
Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee

2025 Annual Report

Authorized under Minnesota Statutes, section 97A.055, subd. 4b

09/15/2025

Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee

Eli Mansfield, FWAC Chair

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September 15, 2025

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Senator Steve Green, Ranking Minority Member

Senate Environment, Climate, and Legacy Committee

Representative Peter Fischer, Co- Chair

Representative Josh Heintzeman, Co- Chair

House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee

Subject: 2025 Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee Report

Commissioner, Senators and Representatives:

I am pleased to present the 2025 report of the Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee (FWAC). This report fulfills the requirement of Minnesota Statutes, section 97A.055, subdivision 4b(c), which states:

By September 15 each year, the committee must submit a report to the commissioner and to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over natural resources finance and policy. Each even-numbered year, the report must focus on biennial budget outcomes achieved from game and fish fund expenditures. Each odd-numbered year, the report must focus on outcomes related to protecting habitat, fish and wildlife population management, monitoring and research, and communications and engagement.

The committee began operating in 2025 and replaces the citizen oversight committees that operated from 1994 to 2024. The committee reviews annual outcomes achieved from game and fish fund expenditures, and it also makes recommendations to the legislature and the commissioner related to fish and wildlife investments and policy in general.

This report includes fish and wildlife policy recommendations for consideration by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Minnesota Legislature. The committee focused its recommendations this year on six topics:

- Moose management and recovery
- Land acquisition and habitat enhancement
- Engagement: educating the public on DNR initiatives

- 4 the Outdoors
- Wolf management and monitoring
- Wildlife damage and venison donation

The committee's primary recommendations to the DNR include:

Moose management and recovery

- Designate pilot experimental moose recovery zones to evaluate intensive management strategies under scientifically controlled conditions.

Land acquisition and habitat enhancement

- Develop a maintenance forecast requirement for new acquisitions.
- Delegate low-risk acquisition approvals to regions.

Wolf management and monitoring

- Support delisting the wolf in Minnesota based on recovery goals having been met.
- Increase public education about wolves and wolf ecology.

Engagement: educating the public on DNR initiatives

- Create a directory that provides up-to-date contact information by division.

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- Establish additional contacts with other state agencies (if not currently established) to explore any additional avenues for state funding for fish and wildlife and outdoor recreation.

Wildlife damage and venison donation

- Partner with a conservation organization for fiscal services to manage deer processor payments.
- Consider the appropriateness of Heritage Enhancement Funds as a funding source for the wildlife damage program.
- Foster public-private partnerships to promote and scale the wildlife damage program and venison donation program.

The committee's primary recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature include:

Moose management and recovery

- Fund the 2026 LCCMR Moose Habitat Project.

Land acquisition and habitat enhancement

- Expand use of Outdoor Heritage Fund and Environment & Natural Resources Trust Fund for maintenance.

Wolf management and monitoring

- Remove wolf management zones.
- Explore reducing depredation compensation costs in the future in cases where wolf depredation has been proven.

Engagement: educating the public on DNR initiatives

- Encourage and fund positions and platforms for the public to directly engage with the DNR.

4 the Outdoors

- Potentially appoint citizens or staffers to further aid the state in exploring long-term solutions that can benefit the state of Minnesota in continuing to build and support outdoor recreational opportunities.

Wildlife damage and venison donation

- Consider the use of state general funds to support the wildlife damage program.
- Transfer oversight of the venison donation program from MDA to DNR.
- Amend Minnesota Statute 97B.303 to allow donations from both individuals and entities, as well as expand recipients to include nontraditional food charities (e.g., local churches, community orgs, or individuals).
- Revise MDA x-ray requirements for donated venison.

On behalf of all committee members, we are grateful for the opportunity to serve in this role and for the continued partnership with the DNR and the legislature. This first year of the FWAC has reminded us of both the challenges and opportunities that come with stewarding Minnesota's fish, wildlife, and natural resources. We approach this work with humility, knowing how much is at stake, and with optimism about what we can accomplish together in the years ahead.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eli Mansfield', with a stylized, flowing script.

Eli Mansfield, Chair, Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee

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Moose Management and Recovery

The 2011 Moose Research and Management Plan was designed as a foundational step toward moose recovery in Minnesota. A decade later, our understanding of moose population dynamics has deepened—particularly around calf mortality, predator-prey relationships, and habitat limitations. However, statewide moose recovery remains elusive and may require a shift from passive monitoring to active interventions.

The Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee recommends the creation of Experimental Moose Recovery Zones where the DNR, in partnership with federal, tribal & local communities, can pilot integrated strategies—particularly around calf recruitment, predator management, and habitat enhancement. The committee also urges the 2026 Minnesota Legislature to approve funding for the Moose Habitat Improvement Plan, which was recently recommended for funding by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

Summary of Findings

Progress Since 2011 Moose Plan

Clarified Goals and Progress

- The original plan sought to lay the groundwork for moose recovery, focusing on data collection and ecological understanding—not immediate reversal of population trends.
- Stabilization of the northeastern population has occurred, but this is attributed as much to natural events (e.g., severe winters, wildfires) as to management interventions.
- The DNR met its deer density targets (<10/sq mile) in many areas of Minnesota moose range, although recent research indicates even lower thresholds may be necessary to curb parasite transmission (e.g., brain worm).

Research and Data Advances

- Studies have confirmed high pregnancy rates but poor calf recruitment, driven largely by predation and environmental stressors.
- A new collaring study, in partnership with the 1854 Treaty Authority, begins January 2026 with LCCMR funding—representing a critical opportunity for data collection and intertribal collaboration.

