To: Honorable Governor Kim Reynolds  
Members of the Iowa General Assembly

From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission

Date: January 10, 2018

2017 Annual Report and Recommendations

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) respectfully submits its Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly of Iowa. The report represents the major activities and accomplishments of the NRC for 2017 and includes the commission’s recommendations for policy and legislative changes for 2018.

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

Sincerely,

Margo Underwood, Chair, Clear Lake, IA  
Natural Resource Commission

Phyllis Reimer, Vice-Chair, Crescent, IA  
Kim Francisco, Secretary, Lucas, IA  
Marcus Branstad, Adel, IA  
Tom Prickett, Glenwood, IA  
Dennis Schemmel, Grimes, IA
The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) submits the following report to Governor Reynolds and the Iowa General Assembly. The report discusses the accomplishments and status of the programs administered by the Conservation and Recreation Division of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). 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 implores the Governor and General Assembly to hold the protection and enhancement of Iowa’s natural resources in the highest regard during the legislative process. The NRC regards natural resources management to be an inherent duty of decision-making legislators, and the preservation and enhancement of the state’s natural areas should also be viewed as economic development tools.

Studies over the last nine years dramatically illustrate how Iowa’s natural resources are vital to the state’s economy. For instance hunters, anglers and wildlife enthusiasts represent a total economic benefit to the State of Iowa of $1.54 billion per year, including $974 million in local retail sales that creates and supports more than 17,800 jobs! Visitors and users of Iowa’s state parks, rivers, lakes, forests and trails account for $2.63 billion in spending revenues annually.

Public polling continues to illustrate that the majority of Iowa’s citizens want broader recreational opportunities and restored natural resources. Iowa’s electorate overwhelmingly approved the Iowa Land & Water initiative in 2010, sending the message that the citizens of Iowa are willing to pay the price for cleaner air, soil and water.

Yet while the DNR continues to face stiff challenges in its charge to protect and enrich Iowa’s inherent resources, department under-funding remains the most daunting obstacle. Two key fiscal challenge areas for FY2018-2019 are maintaining solvency of the Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund and operating Iowa’s state parks and recreation areas with fewer park staff and decreased funds for park infrastructure projects. These two critical challenges are described in the Appendix of this report.

The NRC urges the Governor and General Assembly, during its appropriations process, to increase the fiscal obligations necessary for the DNR to execute its vital and essential work, which also enhances the health and well-being of Iowa citizens.
Iowa Natural Resource Commission
2017 Major Accomplishments

- Twenty-four Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) city and county grant projects were approved in the amount of $2,930,957. If REAP had been fully funded at $20 million, which was the original legislative intent upon passage, another 13 projects benefiting cities and counties could have been approved in FY18.

- Twenty state park improvement projects in 11 different state parks were approved in the amount of $3,614,778. These projects included upgrading aging and storm damaged infrastructure, repairing roads and damaged infrastructure, renovating existing park facilities and adding new facilities such as ADA compliant restrooms and campground upgrades.

- The NRC approved 8 Lake Restoration Program contracts and 11 engineering projects. The Lake Restoration Program has 21 lake improvement projects in progress and 15 projects in initial evaluation and planning stages throughout the state.

- Under the Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP), the NRC and Department approved habitat restorations on 121 sites totaling 28,019 acres. Currently, there are 156 sites totaling 22,646 acres that are open for public hunting during the 2017-18 hunting season.

- Educational programs to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) continued in 2017. By reducing the spread of AIS, this decreases the damage they can cause to private and public property, industry and the negative effects on recreational opportunities. Fifteen seasonal AIS staff conducted 5,974 watercraft inspections reaching almost 17,000 people with the message to prevent AIS. One hundred forty nine access point vegetation surveys were completed at boat ramps and fishing jetties on high use water bodies to identify any new infestations of AIS. Seventy-five whole lake vegetation surveys were conducted.

