



**ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF
CONSERVATION AND
NATURAL RESOURCES**

2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT



**The Honorable Kay Ivey
Governor of Alabama
State Capitol
Montgomery, AL 36130**



Dear Governor Ivey:

I am pleased to submit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Annual Report for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2021.

Alabama's State Parks continued to be a popular choice for outdoor recreation with 5.4 million guest occurrences during FY 2020-2021. Renovations and upgrades to many Parks facilities continued throughout the year. Perhaps the most important Parks accomplishment was the 1,644-acre expansion of Oak Mountain State Park with the addition of the Belcher Tract adjacent to the park. Various outdoor recreational opportunities are in the planning stages for this picturesque part of Shelby County. Alabamians and visitors to our state will soon be able to explore this beautiful location in person.

In addition to being instrumental in facilitating the Belcher Tract addition to Oak Mountain State Park through the Forever Wild Land Trust, ADCNR's State Lands Division (SLD) also completed one of the largest prescribed burns in Alabama's history. Burn crews from SLD and the Alabama Chapter of The Nature Conservancy joined forces to successfully burn 5,750 acres of the Forever Wild Grand Bay Savanna Complex in south Mobile County near Bayou La Batre. This massive undertaking is part of an ongoing habitat restoration project that aims to reverse the effects of decades of fire suppression in one of Alabama's most ecologically diverse locations.

Alabama's Gulf Coast has long been a draw for those seeking the best in saltwater fishing. The 2021 private angler red snapper season once again benefited from state management of this popular reef fish. Our Marine Resources Division's ability to monitor the harvest accurately and in a timely manner through ADCNR's Snapper Check system allowed anglers 124 days to fish our quota of 1.12 million pounds of red snapper. In 2021, anglers landed 951,255 pounds of red snapper in Alabama, making it a successful season for anglers while providing an economic boost to the state.

During the pandemic, the number of new firearms owners surged. To meet the increased need for firearms safety training for the public, ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division expanded its Introduction to Firearms program and held 40 four-hour firearms classes that introduced new shooters to firearms safety and marksmanship skills during FY 2020-2021. The classes are taught by certified firearms instructors with WFF's Law Enforcement Section at ADCNR shooting ranges located throughout the state. This innovative program not only serves as a firearms safety course, but it also introduces those who may not hunt or fish to the variety of outdoor recreational opportunities provided through the Department.

These are just a few of the accomplishments you will find in this report. Thank you for your support and leadership to our agency and the State of Alabama.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher M. Blankenship". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Christopher M. Blankenship
Commissioner

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	5
Conservation Advisory Board	6
Budgets	7
Organizational Chart	8
Administrative	9
Marine Resources	16
Alabama Reef Zone Expansion	20
State Lands	22
Restoring Habitat and Enhancing Outdoor Recreation With Prescribed Fire	30
State Parks	32
The Importance of Modern Campgrounds	42
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries	44
The Next Step in Alabama's Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) Program	58



DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW



The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is an executive and administrative Department of the State of Alabama created by statute. The Commissioner, appointed by the Governor as a member of her cabinet, advises the Governor and Legislature on management of freshwater fish, wildlife, marine resources, state lands, state parks, and other natural resources.

Scope of Operations

The Department's scope of operations includes the administration, management and maintenance of 21 state parks, 23 public fishing lakes, three freshwater fish hatcheries, one aquatic biodiversity center, 162 public boat ramps, 35 wildlife management areas, seven special opportunity areas, 12 shooting ranges, a saltwater mariculture center, and 645,000 acres of trust lands managed for the benefit of several state agencies, and the state's General Fund and the Alabama Trust Fund. Other departmental functions include maintenance of a State Land Resource Information Center and administration of the Forever Wild Land Trust program.

Organization

During Fiscal Year 2020-2021, the Department had four operational divisions and eight support sections. The operational divisions were Marine Resources, State Lands, State Parks, and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. Support sections were Accounting, Engineering, Communications and Marketing, Information Technology, Legal, Personnel and Payroll, Property Inventory, and Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration. The Commissioner was advised by a 13-member Conservation Advisory Board.

Division directors managed the Department's programs under their jurisdiction through authority delegated by the Legislature and the Commissioner. Throughout the fiscal year, the Department promoted wise stewardship, management, and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources. Active public education and voluntary participation programs were expanded, and new plans were implemented to achieve maximum multiple-use benefits consistent with resource conservation.

Department Goals

The Department's major goal is to promote the statewide stewardship and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources and to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy these resources.

Funding

Funding for the Department is generated through special revenues, which include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, mandated interest from endowment and federal regulations. The Forever Wild Land Trust received interest income from the Alabama Trust Fund. Specific revenue sources for the four operational divisions are as follows:

Marine Resources: Saltwater fishing licenses, fines, marine gas tax, and federal grants. Marine Resources also has an endowment, but it has not grown enough to enhance operations.

State Lands: Management fees from the sale of timber, minerals and various leases on state lands administered under the Lands Asset Management Program. Further, the division receives additional federal grants that support specific programs.

State Parks: User-generated funds in the form of entrance, rental, lodging, golf, and other recreational fees. State Parks received a modest amount of funding from cigarette tax revenue.

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries: Fishing and hunting licenses and permits; fines; waterfowl stamps; federal allocations from excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition, archery gear and some fishing tackle; and federal grants. Interest income continues to be generated by the Game and Fish endowment fund for resident lifetime hunting and fishing licenses. Direct donations and voluntary state income tax refund check-offs for the Nongame Wildlife Program continue to decrease from previous fiscal years.

CONSERVATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Conservation Advisory Board, created by statute, is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor for alternating terms of six years and three ex-officio members in the persons of the Governor, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries, and the Director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The Commissioner of Conservation and Natural Resources serves as the ex-officio secretary of the Board.

The Advisory Board assists in formulating policies for the Department of Conservation, examines all rules and regulations and makes recommendations for their change or amendment. By a two-thirds vote of the members present and with the

Governor's approval, the Board can amend, make any changes, repeal or create and promulgate additional rules and regulations. The Board also assists in publicizing the Department's programs and activities.

Meetings

The Advisory Board met two times during FY 2020-2021:

- March 6, 2021, at the RSA Activity Center, 201 Dexter Avenue, in Montgomery, Alabama.
- May 8, 2021, at Jasper High School, 1501 Viking Dr., in Jasper, Alabama

Conservation Advisory Board Members as of Sept. 30, 2021

Members	Hometown	Term Expires
Joseph Dobbs, Jr., Chairman	Birmingham	March 28, 2027
Greg Barksdale	Hanceville	September 30, 2023
Brock Jones	Tuscaloosa	March 28, 2027
Kevin Savory	Dothan	March 28, 2027
Grady Hartzog	Eufaula	March 28, 2027
Raymond Jones, Jr.	Huntsville	May 9, 2025
Jeff Martin	Pell City	May 9, 2025
Ben C. Stimpson, Jr.	Mobile	September 30, 2023
Gary Wolfe	Fairhope	March 28, 2027
Tim Wood	Selma	September 30, 2023

Ex-officio Members

Kay Ivey, Governor, State of Alabama
Dr. J. Mike Phillips, Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Rick Pate, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries

