



DNR Response to

Citizens Oversight Report on  
Game and Fish Fund Expenditures  
Fiscal Year 2015

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November 2016

## Top findings and recommendations

- **Complete a deer management plan by the end of 2017 to prioritize DNR resources, goals, and objectives for managing deer statewide. The plan should include an intensive public involvement process. Following the completion of the plan, the DNR should complete the goal setting process for all areas of the state.**

**Response:** *We agree that completion of a deer management plan is a high priority. Work on the statewide deer management plan is underway, and it does involve a robust public involvement process. We are currently in the process of finalizing appointments to a Deer Advisory Committee, which will consist of invited stakeholder organizations as well as at-large citizen members. The Committee will begin meeting in December 2016. We also will provide a variety of other ways that members of the public can engage in the planning process. We plan on finishing the plan in time to inform the 2018 deer hunting season. Upon completion of the plan, we will continue to revise deer population goals in the six goal block areas of the state where goals have not been revised since 2012.*

- **Implement the Pheasant Action Plan and all its objectives to reverse the trend of lost hunting opportunities and decreased water quality and grassland habitat across the pheasant range. A huge concern is the loss of 700,000 acres of land from participation in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the past five years, with another 400,000 acres expiring in the next four years.**

**Response:** *We agree that implementation of the Pheasant Action Plan is a high priority. The Pheasant Summit Action Plan was developed after the Governor's Pheasant Summit in December 2014. Since then we have developed the Plan and a Report Card to track the progress of the Plan. The Report Card has 10 Action Items:*

- 1) *Target habitat efforts: We have developed maps of 9 square mile habitat complexes across the pheasant range. These are areas where we will prioritize protection, restoration, and enhancement efforts.*
- 2) *More habitat on private land: Due to the lower federal cap, CRP numbers are down dramatically. However, demand is up. Only 9% of people applying to the program were accepted this year. Minnesota has submitted a CREP proposal, and we are hopeful for a positive outcome.*
- 3) *Farm Bill Assistance Partnership (FBAP): DNR has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), and Pheasants Forever (PF) to better formalize the FBAP. The DNR also has increased our funding for the program in the last two years.*
- 4) *More habitat management: We continue to receive funds from the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF). Additionally, partners have been very successful in bringing in additional funds such as NAWCA grants. Minnesota received two large (\$1M) and 10 small (\$75K) NAWCA grants last year.*

- 5) *More public lands: We continue to receive funding from OHF and other sources for public land acquisitions. No bonding bill was passed in 2016. While acquisition acres declined between 2014 and 2015, several transactions are pending and will show up in 2016.*
- 6) *Buffer strips: DNR completed the buffer protection maps and is working on map corrections. Meanwhile, BWSR is working on implementation.*
- 7) *Better roadside habitat: DNR hired a Roadsides for Wildlife coordinator and will be reconvening the interagency task force. A roadside mowing law did not pass last session.*
- 8) *Maintain walk-in access (WIA): We secured \$1.67M in funding from NRCS to continue our WIA program. We hired a new coordinator and were able to increase our acres significantly over last year. There are now 23,000 acres in the program. We also added several new counties to the program and more counties are interested in being added next year.*
- 9) *Expand citizen education: We have developed communication plan/strategy. We have also published several articles in national magazines about our efforts and have plans for additional publications and other outreach.*
- 10) *More habitat research: We are continuing existing nest and chick survival studies and hired a new grassland habitat monitoring biologist in the early summer of 2016.*

- **Complete strategic plans for each large Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) across the state. The plans should detail desired future conditions and habitat objectives to maximize management of game and recreational hunting opportunities on those WMAs.**

*Response: We agree and we have sought funding in the past for this effort. We currently are working on plan for two units, the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area and the Thief Lake Wildlife Management Area. Each of these efforts have a dedicated staff person that will coordinate the planning effort, including a public engagement component. The planning process for these two WMAs will inform planning efforts for the remaining major units.*

- **The DNR should utilize the dedicated funding from the trout and salmon management account, especially the large balance being carried forward from the past few years, for trout stream easements whenever opportunities for acquisitions in priority watersheds are available and might otherwise be delayed or lost due to interruptions in other funding sources. These dedicated funds should not be diverted to back fill a budget shortfall in the overall Fisheries Section budget, including via new cost coding practices.**

*Response: DNR continues to use dedicated funds as directed in statute. This includes easement acquisition as well as the monitoring of some trout stream easements. Regular monitoring is required by the DNR's internal conservation easement stewardship policy (Operational Order 128) and to preserve the values for which the easement was acquired. The fisheries section has recently revised criteria to rank parcels for easement purchase and is working with the acquisition unit to complete easement purchases, one of which will use trout and salmon funding. The division also continues to seek trout stream easement funding (including monitoring funds) from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC).*

- **Develop and implement a marketing plan that encourages anglers to purchase walleye stamps and propose amendments to the relevant statutes to expand the statutorily allowed uses of walleye stamp proceeds to cover all aspects of walleye management.**

**Response:** Currently, the walleye stamp is promoted through press releases, Division Facebook posts on Minnesota Fishing, and included as a reminder/encouragement in all emails to ELS customers for the angling season. These no-cost efforts have kept sales in pace with other voluntary programs like the tax check-off. The Division will continue to include the walleye stamp in seasonal outreach efforts like social media, email, news releases and fishing e-newsletters sent by the Division.

The last directed marketing effort was in 2010 with a legislative appropriation of \$25,000 for marketing the stamp. There was a residual effort from the 2010 promotion in 2011. In 2012 posters were created and distributed to ELS vendors to promote the sale of the walleye stamp with validations actually declining and pictorial purchases increasing less than 1,000 validations.

- **Determine all the costs of administering the aquatic plant management program and propose to the Legislature an increase in the fee charged to lakeshore owners for aquatic plant management which matches and offsets the actual costs of administering the program.**

**Response:** *DNR has made prior attempts in 2010 to address this issue through rulemaking, and legislatively in 2012 and 2013, but those attempts were unsuccessful. The DNR continues to receive strong resistance to elimination of the \$2,500 cap. The agency will review costs once again and determine whether there are potential need and opportunity for future action.*

- **Develop a comprehensive package of funding, including license fee increases for fishing, hunting, ice shelter, and the like, which will ensure the solvency of the GFF for the next decade, without a reduction in the level of management effort. The funding plan should:**
  - **Consider all permit fees, stamps, ice shelter fees, dark house fees, etc.**
  - **Be submitted to the Governor's office and key Legislative leaders and committee chairs by January 2017 in order to give the proposal the best chance of being enacted before July 1, 2018, the start of FY2019.**
  - **Include a proposal for annual general fund appropriations to the GFF that reflects the tremendous economic impact that fishing and hunting, and fish and wildlife management activities, provide to the citizens and state treasury.**

**Response:** *The DNR concurs with the BOC's recommendation that license fee increases are warranted. The DNR is currently evaluating needs and opportunities to increase license fees consistent with DNR priorities.*