Habitat Management

- Habitat treatments have been sporadic and constrained by structural challenges (e.g., School Trust land restrictions, timber market volatility).
- The America the Beautiful (ATB) grant facilitated multi-agency planning but has not yet produced large-scale implementation.
- A second round of ATB grant funding aimed at habitat improvement is forthcoming.
- The 2026 LCCMR recommendation for habitat improvement related to Moose Management provides a timely opportunity to operationalize these plans, pending 2026 legislative funding approval.

Key Challenges in Moose Recovery

Predator and Ungulate Management

- Deer densities have been reduced, but social and political barriers hinder further reductions. Furthering the decline of deer density specifically for moose recovery may prove difficult if local/community priorities rest on the goal of improving deer numbers for fall harvest and hunter enjoyment.
- Wolf management remains constrained by federal protections. While biologically significant, current legal frameworks preclude meaningful interventions across a wide range of the state.
- Integrated predator management must be evaluated in a scientifically controlled and politically viable manner—hence the need for experimental zones.

Implementation and Interagency Barriers

- The 2011 plan is now likely outdated. Specifically, it does not possess direct mechanisms for coordinated implementation across sectors and land ownerships. However, this work has been successfully completed by the DNR using ATB Grant Funding.
- Habitat improvement is under-resourced for both staffing and physical resources, resulting in a limited capacity for interagency execution.
- A modernized plan for moose management should move beyond “big game” silos and integrate wildlife, forest, and land use policy across jurisdictions.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Designate pilot Experimental Moose Recovery Zones to evaluate intensive management strategies under scientifically controlled conditions.

- Zone characteristics
 - Locations where natural events (e.g., fire) have improved habitat and harsh winters have reduced deer densities.
 - Locations where there is overlapping/adjacent public ownership or other cooperative land managers to ease operational coordination.
 - Zones where earlier planning efforts (e.g., via ATB grant) have established baseline data and stakeholder engagement
- Management tools to test
 - Predator control, including wolf harvest (see Wolf Management and Monitoring section for more information).
 - Deer management strategies to achieve lower deer densities.
 - Intensive habitat treatments (e.g., shearing, prescribed burns).
 - Monitoring of calf recruitment, adult survival, and habitat utilization as primary success metrics.
- Scientific and administrative structure
 - Zones would have a defined operational timeline (e.g., 5 years)
 - Data collection protocols linked to existing research and forthcoming collaring projects.

- Governance model modeled after the ATB partnership framework, including tribal, local, state, and academic stakeholders.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Fund the 2026 LCCMR Moose Habitat Project. The LCCMR has formally recommended funding for a Moose Habitat Improvement Project slated for legislative review in 2026. Legislative approval is essential to:

- Improve resource allocation and staffing for hands-on habitat work.
- Address barriers brought forth by timber industry volatility.
- Align fieldwork with the collaring study and potential recovery zones.

Next Steps

Priority Action	Lead	Timeline
Explore criteria for designation of Experimental Moose Recovery Zones	DNR Wildlife Section	January 2026
Launch collaring study in partnership with 1854 Treaty Authority	DNR, Tribal partners	January 2026
Secure legislative approval of LCCMR habitat funding	Minnesota Legislature	2026 session
Draft revised Moose Management Plan	DNR, FWAC, partners	Beginning in 2026
Conduct review of ATB grand planning phase	FWAC	Q1 2026

Conclusion

Moose are an iconic megafauna in the great state of Minnesota. The past decade has yielded important scientific insights through dedicated work from the DNR, Tribal Agencies, and biologists on the ground—the outdoor community now calls for active experimentation, adaptive policy, and cross-sector implementation. The committee urges the DNR and Minnesota Legislature to act decisively to launch pilot zones and approve funding necessary to sustain this prototypical Minnesota species.

Contributors

Group Members:

- Eli Mansfield (Chair)
- Kevin Maki
- Scott Schopper
- Tony Miller

Land Acquisition and Habitat Enhancement

This review focused on identifying barriers, opportunities, and actionable solutions to improve the DNR's land acquisition and habitat enhancement efforts. The committee explored how the DNR can sustainably fund ongoing stewardship, improve acquisition efficiency, and adopt a business-oriented operational mindset while aligning with conservation and recreation goals.

Review Methods

Information Reviewed

- 2018 WMA and AMA Acquisition and Management Strategic Plan
- 2016 WMA User Survey
- SLAM Goals and Metrics
- Carlos Avery, Lac qui Parle, Mille Lacs, and Red Lake WMA Master Plans
- Forestry, Parks and Trails, Fish and Wildlife and Ecological and Water Resources Land Acquisition Plans
- 2016 Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council Land Acquisition Report
- Staff presentations

Groups or Individuals Consulted

- Sarah Strommen, Commissioner
- Pat Rivers, Deputy Director, Division of Fish and Wildlife
- Jeff Tillma, Land Acquisition Consultant
- Kerstin Larson, SLAM Supervisor
- David Trauba, Wildlife Section Manager
- Jamie Gangaware, Wildlife Operations Manager, Division of Fish and Wildlife
- Private partners (Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Hunters of Color, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever)

Summary of Findings

Highlights

- Acquisition is well-funded, but ongoing stewardship lacks sustainable funding.
- Acquisition processes are relatively slow compared to private transactions but have been improving via the Streamline Project.
- Maintenance costs are rising with limited staff capacity to meet them. Maintenance includes both public land user access facility maintenance and habitat maintenance (but does NOT include office buildings).
- SLAM goals lack ROI-based lag measures.
- Partnerships can offer opportunities for improvements.
- ~85% of acquisitions come from private landowners, ~9% from corporations, ~5% from nonprofits (i.e. Ducks Unlimited) and ~1% from the public / government.

