

## **IOWA STATE REPORT**

### **January 2024-December 2024**

**Pete Hildreth, Division Administrator**  
**Iowa Department of Natural Resources**  
**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.

**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](http://www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/Grants-Other-Funding/Natural-Resources-Rec-Trust).

### **Fisheries Bureau:**

The Iowa DNR hatchery system continues to embrace the production of sportfish for stocking purposes in recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS). In three seasons of use, the RAS incubators have produced 224,977,844 Walleyes, 3,871,719 Northern Pike, and 462,910 Muskellunge. During the 2024-25 winter, SLFH built a RAS dedicated for Muskellunge production. This system is composed of two 5' and two 8' self-cleaning tanks as well as the water processing components typical of RAS. While we have a lot to learn about Muskellunge culture in RAS, we believe this system will be able to produce 20,000 four-inch fingerlings in July and 2,500 ten-inch advanced

fingerlings in October.

For the second year, the Fisheries Bureau stocked Paddlefish in Rathbun Lake, in an effort to establish the State's first reservoir Paddlefish fishery. This program was expanded in the fall of 2024 to include the Iowa Great Lakes area. Approximately 2,130 Paddlefish were stocked into West Lake Okoboji, a glacial natural lake in Northwest Iowa. The mean length and weight of Paddlefish stocked in 2024 were 19.6 inches and 1.1 lbs. Historically paddlefish were a rare but natural component of this fishery as they migrated up the Little Sioux River from the Missouri River. Goals of this stocking are similar to the previous program established at Rathbun Lake.

Iowa is celebrating 150 years of trout stocking in 2025. Trout management in Iowa has a long history beginning in 1875, when the first Brook Trout were stocked into an Iowa stream. Stocking trout became a common management practice during the 1900s, 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 the mid-1990s, the focus shifted to wild trout management. Wild, naturally reproducing Brown Trout and Brook Trout were spawned and their offspring used to establish new fisheries in several Iowa streams. Stockings of wild-strain fingerlings were very successful. 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. For the first time in many years, no Brown Trout fingerlings were produced in Iowa in 2024, which 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:**

Foresters continued to monitor for serious insect, disease, invasive plant species, and environmental problems in Iowa's woodlands. Aerial surveys of 820,751 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 Section assisted in contracting, placing, and monitoring 5,276 spongy moth traps that captured 1,296 male spongy moths. A total of 227 walnut twig beetle monitoring traps were placed around the state. No walnut twig beetles were captured. However, 8,230 ambrosia beetles, Pityophthorus beetles and weevils were collected and submitted as part of the national survey. A total of 5,314 maples in 34 communities 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.

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 379 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. Urban Forests continue to be threatened by canopy loss due to weather

events, and invasive plant, pests and diseases. Over 4 million urban trees were damaged or lost in Iowa communities from the August 10 derecho storm. The economic loss caused by the top five key pests (spongy moth, bur oak blight, emerald ash borer, 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.

#### **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 2024, public land and conservation easement acquisitions totaled 2,230 acres.

The Rivers Program contains four major areas: water trail outreach; 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. A total of 1,221 miles of dedicated water trails have been developed across 38 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.

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 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 2024, 63 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling \$15,968,046 on public lands were contracted.

The Lake Restoration Program's focus is on restoring Iowa's significant publicly-owned lakes and shallow lakes/wetlands. 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 36 lakes, with 24 projects underway, and 12 projects in the initial planning stages. Additionally, restoration work has been completed on 44

projects that enhanced over 14,400 acres of shallow lakes/wetlands across the state.

### **Law Enforcement Bureau:**

In 2024 the Iowa DNR Law Enforcement Bureau was granted approximately \$1.6 million dollars from Governor Kim Reynolds to replace our aging portable & mobile police radios for conservation officers and park rangers. Ten of our conservation officer radio programmers worked to develop a standardized statewide radio program to push out to all 240 radios, and worked closely with local counties to acquire & renew MOUs for talk group/frequency sharing between agencies. This group's next project will be working with the Iowa Department of Public Safety to implement & train officers on a newly acquired state-level computer aided dispatch and records management system in 2025.

In 2024, the DNR Law Enforcement Bureau also researched & implemented the foundations of a peer-support program. Eleven volunteers were selected to attend the Peer Support Foundation's three-day Basic Peer Support training, and were tasked on researching and developing a proposed policy/SOP for the program. These volunteer officers worked hard to connect with other state agency peer-support/officer wellness program representatives and worked with the Iowa Department of Public Safety's Wellness Bureau on use of the Cordico Wellness App to develop the program and is looking toward implementation statewide.

