

To: Honorable Governor Terry Branstad

From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission

January 17, 2011

NRC annual report and recommendations

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) respectfully submits its annual report and recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly of Iowa. The report represents the major activities and accomplishments of the NRC for 2010 and includes the commission's recommendations for policy and legislative changes for 2011. The recommendations reflect the issues faced by the NRC over the last year, as well as comments received from the Iowa citizenry during commission meetings and formal public comment periods.

The NRC extends its thanks for your time and consideration of the report and recommendations and stands willing to answer any questions or receive comments.

Sincerely,

Gregory Drees, Arnolds Park, Chair
Tammi Kircher, Keokuk, Vice-chair
Kim Francisco, Lucas, Secretary
Elizabeth Garst, Coon Rapids
Margo Underwood, Clear Lake
Dennis Schemmel, Grimes

Report to the Governor and General Assembly
Iowa Natural Resource Commission
January 17, 2011

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) submits the following report to Governor Branstad and the Iowa General Assembly. The report discusses the accomplishments and status of the programs administered by the Conservation and Recreation Division of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). Based on issues regarding the state of natural resources in Iowa over the last year, the report also makes legislative recommendations for consideration by the Governor and General Assembly.

The NRC encourages the Governor and General Assembly to hold the protection and enhancement of Iowa's natural resources in the highest esteem when developing statewide legislative policies. The NRC believes natural resource management and cultivation should be part of the inherent duties of decision-making Iowans, and restoration and custody of the state's natural wonders should be viewed as economic development tools.

The IDNR remains sorrowfully under-funded relative to its needs. This fact alone should shame all Iowans: Iowa ranks 48th among all states in the funds it directs to natural resources.

Of special concern is lack of funding for routine maintenance, adequate signage and sufficient staffing in state parks and for state forestry programs.

The NRC urges the Governor and General Assembly to appropriate necessary monies to allow the IDNR to carry on its essential and vital work, also keeping in mind that the electorate overwhelmingly approved the Iowa Land & Water ballot initiative.

Major accomplishments of the NRC and IDNR in 2010

- The NRC has urged and guided the IDNR to incorporate important new strategies in its construction, land acquisition and management projects, including: Dark Sky Lighting – a practice intended to reduce ambient light pollution and emphasize natural light by directing sources downward and implementing cutting-edge lighting techniques; Low Impact Development (LID) – resourceful management through the use of rain gardens, bio-swales, pervious paving and other storm water management techniques; Green Construction – paying close attention to using “green” approaches to construction projects, including geothermal, solar, eco-friendly and natural material uses, and purchasing those materials locally whenever possible.
- After being mandated by the Legislature in 2006 to reduce Iowa’s ever-expanding deer population to manageable levels, the NRC – with guidance from IDNR professional biologists – has reached most targeted population goals. Although always a controversial issue, Iowa’s statewide deer numbers have been largely brought under control through expanded seasons, tag opportunities and a burgeoning depredation program. Countless public hearings, public comment periods during NRC meetings and NRC decisions regarding deer seasons and regulations were all influential in the deer management process.
- Despite significant state budget cuts, Iowa’s state park system received strong backing from the NRC, IDNR and volunteers, supported by a successful special appropriation for supplies. A state parks image design guide was commissioned to give construction credence and architectural integrity to all future expansion with the system. The \$5 million legislative appropriation for infrastructure improvements provided a good first step in getting parks in shape for the centennial anniversary of the state parks system, although budget reductions have severely impacted routine park maintenance.
- The IDNR and NRC worked diligently to enhance and improve operations at Honey Creek Resort, despite stiff challenges from adverse weather, record high lake levels and the countrywide economic downturn. An asset management company was hired to help guide the resort operation in the right direction. Capital Hotel Management has aided Central Group in refocusing its marketing strategies, streamlining services while reducing expenses and initiating revenue-boosting philosophies.
- The NRC continued its role in approving public land acquisitions totaling 2,300 acres in 2010, construction projects on IDNR lands – including state parks infrastructure, wetland restorations, boat ramp and road construction, etc. – and easement agreements, all of which add to the public’s access to, and enjoyment of, Iowa’s natural resources.
- The IDNR’s shallow lakes initiative and lakes restoration program – focused on improving water quality – continued to receive NRC support, increasing the public’s use of Iowa lakes by 25 percent in 2010.
- The NRC continued its annual role in assessing and tweaking hunting, fishing and trapping regulations to best manage those renewable resources.