Focus Areas

Unsustainable Operational Model

SLAM as an organizing tool: The DNR applies Strategic Land Asset Management (SLAM) to purchase, exchange, or divest lands to align with conservation, recreation, and economic needs, but measures outcomes primarily in conservation acreage acquired, not in financial or revenue outcomes per dollar spent. SLAM goals emphasize reducing management costs by consolidating parcels and improving access but lack systematic lag metrics connecting land acquired to revenue generation (e.g., license sales, user fees) or avoided costs. On the website, there are two published metrics:

1. Proposed acquisitions (including easements) that meet three or more SLAM goals. The DNR strives to have about 80% of the department's acquisitions meeting three or more SLAM goals. Between 2017 and 2022, the goal has been accomplished, ranging from 81% to 98%. This does not tell us anything about increased usership (new revenue to the organization).
2. Ratio of sales parcels offered to sales parcels sold. The goal is 75% of offered parcels are sold. Since moving land sales online in 2022, the DNR has improved from selling about 73% of parcels to about 90%. Goal accomplished. This means fewer wasted efforts, more money coming back in, and a more efficient sales program overall. Again, this does not tell us anything about increased usership (new revenue to the organization).

Interview feedback reinforced that staffing shortages and flattened hierarchies have led to field staff taking on multiple roles, reducing DNR's ability to manage new or existing land and aquatic assets effectively. Additionally, internal hesitancy to adopt lag (outcome) metrics further limits evaluation of whether investments are delivering intended results (e.g., improved visitation, habitat gains). The hesitancy is oriented around the lack of capacity to track and maintain those metrics.

Gaps and Overlooked

Opportunity: Adopting a business lens with clear ROI targets (e.g., "for every \$1 invested, we generate \$1.50 in economic / ecological / social value") would better align SLAM and FWAC objectives.

Example lag measures:

- User fee / licensing revenue increase per new acre acquired (goal to increase)
- Maintenance cost per acre trend (goal to decrease)
- Visitor counts correlated with acquisition (goal to increase)
- Habitat condition indices (e.g., NPC quality scores) tied to acquisition (goal to increase)

Ongoing Maintenance Costs

Master Plans (Mille Lacs, Lac qui Parle, Carlos Avery, Red Lake) confirm rising infrastructure maintenance needs: water control structures, roads, signs, dikes, and culverts are aging and stressed by increased flooding and deferred maintenance due to budget limitations. Game and Fish Fund (license sales, federal aid) funds salaries and operational costs but is insufficient to meet deferred maintenance across millions of WMA and AMA acres. Acquisition and restoration costs are covered by the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) and Reinvest in Minnesota fund (RIM), but maintenance and stewardship funding remain unfunded mandates.

Staff shared that DNR does not forecast long-term maintenance costs for new acquisitions, focusing only on immediate spending capacity. Maintenance funding is limited to approximately \$400,000 annually across 1.4 million acres, a figure that internal stakeholders described as inadequate and stressful. Routine operations (e.g., signage repair, parking upkeep) and habitat management activities are often harder to fund than one-time acquisition and restoration projects.

Stewardship includes recurring costs that are beyond just ecological care, like resolving trespasses and violations of easement terms - which means the state is on the hook for drawn-out and expensive financial obligations. These obligations compete with the actual costs for maintaining habitats.

Gaps & Overlooked

- No operating cost forecast is required prior to acquisition acceptance, despite “initial development plans” being required (fencing, posting, parking). OHF dollars must be open to the public hunting and fishing which adds long-term operational demands / costs.
- Missed opportunities to:
 - Accept or require stewardship endowments from donors or partners.
 - Tie maintenance funding eligibility to demonstrate deferred maintenance backlogs.
 - Leverage carbon credit markets on forested parcels for passive revenue streams to offset maintenance costs.

Process Inefficiencies

Acquisition approvals are multi-layered (area, region, SLAM, FAW, county boards), title work can be complicated, clean-up delays and drawn-out negotiations are some of the steps that can result in long transaction times (2-3 or more years) compared to private market transactions (less than 12 months). DNR aims to avoid duplication with partner due diligence but lacks standardized processes to fully coordinate surveys or environmental assessments from partners, which can draw out timelines.

Interview feedback noted inefficient title work and environmental assessments as key cost and time drivers. However, some recent efforts - such as streamlining property appraisal prep using standardized data forms - have cut timelines from over 240 days to under 20 days in specific situations. Broader use of tools like e-recording, remote notarization, and electronic signatures is still limited by procurement and policy barriers.

Gaps & Overlooked:

- Consider delegating approval thresholds downward for acquisitions below a certain risk/complexity level.
- Continue recent continuous improvement efforts to develop standardized due diligence acceptance protocols for partners (e.g., Ducks Unlimited) to speed transactions.
- Implement performance metrics for time to close acquisitions and cost per transaction for continuous improvement.
- Proactively identify and pursue priority parcels using GIS and predictive analytics to shift from reactive to proactive acquisition strategy. This is really about maximizing use of time.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Primary Recommendations

Develop a maintenance forecast requirement for new acquisitions.

- Description: Require cost and operational maintenance forecasts before approving acquisitions to avoid increasing unfunded stewardship liabilities.
- Staff Capacity: Moderate (adds review step).
- Cost: Low.
- Timeline: 12 months.
- Impact: Informs sustainable decision-making, preventing underfunded maintenance.
- Note: Forecasts should include both habitat-specific and non-habitat infrastructure (e.g., roads, signage, parking).

Delegate low-risk acquisition approval to regions.

