

## **Indiana State Report**

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### **Changes to Rule Making**

The Division of Fish and Wildlife proposed several administrative rule changes in 2024 affecting deer hunting, as well as trapping seasons for river otters and bobcats. Deer hunting rule changes were approved by the Natural Resources Commission after going through a lengthy public input process. Changes were proposed after gathering comments from the public through a deer management survey and included simplifying the rules, setting antlerless bag limits, as well as allowing for additional muzzleloaders to be used. Three public hearings were held to receive comments on the proposed changes, allowing for both in-person and virtual participation, in addition to two public comment periods that lasted over several months, allowing for comments both online and by regular mail. The Division also made changes to the rule governing the river otter season to open the otter trapping season statewide and set the statewide quota. The division announced all these proposed rule changes in news releases, social media posts, monthly electronic newsletters, and on the website. Senate Enrolled Act 241-2024 was passed by the Indiana State Legislature, requiring the DNR to have a rule establishing a season for harvesting bobcats in place by July of 2025. In response, the Division proposed a rule to allow for the trapping of bobcats in 40 counties in Indiana, as well as require a state game breeder's license to sell bobcats. The public comment period started in 2024 for these changes, with comments received both in support and in opposition.

### **New Customer Management System Launch**

February 2024 marked the beginning of the highly anticipated transition from DFW's legacy license system to a new, more efficient customer management platform. Now called the Activity Hub, the system enhances key functionalities, including license sales, game check-ins, HIP registration, donations, and gift certificates. Retailers also benefit from a suite of upgrades, such as streamlined account creation, robust payment processing, improved customer support workflows, enhanced corporate reporting, and an updated product catalog. One standout feature of the Hub is the option for customers to purchase a durable license card as an upgrade. These cards showcase one of six designs chosen from over 400 entries submitted in an art and photo contest leading up to the launch. Throughout the launch, the team collaborated with our new license vendor to develop the system, conduct User Acceptance Testing, prepare customers and retailers for the transition, and update webpages to reflect the new URL. The launch culminated on December 11, with Director Wuestefeld successfully making the inaugural purchase post go-live. Future phases of the project will introduce event registration and management, property check-ins, commercial licenses and permit management, and volunteer management.

## **License Sales & R3 Efforts**

R3 staff led a comprehensive R3 strategic planning process to guide the work of the Division and external stakeholders over the next five years. Aligned with this plan, the team produced new video and web assets, including content on deer hunting cartridge regulations and shooting range introductions. A new webpage was also launched to provide DIY deer processing resources for hunters. The R3 Team continued to strengthen partnerships by offering equipment, mentorship, and hands-on activities, including 29 fishing workshops with over 300 participants and 8 hunting/trapping events with over 150 participants. While license sales declined slightly, hunting (-1.6%) and fishing (-1.48%), year-over-year comparisons with 2022 show a smaller drop in hunting (-0.6%) and an increase (+5.2%) in fishing. Specific declines included deer (-1.19%), spring turkey (-0.03%), and trapping (-8.18%).

## **Women's Fishing Campaign**

With \$40,000 in Sport Fish Restoration funds and a \$25,000 grant from the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF), the Division conducted a campaign to retain and reactivate female anglers ages 18-34. The campaign featured retro-themed digital ads focused on the theme of "renew." The paid ads ran on Meta, Google, and YouTube April 5-May 31, 2024. The goal of the campaign was to increase the number of license holders, reduce churn, and generate 450k of digital ad impressions. Specific messaging included "Renew your sense of tradition," "Renew your adventurous spirit," "Renew your joy for pure fun," and "Renew your passion for getting out there". In addition to still photos in a retro/Polaroid frame, the ads included one video, which outperformed the other ads. Complementary efforts included a new "Women on the Water" landing page, posters featuring quotes from female anglers to display at DNR events, and articles featuring women anglers and affinity groups in the 2024-2025 fishing regulations guide.

During the campaign period, license sales increased in the female 18-34 category by 5% over the same period in 2023. This translated to \$19,000 in revenue and 845 licenses. We well exceeded the goal of 450k impressions, with the "Renew your adventurous spirit" ad exceeding 1.3 million impressions on Meta, and the video exceeding 1 million impressions on YouTube.

## **Land Acquisition**

This Division purchased a total of 582 acres of land in 2024, adding important landholdings to Kankakee Fish & Wildlife Area and Willow Slough Fish & Wildlife Area. A 28-acre mature wetland mitigation site was transferred to the Division from the Indiana Department of Transportation, adding on to the existing Lost Hill Wetland Conservation Area. 3 acres of upland forest along the Trail Creek River were donated by a private conservation club for the Steelheaders Public Fishing Area. This increases bank fishing access to steelhead trout and other fish species. 1.5 acres of lowland forest with river access were donated by a private landowner to the Blue River TWP Public Access Site. This site creates important access for bank fishing, kayaking, and canoeing. 1.14 acres of lowland forest with river access was donated by Vermillion County for the Osanamon Public Access Site. This site offers river access for bank fishing, kayaking, and canoeing.

