

MINNESOTA STATE REPORT

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Digital Initiatives to Encourage Hunters and Anglers to Engage in R3

In the 2023-2024 hunting and fishing seasons, MN DNR utilized digital tools to engage with Minnesotans across the state, inspiring them to get outside and try hunting and fishing. From fall 2023 to spring 2024, MN DNR partnered with Pheasants Forever to encourage existing Minnesota hunters to take the Hunter Mentor Pledge – an online pledge stating they will take a new or lapsed hunter out on a hunt for any in-season game species. One hundred and twenty-eight Minnesota hunters took the pledge, and 41 of them completed the challenge by bringing a new hunter along and sharing a recap of their hunt.

In spring 2024, MN DNR partnered with the Student Angler Organization and Women Anglers of Minnesota to host the second annual Minnesota Moms Fishing Challenge. The virtual challenge encouraged moms in Minnesota to go fishing during Take a Mom Fishing Weekend and share their catch in a Facebook group of participants. Women Anglers of Minnesota hosted pre-challenge fishing 101 webinars, and the Student Angler Organization provided over 100 prizes for randomly selected participants. Over 3,000 moms from 130 different Minnesota zip codes joined the group and posted 1,500 fish. Both initiatives demonstrate that digital programs can lead to real-life experiences in the outdoors.

Fish Community Monitoring Following Failure of Rapidan Dam

In June 2024, flood waters of the Blue Earth River overwhelmed the Rapidan Dam and established a new route around its west abutment. This historic event released millions of cubic yards of sediment that smothered important aquatic habitats further downstream; however, it also created a new route for fish passage that was previously blocked by the dam for 113 years. In response, staff from MN DNR and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency cooperated to initiate a long-term fish community monitoring effort.

The goals of the monitoring effort were to measure immediate impacts to the fish community downstream of the Rapidan Dam site, monitor changes in the downstream fish community over time, and monitor for recolonization of fish species previously extirpated from the fish community upstream of the Rapidan Dam site. MN DNR's River Ecology Unit led the initial sampling effort during November 2024, which included barge electrofishing surveys of four sites upstream of the Rapidan Dam and three sites downstream. Barge electrofishing surveys collected a total of 42 fish species: 35 downstream of the Rapidan Dam site and 33 upstream. Additionally, MN DNR staff installed three acoustic transmitters into the Blue Earth River and Watonwan River upstream of the Rapidan Dam site to detect potential use of the upstream reach

by fish that are implanted with acoustic transmitters further downstream in the Minnesota River and other connected waterways.

Roseau River Fish Passage Project

MN DNR completed a project in 2024 to address several conservation objectives for native fish in the Roseau River. The goal of the project was to modify the existing Roseau River rock arch rapids and incorporate a slope reduction from 5% to 3% slope for better fish passage. Staff replaced the damaged U-shaped rock weirs with a sine-wave pattern. The project increased river connectivity and now allows sensitive fish populations to redistribute as needed in response to hydrologic variability. Additionally, the project targeted lake sturgeon, a state-listed species of special concern and contributed to a basin-wide effort to recover lake sturgeon. The project also created riffle habitat that provides regionally unique spawning habitat for a variety of species.

Federal Funding

MN DNR maintains regular communication with our federal partners to stay updated on our federal programs. While there have been slight delays with our Pittman-Robertson/Dingell-Johnson program, we are still receiving award letter notifications for our grants. Additionally, our reimbursements have been processed as requested, which is encouraging.

Large-scale Prairie Pothole Wetland Restorations on Wildlife Management Areas in Minnesota

Since its establishment in 2020 with funds secured by the Outdoor Heritage Fund, MN DNR's Wetland Management Program has visited Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) across the state to assess the condition of wetlands within the prairie region and implement restoration projects where needed. In 2024, the team implemented wetland restoration projects on more than 90 different WMAs. They restored more than 30 prairie wetlands and enhanced nearly 3,000 acres of wetlands through projects such as implementing natural disturbances, modifying water control structures for water level manipulation and seeding wild rice.