- Description: Approvals could be delegated to FAW's statewide acquisition coordinators, who could both maintain a statewide perspective and provide approvals on a more timely basis.
- Staff Capacity: Moderate (process training required).
- Cost: Low.
- Timeline: 12–18 months.
- Impact: Shortens acquisition timelines, increasing responsiveness.
- Note: This aligns with the DNR Lands and Minerals Division's input to improve internal workflow efficiency.

Secondary Recommendations

Adopt ROI-based metrics in SLAM and SWAAT evaluations.

- Description: Add outcome-based metrics (visitor use, habitat quality, revenue generated) to SLAM evaluations to measure the tangible return on land investments.
- Staff Capacity: Low (uses existing GIS and finance staff).
- Cost: Low (~\$50,000 to pilot).
- Timeline: 6–12 months.
- Impact: Improves decision-making and accountability towards results.

Proactively identify priority parcels using GIS tools.

- Description: Move from reactive to proactive parcel identification using GIS to target high-priority acquisitions systematically.
- Staff Capacity: Moderate (GIS and regional coordination).
- Cost: Moderate (~\$100,000 one-time investment).
- Timeline: 12–24 months.
- Impact: Improves strategic alignment of acquisitions with conservation priorities.

Expand stewardship partnerships (Adopt-a-WMA, no-fee contracts).

- Description: Expand volunteer and partner stewardship programs to reduce maintenance costs while increasing community engagement in WMAs and AMAs.
- Staff Capacity: Moderate upfront, reduces long-term needs.
- Cost: Low.
- Timeline: 6–18 months.
- Impact: Reduces costs, increases public ownership and awareness.
- Note: This is increasingly important as staffing shortages make external stewardship critical to land and water system care.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Primary Recommendation

Expand use of OHF and Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) for maintenance.

- Description: Advocate for statutory changes to allow a portion of OHF and ENRTF to cover ongoing stewardship and maintenance costs. To make this case, the DNR will need to forecast these costs to establish a target budget.
- Staff Capacity: Low.
- Cost: Low.
- Timeline: 1–3 years (2026 legislative session timing).
- Impact: Addresses structural funding imbalance for stewardship.

Secondary Recommendations

Pilot excise tax on outdoor recreation equipment.

- Description: Establish a new excise tax on outdoor recreation equipment to fund maintenance and habitat stewardship.
- Staff Capacity: Low.
- Cost: Low to moderate (policy design).
- Timeline: 2–4 years.
- Impact: New, sustainable funding source for stewardship and maintenance.

Establish permanent stewardship endowment fund.

- Description: Create a dedicated endowment for WMAs, AMAs, and habitat stewardship to ensure stable long-term funding.
- Staff Capacity: Low.
- Cost: High (requires significant capital investment).
- Timeline: 2–5 years.
- Impact: Sustainable funding for stewardship and reduced financial risk.

Encourage conservation development partnerships.

- Description: Develop incentives and structures to align conservation goals with housing and development through public-private partnerships on or near DNR lands.

- Staff Capacity: Low to moderate.
- Cost: Low.
- Timeline: 2–5 years.
- Impact: Supports community development while preserving critical habitats.

Additional Comments or Considerations

Strategic Divestment: Master plans and SLAM acknowledge the ability to sell underperforming parcels, but there is no transparent, systematic portfolio review process to identify candidates for sale to reinvest in higher-priority lands. Recommend establishing an annual “portfolio health check” to identify divestiture candidates. Interviewees noted that while some low-performing parcels exist, federal grant ties and administrative hurdles often delay or block divestment. Simplifying this process would free up resources for higher-value acquisitions.

Visitor Data Integration: There is minimal systematic collection of visitor counts or activity levels per WMA or AMA, preventing direct linkage of public benefits to acquisitions. DNR staff expressed interest in low-cost visitor counters and user surveys, which could help demonstrate value to the public and legislature.

Community Engagement: Master plans emphasize partnerships but do not systematically leverage local user groups or community-based organizations for stewardship. Scaling up Adopt-a-WMA, encouraging citizen science habitat monitoring, and supporting co-investment strategies could significantly reduce maintenance burdens and increase public engagement. DNR staff noted growing reliance on external partners due to flat staffing levels and competing internal priorities.

Financial Profit-and-Loss (P&L) Modeling: Current DNR reporting tracks acres acquired and funds used but does not produce P&L-style operational models. A pilot P&L model for a high-use WMA or AMA could help evaluate whether revenue (e.g., license sales, access fees) and ecosystem services can justify acquisition and stewardship investments over time.

Revolving Maintenance Fund: Interviewees suggested a revolving fund mechanism to support ongoing WMA/AMA maintenance and stewardship—particularly for routine, non-capital needs. This model would help address volatility in year-to-year funding availability.

Treaty Rights and Indigenous Knowledge: Many WMAs and AMAs are located within lands ceded by tribal nations under treaties that preserve rights to hunt, fish, and gather. While not the primary focus of this review, the committee recognizes that acquisition and stewardship activities should align with the state of Minnesota’s obligation to honor these treaties. The committee encourages DNR to ensure treaty rights are respected in land and water resource management decisions, particularly in areas involving wild rice beds, forest gathering zones, and culturally significant water bodies. Inclusion of tribal consultation and culturally informed stewardship practices would also enhance the long-term success of DNR’s conservation goals.

Data Integration and Technology Modernization: DNR’s current data and reporting systems are fragmented, making it difficult for staff to generate integrated, visual insights without significant manual effort. To support more agile, transparent decision-making, DNR should modernize its internal data infrastructure—creating unified systems that allow staff to access acquisition, maintenance, visitor use, and habitat condition data in one place. Generating dashboards, maps,

or visual reports should take seconds—not hours. This modernization would reduce staff burden, improve accountability, and enable more real-time, outcome-oriented conservation planning.

