

**KENTUCKY
STATE REPORT**
May 1, 2024

Rich Storm, Commissioner
Brian Clark & Gabe Jenkins, Deputy Commissioners
Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources
1 Sportsman's Lane
Frankfort, KY 40601

Administrative Services Division

In light of statutory changes designating the department's Commissioner as chief procurement officer, the administrative division staff has been heavily engaged in procurement activities that were previously performed by the Cabinet of Finance and Administration. The Commissioner's designation has afforded the department independence and efficiency in determining the best and most economical ways to support the department's mission.

Engineering, Infrastructure & Technology Division

Engineering Infrastructure and Technology (EIT) completed and initiated multiple high use projects in the last year. Completed projects include an archery range on headquarters campus in Frankfort, KY. New boat ramps were constructed on the Pond River on Harris-Dickerson WMA in Hopkins County, Beaver Lake in Anderson County and Wilgreen Lake in Madison County received a new ramp and a new ADA compliant canoe/kayak launch structure.

Projects planned for construction in the coming year include a new pump on the Ohio River in Ballard County that will aid waterfowl management in the heart of the western reaches of the state's flyway with seasonally flooded acreage on Ballard WMA, and a new shooting range in Scott County on Veterans Memorial WMA. This location is convenient to population centers in both central and northern Kentucky.

The Technology Branch of EIT has implemented improved online systems that enable purchase for permits and applications for quota hunts, sportsman's licensing, and children's conservation camp registrations.

Fisheries Division

Black Bass Genetics

During the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) collected samples for a statewide bass genetics survey. From boat electrofishing surveys, each district took fin clips from black bass in 27 waterbodies across the state of Kentucky that may be impacted by undesirable genetics.

There were two primary purposes of this study: (1) to establish baseline data on the amount of Florida Bass gene introgression into our Largemouth Bass populations; (2) to detect the presence of any Alabama Bass genetics within the Spotted Bass and Smallmouth Bass populations in Kentucky.

Genetic testing was completed at the Southeast Conservation Genetics Lab located at the School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences at Auburn University. Overall, the results from the 26 reservoirs tested supported our expectation that Largemouth Bass populations are composed of primarily pure or nearly pure fish. Of the lakes tested, 8 (30%) would be considered “pure” using a 95% cutoff and an additional 11 (73%) could be added if a 90% cutoff was used. However, there are Largemouth Bass populations in a few reservoirs which have higher than expected levels of Florida Bass introgression. These reservoirs are very small and must have been stocked with Florida Bass or hybrids at some point in the past.

No Alabama Bass alleles were discovered in the samples from our six tested waterbodies. While this is very encouraging, it is impossible to completely rule out the presence of Alabama Bass within the systems during the early phases of any new introductions. Testing for this invasive species will continue in the future.

Along with continuing our statewide black bass genetic analysis, KDFWR is also collecting new Largemouth Bass broodstock, PIT tagging and sending samples off for subsequent genetic analysis. Only known genotype broodstock will be used to produce native Largemouth Bass in the future.

Aquatic Nuisance Species

Work is ongoing with the revision of the 2008 Kentucky ANS Plan (KANSP). The revision includes new content on pathways, updated species tables, trends in introductions, history of introductions, a crosswalk of Kentucky’s prohibited species list with federal and state lists, identifies threats listed in the 2024 Kentucky SWAP, and editorial review of the KANSP. A recommendations document is being drafted that outlines the updates and what type of revision is needed.

The Critical Species Branch continued a statewide effort on combatting the influx of invasive carp in Kentucky waterways through multi-state and federal partnerships. Staff continue to work to assess relative population sizes of bighead and silver carp in the Ohio River, Kentucky Lake, and Lake Barkley by working with the USGS to assess the invasive carp population with fisheries dependent models. KDFWR continues to facilitate the commercial fishing industry targeting invasive carp by enacting special regulations and agreements. In 2023, over 12 million pounds of invasive carp were harvested in Kentucky through the Invasive Carp Harvest Program that provides a per pound subsidy to commercial fishers. Since 2013, over 59 million pounds of invasive carp have been harvested by commercial fishers in Kentucky.