- The NRC approved public land and conservation easement acquisitions and donations totaling 5,770 acres, protecting the natural resources and providing Iowans with new and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities. 4,274 of these acres directly impact water quality and watershed improvement efforts. In 2017, the DNR paid $963,487 in property taxes on public land.

- The Forestry Bureau’s Woodland Health Initiative continues to provide technical assistance to communities and rural landowners. Assistance was provided to 359 communities and 26 community tree inventories were completed. Seventeen Emerald Ash Borer Workshops were held with 1,013 attendees.

- A Teal Waterfowl hunting season was held September 2-10, in the North and South Zones, and September 2-17, in the Missouri River Zone. This was the fourth and final year of an experimental 4-year teal season in Iowa. Over the last four years, hunter success and teal population management have been tracked. This data will be evaluated to develop a recommendation for the future of a September Teal Season in Iowa.
Iowa Natural Resource Commission
2017 Major Accomplishments (continued)

- Youth participation in mentored hunting and fishing programs, hunter education classes, shooting sports in schools and fishing programs continued to expand across Iowa. In 2017, 10,480 students were certified in Hunter Education, 300 Iowa schools are teaching archery to 50,000 Iowa students and the number of students participating in the Scholastic Clay Target program has grown from 395 students in 2007 to 3,800 students in 2017. 28,820 youth and novice anglers were involved in school and community-based fishing programs through Fish Iowa.

- The NRC continued its vigilance in approving 41 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling $10,042,701 on DNR public lands. The NRC encouraged green construction practices and the implementation of Low Impact Development (LID) techniques. $2,476,356 of the above projects total were associated with lake restoration projects. In addition, multiple cooperative agreements were approved to improve watershed, and water quality projects.

- The NRC established hunting and fishing seasons and regulations and secured land management issues including leases and conservation easements.

- The NRC passed rules in response to HF 475 which allows the use of straight walled cartridge rifles for deer hunting.
As the new General Assembly convenes, the NRC urges the Iowa Legislature to lend due recognition in its decision-making process to the Department of Natural Resources. Recommendations of the NRC are:

- **Increase the hunting and fishing license fees to maintain the solvency of the Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund.** Funds from the sales of these licenses support services across the state including fish hatcheries, boat ramps, wildlife management, education and research. (Refer to Appendix).

- **Fund the DNR’s Lake Restoration and Water Quality Improvement Programs at $9.6 million annually.** Iowans value healthy lakes and respond to restoration efforts with a significant increase in recreational usage. The highly successful lake restoration projects add to the state’s overall water quality and complement efforts of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy by working in targeted watersheds above our significant publicly-owned lakes.

- **Fund state park infrastructure improvements at $5 million annually.** The Legislature’s annual $5 million appropriation, which began in 2012 to upgrade aging and deteriorating infrastructure in the state parks system, should be continued, leveraging resources by partnering with the Iowa Parks Foundation. Let’s make all of Iowa’s state parks be the best that they can be by our Parks 2020 Centennial Celebration. (Refer to Appendix.)

- **Support legislation which allows the DNR flexibility to use differential pricing that will produce revenues to cover operating costs for state park cabins and shelter houses and increase park visitation and use of these reserved facilities throughout the year.**

- **Fund the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) at $20 million which was the original legislative intent of the program.** The original REAP formula used to allocate the REAP funds for a variety of programs should be maintained. REAP grants are time-tested to be highly successful avenues for the state, counties and cities to fund conservation, recreation, historical, and infrastructure projects.

- **Educate the appropriate resource user groups and decision makers of the impacts of Aquatic and Terrestrial Invasive Species** and the importance of preventing the introduction and spread of invasive species.

- **Support the Woodland Health Initiative** and provide $2,000,000 in Community Woodland Health for grants, technical assistance, and education to an additional 75-100 Iowa communities. This will support local communities with planning in their combat against issues such as the damage to millions of ash trees due to the invasive Emerald Ash Borer.
• **Recognize and support the DNR’s communication and outreach programs** designed to increase younger Iowans’ connections with the State’s natural resources. Youth participation in mentored hunting and fishing programs and hunter education and shooting sports in school programs are vital in keeping future generations interested in, and working for, outdoor recreational opportunities.

