

**MISSOURI
STATE REPORT**
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Financial Update

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget for the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) continues to represent less than 1 percent of the total state government budget in Missouri. The primary sources of revenue in FY 2024 were the one-eighth of 1 percent Conservation Sales Tax, at about \$171.3 million, and permit sales and federal reimbursements, at about \$93.6 million. Total receipts for FY 2024 were \$283.5 million.

Conservation pays by enriching our quality of life and contributing to our economy. In Missouri 4.8 million residents and nonresidents age 16 years and older participate in fishing, hunting, or wildlife-related recreation each year. The total economic impact of fish and wildlife recreation and the forest products industry in the state is more than \$19 billion annually. Expenditures and retail sales from fish and wildlife recreation and forest products support over 85,000 jobs.

Highlights of Conservation Challenges and Successes

MDC Administration. The Missouri Conservation Commission selected Jason Sumners to serve as the tenth department director in 2024. Sumners is supported by Aaron Jeffries, Deputy Director – Engagement, Andrew Bond, Deputy Director – Business and Operations, and Laura Conlee, Deputy Director – Resource Management.

Shepherd of the Hills Conservation Education Center. In December 2024, the Commission, MDC staff, volunteers, partners, elected officials, and the public celebrated the grand opening of the Shepherd of the Hills Conservation Education Center in Branson. The new \$7 million facility, which is 2.5 times larger than the old building, is adjacent to MDC’s Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery and features a large multi-purpose room that can be divided into two classrooms. The new building also features a 7,500-gallon indoor aquarium, new exhibits, an expanded lobby, larger restrooms, and more office space for staff.

Flood Conditions. Missouri experienced extreme flooding in November 2024 that caused significant damage at Montauk Fish Hatchery, Maramec Spring Fish Hatchery, George O. White State Forest Nursery, and several river accesses in the Ozark Region. MDC’s winter catch-and-release trout season at Montauk State Park was closed for the remainder of the season.

Jay and Carolyn Henges Wetland Education and Conservation Center. MDC and the Great Rivers Habitat Alliance (GRHA) entered into a cooperative agreement to protect habitat and add public and educational opportunities on nearly 785 privately-owned acres of prime wetland habitat in an area recognized by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan as a priority Waterfowl Conservation Region. The property is a mix of natural and agricultural habitats and holds a 330-acre refuge which is a significant migratory stopover for ducks, geese, and shorebirds during spring and fall migrations. The property, located in St. Charles County, will serve as GRHA's new headquarters and be a center for education, scientific research programs, land-management workshops, and managed public-hunting opportunities.

Tree Seedling Program. The George O. White Nursery grows and distributes about 2 million low-cost seedlings every year to Missouri citizens and processes over 13,000 customer orders. It provides free seedlings to approximately 80,000 fourth-grade students for Arbor Day and assists the Monarchs Collaborative with hundreds of milkweed root stock to be planted by Master Naturalist and Master Gardener groups.

Hatchery Program. MDC manages 9 fish hatcheries (5 cold water and 4 warm water). In the past year, approximately 1.5 million trout and 5 million warm water sportfish were stocked to help maintain quality fishing opportunities. Historic flooding occurred at Montauk and Maramec Spring hatcheries in November 2024, impacting fish inventory in the cold-water system.

Deer and Spring Youth Turkey Harvest Results. Missouri's 2024-2025 deer-hunting season ended with a total deer harvest for the season of 276,262. Preliminary data shows young turkey hunters harvested 4,428 birds over youth weekend, April 12-13. This spring's youth harvest is the second highest harvest since the youth season began in 2001, behind only 2015 at 4,449 birds.

Brown-headed Nuthatch. MDC and partners continued Brown-headed Nuthatch reintroduction efforts in the Missouri Ozarks. In 2020 and 2021, MDC released 102 birds to the U.S. Forest Service's Mark Twain National Forest as part of a pilot effort to achieve holistic ecosystem restoration of Missouri's shortleaf pine woodlands. To establish an extensive, sustainable population, 95 more nuthatches were reintroduced. A portion of the birds were fitted with a radio transmitter and are being monitored using a local array of automated telemetry Motus towers.