Contributors

Group Members:

- Chris Herndon
- Kirk Duholm
- Greg Taylor
- Kaitlyn Rutledge
- Brad Fitzgerald
- Tony Miller

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Wolf Management and Monitoring

The goal of this review is to deliver practical, forward-looking recommendations for wolf population management and distribution that address the current needs and can be effectively implemented by the DNR.

Goals:

- Develop a compatible management plan that contains research, ecology and the ecosystem that can be implemented soon after the delisting of the gray wolf.
- The plan should be acceptable to hunters and farmers.
- The plan should be directed to reduce and manage depredation from current unmanaged state of livestock, deer, moose and other domestic animals. (i.e. dogs, cats, chickens)
- To maintain a sustainable population of gray wolves.
- To reach all interested parties as to proper management of the gray wolf and help them understand the management objectives.

Review Methods

Information Reviewed

Minnesota Wolf Management Plan 2023 – 2032

Groups or Individuals Consulted

Dan Stark – DNR Wolf Management Specialist

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways

According to the wolf plan, Minnesota's wolf population has remained relatively stable for decades, wolves occupy nearly all suitable areas of the state, and they exceed population criteria for being removed from the ESA. The state should be able to manage the population accordingly.

Supporting Evidence

- Minnesota's wolf population was estimated to be 2,919 wolves +/- 800 in winter 2022-23.
- The number of wolves taken by USDA for wolf conflicts averaged 188/year since 2012.
- Wolf depredation complaints in 2024 were the highest they've been since 2010, with 252 complaints and 238 wolves removed; however, complaints and wolves taken are variable year to year.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Support delisting the wolf in Minnesota based on recovery goals having been met to allow DNR to manage wolf populations. The support to delist is premised on the species recovery status - the DNR supported ESA protections while recovery was underway. If delisting occurs, state management would focus on broad engagement with management partners (Fed gov, Tribes, etc.) and the public, and the DNR's commitment to a robust population would be maintained.

Two proposed amendments to the Federal Endangered Species Act have the potential to impact wolf management in Minnesota. The first is the Endangered Species Act Amendments Act of 2025 (H.R.1897). Importantly, under this amendment it appears to imply that states can develop recovery plans for Federally Threatened Species and petition the Secretary to use that recovery plan for regulations. This bill has additional impactful implications such as a change in the definition of harm from including habitat to more specifically referring to the species.

Another proposed amendment, H.R. 845 the Pet and Livestock Protection Act of 2025, would delist grey wolves wherever found. If either amendment passes, it is likely to impact DNR oversight of the wolf population. Passing of H.R. 1897 may allow for the state to assume greater responsibility of the recovery of the species if desired and feasible. Additionally, it may increase the fiscal responsibility of the state for wolf management.

Provide more education about wolves and their ecology to increase public understanding. Find the middle ground to capture what keeps the wolf population in Minnesota healthy.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Remove wolf management zones. DNR's wolf plan advocates for removing zones. The current zones are A & B. In Zone A (approximate northeastern 1/3 of the state within Federal recovery zones) a person can kill a wolf if there is an "immediate threat" to livestock or other domestic animals. Removing management zones would remove current zone B (the remainder of the state) rules that allow less restrictive taking of wolves, "to protect" livestock and pets even without an immediate threat. In DNR's perspective, removing zones would allow consistent management focused where depredation conflicts occur, not just where wolves are present.

Explore reducing depredation compensation cost in the future in cases where wolf depredation cases have been proven. If compensation is taken away maybe the producer will improve wolf prevention measures.

Additional Comments or Considerations

If wolves are delisted, what happens to the USDA depredation program and compensation?

Is there a correlation to livestock numbers per wolf depredations by area? If there is an increase in livestock populations, does it lead to more depredation cases?

What are the projections for the wolf population over the next 10 years?

Contributors

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Engagement: Educating the Public on DNR Initiatives

The Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee discussed opportunities for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to better engage the public with resources that clearly delineate the complex nature of the agency's divisional nature and the various services and expectations for agency divisions (e.g., the Parks and Trails Division, Ecological and Water Resources Division, and Forestry Division all perform different task with different statutory mandates).

Within the Fish and Wildlife Division specifically there is an opportunity to provide public stakeholders with information that allows them to better understand and appreciate the breadth of work taking place within the Division. Positions within Fish and Wildlife, such as the recently created Hmong and Karen community liaison positions, should be visible to the public as a point of contact within the agency. Even information on who is currently in leadership within the division can be hard to identify making it difficult for the public to communicate effectively at times.

Overall, the DNR website is organized by possible public request or subject matter, but to engage with the DNR on the specific webpage, projects are not consistent in sharing divisions and who to contact. Some share emails for a division, some give admin names, and some give no contact. There could be better opportunities for the public to understand how to contact liaisons and division staff/roles. Considering public taxes pay for portions of the salary and/or projects, public concern and input is important.

Conversely, in researching neighboring states and their contact information, there is transparency in their leadership org charts and a directory page with phone numbers, addresses and email addresses. Both Wisconsin and Michigan provide this information.

Review Methods

Information Reviewed

- [Minnesota DNR public engagement website](#)
- [Michigan DNR organizational chart](#)
- [Wisconsin DNR staff directory](#)

Groups or Individuals Consulted

Self-directed, as members of the public.

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways

The opportunity for transparency in the DNR directory by division and liaison is lacking for Minnesota in comparison to neighboring states within the Great Lakes area. DNR can better serve the public by allowing for input by project and division to those in leadership roles.

Public input is lacking unless it's related to specific projects in phase of public comment. This is a disservice to receiving constructive criticism and also praise where it is due.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Create a directory that is up to date and provides contact information by division.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Encourage and fund positions and platforms for the public to directly engage with the DNR. A Points of Contact Page that contains contacts for each of the major DNR sections (including education section and queries for teachers, non-profits, municipalities, etc.) would continue to facilitate communications.