• **Support and expand the Iowa Habitat Access Program** (IHAP). Currently, 22,646 acres are voluntarily enrolled in the program at 156 sites and open to public hunting during 2017-18.

• **Fund the Low-Head Dam Modification Program and Water Trails at $1 million annually.** Iowa has 177 low-head dams in 57 of Iowa’s 99 counties. These dams pose safety threats to people and communities, burden owners with costly repairs and diminish stream health and the vitality of aquatic life. Dam modification eliminates problems while improving safety, reducing financial costs, enhancing fisheries, restoring river connectivity and habitat, and increasing recreational opportunities.

• **Fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund by devoting 3/8 of each penny of sales tax for the betterment of Iowa’s natural resources.** This is prescribed by the passage of the 2010 Iowa Constitutional ballot initiative, approved by 63% of Iowans, and which resulted in the addition of Article VII, Section 10, to the Iowa Constitution. This funding, as recommended by the legislatively mandated Sustainable Funding Advisory Committee, would dedicate an estimated $150 million annually to Iowa’s woefully under-funded conservation, habitat, water quality, and recreational initiatives.
Conclusion

The NRC is a group of seven Governor-appointed citizen volunteers with diverse backgrounds, interests and personalities. Commissioners share a love of the outdoors and a strong sense of responsibility to protect and enhance the natural resources of Iowa.

Polling and other survey tools illustrate that Iowa citizens care deeply about natural resources and the recreational opportunities they provide. Added benefits include improved health and quality of life and continued strengthening of our state’s economic development. The NRC – in partnership with the DNR and other local, state and federal organizations and agencies – works steadfastly to that end.

A passionate and professional DNR family and its NRC support group will continue to tirelessly place Iowa’s natural resources on a lofty level of priority and favor.

We encourage the Governor and Iowa Legislators to discuss solutions to two key fiscal challenges for FY2018-2019: Operating Iowa’s State Parks and Recreation Areas and maintaining the solvency of the Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund.

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

Respectfully Submitted,

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General Fund Appropriations
Fiscal Year 2018

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Source: Iowa Department of Management

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DNR General Fund Appropriation History

Year: FY 07, FY 08, FY 09, FY 10, FY 11, FY 12, FY 13, FY 14, FY 15, FY 16, FY 17, FY 18

Appropriation amounts:
- FY 07: $18,937,968
- FY 08: $20,823,837
- FY 09: $21,994,799
- FY 10: $15,695,609
- FY 11: $13,336,069
- FY 12: $12,266,688
- FY 13: $12,516,700
- FY 14: $12,862,307
- FY 15: $12,862,307
- FY 16: $12,862,307
- FY 17: $11,507,811
- FY 18: $11,299,811
Two Challenge Areas for FY2019

- State Parks Funding
- Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund
Challenge: State Parks Operations

Number of FTEs per area managed

- Less than one FTE, 39%
- One FTE, 37%
- Two or more FTEs, 24%

Percentages are approximate based on shared staff and changing needs over time per area. Figures include parks, forests and OHV parks, but do not include preserves.

State Park FTEs = 112
Seasonal Staff in 2017 = 150 (down from 240)
Overnight Guests in 2017 (YTD) = 339,410
Ratio of Park Staff to Overnight Guests = 1 to 1,295
Park Visitors in 2017 (YTD) = 13,733,035
Ratio of Park Staff to Visitors = 1 to 52,416
Challenge: Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund

Revenues are relatively stable, but expenses are increasing.

- **Revenues**: fishing, hunting and trapping licenses, grants, rent, donations
- **Operations**: staff, equipment, boats, vehicles, contracts
- **Capital Investment/Improvement**:
  - Construction, hunting and fishing access, land improvement
  - Code-required expenses like county habitat grants, property taxes, electronic licensing system, law enforcement retirements
- **Ratio** of Law Enforcement FTEs in charge of safety to license buyers/boat owners = **1 to 9,011**