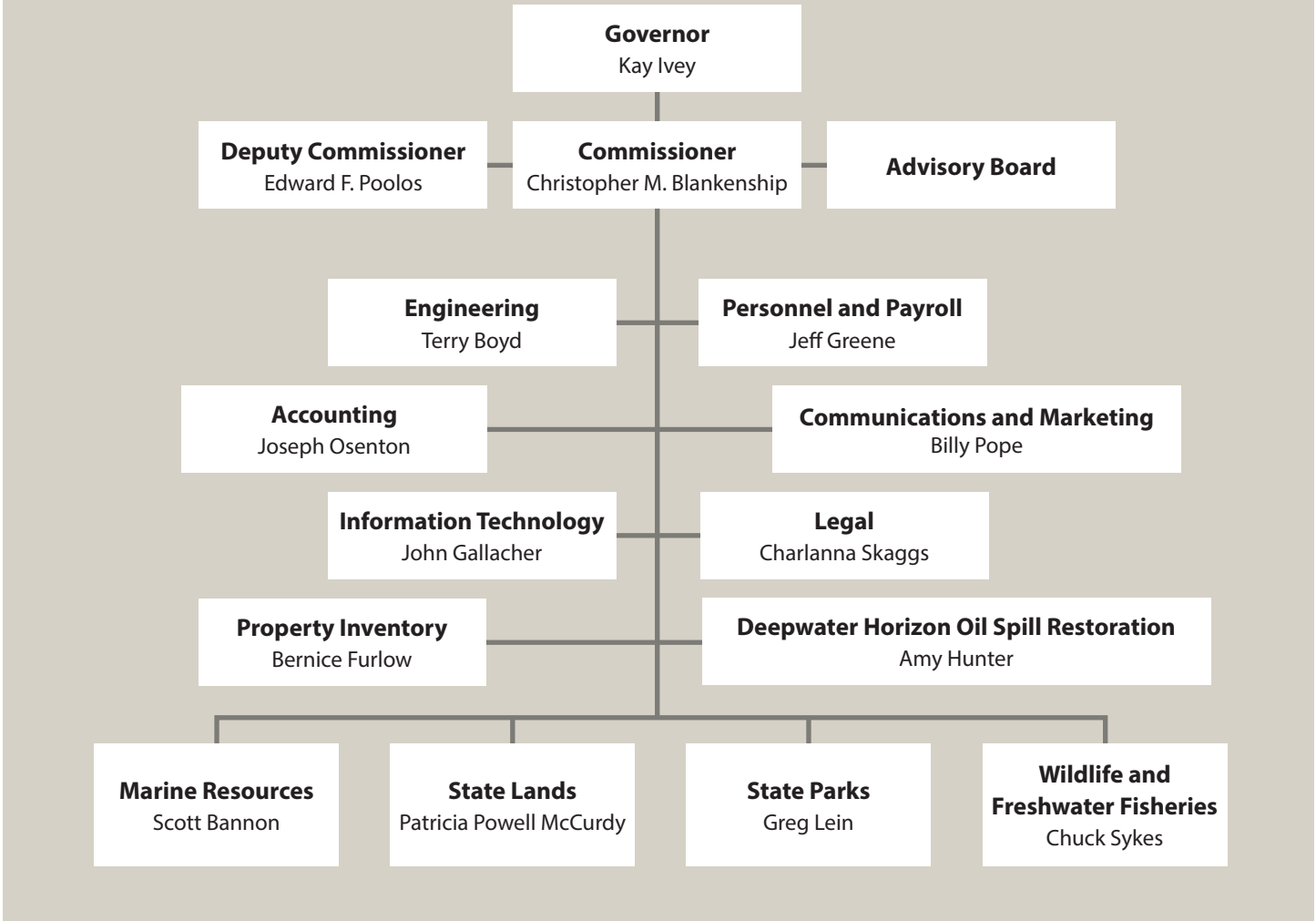
Ex-officio Secretary of the Board

Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

BUDGETS

	ACTUAL 2021	BUDGETED 2022	REQUESTED 2023
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	960	1,189	1,235
UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE FORWARD	106,147,572	89,125,000	44,773,178
Federal Funds			
0303 Marine Resources - Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission	955,938	914,000	1,040,614
0303 Marine Resources - Commerce	912,048	935,600	709,630
0303 Marine Resources - Interior	1,343,068	1,185,750	1,200,788
0304 Game & Fish - Interior	19,403,427	22,566,000	23,725,187
0304 Game & Fish - Misc	0	522,000	540,750
0305 Lands - Commerce	2,640,539	4,412,000	5,169,682
0305 Lands - Interior	329,595	995,406	715,112
1713 Restore Act	21,145,083	138,340,207	137,727,169
Total Federal Funding	46,729,698	169,870,963	170,828,932
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	8,926,623	2,195,000	0
Licenses and Permits	28,567,641	26,014,100	26,161,653
Land Management Fees	2,837,860	3,198,457	3,292,563
User Fees	43,961,008	45,033,195	45,625,111
Timber Sales	71,142	588,000	600,000
Fines	517,861	503,100	516,620
Trust Fund Interest (MR and WFF)	773,300	680,000	650,000
Other	11,222,422	8,652,000	7,480,560
Total Departmental Related Receipts	96,877,857	86,863,852	84,326,507
Cigarette Tax	2,398,000	3,000,000	3,000,000
Gasoline Tax	2,814,563	2,829,870	2,630,000
Use Tax Discount Cap	1,014,437	1,145,380	1,075,000
Sales Tax Discount Cap	2,000,000	7,000,000	7,378,000
GOMESA	28,043,425	30,000,000	35,000,000
Forever Wild Land Management	900,000	900,000	900,000
BP Oil Spill/NRDA Reimbursements	12,257,912	24,000,000	25,000,000
Coronavirus Relief Fund	740,960	0	0
Total Other Receipts	50,169,297	68,875,250	74,983,000
Administrative Transfer	8,708,181	10,000,000	10,000,000
Actual All Receipts	202,485,033	335,610,065	340,138,439
BFY 2021-2023 Expenditures or Budgeted	219,507,605	379,961,887	360,715,568
Revenues verses Expenditures--Over(Under)	(17,022,572)	(44,351,822)	(20,577,129)
UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE	89,125,000	44,773,178	24,196,049
BFY 2021-2023 Expenditures/Budgeted	219,507,605	379,961,887	360,715,568
BFY 2021-2023 Federal Funding	46,729,698	169,870,963	170,828,932
BFY 2021-2023 State Funding	172,777,907	210,090,924	189,886,636

Department Organizational Chart as of September 30, 2021



FY 2021 Budgets and Expenditures for Administrative Division

Section	Budgeted Amount	Actual Expenditures	Over/(Under)
Accounting	2,317,292	1,757,905	(-559,387)
Commissioner	732,239	619,129	(-113,110)
Engineering	458,593	405,378	(-53,215)
Communications and Marketing	946,305	806,499	(-139,806)
Information Technology	2,407,239	2,347,582	(-59,657)
Legal	1,085,797	992,236	(-93,561)
License	333,476	256,287	(-77,189)
Payroll and Personnel	1,123,090	1,201,514	78,424
Property Inventory	428,010	433,304	5,294
Contingency	623,337	0	(-623,337)
Totals	10,455,378	8,819,834	(-1,635,544)

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

ACCOUNTING

The Accounting Section is the central clearinghouse for all departmental financial data. Accounting maintains and records all receipts and disbursements for the Commissioner's office, the administration sections, and each of the four divisions. Accounting is responsible for six internal functions: accounts payable, accounts receivable, budgeting, procurement, hunting and fishing license sales, and financial reporting.

Accounts Payable reviews and approves all payment transactions and transfer journal entries for the Department. More than 20,000 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

Accounts Receivable reviews and approves all cash receipts and investment transactions for the Department. More than 12,000 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

The **Budgeting Office** prepares and submits the annual budget. It also processes budget modifications as required during the year. The Department expenses for FY 2020-2021 were approximately \$219.5 million.

Procurement provides purchasing assistance to each administrative section and to all divisions. This office is the liaison between ADCNR and State Purchasing.

The **Hunting and Fishing License Office** is responsible for receiving revenues from license sales and certifying them into the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and Marine Resources funds.

Financial Reporting processes Comprehensive Annual Financial Report entries, closing entries, and reports on grants; calculates federal draws; and maintains grant budgets for the Department.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Communications and Marketing Section provides a variety of services for the Department including writing news releases; publication and graphic design; editorial, proofreading, and copywriting services; website development; video production; photography; email marketing; marketing analysis; and a weekly outdoors column sent to the media and published on the Department's website. Staff also coordinates special projects and events such as Outdoor Alabama hunting and fishing nights with two minor league baseball teams. FY 2020-2021 personnel included six full-time positions.

Accomplishments

- Managed the Department's email marketing and communication platform (GovDelivery) that is used to communicate with 1,110,605 subscribers distributed among 187 interest topics. Distributed communications included press releases, annual hunting and fishing license expiration reminders, weekly outdoors articles, lapsed hunting and fishing license

marketing incentives, and more. In FY 2020-2021, section email marketing and communications efforts generated \$808,239 in revenue from 13,870 license buyers.

- Developed landing pages on OutdoorAlabama.com for various marketing campaigns, outreach programs, and licenses. Those landing pages generated \$375,522 in revenue from 9,471 license buyers.
- Continued a key partnership with Academy Sports + Outdoors to provide license incentives, host live TV segments promoting hunter safety, and organize a first responder appreciation event. To assist in reactivating and retaining license buyers, Academy provided a 20% discount to lapsed license buyers. That discount promotion generated \$234,731 in revenue with 2,636 licenses sold. Academy hosted two in-store live TV remotes valued at \$16,000 at their Huntsville and Hoover locations to promote hunter safety prior to the 2020-2021 hunting season. During the Academy Sports + Outdoors SEC Football Tailgate Tour, ADCNR Conservation Enforcement Officers were honored at a first responders appreciation event in Northport, Alabama. Conservation officers and staff of the Northport district office were treated to a wild game tailgate and featured on Academy's social media platforms. The event was hosted by ESPN's Marty Smith. As part of the appreciation event, Academy Sports + Outdoors donated \$10,000 in Academy gift cards to the Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers Association (ACEOA) to assist with outreach and R3 (recruitment, retention, and reactivation) efforts.
- Partnered with the Alabama State Parks Division, Alabama Tourism Department, and ACEOA on the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest. Coordinated a traveling exhibit of the winning photos in locations across the state, such as state parks, museums, and libraries.
- Developed and edited 127 press releases (including weekly outdoors articles) focused on departmental programs, public events, and hunting and fishing regulations.
- Managed public information requests from local, regional, and national media outlets; nongovernmental and governmental agencies; and the public.
- Managed the Department's official Outdoor Alabama social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Facebook continued to be the most effective social media platform to connect with our constituents. The Outdoor Alabama Facebook page has seen continued growth in users, engagement, and reach. In FY 2020-2021, the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page grew by 3,747 followers, for a total of 53,341. Total reach of the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page for FY 2020-2021 was 960,004 Facebook users, an increase of 67.3% over the previous fiscal year. Additionally, the Outdoor Alabama Instagram page grew exponentially to 5,100 followers with a reach of 351,358 Instagram users.

- Produced 8 Facebook Live streams for ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division for a combined total of 80,000 views and an estimated reach of 195,000 Facebook users.
- Oversaw and maintained content for two official Department websites – OutdoorAlabama.com and AlabamaForeverWild.com.

OutdoorAlabama.com

Users: 2,143,268 (down 2.31% from FY 2019-2020)*

New Users: 2,122,495 (down 2.77% from FY 2019-2020)*

Pageviews: 7,738,426 (down 9.71% from FY 2019-2020)*

***Note:** The decrease in website traffic for FY 2020-2021 is due to the spike in website traffic we experienced during the early stages of the pandemic (March 2020). When comparing website traffic between FY 2018-2019 and FY 2020-2021, new users of the website are up by 342,778.

- Served as the liaison with the website contractor to provide solutions for various website issues as well as administrative and troubleshooting services for the Department.
- Designed various promotional items, digital and printed marketing materials, various annual species reports, advertisements, maps, calendars, signage, business cards, retirement certificates, and vehicle graphics and wraps.
- Shot photographs and video both on location and in studio in support of Department programs and events. Section staff also maintained video and photo archives for various departmental projects and distribution to news media, outdoor writers, and print and digital publications.
- Created public surveys and produced reports through the Qualtrics survey platform in support of Departmental staff research.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The Information Technology (IT) Section provides computer hardware, software, and networking services for the Department. Hardware services include setup and installation of computers and mobile devices, management of departmental servers, and installation and support for printers, monitors, copiers, and scanners. Software services include web-based application development and maintenance; analysis, design, and support for the Department's E-Gov applications; support for all mainframe applications; and support and maintenance of Department websites. Networking services include support for all wired, wireless, and cellular technologies used throughout the Department. IT support also provides support for email and cloud storage platforms through the Microsoft Office 365 Enterprise Agreement.