Contributors

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4 the Outdoors

Funds for state fish and wildlife agencies typically come from 2 major sources: Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Programs and license fees. Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Programs funding comes from federal excise taxes on purchases of hunting and angling and boating related equipment (i.e., firearms, ammunition, fishing tackle and boat fuel). The Wildlife Restoration Program was created through the passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937, and the Sport Fish Restoration Program was created through the passage of the Dingell-Johnson Act in 1950. These funds are largely directed towards activities that support wildlife and game fish. Over time, the number of hunters and anglers in the U.S. has decreased or only increased slightly (Figure 1). In contrast, wildlife watching in the U.S. has increased dramatically with results from the most recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) survey (conducted every 4 years since 1955) indicating more than half of the U.S. participates in this activity. While it is good news to have citizens engaging with the outdoors as it promotes cognitive benefits and improves mood and mental health (Weir 2020), federal excise taxes are more closely aligned with angling, boating, and hunting participation.

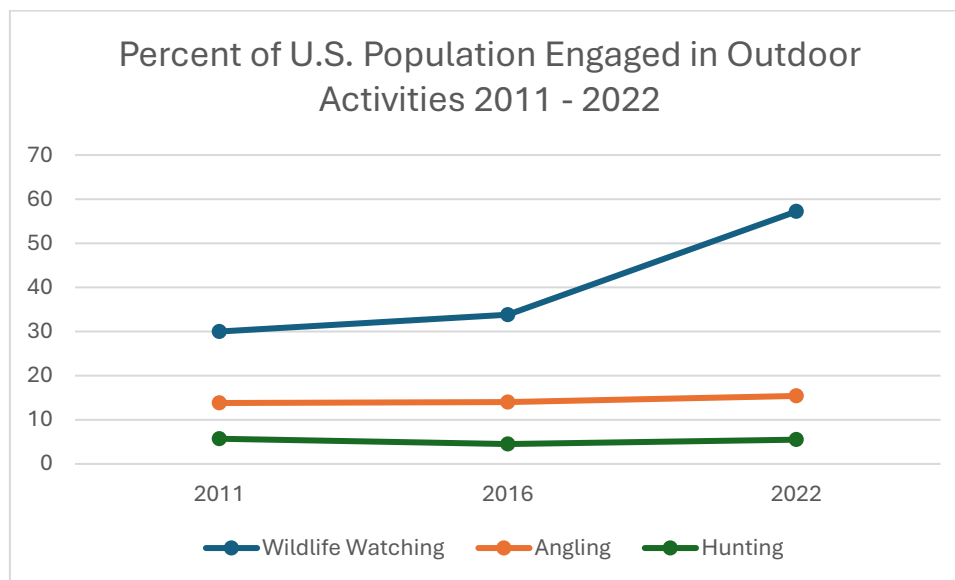


Figure 1. Percent of U.S. population over 16 years of age who participated in wildlife watching, angling, or hunting from the USFWS National Survey on Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation

Many states, including Minnesota, also rely heavily on funding from hunting and angling licenses to also fund the state fish and wildlife agency. With the decline in hunting and angling participation, the historical sources of funding for state fish and wildlife agencies does not meet current user demand nor address current conservation issues. Fees from excise taxes primarily fund conservation and habitat efforts for wildlife and sportfish species; since the development of that funding model, most states face much greater need for conservation of non-game species and their habitats, concerns that may not have been evident at the inception of the federal laws. In recent years, efforts to create new funding mechanisms at the federal level, including the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA), have not passed, primarily stymied due to lack of agreement on the 'pay for' or disagreement about where the taxes or other funds will come from to pay for the new funding model. Many states have approached this mismatch in modern demand versus antiquated

funding in a variety of ways: Oregon pulls funds from their lottery, Georgia has fundraising events, and other states fund their state agencies through general funds, additional sales taxes, or donations (National Wildlife Federation 2021).

DNR staff (similar to fish and game staff across states) report that revenues to the Game and Fish Fund are not keeping up with increasing costs. Costs increase due to inflation and emerging ecological and social challenges. License sales for both hunting and fishing have decreased since a recent peak in 2020. The DNR anticipates an overall downward trend due to overall aging of the hunting and fishing population. Excise tax revenue (Wildlife Restoration and Sport Fish Restoration grants) over the past five years has resulted in substantial income to the fund, which has helped offset the declines in license revenue. However, the DNR predicts excise tax revenue will decline for the upcoming forecast period and be unable to keep up with increasing costs.

Through a year-long process of public engagement, the 4 the Outdoors program has identified 4 guideposts to help shaped a shared vision for the future of outdoor recreation and conservation in Minnesota these can be summarized as: ensuring the benefits of outdoor recreation and conservation of natural resources for future generations; working together to support diverse outdoor recreation opportunities and conservation of natural features; meet the outdoor recreational needs of Minnesotans in an equitable manner; and align conservation and outdoor recreation values with Minnesota state priorities. The group has further identified 4 areas where action should be taken: optimize the use of current funding; explore use and application of fees; increase opportunities for direct support; and secure stable and predictable operational funding (see the 4 The Outdoors report).

The committee set out to establish where the 4 the Outdoors group is in these important tasks on securing stable state level funding.

Review Methods

Information Reviewed

- 4 The Outdoors Report <https://files.dnr.state.mn.us/aboutdnr/funding-future/future-funding-report-p.pdf>.
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- National Wildlife Federation 2021 Report: How State Fish and Wildlife Agencies are Funded. <https://statewildlifetoolkit.nwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HowStateWildlifeAgenciesareFunded.pdf>.
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- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2022 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Final_2022-National-Survey_101223-accessible-single-page.pdf.
- Weir, K. 2020. Nurtured by Nature. *Monitoring on Psychology* 51(3):50.