Missouri White-Tailed Deer Management Plan. MDC finalized the statewide white-tailed deer management plan for 2025-2034. The plan focuses on five goals: population management; hunting and recreation; deer health and disease; education, communication, and public engagement; and research.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). MDC's work protects the health of deer populations and believes it's a critical step in preserving our ecosystems, safeguarding public interests, and combating the spread of CWD. Proactive measures to ensure deer health, such as limiting artificial congregation points, enhancing surveillance, and supporting science-based wildlife management, are not optional. Once entrenched, CWD is virtually impossible to eliminate, making prevention and early intervention powerful tools. MDC's investment in disease monitoring, habitat conservation, and responsible hunting practices, help maintain vibrant, resilient deer populations that are crucial to ecosystems and deeply valued by hunters, nature lovers, and communities alike.

Each year, MDC tests a sample of the state's deer population for CWD to better understand where the disease is on the landscape so management actions can be applied and learn about how the disease is spreading. MDC sampled and tested more than 36,000 deer for CWD between July 2024 and April 2025. Of the deer sampled, 243 tested positive. Those deer bring the total number of CWD cases found in the state to 815 since the state's first case in wild deer was found in early 2012. Including recent sampling efforts, MDC has collected more than 316,000 tissue samples for CWD testing since the disease was first detected.

Invasive Species. MDC continues active engagement and leadership within key invasive species collaborations including Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership, Missouri River Basin Invasive Carp Technical Committee, Scenic Rivers Invasive Species Partnership, Missouri Invasive Plant Council, and Missouri Invasive Forest Pest Council. Prioritized invasive species management was performed across the state in terrestrial and aquatic habitats. An invasive carp removal project on the Lamine River extracted 43,000 lbs. of silver and bighead carp in a 2-week effort to inform on commercial fishing potential for the tributary of the Missouri River. MDC set 3,237 spongy moth traps in 37 counties and the City of St. Louis in coordination the Department of Agriculture's 5,696 traps in 61 counties; in total capturing only one moth. This Early Detection, Rapid Response surveillance successfully continues to protect Missouri's forests from the renowned destroyer. Monitoring for new invader Northern Snakehead continued in the Southeast region of the state. Targeted marketing provided multimedia outreach and informed the public how to report any catches online.

Strike Teams Partnership. MDC is working in collaboration with partners to establish mobile strike teams across the state to accomplish our shared vision for conservation by combating invasive species and restoring natural communities. We have two strike team models, our Invasive Species Strike Teams and Habitat Restoration Strike Teams. The Invasive Species Strike Teams are a partnership between MDC, the Missouri Department of Transportation, and the Missouri Prairie Foundation. These 28 MoDOT-based teams control targeted invasive plants along thousands of Missouri highway miles. The Habitat Restoration Strike Teams are a partnership between The Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever, and Shaw Nature Reserve. These teams prioritize efforts using MDC's Tiered Approach to Natural Communities and Habitat Management and provide restoration management activities on public and private land. In FY24, the Habitat Restoration Strike Teams completed nearly 54,000 acres of management, mostly focused on prescribed burns. Within that total, over 1,000 acres of invasive species were treated.

Eliminating Feral Hogs in Missouri. MDC is part of a productive network of federal and state agencies called the Missouri Feral Hog Elimination Partnership (Partnership). The Partnership includes over 15 federal and state agencies and agriculture and conservation NGOs, collaborating under the common goal of eliminating feral hogs from public and private lands throughout Missouri. During 2024, the Partnership removed 5,105 hogs from the landscape, assisted 609 landowners, and scouted 3,984,563 acres. Since 2016, efforts by the Partnership decreased decrease in the number of Missouri watersheds showing evidence of being occupied by feral hogs by 84.4%. In addition to on-the-ground operations, the Partnership placed equipment at Soil and Water Conservation District offices for landowners to use in areas with high feral hog activity and conducted landowner and community outreach activities.

Assisting Private Landowners and Communities. In FY2024, MDC staff assisted private landowners with implementation of nearly \$2.3 million in cost share for implementing wildlife improvements on their properties. The most popular practices included invasive species treatment, woodland prescribed burning and timber stand improvement. These practices contribute to improving nesting and brood rearing habitat for wild turkey and other wildlife species. Staff also assisted communities with implementing conservation practices. MDC staff utilized Commission funds to implement \$1.1 million of conservation improvements throughout Missouri's communities. The most popular practices included critical risk tree removal, tree pruning, and community tree inventories.