Telemetry results continue to clarify our understanding of invasive carp movements in the relation to harvest, invasive carp behavior, and deterrent efficacy. Estimated mean pool-to-pool transition probabilities were generally low (< 0.2) for Silver Carp, suggesting that most of these Ohio River fish remain within the pool in which they were tagged.

The Bio-Acoustic Fish Fence, at Barkley lock, is now being operated in a constant state. This type of deterrent uses sound, bubble curtain, and lights to create an environment invasive carp avoid. KDFWR is working with partners to secure funding to maintain that system into the future. The initial study period has demonstrated this system deters silver carp crossings by at least 50%. This is helping reduce the number of invasive carp from immigrating into the reservoirs. KDFWR participated in 20 structured decision-making meetings with collaborating agencies to provide data and expert opinion on the distribution of invasive carp populations, identify available deterrent methods, and prioritize installation and maintenance of deterrents in the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Tombigbee waterways.

Substantial effort and funding are being directed to mass removal of invasive carp in the Tennessee and Cumberland River systems. However, relatively little is understood regarding the level of exploitation that results from these investments and efforts. A better understanding of exploitation is critical to informing our current, primary management tool for invasive carp. KDFWR, together with Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and other partners, will implement a high-reward tagging study in Kentucky and Barkley reservoirs to obtain estimates of exploitation and better evaluate current removal efforts.

Information & Education Division

Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation (R3) Program

In September 2023, a new wheelchair accessible archery range located on KDFWR's headquarters campus in Frankfort opened to the public. The new range features 11 shooting lanes with bag targets suited for field points. The lanes feature a mix of fixed target stands at 10, 20 and 30 yards, as well as lanes with movable targets that allow for a target range to 50 yards. Additional lanes allow access from an elevated shooting deck that can mimic shot angles from a tree stand in the field. Two poles on top of the elevated platform will allow Hunter Education classes and R3 programs to demonstrate proper use of fall-arrest systems and safe shooting from tree stands and saddles. The R3 program also increased access to fishing equipment and educational material through the expansion of loaner pole stations, which now include 35 state parks, 20 public libraries and five extension offices; Through a multi-state grant, it also created digital assets that feature diverse audiences participating in fishing and paddling.

Conservation Education

KDFWR helps educate thousands of school children each year on a range of topics. Campers who attend any of the three summer conservation camps operated by the agency

receive instruction in the safe pursuit of outdoor activities and skills related to or dependent upon the responsible use of natural resources. More than 4,200 children in grades 4-6 attended a conservation camp in 2023. As a direct result of the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Foundation's support, 365 children attended conservation camp this past summer. The Foundation's contribution of more than \$74,000 represents its largest contribution toward camp scholarships. The previous record was \$67,000 in 2019. The Salato Wildlife Education Center in Frankfort welcomed more than 45,000 visitors in 2023. Almost 13,000 of those were guests who visited with a school group, an increase of 35 percent compared to 2022.

Hunter Education

From Oct. 1, 2022 – Sept. 30, 2023, there were 10,343 hunter education certifications issued in Kentucky. During the reporting period:

- 7,255 students were certified in 383 hunter education courses;
- 3,088 students completed Hunter Education at a KDFWR conservation camp; and
- 989 people participated in 13 advanced hunter education events.

Of the 7,255 students, program staff and volunteers certified 178 students in 10 bowhunter education courses.

There are 280 active volunteer hunter education instructors on file with 1,098 in the Hunter Education Volunteer Database. During the reporting period, 114 new instructors were trained at 22 volunteer instructor classes. Volunteer hunter education instructors provided 6,325 hours of program instruction yielding \$154,000 of in-kind match.

Communications – Raising the Bar

Kentucky Afield TV is the longest running outdoor show in the world and is the third longest running show of any kind in the world. This weekly television program is shot, edited, and produced by the Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources. Kentucky Afield has over 30 television affiliates across several states, and online viewership of the show continues to increase. Its online audience is more than 163,000 YouTube subscribers; up 5 percent in the last year; 5.4 million total YouTube views in 2023, in addition to over-the-air-viewers. Kentucky Afield Magazine has its greatest number of paid subscribers in the last 20 years; around 25,000 paid subscribers. Several employees in the I&E Division who were honored for excellence in communications in 2023. Kentucky Afield TV was honored by the national Association of Conservation Information (ACI) with a first-place award for hunting and fishing video feature and second place for recurring video program. Division staff also received five first-place awards and 12 awards overall in the Kentucky Association of Government Communicators' 2023 Awards of Excellence competition. Winners were announced in December at the association's annual meeting in Frankfort.