Facilities and Personnel

The IT staff consists of 17 employees: IT manager, programmer analysts (3), system specialists (6), system technicians (3), laborer (1), and contractor-filled positions (3). There are currently six vacant merit positions in IT.

Accomplishments

- Continued project to convert all ADCNR locations to cloud-based Cisco Meraki networks for increased visibility, management, and security for both internal and public networks.
- Implemented new secure endpoint software for computers that provides advanced protection, detection, response, and threat-hunting capabilities
- Used regular phishing campaigns and cybersecurity awareness training. Lowered ADCNR phishing percentage from 7.5% to a below-industry-average 4%.
- Implemented a new cloud storage backup solution to provide increased disaster recovery and business continuity capabilities
- Provided on-demand IT training for all staff
- Deployed a new platform for ADCNR user policy acceptance and customized training modules
- Added dedicated security analyst staff to provide cybersecurity expertise and monitor all threats to ADCNR resources
- Installed a more robust server backup solution including a new air-gapped ransomware protection appliance
- Implemented Department-wide cloud-based web filter and DNS security platform to increase endpoint protection both on and off ADCNR networks
- Deployed new paperless electronic signature capabilities to increase efficiency and reduce waste
- Created new help desk portal for users to submit and track tickets as well as find useful information and links
- Processed Game Check information on more than 195,000 deer harvested in the 2020-2021 season
- Managed commercial and recreational licenses
- Developed Volunteer Operations Reporting System at the request of ADCNR's Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) to track and monitor volunteer hours
- Developed Technical Assistance Requests and Tracking (TART) web application to collect, catalog, and report on technical guidance, public assistance, and outreach activities provided by WFF staff. Monthly, quarterly, and annual reports; activity history; and follow-up actions are also available through this system.
- Rewrote the main Alabama Coastal Restoration site in DNN (dot net nuke) and migrated into the primary ADCNR website, Outdoor Alabama
- Converted Restore Alabama from a DNN (dot net nuke) site and rewrote in dot net
- Added a reconcile module to Lease Tracking and Payment that gives State Lands Division personnel the ability to match payments from the old Access system to the new system
- Modified Hunts to include a new Special Opportunity Hunt type that allowed fees for WFF
- Rewrote several sections of Hunts to improve performance and improve user experience and productivity

- Added Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) tracking to Game-breeders. This is being enhanced and implemented in 2022.
- Rewrote the process that calculates a hunter's preference points
- Enhanced the Heritage database for the ArcGIS users by connecting the servers and writing code to allow data retrieval
- Consolidated lifetime privileges to allow multiple lifetime privileges per license with limited discounted combination
- Created and implemented a site for Enforcement Officers that tracks and accesses residency requirements of lifetime license privileges
- Worked with NIC AL on modifying the phone application to allow entering deer and turkey year-round in Game Check
- Modified COORS to allow an optional third-level approval for the Accounting Section
- Rewrote API webservice of Hunts. This will be tested and implemented in 2022.
- Streamlined the workflow for the Snapper Check web service
- Created a webservice for Wildlife Management Area (WMA) check in. This will be implemented in 2022.
- Automated the Southwick Data Extraction
- Researched MariaDB and Drupal content management for marketing
- Set up and configured several frameworks and TFS servers

LEGAL SECTION

The Legal Section provides legal counsel and advice to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, division directors, law enforcement personnel, and other employees of the Department.

The Legal Section also performs work relating to the acquisition of real estate for the Department, including procuring title evidence (title insurance, title opinion, title research), preparing deeds, issuing Attorney General Title Opinions, closing acquisitions, recording deeds, and obtaining the final title policies/opinions, tax assessments, and payment of taxes due.

The section handles departmental contracts and legal instruments of all types including, but not limited to, oil and gas leases, real estate leases, personal-service agreements, construction contracts, engineering contracts, easements, lease purchase agreements, State Parks concession contracts, and other documents as requested.

The section corresponds with, meets, and advises members of the Governor's Office, the Alabama Legislature, and fellow state attorneys on matters of legal, legislative, or regulatory interest related to the Department.

The section drafts, reviews, and monitors legislation affecting the Department. It also drafts rules and regulations pursuant to the Alabama Administrative Procedures Act.

Litigation against the Department and its employees, as well as litigation initiated by the Department, is also managed by the Legal Section. This includes cases and appeals filed in state and federal courts, as well as those before state agencies and boards. The representation provided by the Legal Section includes all facets of conflict resolution and litigation, preparation of pleadings and briefs, and oral arguments.

PERSONNEL AND PAYROLL

The Personnel and Payroll Section provides personnel-related support services to the Commissioner's office, division directors, section chiefs, and each employee of the Department. The section serves as liaison to the State Personnel Department for ADCNR's personnel actions and activities.

The section is responsible for processing all payrolls as well as maintaining all employee files and payroll records. The section supports the advancement of ADCNR's employees in various ways, including facilitating training opportunities and assisting with the administration of benefits. Contact the Personnel Office at (334) 242-3501.

ENGINEERING SECTION

The Engineering Section provides professional planning and programming, engineering, architectural, landscape architecture, surveying, cartographic, and related administrative services to the Department's divisions.

The section had four employees during FY 2020-2021: one Conservation Engineering Services Chief, one part-time Conservation Construction Inspector I, and two retired state employees. The section's facilities are in Montgomery.

PROPERTY INVENTORY

The Property Inventory Section is responsible for tracking all new assets acquired by the department as well as the disposal of all assets once they have reached their end of service. This includes assuring that all new property is barcoded and entered into the State Inventory Database as well as tracked throughout its lifetime within the department.

The Property Inventory Section is also responsible for coordinating and implementing the Department's yearly internal inventory of property as well as the bi-annual audit by the State Auditor's office.

DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL RESTORATION

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration Section (DWHRS) coordinates administrative and technical aspects of restoration in coastal Alabama associated with the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Specific activities include participating in Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council meetings, participating in Trustee Implementation Groups, conducting public meetings related to NRDA activities, soliciting public input regarding potential restoration ideas, assisting with development of draft restoration plans and implementation of early restoration projects, and representing the interests of the NRDA trustees and the Governor's office.

The DWHRS assists the Commissioner related to his service as the Governor's designee to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council, established pursuant to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012 (RESTORE Act), which directs 80% of Clean Water Act civil penalties resulting from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill for restoration projects within the five Gulf states.

The DWHRS also provides administrative support to the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council, which was established by the federal RESTORE Act to oversee certain funds allocated directly to the State of Alabama.

In addition, the DWHRS staff assists the Commissioner and coordinates with the Governor's office in relation to efforts by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to distribute grant proceeds for coastal restoration from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (GEBF). This fund resulted from two plea agreements entered in early 2013 resolving the criminal cases against BP and Transocean arising from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Significant accomplishments in FY2021 included:

- Implemented NRDA Restoration Plan III containing seven projects valued at more than \$23 million
- Announced funding for two new strategic land acquisition projects under NFWF-GEBF valued at more than \$8 million
- Implemented \$2.1 million Commitment and Planning Support grant from the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (RESTORE-Federal Council) to support the state's efforts in collaborative planning for Gulf-wide restoration efforts
- Continued support, as administrator, for the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council implementing Alabama's Multiyear Implementation Plan (MIP) and State Expenditure Plan (SEP) as required under the RESTORE Act. The two plans describe more than 40 projects valued at more than \$315 million.

An overview of restoration projects benefiting the State of Alabama, organized by funding stream, is provided below. Additional project details are available at www.outdooralabama.com/alabama-coastal-restoration-program/alabama-coastal-restoration-about.

NRDA Early Restoration Projects

- Marsh Island Restoration Project (Portersville Bay) - \$11,300,000
- Dune Restoration Project (Gulf Shores and Orange Beach) - \$1,500,000
- Nesting Sea Turtles Habitat Improvement Project - \$345,000
- Avian Habitat Enhancement Project - \$279,000
- Gulf State Park Enhancement Project - \$85,500,000
- Alabama Oyster Cultch Restoration - \$3,400,000
- Alabama Swift Tract Living Shoreline Project - \$5,000,080
- Point aux Pins Living Shoreline Project - \$2,300,000
- Osprey Restoration in Coastal Alabama Project - \$62,580
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Trail Enhancement - \$545,110

NRDA Restoration Plan I Projects

- Fort Morgan Pier Rehabilitation Project - \$3,075,000
- Laguna Cove Little Lagoon Natural Resource Protection Project - \$4,400,000
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvements Project - \$1,000,000
- Dauphin Island Eco-Tourism and Environment Education Area - \$4,000,000
- Mid-Island Parks and Public Beach Improvements Project - \$1,900,000

NRDA Restoration Plan II Projects

- Magnolia River Land Acquisition (Holmes Tract) - \$4,144,162
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (East Gateway Tract) - \$4,247,000
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (Harrod Tract) - \$3,606,900
- Lower Perdido Islands Restoration, Phase I - \$994,523
- Southwestern Coffee Island Habitat Restoration Project, Phase I - \$825,225
- Little Lagoon Living Shorelines - \$210,999