Throughout the year, the land acquisition team worked to secure nearly 3,950 acres of permanently protected land in Sullivan County. Once part of the formerly leased Minnehaha FWA, this conserved land was safeguarded through a collaboration with the Conservation Law Center—leader of the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape—alongside The Conservation Fund, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through Walmart’s Acres for America Program, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the U.S. Navy, including the Naval Surface Warfare Center (NSWC) Crane Division and Naval Support Activity (NSA) Crane.

The Division will pay \$10.8 million for the property. The U.S. Navy will pay an additional \$910,000 to support a conservation easement on a portion of the land through the Department of Defense’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration program, and a \$600,000 grant from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through Walmart’s Acres for America program will also support the acquisition. Once purchased and dedicated, the property will be known as Busseron Creek FWA.

### **Nature Preserves Dedications**

There were 5 nature preserve dedications in 2024 adding 924 acres to Indiana’s nature preserve system. Four new nature preserves added: Barnes-Seng Nature Preserve in Dubois County, Eagle Lake Nature Preserve in Noble County, Fern Station Nature Preserve in Putnam County, and Wea Creek Gravel Hill Prairie Nature Preserve in Tippecanoe County. An addition to Granville Sand Barrens Nature Preserve, Tippecanoe County, was also dedicated. The Division and our conservation partners are working with the national Old-Growth Forest Network to showcase 18 old-growth forests found within Indiana State Nature Preserves. These rare, protected forests are preserved and stewarded for the benefit of wildlife and future generations and are great places to hike and explore.

### **Indiana Stream and Wetland Mitigation Program**

The Indiana Stream and Wetland Mitigation Program (IN SWMP) is a statewide in-lieu fee program that allows applicants (developers) the option to purchase stream and/or wetland mitigation credits to fulfill compensatory mitigation requirements for permitted impacts. IN DNR’s program sells “advance credits” to permit applicants who purchase these credits in-lieu of performing mitigation themselves (i.e., permit recipient-responsible mitigation). The legal obligation to provide compensatory mitigation is then transferred to the sponsor of the in-lieu fee program (Indiana DNR) upon receipt of associated credit fees. This allows the IN DNR to acquire qualified land using program credits and not state funds.

This year’s planning continued with IN SWMP on a local project. Charlene Buss, of White County, Indiana, wished to leave a legacy to the IN DNR by including a donation of land totaling 241 acres in her will. After her passing in 2016, this land came under the management of the Division of Nature Preserves as the Buss Conservation Area. Having been left as agricultural land until restoration could begin, the plan is to restore and enhance about 23 acres of wetlands and 10,383 linear feet of stream area. The remaining acreage will be restored to forest, prairie and shrub thicket habitats. With these restorations, Buss Conservation Area will contain many of the habitats historically known from this region of Indiana and will provide protection along the Tippecanoe River. Buss Conservation Area will eventually be open for recreation and the people of Indiana to enjoy!

## **Chinook FWA Coal Fire**

In October of 2024 property staff ignited a routine prescribed fire at Chinook Fish and Wildlife Area in Clay County. The burn was successfully completed and extinguished, and staff left the area. Over the course of the next couple of days, staff received reports of fires outside of the burn area and extinguished the fires. Staff noticed that trees and shrubs in the area were burning from the roots and falling over. After consultation with the Division of Reclamation staff it was determined that the subsurface coal mine refuse had ignited. The underground fire spread to cover an area of approximately 150 acres. Full sized trees had burned at the roots, causing the trees to fall in the wind. Other dangers were present as well, such as burned-out pockets of coal refuse forming cavities that were covered by coal ash. This made it impossible for staff to work within the burn zone safely.

The Division restricted public access to the area and worked with the Division of Reclamation staff to counter the underground fire. The main strategy was to keep the fire contained on state property and avoid damaging private property that bordered the area. In areas where the fire threatened to move toward private property, hot spots underground were excavated and extinguished. Otherwise, it was decided to let the fire burn itself out. The Division of Fish and Wildlife and Division of Reclamation staff monitor the burn frequently with thermal detection equipment on drones. The fire has reduced in size significantly since October, but there are possibly a few hot spots left in the area. This spring and summer will determine if the fire will be eventually extinguished or be a source for future surface fires.

## **Mussel Propagation, Augmentation, Reintroduction**

The Division continued to partner with the National Park Service (NPS), Indiana Dunes National Park, and the White River Freshwater Mussel Propagation Facility (WRFMPF), Muncie Sanitary District, Bureau of Water Quality, in freshwater mussel conservation efforts in the state. Several rounds of gravid female mussels (Ellipse, Fatmucket, and Plain Pocketbook) were provided to NPS for propagation efforts. Mussels produced will be used for reintroduction in the East Arm Little Calumet River within the Park boundaries. Propagation efforts for Kidneyshell, Wavyrayed Lampmussel, and Plain Pocketbook were attempted at the WRFMPF, with successful production of the latter two. Techniques for successful Kidneyshell production continue to be studied. All produced mussels will be used to augment populations in the upper West Fork White River drainage.

