

IOWA STATE REPORT

January 2023-December 2023

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Conservation and Recreation Division
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Iowa DNR Mission Statement: To conserve and enhance our natural resources in cooperation with individuals and organizations to improve the quality of life in Iowa and ensure a legacy for future generations.

The Department of Natural Resources Conservation and Recreation Division: The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is led by Director Kayla Lyon and Deputy Director Alex Moon. The Divisions within the DNR are the Environmental Services Division (ESD) and the Conservation and Recreation Division (CRD). CRD is charged with the management of Iowa's fish, wildlife, and natural resource management under a Forestry Section and the Bureaus of Fisheries; Land and Waters; Law Enforcement; State Parks, Forests, and Preserves; and Wildlife. In October 2020, Pete Hildreth was appointed to serve as Division Administrator.

Strategic Deployment: Strategic Deployment is a top-down and bottom-up process involving dialogue between management and teams in which progress indicators are developed from the top down and results come back from the bottom up. It is also a communication process to ensure that every employee pulls in the same direction at the same time and is considered the act of setting direction and steering towards your True North.

To date, the Division has four teams from FY2023 (Aquatic Management Areas, Training, Recruitment, and Health and Safety), that are moving into another phase of work. CRD leadership will reconvene in late spring 2024 to conduct a retrospective and determine opportunities for focus.

Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund: In 2006, the legislatively appointed Sustainable Funding Advisory Committee, chaired by the DNR, began their in-depth four year internal and multi-state research in preparation for their comprehensive reports to the Governor and General Assembly. In 2008 and 2009, proposed legislation was overwhelmingly passed to allow the people of Iowa to vote on a Constitutional amendment that would create a dedicated trust fund. In November 2010, the people of Iowa voted to amend Iowa's Constitution to create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund and authorize a dedicated funding source of 3/8 of 1% of sales tax the next time the tax is legislatively raised. Iowa Code Chapter 461 provides the framework for the distribution, use, and accountability of this Trust Fund. Since the Trust Fund's enactment on January 1, 2011, legislators continue to discuss sales tax options to finance this Trust Fund. To date, the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund has not acquired any receipts, although, in 2019, the Governor moved to include the Invest in Iowa Act in her FY21 budget which supported the funding of the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The issues of 2020 did not help advance the cause. The DNR continues to submit mandated reports to the General Assembly annually. These reports and more information

can be found at: www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/Grants-Other-Funding/Natural-Resources-Rec-Trust.

Fisheries Bureau:

The Rathbun Fisheries Management team requested Paddlefish for stocking in Lake Rathbun. This is an effort to establish the State's first reservoir Paddlefish fishery. The overall goal of the program is to establish a unique and potentially "trophy" fishery for this species that was formerly a resident of the Chariton River drainage. As it is believed some of these stocked fish may escape the lake, it was determined that the stocked product should originate from an unstocked Mississippi River population. To that end, 100,000 Paddlefish fry were acquired from the Missouri Department of Conservation, the broodstock originating from the Osage River population. Fifteen thousand of these fish were cultured at the Rathbun Hatchery through October, 2023. The other 85,000 were stocked in Brown's Slough, to be released into Rathbun Lake in June when the wetland was drained. Unfortunately, no fish in the Brown's Slough stocking survived, likely due to poor oxygen conditions during the grow-out period. Of the 15,000 cultured at the hatchery, 3,847 individuals were stocked with a mean length of 21 inches (TL) and a mean weight of 1.0 lbs. Twenty-five individuals were implanted with acoustic transmitters to monitor their movements, survival, and potential escapement from Rathbun Lake. These fish will be analyzed with Walleye and Hybrid Striped Bass that were previously tagged as part of other studies. Stockings will continue on an annual basis.