- Restoring the Night Sky - \$399,658
- Toulmin Springs Branch Engineering and Design - \$479,090
- Fowl River Nutrient Reduction - \$1,000,000
- Weeks Bay Nutrient Reduction - \$2,000,000
- Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Conservation Program - \$935,061
- CAST Triage - \$622,915
- CAST Habitat Usage and Population Dynamics - \$1,631,697
- CAST Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$906,874
- Enhancing Capacity for the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network - \$2,432,389
- Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$686,374
- Assessment of Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Populations and Health - \$3,059,229
- Colonial Nesting Wading Bird Tracking and Habitat Use Assessment - \$1,547,500
- Oyster Cultch Relief and Reef Configuration - \$480,262
- Side-scan Mapping of Mobile Bay Relic Oyster Reefs - \$104,229
- Oyster Hatchery at Claude Peteet Mariculture Center - \$2,949,472
- Oyster Grow Out Restoration Reef Placement - \$962,370

NRDA Restoration Plan III Projects

- Perdido River Land Acquisition (Molpus Tract) - \$4,792,540
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvement, Phases IIa and IIb - \$4,683,304
- Gulf State Park Pier Renovation - \$2,447,021
- Perdido Beach Public Access Coastal Protection - \$383,300
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Enhancement (Mobile Street Boardwalk) - \$1,189,899
- Stewardship of Coastal Alabama Beach Nesting Bird Habitat - \$2,067,381
- Dauphin Island West End Acquisition - \$7,938,770

NRDA Regionwide Trustee Implementation Group Restoration Plan I Projects

- Restore and Enhance Sea Turtle Nest Productivity on Gulf of Mexico Beaches - \$9,020,000 (\$1,000,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Marine Debris Impacts on Sea Turtles Gulf-wide - \$3,575,000 (\$699,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Enhancements to the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network, and Enhanced Rehabilitation - \$5,400,000 (\$500,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Bird Nesting and Foraging Area Stewardship - \$8,043,000 (\$800,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Marine Debris Impacts to Birds Regionwide Habitat Restoration - \$3,575,000 (\$707,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Conservation and Enhancement of Nesting and Foraging Habitat for Birds - \$21,000,000 (\$6,500,000 allocated to Alabama for Pilot Town Acquisition and Restoration)
- Improving Resilience for Oysters by linking Brood Reefs and Sink Reefs - \$35,819,974 (\$7,123,995 allocated to Alabama)

NFWF-GEBF Projects

- Restoration and Enhancement of Oyster Reefs - \$3,750,000
- D'Olive Watershed Restoration - \$12,700,000
- Fowl River Watershed Restoration - \$3,300,000
- Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment - \$4,400,000
- Alabama Marine Mammal Conservation and Recovery Program - \$1,900,000
- Coastal Habitat Restoration Planning Initiative - \$4,200,000
- Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$1,800,000
- Multifaceted Fisheries and Ecosystem Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$2,200,000
- Grand Bay Acquisition - \$5,770,000
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition Initiative, Phase I - \$286,000
- Mobile County Conservation Acquisition - \$4,260,000
- Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement - \$12,500,000
- Alabama Coastal Bird Stewardship Program - \$1,460,000

- Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase I - \$5,900,000
 - Dauphin Island Conservation Acquisition - \$3,560,000
 - Fowl River Spits Restoration - \$1,100,000
 - Bon Secour/Oyster Bay Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$12,500,000
 - Gulf Highlands Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$36,000,000
 - Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase III - \$4,400,000
 - Little Dauphin Island Restoration Assessment - \$1,480,000
 - Salt Aire Shoreline Restoration - \$12,700,000
 - Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition, Phase II - \$6,900,000
 - Dauphin Island Bird Habitat Acquisition and Enhancement Program - \$4,500,000
 - Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition - \$5,900,000
 - Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase IV - \$2,800,000
 - Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement, Phase II - \$22,499,000
 - Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase II - \$16,578,000
 - Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island, Phase I - \$329,000
 - Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase I - \$750,000
 - Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase I - \$1,528,000
 - Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition (Three Rivers), Phase II - \$4,423,000
 - Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline Restoration Engineering and Design - \$250,000
 - Lower Halls Mill Creek Protection - \$2,687,000
 - Blackwater River South Tract Acquisition - \$5,212,000
 - Lower Fish River Watershed Restoration - \$6,554,000
 - Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline and Habitat Restoration, Phase II - \$22,631,385
 - Dauphin Island East End Beach and Dune Restoration, Phase I - \$1,400,000
 - Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase II - \$5,100,000
 - Wolf Creek Headwaters Restoration, Phase I - \$500,000
 - Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase II - \$22,855
 - Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase II - \$19,798,000
 - Graveline Bay Marsh Restoration, Phase II - \$6,437,000
 - Dauphin Island Beach Nourishment Engineering and Design - \$1,143,000
- RESTORE - Direct Component Projects (Bucket 1)**
- Alabama State Port Authority RO-RO Terminal - \$29,630,741
 - Baldwin Beach Express I-10 to I-65 Exit, Right-of-Way Acquisition - \$11,678,481
 - Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Harbour Town - \$17,412,013
 - Historic Africatown Welcome Center - \$3,689,214
 - Redevelop City Docks (City of Bayou La Batre) - \$21,658,840
 - Mount Vernon Water Treatment Plant - \$1,545,000
 - Mobile Greenway Initiative - \$9,991,000
 - Northwest Satsuma Water and Sewer Project - \$1,813,521
 - Innovating St. Louis Street, Mobile's Technology Corridor - \$6,062,065
 - Bayou La Batre Water Distribution System Upgrades - \$5,465,180
 - Mobile County Blueway Trail Development - \$8,240,000
 - Gulf Shores Ambassadors of the Environment - \$10,040,701
 - Baldwin County ALDOT Capacity Improvements - \$58,504,000
 - Fairhope Working Waterfront and Greenspace Restoration - \$6,386,000

— Planning Grant for Amended MIP - \$300,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 1 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Coastal Alabama Comprehensive Watershed Planning Project - \$4,342,500
- Alabama Living Shoreline Restoration Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$6,250,000
- Comprehensive Living Shoreline Monitoring Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$4,000,000
- Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration & Monitoring Program - \$875,000
- Marsh Restoration in Fish River, Weeks Bay, Oyster Bay, Meadows Tract, Categories 1 and 2 - \$3,158,043
- Enhancing Opportunities for Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediments - \$3,000,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 2 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Alabama Commitment and Planning Support Grant - \$2,100,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3a (Bucket 2)

- Perdido River Land Conservation and Habitat Enhancements - \$26,800,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3b Proposed Projects (Bucket 2)

- Coastal Alabama Regional Water Quality Program - \$25,000,000
- Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justins Bay (Mobile Bay) - \$1,000,000
- Developing Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins - \$3,400,000
- Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program - \$1,500,000
- Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration - \$9,000,000
- Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program - \$1,000,000

RESTORE - Spill Impact Component Proposed Projects (Bucket 3)

- Characterization and Delineation of Significant Sand Resource Areas Essential for Beach Restoration, Offshore Alabama - \$951,175
- Alabama Gulf Seafood Marketing Program - \$2,937,699
- Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for the Coastal Alabama Region - \$579,375
- Replacement of Substandard Facilities at the ADEM Coastal Office and Mobile Field Office - \$6,038,599

— Extension of Effluent Force Main from Bayou La Batre Wastewater Treatment Facility - \$16,068,000

— Three Mile Creek Watershed Restoration - \$12,081,900

— Aloe Bay/Mississippi Sound Water Quality Enhancement Project - \$11,845,000

— Dirt Road Paving Program (Sediment Reduction) - \$10,395,914

— Bayou La Batre Collection System/Lift Station Upgrades - \$13,189,150

— Mobile Area Storm Water Mapping and Resiliency Planning - \$3,090,000

— Perch Creek Area Sanitary Sewer Trunk Line Cured In-Place Pipe - \$3,665,048

— Implementing Storm Water Management Improvements for Toulmin Springs Branch and Gum Tree Branch - \$1,222,744

— One Mobile: Reconnecting People, Work and Play Through Complete Streets - \$1,287,500

— City of Chickasaw Sewer Rehabilitation Project - \$1,339,000

— Longevity, Stability and Water Quality Improvements (Bon Secour) - \$350,966

— Orange Beach North Sewer Force Main Upgrade - \$5,350,850

— Fairhope Sewer Upgrade, Phase I - \$10,300,000

— Eastern Shore Sanitary Sewer Overflows Prevention Plan (Fairhope) - \$1,030,000

— Expansion of the Orange Beach Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Center/Gulf Coast Wildlife Recovery and Interpretive Center: Feasibility, Planning and Preliminary Design - \$472,255

— Environmental Restoration of Cotton Bayou and Terry Cove - \$515,000

— Auburn University Gulf Coast Environment Research Station - \$9,270,000

— Lillian Park Beach Habitat and Shoreline Protection - \$645,254

— Fairhope Area Community-Based Comprehensive Land Use Plan - \$669,500

— Canal Road Improvements East of SR161 - \$1,903,718

— Little Lagoon Restoration Project - \$6,175,557

— Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension - \$4,566,608

— Meaher State Park Improvements - \$3,553,500

— Alabama Point Seawall Repair - \$2,562,640

— Planning Grant to Amend SEP - \$300,000

MARINE RESOURCES DIVISION



The mission of the **Marine Resources Division (MRD)** is to manage the state's marine fishery resources through research, enforcement, and education for the maximum benefit of the natural resources and the citizens of Alabama. MRD consists of the Biological (Fisheries), Enforcement, and Administrative sections.

The **Biological Section** makes recommendations regarding fishery-related matters to Division managers. To meet this responsibility, section staff conduct varied monitoring programs to gather data for many species of fish and invertebrates. These programs are divided into fishery-dependent and fishery-independent programs. Fishery-dependent data is collected from commercial sources such as vessel or dealer reports as well as recreational sources such as individual anglers and party or charter boats. Fishery-independent data is collected by scientists conducting long-term resource monitoring projects. Section staff also manage programs focused on oyster restoration, inshore and offshore artificial reef programs, and the mariculture program located at the Claude Petet Mariculture Center. The section works with the public as well as state and federal agencies along the Gulf of Mexico to col-

lect data to determine the status of state and federal marine resources. Each year, the Biological and Enforcement sections partner to participate in public outreach programs.