Mobile Applications. MDC continues to use technology, such as free mobile applications, to connect people to nature. MO Outdoors enables users to find MDC conservation areas, fishing accesses, hiking trails, shooting ranges, and nature centers by location or based on their desired types of outdoor activities. MO Fishing allows anglers to buy fishing permits and see fishing structures in Missouri water bodies. MDC's most popular app, MO Hunting, allows hunters to buy permits, view regulations, and check-in animal harvests. At the end of FY24, the 3 apps had more than 1.6 million lifetime installs.

Boone County Nature School. In August 2024, MDC and Columbia Public Schools opened the Boone County Nature School. The property boasts a new 8,230-square-foot building that houses four nature-themed classrooms, lab space, nature and student-related lobby exhibits, and offices. The building and associated grounds serve Boone County school district students through unique "place-based" education as well as the public through special conservation-related programming.

Helping Missourians Discover Nature. Discover Nature Schools (DNS) curricula is used in 46 percent of Missouri schools to support teachers engaging students with inquiry based, hands-on, outdoor learning from pre-K to 12th grade. Two new DNS curricula were introduced: *DNS Kindergarten: Bears Through the Seasons* and *DNS First Grade: Exploring Missouri*, each meets all state science standards for the specific grade level. Trained teachers also receive prepared teacher kits to support indoor and outdoor conservation focused lessons. Working with MDC's social science program, DNS is implementing an evaluation of curriculum success in meeting the needs of teachers, getting students outside, connecting students to nature, and facilitating the development of inclusive pro-conservation identities.

Archery in the Schools Program Builds Champions. MDC provides Missouri National Archery in the Schools Program (MoNASP) grants to schools for equipment and free teacher and staff training for those administering the program. More than 83,500 Missouri students from 800 schools and homeschool groups reported participation in MoNASP during the 2024-2025 season. This year's state tournament was held in Branson. The bullseye tournament had 3,852 archers and 3D tournament had 1,782 archers, with some archers competing in both events.

Conservation Agent Training Academy. Twenty conservation agent trainees began the Conservation Agent Training Academy in March. Upon graduation, MDC's law enforcement staffing levels will be nearly full strength. Agents Chase Wright and Marc Bagley made a once-in-a-lifetime poaching case when they responded to an Operation Game Thief call and

apprehended three subjects shooting 50 mallards in closed season on the Missouri River in January of 2024. These cases were adjudicated with support from the Saline and Carrol County judicial systems. In addition to a stern lecture from the judge, the three hunters were ordered to pay more than \$7,000 in fines and donate \$7,500 to Ducks Unlimited/Delta Waterfowl. Each hunter was also sentenced to 30 days in jail (suspended upon completion of 2 years of probation, 50 hours of community service with MDC, and completion of a victim's impact panel). These cases illustrate the importance of maintaining strong relationships with citizens, prosecutors, and judges to conserve our wildlife resources.

Listening to Missourians. MDC continues to offer virtual public input opportunities. In addition to annual hunter and angler surveys, MDC conducted surveys on participant and landowner satisfaction with the Missouri Recreational Access Program, collected input from attendees of the regional Wetlands Summit hosted by the Conservation Federation of Missouri and MDC, conducted a survey and a series of focus groups with landowners in CWD core areas to better understand motivations and barriers to participating in targeted removal, and conducted listening sessions in Kansas City to inform the further development of community conservation programs and services. Approximately 235 partners, representing 139 organizations, participated in MDC's eighth annual Conservation Partners Roundtable.

Conservation Volunteers. In calendar year 2024, 880 Master Naturalist volunteers contributed 75,638 hours of service to conservation projects and activities in their local communities. Just over 600 volunteers at nature centers, interpretive sites, and shooting ranges, along with hunter education instructors and fishing education instructors, recorded 46,445 hours in 2023. Stream Team volunteers contributed 60,600 hours during calendar year 2024.