NRC legislative recommendations

- Provide funding for the Iowa Department of Health to conduct a research study to determine the extent of lead slug fragmentation and any associated public health risks in the processed venison donated to the state's Help Us Stop Hunger (HUSH) program. Hunters donated 7,075 deer during the 2009-10 hunting seasons, generating 1.2 million meals to needy citizens through the Food Bank of Iowa. In 2011 the NRC would like to determine the extent of lead slug fragmentation and any associated human health risks in the processed venison donated to HUSH. The NRC is also concerned about the toxic effects of spent lead ammunition and irretrievable lead fishing tackle on the Iowa citizenry and its wildlife.
- Recognize the importance of and support the IDNR's communications and outreach programs designed to increase younger Iowan's connections with the state's natural resources. The IDNR website, Facebook and Twitter connections and Iowa Outdoors magazine provide important information to connect younger Iowans with hunter education and shooting sports in school programs, youth mentoring hunts and fishing programs, all of which are designed to increase youth participation.
- Increase the number of non-resident deer licenses. Such an increase would allow full utilization of Iowa's world-class deer herd. The increase in non-resident hunters will benefit Iowa businesses, particularly rural parts of the state that include bed & breakfasts, outfitters, landowners and others. The initiative would also aid the NRC in reaching deer herd population goals in those parts of the state where liberalized regulations have not yet reduced herds to goal levels.
- Change the mourning dove classification from songbird to game bird. This simple legislative act would allow the IDNR and NRC to establish a dove hunting season, a tradition that exists in all of Iowa's neighboring states. Carefully monitored by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, mourning dove populations are such that biological data supports a proposed season in Iowa that would pose no threat to the specie's sustainability. A dove season would provide economic growth and outdoor recreation in rural Iowa, also providing an opportunity to retain hunters young and old.
- Join the NRC in monitoring the Wildlife Bureau's progress with its "Wildlife Habitat on Private Lands Promotion Program." If successful, this project will expand wildlife habitats, while also increasing public access for hunting and rewarding landowners for improving habitat and allowing public access.
- Provide funds for programs to regenerate oak/hickory forests and oak savannahs in Iowa. Programs should include demonstration of timber stand improvement and prescribe fire techniques in state parks, research on diseases threatening our forest resources, prescribed fire training for fire departments and technical assistance for private landowners. Iowa is losing its oak/hickory forests at an alarming rate, and disease threats to the remaining remnants are escalating. Forest management in our state parks should be a high priority.

- Continue the multi-year funding of the state park infrastructures improvement campaign. The Legislature's \$5 million appropriation in 2010 to upgrade the aging infrastructure in the state parks system should be renewed on an annual basis, leveraging state resources by partnering with the Iowa Parks Foundation.

Conclusion

The NRC is an entity of citizen volunteers with diverse backgrounds, interests and personalities. Commissioners share a love of the outdoors and a sense of responsibility to protect and enhance the natural resources of Iowa.

Polling and other survey tactics illustrate that Iowa citizens care deeply about natural resources and the recreational opportunities they provide. The NRC – in partnership with the IDNR and other local, state and federal organizations and agencies – works steadfastly to that end.

We are faced with many challenges, foremost among them daunting budgetary issues. Where once prairie and wetland landscapes flourished, row crop agriculture now dominates. Very little Iowa land is in public ownership.

Yet, in the face of these and other obstacles, a passionate and professional IDNR family and its NRC support group will strive tirelessly to place Iowa's natural resources on a lofty level of priority and favor.

The NRC thanks the Governor and General Assembly for the opportunity to submit this report and invites further inquiry and conversation about these issues.

Gregory Drees, Arnolds Park, Chair
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