The **Enforcement Section** is responsible for patrolling Alabama's shorelines, coastal waters, and adjacent federal waters and enforcing state and federal laws and regulations relating to the conservation and protection of marine resources. Officers also enforce boating safety as well as hunting and freshwater fishing laws and regulations. The section coordinates extensively with other state and federal agencies in cooperative enforcement operations, investigations, training, public safety, search and rescue, and other natural resource issues. In FY 2020-2021, the Enforcement Section employed 19 Conservation Enforcement Officers.

The **Administrative Section** is responsible for accounting, billing, payroll, license sales, and public inquiries.

The Division is housed at two facilities, one on Dauphin Island and the other in Gulf Shores. During FY 2020-2021, the two facilities supported 63 full-time employees, one part-time employee, and six temporary positions. There were 78 full-time, one part-time, and 12 seasonal employees budgeted during the year.

In 2021, MRD administered two financial assistance programs for businesses associated with seafood harvest and sales in Alabama through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). The two programs provided a combined \$6.1 million in aid to Alabama applicants.

Accomplishments and Activities

BIOLOGICAL SECTION

Staff monitored oyster densities on Alabama's public oyster reefs to assist in development of the 2021 oyster season. Biologists collected and processed 178 SCUBA quadrat samples from reefs that were planted with cultch between 2013 through 2016 as well as from non-planted reefs for comparison. The overall numbers of legal-sized oysters increased slightly from the 2020 quadrat survey. Spat (juvenile) and sublegal oyster densities were slightly lower, a result of extended periods of low salinity. Higher than normal rainfall across Alabama resulted in

increased freshwater flowing into Mobile Bay in the spring and summer of 2021, causing the lower average salinity.

Staff continued monitoring several sites in Mobile Bay to compare oyster larvae settlement and growth on oyster reef materials of varying heights and configurations. The results will provide more information to managers on how best to create reefs in the future to maximize oyster survival. Increased survival would help to provide better water quality in Mobile Bay and surrounding waters.



Staff completed mapping areas of medium and high interest using side-scan sonar to determine the locations of live oyster reefs in Mobile Bay. To date, nearly 30 square miles of water bottoms have been scanned. Areas with oysters or hard bottom identified by the side-scan images are verified by staff. Areas with suitable hard bottom will be considered for future oyster restoration projects.

Staff continued to address permitting issues related to construction of a new oyster hatchery and grow-out facility. Once completed, the hatchery will produce an estimated 65 million oyster larvae per year. The oysters produced in the grow-out facility will be distributed to various locations in Mobile Bay and the Mississippi Sound to bolster natural populations, which can be negatively affected by periods of drought, floods, and hurricanes. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2022.

Staff collected biological samples (age structures, length, sex, and weight) from 851 fish, representing 13 saltwater species. This data is helpful to fishery managers because it describes the age of fish being harvested by anglers in Alabama. Knowing the distributions of fish by their age that are kept by anglers assists section staff with determining appropriate regulations for each species.

Staff within the Biological Section participated in the NOAA Fisheries Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) during FY 2020-2021. This survey gathers catch information directly from recreational saltwater anglers. It is important because it is a major source of information used in stock assessments for many finfish. Staff surveyed 5,616 anglers at various marinas, public boat ramps, and shore sites during 2020-2021, an increase of 2,285 angler surveys over the previous year. This increase was due to an easing of COVID-related restrictions as well as to tablet-based reporting that was fully implemented in February 2021. Use of electronic devices allows field samplers to obtain interviews and upload data into databases faster and more efficiently than paper-based collection methods. To streamline additional Division programs, MRD staff are working to expand the use of electronic data collection.

During FY 2020-2021, the Division managed Alabama's portion of the Gulfwide private recreational angler red snapper quota. Harvests were monitored through Alabama's Snapper Check reporting system to keep Alabama within its 1.12-million-pound quota provided in 2021. Snapper Check, a mandatory reporting

program, allows the calculation of cumulative harvest within several days of being reported. That allows managers to monitor the harvest very closely to reduce the risk the quota will be exceeded. The 2021 red snapper season was the fourth year of an alternative management system in which each state along the Gulf of Mexico used data collection systems to monitor harvests against their respective quotas allocated by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. The 2021 season ended with the largest number of red snapper fishing days (124) provided to Alabama's recreational anglers since 2007. The additional access is primarily the result of improved data collection that shows a larger population of red snapper. Closely monitoring daily harvests via Snapper Check also shows when harvests are reduced or non-existent during poor weather days, including those from tropical weather systems.

The Claude Peteet Mariculture Center (CPMC) in Gulf Shores continued its fish stocking program. Three species of fish were raised at CPMC in FY 2020-2021: Florida pompano, southern flounder, and spotted seatrout. Florida pompano releases totalled 7,007 fish. The second spawning of flounder at CPMC resulted in 34,591 fish 1 to 2 inches long being released in local waters during spring 2021. Spotted seatrout were spawned for a second year, and 99,613 fish were reared and released. Production increased compared to 2020 except for Florida pompano. Staff will take steps to correct possible culture issues prior to the next spawning cycle.

Eastern oysters were spawned at CPMC in 2021. Staff were able to rear nearly 20 million 9-day-old free-swimming larvae that were released near local oyster reefs. The spawning was a trial in preparation for future, larger oyster spawning events and grow-out activities in an effort to restore oyster populations within Mobile Bay and the Mississippi Sound.

Staff used gillnets, otter trawls, and seines to gather information about the abundance and age of a variety of recreationally and commercially important marine species. Staff completed 235 field days with the sampling gear in Mobile and Perdido bays and the Mississippi Sound. Gillnet sets were deployed on 102 days, and 133 days were used for seine and otter trawl sampling activities. This sampling provided helpful data for establishing population trend information for a variety of species, including those that are key indicators of ecosystem health as well as those that are harvested commercially or recreationally. These sampling activities began in 1981. The data represents

one of the oldest continuous datasets of its kind in the Gulf of Mexico.

A multi-year grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) supported multiple projects managed by section staff. These projects included sampling reef fish associated with artificial and natural reefs and open water bottoms with hook and line gears and mapping 62 square miles of water bottoms with side-scan sonar. These programs provided valuable data that MRD staff use to manage Alabama's nearshore and offshore marine fisheries. Additionally, NFWF provided funding to conduct a cultural resource assessment of 110 square miles of water bottoms offshore of Alabama. The cultural resource assessment was a requirement for a federal permit request to allow artificial reef construction projects along the seabed within the assessed area. Subsequent approval of this permit increased the size of Alabama's artificial reef program permit area and will provide increased fishing opportunities that will help to maintain the state's coastal economy.

Following permit authorization, contracts using NFWF funds were developed to deploy 1,203 juvenile reef fish shelters in new areas 6 to 9 miles from shore and 456 high-relief artificial reef modules in various areas, from nearshore out to approximately 45 nautical miles offshore. GPS coordinates for new and enhanced sites will be available at outdooralabama.com in January 2022. Staff also inspected and permitted 448 reef structures deployed by private reef builders. Each structure was evaluated to ensure compliance with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission's Guidelines for Marine Artificial Reef Materials.

In cooperation with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and the other Gulf states, staff completed a study to improve the quality and accuracy of commercial landings information. The group collected and analyzed brown and white shrimp samples to validate, verify, and update conversions of reported weights and units from seafood dealers to whole (live) weight for the species. The development of updated conversion factors allows commercial landings to be reported accurately for use in fisheries stock assessment and management.

ENFORCEMENT SECTION

During FY 2020-2021, MRD enforcement officers conducted 3,305 commercial fishermen inspections, 11,884 recreational fishermen inspections, 11,353 patrol hours, and 4,321 vessel boardings.

MRD officers continued to participate in joint investigations with NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) regarding Gulf reef fish, marine mammals, sea turtle protection, and international unreported/undocumented seafood. Additionally, staff conducted joint patrols with uniformed NOAA enforcement officers.

MRD Enforcement entered into its 20th Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) with NOAA/OLE. The JEA provides equipment and funding for officers to enforce federal laws and regulations. The most recent contract included funding for patrol vehicles, outboard engines, and repairs to vessels. Additionally, it provided funding for underway and dockside patrols for federal priorities such as reef fish and turtle excluder devices.

The Enforcement Section continues to work on the two (four-year) grants funded with monies from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The first grant, Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Protection: Enhancement and Education, is aimed at collecting data related to sea turtle nesting and protecting those nests from human interaction. A secondary aim of the CAST grant is to help educate the public about the dangers of interfering with sea turtles during the vulnerable nesting periods. To help with this, the section purchased two portable camera systems that are connected to the Coastal Remote Monitoring System. To aid with the enforcement and data collection, two side-by-side utility vehicles (with trailers) were also purchased with grant funds. The second grant awarded under this plan was the Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education. This grant provides funding for educational materials to aid in teaching the public how to limit negative dolphin and human interactions.

During FY 2020-2021, the section participated in the South Alabama Regional Search and Rescue group. Officers also worked closely with other state law enforcement agencies in a variety of activities including the investigation, apprehension, and prosecution of persons in multiple federal fisheries violations that occurred in Alabama as well as other jurisdictions. Additionally, MRD Enforcement Officers participated in several outreach and education events. These events provide opportunities for officers to educate the public about fishing laws and management.

Future Issues

The federal management of red snapper and other reef fish continues to be a high priority in the fishing community. MRD will continue to work with the federal government and the other Gulf states to manage the shared federal species to the maximum benefit of all user groups.

The health and production of Alabama's public oyster reefs continue to be a significant concern. Several oyster projects will continue in 2022 with a priority being construction of an oyster hatchery addition to the CPMC and a larval setting facility on Dauphin Island. These facilities will assist in recovery and rehabilitation efforts by producing larval oysters to stock on Alabama's reefs, to supplement natural production.