Cage culture of Snuffbox continued for augmentation work in the Tippecanoe River. In April, glochidia were extracted from six female Snuffbox from the Salamonie River and used to infect Logperch that had been collected from the Tippecanoe River. The infected Logperch were placed among six cages in Lake Shafer (on the Tippecanoe River) for drop-off. The cages will stay in place until late summer, early fall 2025, when any juveniles produced will be harvested for placement at an augmentation site on the Tippecanoe River.

## **Fisheries Dashboards**

The South Bend Fish Ladder is one of 5 fish ladders located on the St. Joseph River that allow stocked trout and salmon to return to Indiana portions of the river during annual spawning runs. These fish ladders allow fish to move freely throughout the lower 63 miles of river, from Lake Michigan upstream to the Twin Branch Dam in Mishawaka. Biologists monitor fish

passage using a motion-activated camera located at a viewing window within the ladder. The St. Joseph River Fish Ladder Dashboard was launched in 2024 and provides weekly updates to anglers on migration. The dashboard provides daily migration totals by species as well as water temperatures and allows anglers easy access to current migration totals.

The Status & Trends Program has been operating for the last fifteen years, collecting data on approximately 140,000 individual fish from nearly 150 waterbodies scattered across the state. In 2024 we were able to successfully launch a dashboard summarizing this data that has quickly become a preferred resource for anglers. The dashboard allows anglers to search for data on their favorite lake as well as compare survey results for select species.

### **Invasive Carp Harvest Permit Program**

The Invasive Carp Harvest Permit Interim Rule was passed in August of 2024, allowing the use of gill and seine nets to harvest invasive carp. The permit has enabled the Invasive Carp Unit to partner with Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources utilizing their contracted fishers to harvest invasive carp in Indiana waters on the Ohio River. It also allowed implementation of a pilot Incentivized Carp Harvest Program, contracted with Tetra Tech. The incentivized program offers \$0.12 per pound to fishers and \$0.15 per pound to processors for harvested invasive carp in Indiana designated waters, including the Wabash and White Rivers, along with their connected backwaters and tributaries. The bulk of reported invasive carp harvest can be primarily attributed to the incentive program. As expected, the concern of bycatch of other fish species has remained minimal mirroring data from other states. The Indiana Invasive Carp Unit plans to continue proactive efforts to sustain the invasive carp harvest permit and incentivized programs as crucial tools for managing invasive carp populations.

### **Wildlife Considerations in Economic Development and Wildlife Passage**

The DFW's Environmental Unit is a team of 7 dedicated staff who review proposed development projects across Indiana, serving a wide range of customers that include farmers, families, developers, and government agencies. In 2024, this team reviewed over 1,700 projects consisting of nearly 500 stream projects, over 100 lake projects, and 900 Environmental Reviews. These projects range from home renovations to warehouse developments, large piers, road projects, low head dams and more. This team makes an extended effort to meet our customers for pre-permit meetings, engaging in early coordination to provide technical expertise and guidance with the goal of higher customer satisfaction, and better outcomes for both economic projects and wildlife resources. In 2024, Biologists approved 115 projects which saw fish and wildlife passage maintained or improved. Common recommendations for passage include constructed benches beneath bridges, improved stream substrates in culverts, amphibian and fish passageways, dam removals, and other wildlife crossing designs. The Environmental Unit has been actively partnering with the Indiana Department of Transportation to provide input on the development of a GIS tool for identifying Wildlife Vehicle Collision (WVCs) hotspots and setting better standards of communication for more cost-effective wildlife outcomes in bridge reconstruction. Additionally, the Environmental Unit launched ROaDS Indiana (Roadkill Observation and Data System) a Survey123 application to internally track WVCs across Indiana.

## **Wildlife Conservation Efforts and Hunting Access on Private Lands**

DFW continues to engage with Indiana landowners to establish, maintain, and enhance wildlife habitat on private lands. In 2024, DFW connected hunters with access to over 22,000 acres of private property under the Indiana Private Lands Access Program. This program continues to be extremely popular, offering financial incentives to landowners who allow controlled public hunting access for gamebirds, turkey, deer, waterfowl, and small game. Surveys show 83% of participating landowners and hunters are either happy or extremely happy with the program. DFW employs a team of 14 wildlife biologists who connect landowners to financial incentive programs and provide technical expertise in habitat installation and enhancement across Indiana. State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) is an initiative within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that provides the financial and technical aid to landowners needed to achieve species-specific wildlife habitat goals on their property. SAFE is the largest portion of CRP in Indiana, making up roughly 57,000 acres, or 30% of the program statewide. DFW holds a contribution agreement with USDA-NRCS to provide management plans, burn plans and workshops, status reviews, and practice certifications on SAFE and other wildlife practices through CRP. The Grasslands for Gamebirds and Songbirds Initiative (GGS) is a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) in its second iteration after seeing outstanding success in the program's first round of funding. GGS 2.0 expanded the program geographically and brought in over \$2.6 million dollars, and 23 partners together to enhance wildlife habitat on private land across Indiana. To date, 1,290 acres of habitat have been developed in partnership with over 170 landowners with a goal of over 3,000 acres of grassland and pollinator habitat by project end in 2027.