Groups or Individuals Consulted

- Jon Hansen, DNR
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- Cara Hanson, DNR
- Kelly Wilder, DNR
- Heather Kieweg, DNR
- Kristin Hall, DNR
- Rob Rabasco, Conservation Partners Legacy Program Administrator, DNR
- Greta Brandt, Policy and Planning Coordinator, Fish and Wildlife Division, DNR

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways

The 4 the Outdoors group is currently in the process of collecting information from Minnesotans on how they feel about user fees through an online survey <https://engage.dnr.state.mn.us/reinvesting-in-minnesotas-outdoors/surveys/4-the-outdoors-fees-questionnaire>.

This particular iteration of the 4 the Outdoors survey focuses more on user-based tax on outdoor gear or access (i.e. the “backpack tax”). In Michigan, academic researchers and fish and wildlife biologists conducted a survey of over 3,000 wildlife-associated recreationists to evaluate their support of different conservation funding models. The four models included: state sales tax, lottery proceeds, extractive industry proceeds, and a user-based tax on outdoor gear. Interestingly, the group found no difference in the opinion of those respondents who identified as hunters or wildlife watchers when accounting for other variables such as gender. Overall, they found the greatest support for an industry-based funding policy and the lowest support for the user-pay model or backpack tax (Henderson et al. 2021). The backpack tax may arguably be at odds with goals of making outdoor recreation more equitable. Indeed, there is some speculation that the high costs of hunting for purchase of guns, access to hunting land, etc. has kept this activity more limited to white males, as additional demographics have not engaged in the activity to the extent that they can buoy the population of hunters. As the overall U.S. population continues to urbanize, trends may favor outdoor opportunities with less upfront costs and preparation.

DNR staff and leadership have attempted to optimize use of funding and prioritize funding for critical needs while also reducing costs. The federal government has clarified that Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), funds paid by the state of Minnesota to local governments to compensate for loss of property taxes from public lands, is eligible to be matched by Pittman-Robertson dollars. Fee collection systems have been modernized. The State Fair Nature Store was also brought back to the Minnesota State Fair and earned ~\$100,000 in revenue for the DNR.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Establish additional contacts with other state agencies (if not currently established) to explore any additional avenues for state funding for fish and wildlife and outdoor recreation. It would be nice to see what has and what has not worked for other states and receive expert opinion on whether these are opportunities that can be pursued by the state of Minnesota. It may be informative in additional surveys to explore support in Minnesota for an industry-based funding model.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Potentially appoint citizens or staffers to further aid the state in exploring long term solutions that can benefit the state of Minnesota in continuing to build and support outdoor recreational opportunities. According to Explore Minnesota, outdoor recreation added \$13.5 billion to the state's economy, a 10.5% increase since 2022. However, USFWS trends indicate an almost 20% increase in wildlife watching from 2016 to 2022, which potentially indicates unexplored or untapped interests and potential revenues from increasing demand in outdoor recreation activities such as wildlife watching. While hunting and angling remain firm interests in the Midwest and across the U.S., new markets are potentially emerging in non-consumptive aspects of outdoor recreation as demand for these activities increases. The 4 the Outdoors survey should indicate where public support may lie in Minnesota for any backpack tax or user-fee based funding model, but the Michigan survey also indicates public support for an industry tax.

Additionally, both groups should keep close watch on funding at the federal level. The Sportfish Restoration Act is up for renewal in 2026 and passage of a new funding mechanism such as RAWA will hopefully be addressed in upcoming congressional sessions.

DNR staff, like many other experts in the fields of conservation, believe RAWA or similar federal funding would bring significant, stable, and flexible funding (e.g., could be used for engagement and enforcement to address rare species poaching). However, if RAWA doesn't resurface in upcoming congressional sessions, the Minnesota Legislature may endeavor to enhance the stability of the current State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program funds. Progressing beyond an annual appropriation framework, to a longer-term framework (e.g. 5-10 years) would allow the DNR to better forecast and plan their efforts.

Additional Comments or Considerations

Questions submitted to the 4 the Outdoors group awaiting response

- What are the 4 the Outdoors deliverables over the next 1.5 years until the end of the program?
- What are the next steps?

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Wildlife Damage and Venison Donation Programs in the DNR Fish and Wildlife Division

This review focused on understanding the Wildlife Damage program operated by the DNR's Fish and Wildlife Division and the Venison Donation program run through a partnership between the DNR and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). These programs use Game and Fish Fund dollars and directly serve the public. The Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee examined the Wildlife Damage program's scope and operations, with special attention on the Minnesota Venison Donation Program. This program enables hunters to donate harvested deer meat, helping manage deer populations and mitigate damage to agricultural and other public and private landowners while providing food for charitable use. The committee's review identified several ways to improve program effectiveness and support among hunters.