Law Enforcement Division

Law Enforcement Academy Class 27 recently graduated eight recruits from Bluegrass Community Technical College with an associate degree. This program began as an initiative from “Educating Heroes” and was adopted by KDFWR in 2023 as an effort to further educate our Conservation Officers.

The Law Enforcement Division has begun recruitment and hiring for the addition of twelve Conservation Officer Recruits for Academy Class 28, set to begin early September 2024.

Our K-9 program is gaining a lot of statewide attention and is proving to be a great addition to the Division. The three sibling K-9 Labrador Retrievers began patrols with their handlers in December 2022 where they have since made numerous cases, including locating lost persons, wildlife crimes, and keeping our public outdoor use areas free of narcotics.

We began our drone program in 2022 with the issuance of three drones across the state. Since implementation, the program has been extremely beneficial and has greatly expanded. Issuance of drones statewide is forecasted to be complete by the end of 2024.

The Law Enforcement Division launched its first social media campaign through the creation of its own Facebook account. Since implementation in March 2023, it has gained almost 11,000 followers and has proven to be a great public relations and recruitment tool.

Marketing Division

2023 brought the return of a full event schedule for the Marketing Division. We attended eight large-scale events, including the new Elk & Outdoor Fest – which featured the announcement of Kentucky’s Elk Hunt Drawing winners. This first-year, one-day event was a huge success – with more than 3,500 people in attendance!

The different divisions within KDFWR work together to create unique and educational experiences for all who attend the shows and events. Representatives from Fisheries, Wildlife, Law Enforcement and Information & Education divisions are on-hand to interact with the public, creating a positive atmosphere at each event.

In efforts to reach a broader audience, the Marketing Division began selling branded merchandise at shows and events to increase revenue. From 2022 to 2023 there was a 65% increase in the sales of the branded merchandise. Popular items included t-shirts and sweatshirts with the agency logo along with stickers. The division increased the awareness of the department’s annual Fishing Forecast by branded hats and shirts to promote the opportunities for anglers across the state.

Kentucky Wild celebrated 5 years as a membership-based program whose proceeds support the conservation of Kentucky's wildlife that are not hunted, fished, or trapped. Through scheduled member experiences, Kentucky Wild members can join agency biologists in the field to witness conservation in action. This year, members helped fund exciting conservation projects including the purchase and installation of cave gates to protect federally endangered Virginia big-eared bat colonies in eastern Kentucky and supplies needed for an eastern hellbender propagation project. Member experiences included banding Peregrine falcons, surveying for rare stream fish, glitter-tagging federally endangered freshwater mussels, and a bat survey for federally endangered Indiana bats.

Wildlife Division

The Department completed acquisition of the state's largest ever conservation easement, which now makes up the biggest wildlife management area in the Commonwealth. The Cumberland Forest WMA is a nearly 55,000-acre privately-owned property comprised of several tracts in three counties of southeastern Kentucky (also in the 16-county elk zone). This will likely serve as a model for future WMA projects where fee-simple purchase may not be cost-effective or otherwise feasible. The project was made possible through a strong and diverse partnership including the Kentucky General Assembly (which appropriated the state match of \$3.875M to acquire the public recreational access and management easement), the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, the Nature Conservancy, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Walmart's Acres for America program.

In December 2023, through its routine CWD surveillance, KDFWR detected Kentucky's first CWD positive case, in a 2.5-year-old hunter-harvested buck. The detection occurred in far western Kentucky, with cases detected in surrounding states (Tennessee, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana). KDFWR had conducted statewide CWD surveillance for more than 20 years and tested more than 40,000 deer prior the detection. Surveillance in the western Kentucky region was heightened during fall 2021 in response to a detection in Tennessee less than 8 miles from Kentucky's border.