Trout management in Iowa has a long history beginning in 1875, when the first Brook Trout were stocked into an Iowa stream. Stocking of trout became a common management practice during the 1900's, when poor stream habitat conditions limited trout natural reproduction. With the widespread adoption of conservation practices across Northeast Iowa, stream quality began to improve. By 1980, the natural reproduction of trout was documented in 5 Iowa streams. By the mid-1990's, a renewed interest in wild Iowa trout was emerging. Wild, naturally reproducing Brown Trout from French Creek and wild Brook Trout from South Pine Creek were spawned and their offspring used to establish new fisheries in several Iowa streams. Stockings of wild-strain fingerlings were very successful compared to those using hatchery strains with wild strains quickly being adopted for annual fingerling stockings. As a result of those stockings, 81 streams in Iowa now have self-sustaining wild populations of trout with another 27 streams showing some level of natural reproduction. In 2019, the stocking of nearly all Brown Trout fingerlings ended due to the proliferation of wild populations. Brook Trout restoration stockings continue, with wild populations currently established in 14 streams. Restoring additional wild Brook Trout populations throughout Northeast Iowa remains a high priority for Fisheries Management staff.

Forestry Section:

The Urban and Community Forestry Program continues to provide technical, educational and financial assistance to communities, individuals and organizations. Last year the program provided support to 302 communities. One of the main components of assistance continues to be tree inventories, forestry management plans and emerald ash borer (EAB) preparation for communities under 5,000 in population. A recent statewide canopy cover assessment provides data on where and how much tree cover we have in Iowa. Iowa communities have 18.5 percent tree cover, about 253,056 acres of community forest. Urban Forests continue to be threatened by canopy loss. The economic loss caused by the top five key pests (Gypsy moth, bur oak blight, EAB, Asian long-

horned beetle and thousand cankers disease) is an estimated \$1.4 billion over 20 years for forest landowners and wood products businesses and over \$20 billion in urban tree removal. Forest Service studies show 4.5 million trees were lost due to development in Iowa from 2010 to 2015. Additionally, over 4 million urban trees were damaged or lost in Iowa communities from the August 10 derecho storm.

Foresters continued to monitor for serious insect, disease, invasive plant species, and environmental problems in Iowa's woodlands. Aerial surveys of 1,264,906 acres was mapped to determine forest health problems and potential management plans. Ground confirmations were conducted to resolve any issues identified in the aerial survey. District foresters worked with impacted landowners on appropriate salvage and reforestation efforts in areas with oak wilt, Dutch elm disease, oak tatters, aspen decline, bur oak blight storm, and flood damage. In cooperation with the IDALS State Entomologist and the USDA, the Forestry Bureau assisted in contracting, placing, and monitoring 4,294 spongy moth traps that captured 10,491 male gypsy moths. A total of 631 walnut twig beetle monitoring traps were placed around the state. No walnut twig beetles were captured. However, 16,181 ambrosia beetles, Pityophthorus beetles and weevils were collected and submitted as part of the national survey. A total of 7,562 maples in 26 counties were examined for the presence of Asian longhorned beetle. No Asian longhorned beetles were found. Iowa confirmed two first instar larvae of spotted lanternfly in Dallas County in 2022. This is Iowa's first detection of this pest and no established population was discovered, just two instars. Several meetings were held to cover non-native invasive plants and various other plants.

Land and Waters Bureau:

The Public Land Acquisition and Management Program aids operating bureaus to acquire lands and to address land management issues, such as unauthorized land-uses and boundary issues. It also assists programs with agreements such as habitat leases, county or city management agreements, office leases and building disposal agreements. In 2023, public land and conservation easement acquisitions totaled 2,986 acres, protecting natural resources, providing Iowans with new and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities, impacting water quality and watershed improvement efforts and impacting recovery efforts for threatened and endangered species.

The Rivers Program contains four major areas: water trail outreach, including real-time reporting on hazards in interactive mapping, planning, designing, constructing and signing; low-head dam mitigation to remove or reduce hazards to public safety and/or fish passage; moving water education instruction and training; and comprehensive conservation efforts, in partnership with local groups and stakeholders, in identified protected water areas. A total of 1,221 miles of dedicated water trails have been developed across 36 water trails. On major rivers, 36 dams have been removed or made fish passable and safer since the low-head dam public hazard program began in 2008.

The Environmental Review and Sovereign Lands Program provides services for DNR and the public to ensure compliance with state and federal rules and regulations pertaining to public trust resources in Iowa. Staff apply information about protected species, state preserves, natural communities, and other significant natural resources for the review of potential environmental impact of proposed construction and development projects requiring a permit from the Department through the Environmental Review and Sovereign Lands Construction Permit sections. The

Threatened and Endangered Species staff coordinate the conservation of federally listed species of plants and animals and state-listed species. Staff also develop and maintain a database of locations of listed species and special natural communities such as prairie and fen wetlands and oversee research activities including federally funded projects. The State Preserves staff work with the State Preserves Advisory Board to develop and maintain a statewide network of preserves on lands with significant biological, geological, archaeological, historical, or scenic value.

