

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Natural Resources Board Agenda Item

SUBJECT: Wildlife Management Restructuring Plan

FOR: June 2022 Board meeting

TO BE PRESENTED BY: Eric Lobner, Director, Bureau of Wildlife Management

SUMMARY:

This item it meant to inform the board of the restructuring of the Bureau of Wildlife Management and the outreach that has been done with partners regarding the overall changes and the intended benefits of the new organizational structure.

RECOMMENDATION: Information only.

LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS (check all that are applicable):

Background memo

Type name of attachment if applicable

Type name of attachment if applicable

Type name of attachment if applicable

Approved by	Signature	Date
Eric Lobner, Bureau Director	<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Eric Lobner</i> <small>49A5E090CF88465...</small>	6/6/2022 5:03 PM CDT
Tami Ryan, Deputy Division Administrator	<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Tami Ryan</i> <small>F8F3A49CA01C401...</small>	6/6/2022 6:06 PM CDT
For Preston D. Cole, Secretary	<small>DocuSigned by:</small> <i>Sarah Barry</i> <small>A7D70DC3770642F...</small>	6/14/2022 1:50 PM CDT

cc: Board Liaison – AD/8

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by Sarah Barry

Sarah Barry

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CORRESPONDENCE/MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 6, 2022

FILE REF:

TO: Natural Resources Board members

FROM: Preston Cole, Secretary

SUBJECT: Wildlife Management program restructuring

Over the last decade, there have been a variety of actions that have either directly or indirectly impacted the operations of the Wildlife Management program. Specifically in 2014, the department completed the Deer Trustee Report Process which resulted in several transformative changes to Wisconsin's deer management program including the creation of the County Deer Advisory Committee (CDAC) process as well as the creation of the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). Both of these items have an underlying premise of further connecting WDNR wildlife biologists with both private landowners and the hunting public to discuss deer management issues as well as general wildlife habitat management activities, resulting in additional workload for the wildlife management program.

In addition, the agency conducted the Strategic Alignment process in 2017 which made additional changes across the agency, including within the WM program. Specifically, the prescribed fire responsibilities were consolidated into the Division of Forestry, recreational property management activities on DNR managed lands were consolidated in the Parks & Recreation Management program and habitat management responsibilities were aligned with the Wildlife Management and Natural Heritage Conservation programs.

Following the completion of the strategic alignment, the Wildlife Management program embarked on the development of a strategic plan to incorporate the changes into the vision for the program which was completed in 2019. The priorities for the program identified through the strategic planning process include:

- Expand our planning and prioritization processes for species and habitat management plans
- Build a closer connection between the species specialists and the individuals and groups most closely connect to those species and their habitats
- Increase connections with the public to the work of the program
- Expand citizen-based science and management opportunities

As a result of these changes, the Wildlife Leadership Team completed a Program Review process over the last several years which critically evaluated the functions of the program and aligned the reduced workforce with the priorities of the program, taking into account the changes from previous alignment efforts as well as changing societal interests. Based on the evaluation, it was clear changes were required to more effectively align the workforce in order to accomplish the workload facing the program. This effort was completed in February 2022 with a proposed restructuring plan shared with staff during the first week of March. A summary of the changes can be found in "Table 1: Summary of Wildlife Management program changes."

Throughout March, the proposed restructuring was shared with a number of conservation partner groups including:

- Duck's Unlimited

- National Wild Turkey Federation
- Pheasants Forever
- Ruffed Grouse Society
- Wisconsin Conservation Congress – District Leadership Council
- Wisconsin Waterfowl Association – Executive and Migratory Bird Committees
- Wisconsin Wildlife Federation – Executive Committee

The overarching sentiment from the partners is that the proposed restructuring makes a lot of sense, and the representatives could see how the proposal would better align similar functions and specializing the duties of individual staff would result in increased effectiveness and service delivery. An overview of the feedback provided by partner groups is available in “Table 2: Wildlife Management Restructuring Proposal – March 2022”. There was strong support for aligning all of the functions related to the hunting seasons into one section, further connecting species specialists with the species and habitat necessary to sustain those species as well as a great appreciation for the challenges of the program resulting from the increased workload that has come to the program over the last decade. In addition, there is an understanding that it will be important to evaluate the impacts of this approach over the next several years and make adjustments as necessary. Lastly, as a result of the conversations, a number of organizations are interested in having further conversations with the program to discuss mechanisms that they can provide additional support to the program through contract employees as well as financial resources, including the Ruffed Grouse Society, WI Waterfowl Association and Pheasants Forever.