Communicating with Missourians. MDC social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, continue to increase followers and engagement. Facebook is MDC's largest social media channel with more than 380,000 followers. MDC's website has 7.9 million unique visitors annually. MDC utilizes email communications to reach 823,710 subscribers and the free *Missouri Conservationist* and *Xplor* magazines are sent to more than 750,000 individuals to share the value of fish, forest, and wildlife resources. The MDC Wild Webcast series highlights key conservation topics and provides a unique opportunity to ask live questions of MDC experts. MDC hosts a podcast, Nature Boost, to connect more youth and young adults to nature. We offer more than 100 free publications on fish, forest, wildlife, and land management topics to the public.

Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) of Hunters and Anglers. In 2024, MDC hired a consulting firm to conduct a comprehensive study of our R3 educational programs to better understand if our programs result in recruiting, retaining, and reactivating hunters, anglers, trappers, and recreational shooters. While there is evidence that MDC educational programs do indeed contribute to R3, the consulting firm found there are opportunities to grow – specifically, by providing more social supports and clear next steps or pathways for participants to bolster the agency's line-up of R3 programming. As a result of this study, MDC has convened an internal team to develop logic models for all R3 programs and is working to develop a mentorship program, collaborating with a partner, to create and implement a structure for this new initiative. MDC participated in the Hunt for Good campaign offered by the Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports in 2024 to focus on recruitment efforts. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and

Spotify ads targeting 18-34-year-olds that do not hunt or fish were placed to raise awareness of the many benefits hunting and angling provide to the state and individual participants.

MDC also continues to examine the state's *Wildlife Code* to reduce barriers to entry into R3 activities. Missouri's spring turkey regulations were simplified in 2024, resulting in an increase in permit sales. Additionally, staff continue to review the state's deer seasons to find areas to reduce complexity while offering multiple opportunities for participation. To round out the agency's R3 efforts, MDC reached all annual R3 plan goals in 2024: recruit 148,000 new resident permit holders; reduce churn by 1%; and reactivate 100,000 lapsed resident hunters and anglers.

Missouri Comprehensive Conservation Strategy (CCS). Missouri's CCS embraces landscape-scale conservation informed by natural community and wildlife diversity needs, working to maintain, enhance, restore, and re-create healthy natural systems. This integrated approach proactively encourages increased connection between citizens and nature and ensures the responsible use of limited federal- and state-entrusted, partner, and citizen resources.

During FY24, survey and monitoring efforts resulted in 1,002 new and updated records added to Missouri's Natural Heritage Database. To monitor health in Missouri's natural communities and landscapes, we use MDC's recently developed community health index (CHI) and the landscape health index (LHI), which is under development. In FY24, MDC developed five Survey123 applications to improve the utility of the CHI and completed over 30 CHI assessments. For the LHI, scores are integrated from a range of indicators to assess biotic and landscape integrity and social condition within MDC's priority geographies. In FY24, 3 years of bird surveys were used to calculate baseline scores for nine priority geographies. MDC also added two grassland focused priority geographies and the LHI will expand to these new geographies as data are available.

MDC Works to Restore or Protect Native Grasslands and Bottomland Forests. Native prairie covered about one-third of Missouri prior to its settlement. Only 0.5 percent of the original grasslands exist today, mostly in the form of small tracts known as remnants. Remaining grassland is one of the rarest habitat types in the world as most natural prairies have been plowed over and replaced with cool season grasses or crops. MDC is prioritizing initiatives to restore grassland natural communities and improve grassland species through strategic actions. MDC assisted the Missouri Prairie Foundation in purchasing 80 acres of prairie in Dade County in 2025 and 37 acres in Scott County in 2024. MDC purchased roughly 571 acres of Missouri grasslands in 2024, and staff managed nearly 17,000 acres of grasslands in tier 1 and 2 priority areas on public land in fiscal year 2025.

Many wildlife species depend on bottomland forests as an essential type of wetland habitat. Missouri and the lower Mississippi River valley previously had several million acres of bottomland hardwood timber. Only a small portion of this special wetland environment remains. MDC owns approximately 278,500 acres of bottomland forest. MDC recently acquired approximately 114 acres of bottomland forest in Livingston County adjacent to Fountain Grove Conservation Area. In addition, MDC provided Land Conservation Partnership grant funding to Heartland Conservation Alliance to acquire 95 acres of bottomland forest in Jackson County and to Ducks Unlimited for 549 acres in Atchison County. Staff strive to restore and manage bottomland forest ecosystems and their functions through the MDC's strategic objectives.