Implementing Habitat Conservation for SGCN within Conservation Focus Areas

In 2024, MN DNR implemented several habitat projects within Conservation Focus Areas, which are priority areas for working with partners to identify, design, and implement actions and to report on the effectiveness toward achieving the goals and objectives defined in Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan. Conservation Focus Areas were selected to represent locations with Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and habitat resources that need attention and have the opportunity, such as organized and willing partners or funding, to address those needs over the next 10 years.

In the Root River Conservation Focus Area, MN DNR worked with internal and external partners to restore habitats at three different sites in 2024. On the Root River WMA, staff completed an ongoing bluff prairie and oak savannah restoration project by planting native shrubs on five acres of old pasture. Additionally, MN DNR used livestock grazing to control buckthorn on a 23-acre private remnant bluff prairie site and to reduce woody encroachment on a 54-acre site in Reno Horse Campground, located in Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest.

MN DNR also completed several conservation projects in other Conservation Focus Areas throughout the state. In the Brainerd Lakes Conservation Focus Area, MN DNR implemented prescribed goat grazing and cut stump herbicide treatment on 20 acres of Rotary Park in Brainerd to reduce buckthorn encroachment and increase the presence of native grasses and forbs. In the Prairie Coteau Conservation Focus Area, MN DNR partnered with the Sustainable Farming Association to sponsor a Grazing for Soil Health and Conservation Field Tour on a local agricultural producer's property to educate the public about grazing management and strategies for creating habitat opportunities for wildlife on agricultural lands.

Pilot Comparison of Anonymous Mobile Phone Location Data with Creel Survey Data

MN DNR is in the process of evaluating Anonymous Location Data (ALD) and its potential usage for fisheries. One potential application of the technology currently being explored is using ALD to supplement or replace extremely expensive creel counts that are currently conducted using aircraft, roving counts, or access-based counts. MN DNR staff identified the latest Lake Pepin/Pool 4 creel survey as a test bed for this technology. The Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee (UMRCC) allocated funds to purchase a set of data from Cobalt (an ALD company). The raw results are currently available on the UMRCC website and will be evaluated with creel data in the next year.

Peatland Restoration Project Planning

In the early 1900s, thousands of miles of ditches were dug in Minnesota peatlands to develop these areas for agriculture. Although the drainage efforts mostly failed, the ditches remain and continue to drain natural wetlands, contribute to downstream flooding, impact important fisheries, and release carbon when peat is oxidized. Many of these ditches are on state lands; however, restoration of these areas requires collaboration with the counties that administer the ditch systems.

Recently, MN DNR staff have engaged with county and Tribal staff to develop a pilot peatland restoration project. The goal of the pilot project will be to demonstrate a successful peatland restoration, both in technique and county coordination, that can be replicated across the landscape. Project staff have identified several potential project sites, collected data, and conducted hydrological modeling to further inform restoration site selection.

Improvements for User Accessibility on Statewide WMAs and Shore Fishing Sites

MN DNR made major strides in advancing the \$150 million Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) initiative launched in 2023. In 2024, field staff proposed projects to improve user accessibility on WMAs that were then selected for funding. MN DNR currently has six projects in design, several of which will likely go to bid in 2025. The first two orders of 19 ADA accessible hunting blinds will be completed in 2025. In addition, MN DNR hired a statewide project coordinator in December 2024 to oversee and administer the Get Out MORE funds.

MN DNR also hired a shore fishing coordinator in 2024 to initiate and oversee improvements and development of new shore fishing sites across the state using the funding provided by Get Out MORE. Over the course of the year, field staff conducted more than 100 site visits to evaluate the suitability of projects submitted by area fisheries offices around the state. MN DNR initiated 30 projects in 2024 in cooperation with cities and counties. Staff completed two

projects in 2024 that improved accessibility at existing shore fishing sites. Cooperative agreements to purchase fishing piers were completed on an additional five projects in 2024.