In 2024 we officially started 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. The first 7 Park Rangers have been reassigned to the Law Enforcement Bureau. The remaining 25 will transfer over in phase two through attrition involving Conservation Officer retirements as well as Park Ranger retirements. 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 \$21,400 dollars was paid out in rewards by the TIP board through the TIP program to citizens taking the time to get involved. The board purchased thermal camera systems for each officer that can be attached to their phone for finding evidence and search and rescue for \$30,000. TIP continues to be a great partner with assisting in protecting Iowa's great natural resources.

In 2024, Law Enforcement officer responded to multiple weather-related tragedies. On the afternoon of May 21, 2024, a violent tornado tracked across southwestern Iowa, devastating the city of Greenfield in Adair county. The tornado would claim 4 lives that day. Dozens of law enforcement officers, along with 8 Conservation Officers and a Park Rangers responded to the town to provide aid, helping secure the city to prevent looting and direct first responders to the command center. They remained available well into the night and helped in the coming days. Additionally, in the evening and overnight hours of June 21, 2024, 19 inches of rain fell in Northwest Iowa and Southwest Minnesota creating a 500-year flood. During this event, Conservation Officers effected over 250 water-based rescues. After the immediate threat had passed Conservation Officers shifted roles and began helping utilities with reaching substations to turn off power and rerouting efforts. This event lasted 4 days with Iowa Conservation Officers

helping with evacuations and staging efforts.

### **State Parks, Forests, and Preserves Bureau:**

**State Parks:** The DNR manages 71 State Parks, Recreation Areas and State Forest Campgrounds with a total of 107,260.6 acres and had an estimated 13.5 million visitors in 2024. The State Park infrastructure system has 4,276 campsites, 93 rental cabins, 29 day-use lodges, and 153 picnic shelters, and over 764 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 2024, 34 capital construction projects were contracted and an additional 80 were in the design phase for a total of 114 active maintenance and renovation projects.

**Operational Changes:** In 2024, the campgrounds at Ambrose A. Call, Ledges, Lewis and Clark, Clear Lake, Pleasant Creek and Wilson Island transitioned to 100%/Same-Day reservations with a cut-off time of 10:00 pm CST. These six 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. 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. Ledges and Wilson Island provide wi-fi at the campground registration building due to poor cell service.

**State Parks Accessibility:** In the fall of 2023 an Action Track Chair was acquired at Big Creek State Park through a grant from the Bronco Wild Fund. The chair is offered free of charge to park visitors with disabilities to utilize on the beach, trails, and fishing accesses. This combined with the Department's ongoing efforts to complete thorough ADA assessments of each park prompted the Legislature to provide a special appropriation to continue making accessibility improvements in State Parks. These additional funds are being utilized to complete deferred maintenance on accessible routes, repair and replace accessible tables and grills, and to improve accessible campsites, parking stalls, fishing accesses, and beach access to name a few. The Bureau is also working to improve communication on the Department's website and in printed materials to better inform visitors with disabilities on what accessible activities are available at each location before visiting.

**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 600 acres of forest stand improvement, 60 acres of reforestation, over 1,500 miles of trail maintenance, 900 acres of prescribed fire, 120 acres of prairie and savanna management and conducted 12 educational programs in 2024. Through the public bid process, in relation to timber stand management and harvesting, they also sold over 1,000,000 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 513 public fish and wildlife areas spanning 423,867 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 23,900 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 39,720 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 4th USDA Voluntary Public Access grant in 2024 and subsequently enrolled/re-enrolled 3 sites and 285.66 additional acres to public hunting prior to the 2024-25 hunting season. As of today, 208 sites and 29,205.89 acres are enrolled in IHAP and scheduled to be open to public hunting during the 2025-26 hunting season. We have roughly 25 sites for 4,750 acres expiring in 2025, most of which are willing to re-enroll. However, the status of federal programs that support habitat developments, namely CRP, is uncertain and causing landowners to delay IHAP re-enrollment until they know more about their status regarding federal program support for their habitat.

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 17 private lands forestry positions and 8 private lands wildlife biologists and technicians. During 2024, these staff developed 1,284 wildlife plans on 42,258 acres and 1,130 forestry plans on 48,395.14 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 worked with 25 cities, 20 state and county parks, and 2 federally owned properties 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. In addition, DNR staff established DMZ's in 14 counties to provide additional harvest in areas where CWD has been detected. During 2024, the Natural Resource Commission authorized 62 DMZs, and allocated 13,885 antlerless deer licenses for purchase by qualifying hunters. Depredation staff also worked with landowners meeting crop damage thresholds for enrollment in the deer depredation program. Landowners were allocated 11,524 licenses and permits for increased hunting pressure and targeted deer removal on those properties. Hunters purchased 55% of the allocated licenses and harvested 3,341 deer for a harvest success rate of 54%. 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. The licenses allocated to landowners enrolled in the deer depredation program accounted for 3.3% of the statewide deer harvest.