In response to the 2019 flooding events that impacted the Gulf states, MRD has developed a plan to provide \$8 million in disaster relief funding for commercial anglers and seafood processors. Approval from NOAA and the Office of Management and Budget is anticipated in 2022.

MRD will continue to address infrastructure damage caused by hurricanes Sally and Zeta. Both the Dauphin Island and Gulf Shores offices required multiple construction projects related to the storms that will continue into 2022.

The reopening of the iconic Fort Morgan Fishing Pier is anticipated in early 2022. The pier provides saltwater fishing access to many residents and visitors to the Alabama Gulf Coast and has been closed since 2014 due to damage from multiple storms and decay brought on by age.

Marine Resources 2021 Budget		FUND 0303		FUND 1402	
BUDGETED ITEM	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	
PERSONNEL COSTS	\$3,487,508.00	\$2,913,074.00	\$356,428.00	\$112,366.00	
EMPLOYEE BENEFITS	\$1,556,544.00	\$1,300,005.00	\$168,168.00	\$52,625.00	
TRAVEL- IN-STATE	\$6,000.00	\$14,198.00	\$7,500.00	\$-	
TRAVEL -OUT- OF-STATE	\$21,000.00	\$4,023.00	\$4,000.00	\$-	
REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE	\$1,324,659.00	\$964,860.00	\$8,700.00	\$2,869.00	
RENTALS AND LEASES	\$120,000.00	\$35,223.00	\$7,200.00	\$156.00	
UTILITIES AND COMMUNICATION	\$360,000.00	\$182,396.00	\$27,154.00	\$2,293.00	
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	\$611,000.00	\$150,312.00	\$84,191.00	\$1,626.00	
SUPPLIES, MATERIALS & OPERATING EXPENSES	\$613,061.00	\$429,982.00	\$125,460.00	\$7,229.00	
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT OPERATIONS	\$532,722.00	\$236,258.00	\$41,010.00	\$15,161.00	
GRANTS AND BENEFITS	\$3,252,862.00	\$1,802,980.00	\$536,500.00	\$-	
CAPITAL OUTLAY	\$8,428,558.00	\$1,603,567.00	\$49,500.00	\$-	
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$334,450.00	\$85,374.00	\$2,586.00	\$-	
OTHER EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$1,110,909.00	\$822,841.00	\$297,787.00	\$5,623.00	
ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER	\$797,000.00	\$686,634.00			
TOTAL	\$22,556,273.00	\$11,231,727.00	\$1,716,184.00	\$199,948.00	

* NUMBERS FROM STATE OF ALABAMA BUDGET MANAGEMENT REPORT * BUDGET FISCAL YEAR 2020 THROUGH SEPT. 30, 2021





ALABAMA REEF ZONE EXPANSION

Alabama has the largest saltwater artificial reef program in the nation, if not the world. In FY 2020-2021, it grew by an additional 110 square miles of Gulf of Mexico bottom. The addition brings the overall square miles of the Alabama Artificial Reef Zone to 1,136.

As part of an overall \$8.135 million expansion of the Alabama Artificial Reef Program, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Marine Resources Division (MRD) recently received authorization of two additional permit areas from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).



Grants from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund, established with criminal fines after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, are allowing MRD to deploy artificial reefs in both nearshore and offshore reef zones.

The nearshore reef zone (out to 15 miles off the coast), which previously consisted of 30 square miles, more than doubled with the addition of 47 square miles south of Baldwin County. The remaining expansion occurred south of Mobile County between 13 and 25 miles offshore with the creation of a new 63-square-mile zone.

The approval of the new zones was a lengthy, comprehensive process to ensure historical resources and artifacts were not impacted by the new reef zones. Bottom surveys were required by the National Historical Preservation Act to ensure that cultural resources would not be compromised. Cultural resources could be shipwrecks, Civil War artifacts, or areas that early inhabitants used as campsites or mounds thousands of years ago. The sub-bottom profiler (scanning equipment) data identified natural levees of bayous, rivers, and creek banks that early inhabitants may have utilized. Ultimately, the data was used to obtain a permit from USACE. The cost associated with the permitting process was \$742,000.

MRD initiated the contracting process and began deploying artificial reefs in the new reef zones on July 30, 2021. The 6- to 9-mile reef zones will receive a total of 1,203 juvenile reef fish shelters. They will be deployed at numerous locations with 3 to 10 shelters per reef site as part of a \$2.4 million contract. The modules are 4.5-foot-diameter concrete discs placed on a pedestal and embedded in a concrete slab. Each module consists of four discs. Monitoring and research have shown that these type modules are extremely effective for providing habitat for juvenile reef fish, particularly gray triggerfish, red snapper, gray snapper, and lane snapper. Deploying juvenile-specific modules is part of a comprehensive effort to develop habitat for all stages of reef fish growth.

Sixty-four pyramid-shaped reefs are scheduled to be deployed in an area south of Orange Beach, creating an additional 48 reef sites within 15 miles of shore.

In support of larger offshore reefs within 35 miles, ADCNR Commissioner Chris Blankenship executed a \$4.9 million contract to deploy 456 pyramid-shaped modules, each 25 feet tall and made of concrete and limestone. The new reef zone south of Dauphin Island will deploy 164 modules to create 123 reef sites. Some of the reef sites will have two modules and others a single module.

Beyond 35 miles, 228 pyramid modules will be used to create 172 new reef sites. The pyramids are some of the largest deployed at 25 feet tall with additional interior space and openings. They will be deployed in single and double models, providing additional structure to existing small pyramids that were deployed in 2004 and 2005. These additions are anticipated to assist with habitat development for several grouper species, vermillion snapper, and greater amberjack.

The expansion of these permitted bottoms creates abundant habitat for marine life off the coast of Alabama and builds resiliency for fishing across the Gulf of Mexico. Private anglers, charter boats, and commercial anglers provide a financial impact to the coastal community and the rest of the state through the sale of fishing supplies, hotel room rentals, fuel purchases, and restaurant attendance, as well as grocery and retail sales. Future generations of Alabamians will benefit from the social and financial impacts of Alabama's Artificial Reef Zone.

MRD provides information about the Alabama Artificial Reef Zone, including the location of all public reef sites, at outdoor-alabama.com/saltwater-fishing/artificial-reefs. ■



EXAMPLES OF PYRAMID MODULES

STATE LANDS DIVISION



The **State Lands Division (SLD)** manages undeveloped, state-owned trust lands that are specific as to their identity as well as to the income beneficiary. The land management program includes Sixteenth Section and Indemnity School Lands of approximately 30,000 acres; approximately 7,000 acres of Department of Mental Health trust lands; Muscle Shoals Grant Lands of approximately 8,000 acres; and other state agency lands, including submerged lands (inland and coastal), of approximately 600,000 acres. Resource uses include oil and gas exploration and development, timber harvesting, farming, coal mining, hunting leases, and commercial uses. SLD continues its efforts to identify additional means of revenue generation through management of these trust lands.

The Forever Wild Land Trust program is administered by SLD at the direction of that program's Board of Trustees. Division personnel provide administrative support including coordination of the assessment and appraisal process, land acquisition transactions, budget preparation, and annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature. In addition to these administrative services, SLD manages many of Forever Wild's 280,000 acres, as well as complementary tracts owned by SLD.

SLD conducts sales and leases of excess state-owned lands pursuant to the State Land Sales and Leasing Act. This law establishes a procedure aimed at ensuring the state receives full fair market value for lands that state agencies sell or lease and that the process is open, competitive, and subject to public scrutiny.

SLD maintains the state Land Resource Information Center (LRIC), which is a database of lands owned by the State of Alabama and its departments, agencies, and institutions. The database offers search capabilities, providing members of the public the ability to readily access information about state-owned lands. The LRIC database can be found by following the "state properties" and then "state land" links on the Open. Alabama.gov website. The LRIC currently contains more than 6,500 land records.

Animal and plant species and areas of biological significance that make up the rich natural diversity of our state are identified and inventoried as part of the Alabama Natural Heritage Data-

base maintained by SLD. This effort, which includes more than 4.5 million records, provides important biological information to conservation organizations, developers, governmental agencies, and the public. It also complements SLD's role in evaluating land acquisition nominations submitted to Forever Wild and implementing a multiple-use management strategy designed to maximize public access to Forever Wild tracts.

SLD operates three facilities dedicated to conservation and land stewardship educational programs and a fourth dedicated to sporting dog field trials, habitat restoration, and hunting programs for youth and individuals with physical disabilities. Located in Spanish Fort, the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center serves as a gateway to outdoor recreation, conservation education, and land stewardship in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, located in Fairhope on Weeks Bay (an estuary of national significance), conducts education and outreach, research, coastal training programs, and stewardship activities related to the estuary and its watershed. The Wehle Land Conservation Center is located in Midway (Bull-ock County) and consists of the Robert G. Wehle Nature Center and the Elhew Field Station, both funded in part through the Robert G. Wehle Charitable Trust. Located in Alabama's Black Belt region, the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area is south of Greensboro in Hale County.

SLD oversees administration of Alabama's Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP), which was approved by the NOAA



in 1979 as part of its national Coastal Zone Management (CZM) program. ACAMP's purpose is to promote beneficial management of the lands and waters located in Alabama's coastal area through a comprehensive and cooperative program designed to preserve, enhance, and develop these valuable resources for the benefit of present and future generations. SLD works in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to implement ACAMP and receives federal CZM Program grant funding from NOAA to support ACAMP and other federal coastal resource programs. SLD's CZM activities, as well as research activities and educational programs at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, complement the Division's responsibilities for managing submerged lands, including promoting public trust resource awareness and the understanding of riparian/littoral area development and associated impacts on private property and public use of Alabama's tidal waters.

SLD administers a regulatory program that manages impacts and improvements to public tidal submerged lands in conjunction with ADEM and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their respective jurisdictions on state and federal waters. The SLD regulations are designed to balance the rights of riparian prop-

erty owners with the public use of those tidal submerged lands for navigation as well as fishing and other recreational uses.