Table 1: SUMMARY OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM CHANGES

SUPERVISORY CHANGES

- The program director will supervise the Species and Wildlife Health section supervisors.
- The deputy program director will supervise the Lands and Habitat section supervisor.
 - o Opportunity for greater field integration
- All section chiefs will be retitled as section supervisors.

SPECIES SECTION

- All statewide species management under one umbrella.
 - o Sharp-tailed grouse, greater-prairie chickens and elk will be managed by assigned wildlife biologists in each species' core management zone.
 - o Species section supervisor will support active integration of statewide and regional species management.
- Section Specialists:
 - o **NEW: Forest Wildlife Specialist**
 - Request for new position number
 - Serve as ruffed grouse specialist
 - Liaison to County Forest Association and US Forest Service
 - Assist in Young Forest Partnership implementation
 - o **CHANGE: Game Bird Specialist**
 - Position will cover migratory birds, pheasant and turkey.
 - o **NO CHANGE:**
 - Deer Specialist
 - Furbearer Specialist
 - Large Carnivore Specialist
 - Rules and Regulations Specialist
 - Wildlife Nuisance/Damage Specialist
 - Wildlife Surveys Specialist

WILDLIFE HEALTH SECTION

- Statewide Specialists:
 - o **NEW: Deer Herd Health Specialist**
 - Request for new position number
 - Point of contact on all deer health issues including CWD, EHD and other deer diseases
 - Implementation lead for annual CWD sampling efforts

- Operations lead for SOD CWD management activities.
- **CHANGE: Wildlife Health Conservation Specialist**
 - Decoupled from CWD responsibilities
 - Increase capacity to support current wildlife rehab, illegally held wildlife, wildlife disease response and other assigned duties.
- **NO CHANGE:**
 - CWD Processing Center Manager
 - Wildlife Data Coordinator
 - Wildlife Disease Specialist
 - Wildlife Veterinarian

LANDS & HABITAT SECTION

- All statewide land management one umbrella.
- Section Specialists:
 - **NEW: DMAP Coordinator**
 - Created a position from existing, unfilled 0.8 and 0.7 FTEs
 - DMAP coordinator position decoupled from section supervisor position to provide greater support for the program and increase capacity of section supervisor
 - **CHANGE: DMAP Specialists**
 - Deer biologist PDs (Eric Canania, Matt Esser and Curt Rollman) changed to DMAP coordinator PDs
 - These changes will alleviate the field's workload associated with DMAP while giving the program the support it needs to enhance and grow the program and private lands management in general.
 - **NEW: Habitat Specialist**
 - Position will use former upland specialist position number
 - Habitat specialist will work directly with district staff to identify and support upcoming priority work.
 - Develop and administer a statewide habitat management plan
 - WisFIRS specialist for WMP
 - Oversight of Adopt and Friends programs
 - **CHANGE: Grassland Specialist**
 - Formerly the conservation agriculture specialist position
 - PD will emphasize the development and implementation of a statewide grassland management strategy.
 - This position will absorb Farm Bill duties and will continue to support conservation grazing and farming agreements.
 - **CHANGE: Wetlands Specialist**
 - Develop and implement statewide wetlands management strategy

- Focus on wetland infrastructure management and maintenance
- Sunsetting impoundments that are no longer productive
- Land Policy Coordinator (no change)

ADDITIONAL CHANGES

- Continue to maintain weekly “deer team” meetings involving the Species Section Supervisor, Deer Specialist, Deer Health Specialist and the DMAP Specialists
- Engage in a discussion with conservation partners on how to consolidate turkey, pheasant and waterfowl stamp applications into one process.
- Over the next several years, transition from the annual waterfowl emergency rule process to a process that is consistent with the USFWS 5-year zone boundary process.
- Implement the Wildlife Switchboard statewide and transition oversight of this effort to the Central Office over the next year.

