

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

From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission

Date: January 28, 2022

2021 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 2021 and includes the Commission's recommendations for policy and legislative changes going forward.

The NRC extends its appreciation 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

Marcus Branstad, Vice-Chair, Adel, IA
Tom Prickett, Glenwood, IA
Uriah Hansen, Grimes, IA

Iowa Natural Resource Commission

As we look back on 2021 and the many accomplishments for the Department of Natural Resources and their team, we are proud of what was accomplished, yet we understand that there is a tremendous opportunity to further the impact we have on conservation, natural resources, and accessibility to natural resources within the State of Iowa. As the Commission met throughout the past year and began planning for 2022 we have outlined major accomplishments for 2021, as well as our recommendations for 2022. The following areas have been identified as having the greatest impacts and opportunities in the immediate future within the Commission and Department of Natural Resources.

Outreach & Community Resources

2021 Accomplishments:

The Natural Resource Commission values education, outreach, and community support regarding natural resources and resource management. The following are examples of the DNR's work that the NRC supports regarding this topic:

- Youth participation in mentored hunting and fishing programs, hunter education classes, shooting sports in schools and fishing programs continued to expand across Iowa.
 - In 2021, 10,576 students were certified in Hunter Education, 185 Iowa schools were teaching archery to 26,246 Iowa students and the number of students participating in the Scholastic Clay Target program was 2,655 on 146 teams.
 - 29,280 youth and novice anglers participated in Fish Iowa!, after school, Scouts and other youth programs. 9,133 youth were involved in community fishing events.
 - 18,330 youth participated in school and community programs on wildlife conservation through Project WILD, Aquatic WILD and Growing Up WILD.
 - 1,260 youth participated in "Explore Bow-Fishing" Programs.
- The Forestry Woodland Health Initiative continues to provide technical assistance to communities and rural landowners. Efforts included:
 - Assistance was provided to 320 communities and 41 community tree inventories were completed by forestry staff and contractors.
 - 13 workshops were conducted to educate Iowans about serious insect, disease, invasive plant species and environmental problems in Iowa's communities and woodlands.
 - 1,510 woodland management plans were developed.
 - 1,749 woodland owners were assisted.

2022 Recommendations:

- **Recognize and support the DNR's communication and outreach programs designed to engage Iowans of all ages, youth to senior citizen, and strengthen their connection to 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. In addition, it is essential to increase collaborative efforts with stakeholders to Recruit, Retain and Reactivate (R3) hunters, anglers and shooting sports participants of all ages and ethnic groups to make participation more easily accessible.

- **Fund the Woodland Health Initiative at \$1,000,000 and provide \$2,000,000 for community and woodland derecho and storm recovery funds** for grants, technical assistance, and education to Iowa communities and woodland landowners. These funds will support local community replanting programs after the derecho and storm events. The funds will also provide communities, woodland landowners, and Iowa's wood industry with planning and implementation projects in their combat against woodland health issues such as the insect damage to millions of ash trees due to the invasive Emerald Ash Borer and other invasive insect and plant species that have been identified in Iowa woodlands.

Public Use & Natural Resources Development

2021 Accomplishments:

- Twenty-five Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) city and county grant projects were approved in the amount of \$3,543,394. If REAP had been fully funded at \$20 million, which was the original legislative intent upon its passage, an additional 11 city and county grant projects worth \$1,952,400 could have been available for funding in FY22.
- Twenty-two state park improvement projects in 21 different state parks were approved in the amount of \$4,138,071. These projects included upgrading aging and storm damaged infrastructure, parking area reconstruction, pavement repairs and maintenance, trail and culvert repairs, boat ramp reconstruction, dam repairs and entry signs.
- The Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP) received strong support from private landowners and hunters to continue the program in FY21. Currently, there are 226 sites totaling 29,453 acres of privately-owned habitat that are open for public hunting during the 2021-22 hunting season.
- The NRC approved public land and conservation easement acquisitions and donations totaling 3,377 acres, protecting the natural resources and providing Iowans with new and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities. 2,582 of these acres directly impact water quality and watershed improvement efforts. In FY21, the DNR paid \$1,226,514 in property taxes on public land.
- The NRC continued its vigilance in approving 49 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling \$14,397,454 on DNR public lands. The NRC encouraged green construction practices and the implementation of Low Impact Development (LID) techniques. \$6,673,386 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.

2022 Recommendations:

- **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, has been greatly appreciated and has provided numerous health, safety and recreational benefits to citizens. We recommend this funding be continued to make the needed improvements and enhancements in all State Parks for Iowans to enjoy now and into the future.

- **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.
- **Support and expand the Iowa Habitat Access Program (IHAP) to 50,000 acres during the next five years.** Currently 29,453 acres are voluntarily enrolled in the program at 226 sites and are open to public hunting during 2021-22 hunting season. Iowa ranks 49th in the country for the least public land holdings. IHAP benefits participating land-owners, the state and Iowa hunters.

Water Quality & Accessibility

2021 Accomplishments:

- The NRC approved 13 Lake Restoration Program contracts and 7 lake related engineering projects. The Lake Restoration Program has 21 lake improvement projects in progress and 14 additional projects in initial evaluation, community outreach, and planning stages throughout the state.
- Educational programs to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) continued in 2021. By reducing the spread of AIS, this decreases the damage they can cause to private and public property, industry, as well as the negative effects on recreational opportunities. Nineteen Seasonal Natural Resources Aides helped with this effort by completing the following work: 6,015 watercraft inspections; 110 trout stream angler interviews; 143 full vegetation surveys; and surveyed vegetation at 584 lake access points on 40 waterbodies.
- Four low-head dam projects were approved to begin mitigation efforts, and one previously approved project was completed in FY 21.
- The West Fork Des Moines River Water Trail in Emmet County was officially designated as a water trail. There are currently 6 water trail projects in planning stages.

2022 Recommendations:

- **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 significant publicly-owned lakes.
- **Fund the Low-Head Dam Modification Program and Water Trails at \$1 million annually.** Iowa has 174 low-head dams remaining 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. By funding dam modification efforts, it will eliminate problems while improving safety, reducing financial costs, enhancing fisheries, restoring river connectivity and habitat, and increasing recreational opportunities.
- **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. Invasive species can cause devastating economic impacts; therefore, education is an important action to help prevent and reduce these impacts.

Funding

2021 Accomplishments:

The Natural Resource Commission annually reviews and approves the DNR's budget submission. As a separate entity from the Department, we see that funding to support the growing need and interest in Outreach & Community Resources, Public Use & Natural Resources Development, and Water Quality & Accessibility is very important to sustain and expand these programs. Along with these areas and the other areas outlined in the constitutionally created Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, it is a vital component in Iowa's growth - not only in improvements to natural resources and outdoor recreation, but in the positive economic impact and workforce benefits that these amenities provide.

2022 Recommendation:

- **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 (SFAC), would dedicate an estimated \$170 million annually to Iowa's under-funded conservation, habitat, water quality, and recreational initiatives. We would also like to emphasize, as the SFAC outlined and the public's understanding of the vote, that this new funding should supplement and not replace, current funding to the Department of Natural Resources.

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 support that end.

The passionate and professional DNR staff and the NRC will continue to tirelessly 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.

Respectfully Submitted,
The Iowa Natural Resource Commission



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