SLD staff supports the ADCNR Commissioner and Governor Kay Ivey in the administration of grants and programs funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA). This act directs the U.S. Department of Interior to distribute a portion of revenues generated from offshore oil and gas leases in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico for purposes such as natural resource restoration, coastal protection, implementation of conservation plans, and other efforts to mitigate impacts of Outer Continental Shelf activities. SLD staff conducts an annual solicitation for project proposals, executes grant awards for projects approved by Governor Ivey, and monitors GOMESA project implementation and compliance.

SLD manages its responsibilities through a Land Management/Administrative Section, which includes Land Stewardship/Enforcement, Asset Management, Recreational Programs, and the Natural Heritage Program, as well as its Coastal Section, which oversees CZM activities and submerged land regulations, Weeks Bay Reserve, and the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center. At the end of FY 2020-2021, SLD employed 60 employees, including part-time or seasonal employees, in support of its programs.

Examples of various program and facility accomplishments during this past fiscal year follow:

ASSET MANAGEMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Generated approximately \$43.2 million in revenue for distribution to state agency/entity beneficiaries including, but not limited to, the Alabama Trust Fund (\$36.5 million), Department of Education (\$3.09 million), Alabama Historical Commission (\$590,423), Department of Corrections (\$280,866), State of Alabama General Fund (\$133,057), and Department of Mental Health (\$104,335)
- Assisted state agencies with revenue generation on trust lands through initiation of leases and sale of excess property pursuant to the Land Sales and Leasing Act's appraisal and bid process
- Administered revenue-generating activities on state-owned lands, including timber sales and issuance of hunting leases, shellfish aquaculture easements, riparian easements, river-crossing permits, submerged/upland pipeline rights of ways, dredge permits, farming/hay leases, oil and gas leases, and coal leases
- Completed reforestation activities on various tracts to provide potential future revenue streams for state beneficiaries, including the Department of Education and the General Fund
- Continued a statewide leasing process, offering 34 tracts of state-owned land in 12 counties for multi-year hunting leases. More than 40 bids were received resulting in execution of 23 hunting leases. Over their terms, these leases are expected to generate more than \$197,000 for state beneficiaries.

FOREVER WILD LAND TRUST ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITIES

- Administered and fully closed acquisition of six tracts across four counties adding a total of 3,660 acres. These program acquisitions also leveraged acquisition of an additional 2,883 acres by providing state-based funding match for \$6.94 in federal grant funds. The closed program acquisitions included the following:
 - Cedar Creek SOA - Elm Bluff Addition (245 acres, Dallas County). Forever Wild's acquisition provided the federally required state-based funding match for ADCNR's acquisition of 710 additional acres utilizing \$2,059,500 of USFWS Service Pittman-Robertson grant funds.
 - D'Olive Bay (212 acres, Baldwin County). Forever Wild acquisition cost was supported by \$202,278 of USFWS national coastal wetland grant funds and a landowner donation of 112 acres.

- Little River State Forest Addition (712 acres, Escambia County). Forever Wild's acquisition provided the federally required state-based funding match for Alabama Forestry Commission's acquisition of 2,173 additional acres utilizing \$4,550,800 of USFWS PR grant funds.
- Mobile Tensaw Delta - The Cutoff Tract (223 acres, Baldwin County). Forever Wild acquisition cost was supported by \$127,556 of USFWS national coastal wetland grant funds.
- Perdido WMA - McNeill Addition (23 acres, Baldwin County)
- Thigpen Hill Option A Phase I (2,245 acres, Butler County)
- Awarded \$497,406 in federal grants and submitted new grant applications seeking more than \$680,000 in grant funding
- Coordinated efforts to secure in the upcoming fiscal year acquisition of a 1,643-acre tract in Shelby County known as the Oak Mountain State Park - Belcher Lake Addition
- Provided administrative support to improve the awareness and understanding of the Forever Wild Land Trust program and the opportunities it provides to Alabama's citizens
- Reviewed approximately 60 nomination inquiries that resulted in 31 tract nominations being processed and evaluated for potential acquisition by the Forever Wild Land Trust Board of Trustees

FOREVER WILD RECREATIONAL AND LAND STEWARDSHIP ACTIVITIES

- Offered 22 days of youth hunting, 10 days of physically disabled hunting, and 32 sporting dog field trial/hunt test event opportunities involving approximately 2,000 sporting dogs at the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area. Also hosted Alabama Audubon field trips in conjunction with the Alabama Black Belt Festival at the Field Trial Area. Activities brought more than 2,500 visitors to the tract and surrounding areas.
- Hosted 1,136 visitors at the Wehle Land Conservation Center facilities for outdoor recreational and educational activities
- Expanded public access opportunities by offering 40 open woods days at the Forever Wild Land Trust Sipsey River Recreation Area (Tuscaloosa County) and 36 open-gate days during hunting season on the following Forever Wild tracts: Red Hills (Monroe County), Old Cahawba (Dallas County), Splinter Hill Bog (Baldwin County), and Lillian Swamp (Baldwin County)

- Maintained approximately 390 miles of public recreation trails for activities such as horseback riding, hiking, biking, canoeing, and multi-use trails and boardwalks on the following Forever Wild tracts: Shoal Creek Nature Preserve (Lauderdale County), Walls of Jericho (Jackson County), Wehle (Bullock County), Splinter Hill Bog (Baldwin County), Old Cahawba Prairie (Dallas County), Jacinto Port (Mobile County), Coldwater Mountain (Calhoun County), Dothan Park Trails (Houston County), Grand Bay Savanna (Mobile County), Cahaba River Park (Shelby County), Perdido River Complex (Baldwin County), Freedom Hills Complex (Colbert County), Indian Mountain Complex (Cherokee County), Mobile-Tensaw Delta WMA (Mobile/Baldwin County), Gothard - AWF Yates Lake WMA (Tallapoosa County), Turkey Creek Nature Preserve (Jefferson County), Coosa County WMA (Coosa County), Tannehill Complex (Bibb County), Blakeley Addition (Baldwin County), and Coon Creek (Elmore County)
- Coordinated implementation of two new trails at Coldwater Mountain. Trails were built by volunteers and added 2.25 miles to Coldwater Mountain trail system. The City of Anniston updated trail maps and installed new signs for the additional trails.
- Received an Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) Recreational Trails Program grant totaling \$70,000 in funding for construction of an access road, trailhead, and 2.5 miles of new trail on Indian Mountain providing access to the Pinhoti Trail in Cherokee County
- Completed three water crossings for trails at Big Canoe Creek
- Placed new trail signs on the Bartram Canoe Trail. Cleaned and reestablished the Two Rivers Point campsite. Repaired hurricane damage at Mudhole Creek and Yancey Branch Lower Delta camping shelters.
- Continued citizen science habitat monitoring project (Project Habitat Watch) at Grand Bay Savanna, Wehle Land Conservation Center, and Old Cahawba Prairie by inviting visitors to photograph the habitat from a fixed camera bracket and share via social media
- Performed prescribed fire on more than 7,125 acres as part of maintaining or enhancing natural plant communities. Several fires were coordinated with partners including The Nature Conservancy and the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Employed both chemical and mechanical methods for control of exotic plant species, along with various trapping techniques for removal of invasive animal species on various tracts throughout the state

- Completed reforestation of 285 acres of shortleaf pine on Freedom Hills and Lauderdale WMAs and 174 acres of longleaf pine on the Charles D. Kelley - Autauga County WMA
- Completed harvesting on approximately 1,000 acres of a 1,100-acre sale of eastern red cedar on Cedar Creek SOA in Dallas County for habitat enhancement in cooperation with ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

NATURAL HERITAGE SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Performed biodiversity survey work, conducted habitat assessments, participated in trail planning, and continued collecting detailed GPS/GIS data of existing Forever Wild tracts to aid management and research of these tracts
- Maintained Geographic Information System (GIS) server software, allowing greater transparency of Forever Wild holdings and ADCNR facilities to the public by providing an interactive map online ([https:// conservationgis.alabama.gov/fwlt/](https://conservationgis.alabama.gov/fwlt/)). This software is also being used to improve geographic information transmission within the Division and the Department.
- Maintained the Natural Heritage Section (NHS) database, which is partially funded by a State Wildlife Grant. The database is accessible via a secure internet website for more than 1,000 approved users and currently contains more than 4.5 million records of plant and animal species occurrences throughout Alabama.
- Continued to enhance the Natural Heritage Section Herbarium, reaching a total of 7,250 specimens – most of which have been digitized, photographed, and databased
- Continued coordination of Section 6 funding from USFWS to support research benefiting at-risk plant species. Administered approximately \$89,800 in federal matching funds, including subawards to Alabama universities.
- Coordinated writing and submission of grant funding proposals for land acquisition and habitat restoration through the National Coastal Wetland Grant Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund

GULF OF MEXICO ENERGY SECURITY ACT (GOMESA) ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Continued to provide administrative support to the GOMESA program by overseeing the disbursement of funds and providing support to the awarded entities