Review Methods

Information Reviewed

- DNR 2024 Game and Fish Fund Report (pg. 60)
- Cervidae Depredation on Minnesota Farms (2024)
- June 2025 DNR Fish and Wildlife Advisory Committee presentation
- MDA Venison Donation Program Statistics (FFY 2020–2025)
- Program websites:
 - <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/hunter-harvested-venison-donation-minnesota>
 - <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/hunting/deer/donation/index.html>

Groups or Individuals Consulted

- Eric Nelson, DNR Wildlife Damage Program Supervisor
- Tyler Schwartze, Conservation Federation of Missouri
- Jennifer Stephe, MDA Venison Donation Program Staff
- Paul Burr, Acting Big Game Program Coordinator, DNR

Summary of Findings

Key Takeaways

DNR Wildlife Damage Program and Deer Damage

Established in 1993, the Wildlife Damage Program addresses a broad range of human-wildlife conflicts—from deer and agricultural depredation to bears in birdfeeders and geese on golf courses. It's the only DNR program serving private landowners statewide, with just three staff operating from Brainerd. The program's dedicated FY24 budget was \$249,000, funded primarily through the Heritage Enhancement Account. The current FY 26 budget is \$144,000. High deer numbers in some parts of the state are a major concern, affecting farms, suburban landscapes, public safety, and deer health. Managing deer populations through hunter harvest is the primary management tool used by the DNR. However, Minnesota's antlerless deer harvest lags significantly behind other states, explained in part by hunters' preferences for mature trophy bucks and by lower hunter numbers overall. For example, National Deer Association data showed that, in 2022, Georgia

harvested 83 antlerless deer per 100 hunters, Missouri 33, and Minnesota only 18. Differences in habitat, deer density, and harvest limits certainly contribute to lower antlerless harvest in Minnesota, yet these numbers indicate that there is potential to increase antlerless harvest in Minnesota.

Encouraging antlerless harvest is critical for sustainable deer management. A strong venison donation program can incentivize hunters to harvest additional deer, without taking on the burden of paying for processing, consuming extra meat, or trying to find people to take the meat, if they wish to harvest a deer for management purposes.

Minnesota's Venison Donation Program

This program allows hunters to donate harvested deer to local meat processors, who are then reimbursed for processing costs and can donate the meat to be distributed through charitable food organizations. In FY24, \$106,115 was raised through a \$1 fee included in the cost of a bonus antlerless deer license sold to hunters to fund the venison donation program; \$100,000 was transferred to MDA for program administration. The program had an FY24 year-end balance of \$457,364 in a special revenue fund.

Program Highlights (2024)

- 221 deer processed by 23 processors.
- 7,804 lbs. of venison donated.
- \$14.58 cost per pound of donated meat.
- In comparison, Missouri's Share the Harvest program processed over 4,000 deer and donated nearly 244,000 pounds of venison in 2024. Their success stems from strong public-private partnerships, offering a model Minnesota could emulate.

Recommendations

To the DNR

Partner with a conservation organization for fiscal services. Consider contracting a nonprofit to manage processor payments, similar to the CWD Partner Sampling Program. This would lower administrative barriers for meat processors and could expand participation.

Consider the appropriateness of Heritage Enhancement Funds as a funding source. The program serves private individuals and landowners and may not meet the statutory definition of activities that "improve, enhance, or protect fish and wildlife resources." This would free Heritage funds for more conservation-focused initiatives.

Support the legislative recommendations in this report.

Foster public-private partnerships. Encourage collaboration with conservation organizations and nonprofits to promote and scale the program. Missouri and Georgia offer successful models for leveraging non-governmental partners to increase outreach, donations, and cost-effectiveness.

To the Minnesota Legislature

Consider the use of state General Funds to support the Wildlife Damage Program. The Wildlife Damage Program serves statewide stakeholders in a way that is unique compared to other work carried out by other Fish and Wildlife staff. The Wildlife Damage Program serves the general public,

including agricultural producers, urban residents, rural landowners, etc. Availability of general funds instead of solely Game and Fish Fund dollars would allow for a potential expansion of staff that currently is not able to meet the statewide demands of their work as thoroughly as possible. As such, an investment of state general funds into the program to increase staffing and better serve the public is warranted.

Transfer oversight of the Venison Donation Program from MDA to DNR. Current program oversight for the Venison Donation Program is provided by staff within MDA, with the utilization of revenue transferred out of the venison donation program special revenue fund. DNR is better positioned to administer the program given its hunter-focused mission. Oversight should not be outsourced to MDA for programs that utilize Game and Fish funds.

Amend MN Statute 97B.303. Update the statute to:

- Allow donation from both individuals and entities, and from both hunter harvest and other legal means (e.g., removal permits, DNR culls or municipal sharpshooters). Many deer are harvested in Minnesota by entities involved in deer population management. Donation of these deer to the Venison Donation Program should be allowed but are not currently.
- Expand recipients to include nontraditional food charities (e.g., local churches, community orgs, or individuals).

Proposed revision of statute 97B.303: *“An individual **or entity** who legally takes a deer may donate the deer, for distribution to charitable food assistance programs, to a meat processor that is licensed under chapter 28A **or to individuals interested in receiving donated venison.** An individual donating a deer must supply the processor with the tag number under which the deer was taken.”*

Revise MDA X-ray requirements. While addressing lead contamination is important, current program rules requiring that all meat donated from deer harvested via firearm be x-rayed for metal contaminants discourages participation by processors, increases program costs, and hinders the distribution of meat in rural communities. To meet the requirement, most venison is funneled to metro area charities after the meat is brought to testing facilities in St. Paul, leaving rural communities underserved when locally harvested meat leaves their communities. The committee recommends:

- Exempting deer taken with non-lead ammunition from x-ray requirements.
- Expanding opportunities for local distribution of venison meat when the contamination risk of lead particles from bullet fragmentation is low through amending statute 97B 303 as described.

Additional Comments or Considerations

Deer management in Minnesota is facing a pivotal shift. Declining hunter numbers, lower antlerless harvests, and changing cultural values will require adaptive strategies. Traditional methods may no longer suffice. Programs like Wildlife Damage mitigation and venison donation will play key roles in managing deer populations and maintaining public support. Increasing engagement, improving access, and aligning with community needs will ensure their long-term success and relevance.

Contributors

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