Engineering and Construction Services oversee the Department's capital improvement projects. From the smallest outhouse to complete lake and watershed renovation projects, professional staff provide and put into practice the most advanced technology to ensure safe and cost-effective solutions to architectural and engineering projects. Services provided include; planning and development, topographic surveys, professional engineering and architectural design services, contract administration, project management and construction inspection, federal emergency management, emergency response projects, consultant selection and contract negotiations, and investigative reporting. In 2023, 52 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling \$19,621,401 on public lands were contracted.

The Lake Restoration Program's focus is on restoring Iowa's significant publicly-owned lakes and shallow lakes/wetlands. Many of our Iowa Lakes, similar to our nation's lakes, are impaired and suffer from excessive algae growth and sedimentation due to nutrient loading and soil loss. The goal is to invest in projects with multiple benefits including improving water quality, building a healthy aquatic community, and increasing public use and recreational opportunities. Iowa has completed restoration work at 35 lakes, with 20 projects underway, and 15 projects in the initial planning stages. Additionally, restoration work has been completed on 42 projects that enhanced over 14,000 acres of shallow lakes/wetlands across the state.

Law Enforcement Bureau:

In 2023 a law enforcement strategic alignment team, consisting of Conservation Officers and Park Rangers, worked together to look at aligning law enforcement efforts in DNR to enhance operational efficiencies, ensuring that the structure and use of resources are managed to create the best possible future for protecting our natural resources and the citizens of Iowa. Through this team's hard work and the planning from law enforcement, parks, and management, a plan has been developed for integrating the park rangers into the law enforcement bureau starting in 2024. This plan will further streamline law enforcement efforts on all public and private lands in Iowa.

The Turn in Poachers (TIP) board has again proved to be a great supporter for the bureau. Their assistance has been instrumental, not only with enforcement cases, but also with securing needed equipment through donations. A total of \$28,000.00 dollars was paid out by the TIP board through the TIP program to citizens taking the time to get involved. The board also purchased a wolf and coyote mount for the Department's TIP trailer a (\$4,800), purchased a doppler radio tracking unit for enforcement (\$17,000), purchased 8 new fur cases for wildlife ID programs (\$6,400) and a cloudrunner camera for long term surveillance (\$2,500). TIP continues to be a great partner with assisting in protecting Iowa's great natural resources.

State Parks, Forests, and Preserves Bureau:

State Parks: The DNR manages 71 State Parks, Recreation Areas and State Forest Campgrounds with a total of 108,748.4 acres and had an estimated 13 million visitors in 2023. The State Park infrastructure system has 4,418 campsites, 93 rental cabins, 29 day-use lodges, and 153 picnic shelters, and over 760 miles of trails. Park amenities can also include shower buildings, restrooms and latrines, beaches, lodges, and shelters, concession buildings, boat ramps, docks and piers. Providing service to these amenities requires the construction and maintenance of sewer systems, lagoons, water systems, wells, electrical lines, transformers, roads, parking lots, sidewalks, lights, offices and storage buildings. In 2023, 24 capital construction projects were contracted and an additional 77 were in the design phase for a total of 101 active maintenance and renovation projects.

Operational Changes: In 2023, the campgrounds at Lake Ahquabi and Pikes Peak State Parks went to 100 %/Same-Day reservations with a cut-off time of 11:59 pm CST. These two parks have implemented this operational change to enhance customer experience and service. This change allows customers to check the real-time availability of campsites, giving them more time to plan their trips. Additionally, if a cancellation occurs, customers can reserve vacant campsites. These changes provide convenience and improve the overall customer experience. If a customer did not make a reservation prior to arriving at either of these parks their options are to use cell phone data, scan a QR code, or contact the call center to make a reservation.

