

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

From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission

Date: April 30, 2021

2020 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 2020 and includes the commission's recommendations for policy and legislative changes.

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

Marcus Branstad, Vice-Chair, Adel, IA
Kim Francisco, Secretary, Ankeny, IA
Tom Prickett, Glenwood, IA
Dennis Schemmel, Grimes, IA

Iowa Natural Resource Commission 2020 Major Accomplishments

- Twenty-four Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) city and county grant projects were approved in the amount of \$2,804,555. If REAP had been fully funded at \$20 million, which was the original legislative intent upon its passage, an additional 10 projects worth \$4,626,155 could have been approved in FY21.
- Seventeen state park improvement projects in 14 different state parks were approved in the amount of \$7,557,774. These projects included upgrading aging and storm damaged infrastructure, pavement repairs and maintenance, renovating existing park facilities, boat ramp and dock replacements, campground upgrades and adding new facilities such as ADA compliant restrooms and showers.
- The NRC approved 10 Lake Restoration Program contracts and 6 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.
- The Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP) received strong support from private landowners and hunters to continue the program in FY21. Currently there are 160 sites totaling 21,999 acres of privately-owned habitat that are open for public hunting during the 2020-21 hunting season.
- Educational programs to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) continued in 2020. 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. Seventy-one whole lake vegetation surveys were completed. Adult zebra mussel surveys were conducted in 8 Iowa lakes. Due to COVID-19, there were no watercraft inspections, trout stream angler interviews or access point surveys completed in 2020. Mobile geofencing was used to target AIS Prevention ads to visitors at high-use boat ramps during June-August.
- The NRC approved public land and conservation easement acquisitions and donations totaling 4,090 acres, protecting the natural resources and providing Iowans with new and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities. 3,513 of these acres directly impact water quality and watershed improvement efforts. In FY20, the DNR paid \$1,174,232 in property taxes on public land.
- The Forestry Woodland Health Initiative continues to provide technical assistance to communities and rural landowners. Efforts included:
 - * Assistance was provided to 262 communities and 43 community tree inventories were completed by forestry staff.
 - * 19 workshops were conducted to educate Iowans about serious insect, disease, invasive plant species and environmental problems in Iowa's communities and woodlands.
 - * 1,542 forest management plans were completed.
 - * 1,828 woodland owners were assisted.

**Iowa Natural Resource Commission
2020 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 2020, 8,682 students were certified in Hunter Education, 231 Iowa schools were teaching archery to 42,421 Iowa students and the number of students participating in the Scholastic Clay Target program was 2,655 on 146 teams.
 - * 30,080 youth and novice anglers participated in Fish Iowa!, after school, Scouts and other youth programs. 9,133 youth were involved in community fishing events.
 - * 27,516 youth participated in school and community programs on wildlife conservation through Project WILD, Aquatic WILD and Growing Up WILD.
 - * 1,050 youth participated in “Explore Bow-Fishing” Programs.

- The NRC continued its vigilance in approving 28 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling \$9,615,021 on DNR public lands. The NRC encouraged green construction practices and the implementation of Low Impact Development (LID) techniques. \$1,212,226 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.

- One dam modification project was completed on the South Skunk River in Ames in FY 20.

- The South Skunk River Water Trail was designated in Story County.

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

Iowa Natural Resource Commission Legislative Recommendations

In review of natural resource related issues and topics, 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:

- **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.
- **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, 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 during the next 100 years.
- **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.
- **Fund the Woodland Health Initiative at \$900,000 and provide \$2,000,000 in Community and Woodland funds** for grants, technical assistance, and education to additional Iowa communities and woodland landowners. These funds will support local communities, woodland landowners and Iowa's wood industry with planning and implementation projects in their combat against 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.

Iowa Natural Resource Commission
Legislative Recommendations (continued)

- **Support and expand the Iowa Habitat Access Program (IHAP) to 50,000 acres during the next five years.** Currently 21,999 acres are voluntarily enrolled in the program at 160 sites and are open to public hunting during 2020-21 hunting season. Iowa ranks 49th in the country for the least public land holdings. IHAP benefits participating land-owners, the state and Iowa hunters.
- **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.
- **Recognize and support the DNR's communication and outreach programs designed to strategically increase younger and all ages of 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. 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.
- **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.

Conclusion

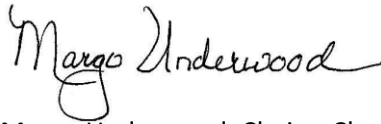
The NRC is a group of seven Governor-appointed citizen volunteers with diverse backgrounds, interests and personalities. Commissioners share a love of the outdoors and a strong sense of responsibility to protect and enhance the natural resources of Iowa.

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.

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



Margo Underwood, Chair – Clear Lake, IA
Commissioner, Iowa Natural Resource Commission
Margo.Underwood@dnr.iowa.gov