help filter out phosphorus, nitrogen, and sediment, and benefit wildlife. The new law provides flexibility and financial support for landowners to install and maintain buffers, and boost compliance with buffer laws across Minnesota. It also strengthens enforcement roles to ensure that adequate buffers are implemented and compliance is achieved. Overall, the new buffer law provides a solid foundation to accomplish the beneficial outcomes that were envisioned with regard to water quality and habitat. The DNR will be involved with mapping where buffers are required, while the Board of Water and Soil Resources will be taking the lead on implementation.

In addition, the Wildlife Section received a change level appropriation of \$500,000 per year for FY 2016-2017 to support expanded implementation of the prairie plan and the Pheasant Summit Action Plan.

W-2 We support completion of a deer management plan within the next year following an aggressive timetable for population modeling and public involvement. The mandated legislative audit may slow that process, but developing strategies to increase the size of the deer herd to improve hunter satisfaction and other inherent deer hunting traditions, and values is both urgent and imperative.

A deer management plan will be developed after the Office of the Legislative Auditor review, which is expected to be completed February 2016.

We are implementing strategies to manage the deer herd to improve hunter satisfaction and other values. The conservative deer harvest last fall coupled with the most recent round of deer goal setting, the outcome of which was to increase deer densities in many permit areas, will help to rebuild deer populations. In addition to that, as a result of a mild 2014-2015 winter across most of Minnesota, good deer production and survival this spring and summer, and another conservative season scheduled for 2015, deer populations are on the rebound and well on their way toward meeting new and existing population goals.

W-3 We support additional funding for the Enforcement Division to fully implement their strategic plan to protect fish and wildlife habitat, deal with aquatic invasives, and other laws, rules, and regulations and public services. Integral to this effort are officers with intimate knowledge of hunting, angling, trapping and other outdoor recreational pursuits.

Thank you for your support. In the meantime, the division is continuing with “cost reduction/efficiency” efforts and seeking funding to support recruiting, hiring and training additional conservation officers. Funding has not kept pace with increases in operational costs and the division continues to manage through reduced staffing. Implementing the strategic plan will help to ensure our efforts are being aimed at the highest resource and public safety priorities.

W-4 We support continued land acquisition and other habitat protection and enhancement programs in the prairie pothole region of the state. These lands are critical for providing opportunities for hunters, trappers, and other recreationists, improving water quality, reducing severity of flooding, and related prairie, wetland, and grassland benefits.

We agree. Recent requests to the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council for DNR land acquisition have focused on the prairie planning section, prioritizing parcels with native prairie habitats and within the Prairie Plan Core/Corridor/Complex geography. Coordination meetings with Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Lands, The Conservation Fund, and others ensures that the highest priority acquisitions are pursued and by the acquiring entity that is best positioned on a given parcel.

W-5 We support a walk-in access type program to expand opportunities for hunting and angling and recommend that additional funding strategies be developed to sustain this program.

We were recently awarded a \$1.67 million Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program grant by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to continue the Walk-in Access (WIA) program. This is the second time the department has received a federal grant from this agency for the WIA program. The new funding in combination with state dollars should fund the program through 2017-2018 season. We will continue to explore other strategies to sustain this program for the long term.