Parks Statewide Signage Master Plan: In 2023, Phase II of the Iowa State Park's statewide signage project began with the installation of wayfinding and campground signage at the first group of parks. This phase includes vehicular directional, pedestrian directional, destination, rules and information, and campsite identification signage. Installations were carried out in two ways: by in-house staff-led teams, or through contracted projects. It is anticipated to take 5 years to install Phase II at all state parks. This builds on Phase I, which was the installation of new entry portal signs at all parks and is part of a signage master plan with goals for functional, consistent and adaptable signage to connect visitors to resources, facilities and amenities in each area.

State Forests: Iowa's state forest system consists of over 46,000 acres and is comprised of four large State Forests. State Forests provide some of the largest contiguous tracts of public forest land in Iowa. They are sustainably managed to yield forest products, wildlife habitat, soil, and water protection, protection of unique plant and animal communities, and outdoor recreational opportunities. They are the backbone of several of Iowa's Bird Conservation Areas. State Forest staff completed over 800 acres of forest stand improvement, 90 acres of reforestation, over 1,300 miles of trail maintenance, 700 acres of prescribed fire, 140 acres of prairie and savanna management and conducted 10 educational programs in 2023. Through the public bid process, in relation to timber stand management and harvesting, they also sold over 400,000 board feet of timber.

Wildlife Bureau:

Access to places to hunt remains one of the primary concerns of Iowa's resident hunters, and Iowans continue to demonstrate support for additional public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities. The Wildlife Bureau operates and maintains 503 public fish and wildlife areas spanning 422,691 acres. About one-third of these acres are federal lands managed by the wildlife bureau under agreements with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Federal lands include more than 23,300 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas in the Prairie Pothole Region of Iowa. All of these public lands are managed to provide quality wildlife habitats and hunting, fishing, and other consumptive and non-consumptive fish and wildlife related recreational opportunities. Managed wildlife habitats include nearly 100,000 acres of wetlands, 140,000 acres of grasslands, and 115,000 acres of forest/woodland. Annual management activities include burning nearly 37,000 acres of prairie, and managing wetland habitats through water level manipulation utilizing 881 water control structures, 246 miles of dams, dikes, and levees and 33 pumping stations.

One of the most popular public hunting programs has been the Iowa Habitat Access Program (IHAP) which provides public hunting on private land. Iowa received its 3rd USDA Voluntary Public Access grant in 2020 and subsequently enrolled/re-enrolled 117 sites and 16,544 additional acres to public hunting prior to the 2023-24 hunting season. As of today, 252 sites and 33,364 acres are enrolled in IHAP and scheduled to be open to public hunting during the 2024-25 hunting season. This increase in opportunity was met with increased use of IHAP sites across Iowa as these sites increase in popularity with both resident and nonresident hunters. The wildlife bureau, through multiple partnerships, provides support to a growing workforce of wildlife and forestry professionals that provide conservation assistance to private landowners across the state. Staffing includes 18 private lands forestry positions and 27 private lands wildlife biologists, technicians, and habitat specialists. During 2023, these staff developed 890 wildlife plans on 23,483 acres and 1109 forestry plans on 30,907.62 acres. In addition to the substantial support provided by NRCS, these staff reflect our partnerships with Conservation Districts of Iowa, Pheasants Forever, and the Wildlife Management Institute.

As part of the wildlife depredation program, DNR staff work with cities and state parks to establish deer management zones (DMZs) with the purpose of holding special antlerless deer hunts in areas that would not otherwise be open to hunting or to provide additional harvest in areas where CWD has been detected. During 2023, the Natural Resource Commission authorized 73 DMZs, and allocated 13,924 antlerless deer licenses for purchase by qualifying hunters. Hunters purchased 39% of the available tags and harvested 2,451 antlerless deer for a harvest success rate of 45%. Depredation staff also worked with 666 landowners meeting crop damage thresholds for enrollment in the deer depredation program. Landowners were allocated 11,780 licenses and permits for increased hunting pressure and targeted deer removal on those properties. Hunters purchased 59% of the allocated licenses and harvested 3,652 deer for a harvest success rate of 52%. These deer depredation programs have proven successful at forming partnerships between cities, private landowners, and hunters to manage deer numbers and provide additional recreational opportunities in these areas. Combined these two deer depredation programs accounted for 5.9% of the statewide deer harvest.