Table 2: Wildlife Management Restructuring Proposal – March 2022

Date/Time	Conservation Partner	Comments
Monday 3/14	Ducks Unlimited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, the changes make a lot of sense and can see the value of the specialization approach and aligning similar functions into the same section. Supportive of the change and would like to maintain the positive working relationship we have and would be interested in further partnering with DNR wherever possible.
Tuesday 3/15	WI Wildlife Federation – Executive Director (Mark LaBarbera)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The changes are unfortunate as they would rather see an increase in the number of staff supporting conservation however, they understand the approach and can see value in it. It is good to see the focus on the importance of working closely with stakeholder groups going forward.
Tuesday 3/15	WI Wildlife Federation – Executive Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, the group supported the concept of aligning staff into the structure identified. Would like to see more support and engagement with the R3 efforts. There is a concern with the backlog of wildlife habitat projects that are not being completed and they would like to see more staff focused on completing the Appreciate the connection of the staff with the partners across the state in order to better address communication challenges on rule changes.
Thursday 3/17	WI Wildlife Federation – Migratory Bird Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize the challenges the program is in with the reductions in the number of staff within the program. Overall, it makes sense however there is concern that the workload for Taylor is going to be too much. It will be important to reevaluate this approach in a year or two
Friday 3/18	WI Waterfowl Association – Executive Committee	<p>The proposed structure makes a lot of sense in balancing workload and resources while seeking efficiencies. Specific recommendations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition the additional work of the turkey and pheasant programs over to Taylor gradually as some of the efforts have front loaded demands of his time.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are concerns with the potential changes to the stamp processes and would recommend to focus on consolidating the stamp applications after the restructuring effort has been implemented for 3-5 years. • See attached letter “WWA DNR Follow-up to 31822 meeting”
Monday 3/21	WI Conservation Congress – District Leadership Council	<p>Overall, the group supported the concept and commented that it made sense. Specific questions focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the popularity of DMAP, it will be important to maintain adequate staffing to meet the interest of the program participants. Great program overall. • Appreciate the increased focus on engaging the public and building stronger partnerships to tackle the work that needs to be accomplished for wildlife populations statewide. • There is a need for support for the local staff to manage the workload. • The advisory committee discussions have value however there seems to be much occurring behind the scenes that the committee is not involved. • It has been taking too long to complete the species management plans. • There are too many management structure rungs from the technician in the field to the top of the agency.
Wednesday 3/23	Pheasants Forever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seems to be a smart approach with the streamlining making sense. • Appreciate the focus from a species specialist, specifically someone to connect with on pheasant issues. • This is a change for the better and can see how pheasant management may get additional attention. • The strategic approach for WI PF may provide opportunities to increase the connectiveness of the DNR and PF. Would like to see additional prescribed fire activities occurring within the historic core pheasant range.
Monday 3/28	Ruffed Grouse Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See the merit in what you are trying to do. • Other states are consolidating and eliminating their species specialists and transitioning to a ecosystem approach. RGS is

		<p>concerned by this approach as the are concerned about a lack of focus on the species management issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MN is headed in a similar direction. • RGS supports this approach and appreciates the attention on habitat management activities.
<p>Monday 3/28</p>	<p>National Wild Turkey Federation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completely understand the desire to reduce the number of reports on the Director. • Overall, this approach looks good and NWTF is interested in partnering further with DNR in any ways they can to support the work of the WM program. • Greatly appreciate being brought in to discuss this restructuring proposal. • Have been concerned as of late with the lack of attention on prescribed fire and would like to see an increase to address the needs.