- Awarded \$1,098,762 GOMESA grant for Emergency Wet Debris Removal in Baldwin County, in response to damage from Hurricane Sally. Identified and removed 350 marine debris targets from several waterways, including the Blackwater River, Bon Secour River, Fish River, Fly Creek, Graham Bayou, Hammock Bayou, Hammock Creek, Magnolia River, Ono Island, Palmetto Creek, Perdido River, Soldier Creek, Styx River, and Manuel Bayou and Little Lagoon.
- Solicited and reviewed additional project suggestions from the public resulting in 16 new project awards totaling more than \$42 million in GOMESA funding for the following:
 - › Cypress Point Land Acquisition (City of Spanish Fort - \$8,500,000)
 - › Mobile Riverfront Park Enhancements: Reconnect with the River (City of Mobile - \$8,000,000)
 - › Public Access Improvement Project through the Expansion of Bayfront Park (City of Daphne - \$4,000,000)
 - › Magnolia River Watershed Constructed Wetlands and Regional Detention – Kelly Pit Mitigation Site (Baldwin County Commission - \$4,000,000)
 - › Foley Nature Parks Expansion and Enhancements (City of Foley - \$2,500,000)
 - › Cedar Point Public Access Acquisition (Mobile County Commission - \$2,254,500)
 - › Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Living Shoreline, Habitat Protection and Public Access Amenities (Town of Dauphin Island - \$2,211,700)
 - › University of South Alabama Healthy Ocean Initiative (University of South Alabama - \$2,018,880)
 - › Bayou La Batre Utilities Board Sewer, North System Improvements (Bayou La Batre Utilities Board - \$1,629,477)
 - › Wastewater Facilities for Southeastern Mobile County, Fowl River Road to Joe Carl Road (Mobile County Water, Sewer and Fire Protection Authority - \$1,612,500)
 - › Billy Goat Hole Boat Ramp Replacement (ADCNR Marine Resources Division - \$1,313,400)
 - › ADEM Coastal Area Litter Traps (ADEM - \$1,000,000)
 - › Fairhope North Triangle Nature Park (City of Fairhope - \$999,989)
 - › Windscape Lift Station Force Main Extension at D’Olive Creek (City of Daphne - \$607,500)
 - › 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center Facility Improvements (ADCNR State Lands Division - \$253,275)
 - › Corn Creek Tributary Restoration (City of Loxley - \$250,000)

COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Alabama Coastal Area Management Program staff provided technical support, funding, and oversight for 11 subawards benefiting projects and activities in Mobile and Baldwin counties. These subawards, totaling more than \$456,301 in federal funds provided by NOAA, supported the following:

- Promoted sustainable tourism and improved public access in Alabama’s coastal area through the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Supported multiple municipal planning efforts, including comprehensive planning, zoning, and mapping updates, stormwater management, subdivision regulation updates, and public access improvements (City of Foley, City of Gulf Shores, Town of Dauphin Island, City of Daphne)
- Continued integration of the Alabama Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program into the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan
- Provided technical assistance, training, and support to communities related to the FEMA Community Rating System, including continued support of the South Alabama Flood Engagement Team to provide a forum for information sharing and training of coastal floodplain managers
- Partnered with the University of South Alabama to map open space in coastal Alabama
- Administered the Coastal Geospatial Data Group by the Geological Survey of Alabama to increase opportunities for data sharing and to improve management of coastal resources
- Sponsored and organized the 34th annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup in partnership with the Alabama People Against a Littered State, providing volunteers and supplies to clean waterways and shorelines across Alabama

SUBMERGED LANDS REGULATORY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Continued to coordinate with federal, state, and local governments as well as individual property owners regarding potential impacts to state-owned submerged lands
- Continued to provide information about the SLD regulations to efficiently manage uses of public submerged lands
- Received, reviewed, and/or approved 25 permit applications for activities impacting near-shore public trust submerged lands through the Notice of Intent to Impact State Owned Submerged Lands (NOI) permit application process, in addition to processing dredge permits and riparian easements

- Received one Shellfish Aquaculture Easement application for off-bottom oyster farms as part of Alabama's Shellfish Aquaculture Program, which promotes the cultivation and harvesting of hatchery-spawned oysters for commercial purposes. More than 55 acres of off-bottom Shellfish Aquaculture Easements have been permitted since 2014.

5 RIVERS DELTA RESOURCE CENTER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted approximately 37,140 visitors
- Provided 70 educational programs highlighting importance of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and Alabama's statewide ecology and biodiversity to 3,000 participants in on-site field trips and 400 individuals via virtual field trips. Worked with four Gulf Shores elementary teachers in planning content for classroom science wall displays showcasing Alabama ecosystems.
- Hosted two art camps and a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) camp for youth ages 5-12
- Hosted annual Alabama Coastal Birdfest with 400 visitors from 17 states participating in 45 trips, workshops, expo and evening events over four days
- Updated facility's live and static exhibits, displayed three traveling photography and artwork exhibits, and partnered with Mobile Rock and Gem Society to create a unique and informative display of Alabama agate and petrified wood
- Provided technical assistance and advice to Emerald Coast Wildlife and Rehabilitation Center in Florida
- Hosted 185 receptions and business meetings with nearly 7,700 participants. Continued to provide a venue for various public meetings conducted by local conservation organizations
- Continued to organize and host Outdoor Market events at the Cypress Gift Shop, showcasing an average of 35 local vendors per event with an estimated 1,900 total visitors
- Partnered with Historic Blakeley State Park to provide guided, public boat tours for 1,944 passengers. The boat tours focused on biodiversity, history, ecology, photography, wildlife, and birding.
- Utilized pollinator garden for classes on pollination, backyard habitat, and monarch butterflies. Photography clubs and butterfly/moth enthusiasts began seasonal documentation of species with initial observations indicating increase in type and number of butterflies and beneficial insects.
- Hosted Spanish Fort Educational Enrichment Foundation's 5K trail run with approximately 380 runners
- Hosted a Mobile County Wildlife Conservation Association Youth Fishing Tournament involving flounder tag and release with GPS attached to each fish by Dauphin Island Sea Lab

- Served as a Coastal Cleanup canoe/kayak site hosting 65 volunteers removing litter from Sardine Pass, Justin's Bay, Blakeley River, and other surrounding local waterways
- Continued to increase marketing and outreach presence in coastal Alabama through participation in tourism/marketing committees of the area chambers of commerce and coordination with area convention and visitors bureaus. Presented in an Orange Beach Snowbird Tourism summit, the Orange Beach Wildlife Symposium, and two Blakeley Historic Park demonstrations. Participated in WKRG's "Destinations" series, David J. Maloney's "The Weekly Show," and Fox 10's "Studio Ten." Staff also worked with Discovering Alabama, providing content for a new birding documentary.
- Worked with film location scouts seeking imagery for an interactive rowing machine. Also participated in a Mobile tourism video and a documentary on the life of Wallace Turnage.
- Supervised planning and implementation of an Eagle Scout project providing pollination/feeding plots for beneficial insects on both sides of the causeway. These locations will also serve as a comfortable place for visitors to observe nature or enjoy a donated book from an outdoor book repository.
- Continued chemical and mechanical efforts to control exotic plant species, including cogongrass and Chinese tallow tree throughout the property
- Managed reservations and answered questions for over 130 campsite reservations for the Bartram and Perdido River canoe trails. Repaired hurricane damage to Justin's Bay Sunrise and Sunset shelters and maintained the campsite and surrounding grounds with both chemical and mechanical treatments.
- Inventoried Alabama Coastal Birding Trail signs in Baldwin and Mobile counties. Replaced missing signs or those in need of repair. Revised the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail booklet to add new sites and edit content throughout.
- Cleaned and maintained grounds for two Battleship Parkway boat ramps
- Installed a new front entrance sign

WEEKS BAY NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Received \$569,030 in NOAA Procurement Acquisition and Construction funds for replacement of the Reserve Pitcher Plant Bog Boardwalk and storm resiliency upgrades to the Reserve Research Dormitory
- Provided place-based field excursions and online, virtual programming that introduced 1,547 preschool to 12th-grade students to local environmental and coastal related topics

- Hosted second annual Alabama Backyard BioBlitz citizen science event with 183 statewide participants, making 1,687 observations utilizing the iNaturalist app to document Alabama's biodiversity
- Collaborated with the Fairhope Rotary Youth Club and local partners to host a seven-week estuary science summer camp
- Partnered with Legacy and Jacksonville State and Athens State universities to conduct multi-day, field-based Teachers on the Estuaries workshops that engaged 25 local elementary teachers in increasing their knowledge and appreciation of local environments, as well as acquiring the necessary skills to act as stewards of coastal resources
- Provided educational vessel tours of the Weeks Bay estuary for 162 participants from civic groups, educational institutions, and regional agencies. Groups included summer students from the Gulf Shores Strengthening Potential through Arts, Recreation and Culture program, Central Alabama Community College, South Alabama Regional Planning Commission, and others.
- Conducted 14 workshops for 504 community members, providing 1,578 training hours related to coastal resource management along the Gulf Coast
- Hosted 776 guest nights in the research dormitory, including researchers, GulfCorps volunteers, workshop participants, visiting educators, and state personnel. This was a 76% increase in occupancy over the previous year.
- Coordinated scientific research with universities and agencies on 10 projects within the Weeks Bay Watershed
- Partnered with The Nature Conservancy and SLD personnel to implement prescribed fire on 90 acres of the Foley Tract to promote biodiversity of the unique pitcher plant bog ecosystem
- Collaborated with GulfCorps team members to implement habitat management activities on Reserve parcels. The work included the removal of a storm-damaged boardwalk prior to prescribed fire and habitat restoration, monitoring at 24 sites within a 300-acre parcel.
- Performed habitat monitoring collected of 324 sediment elevation data points and 22,542 groundwater level, conductivity, and temperature data points as part of Weeks Bay NERR Sentinel Site Project Plan. Repaired storm-damaged infrastructure with the assistance of GulfCorps team members.
- Facilitated citizen science microplastics sampling and participated in monthly nurdle surveys as part of the Gulf Nurdle Patrol (<https://nurdlepatrol.org/>)
- Participated in National Reading Month with schools throughout Alabama by offering virtual and in-person programs that integrated science, social studies, and language arts standards by promoting grade-level reading resources that focus on environmental themes relating to the estuaries and biodiversity of Alabama
- Hosted the inaugural Margaret A. Davidson Graduate Fel-

lowship student, who participated in research, education, and outreach at the Reserve

- Collected continuous water quality and weather data from five sites in Weeks Bay as part of the Reserve's system-wide monitoring program
- Increased partnership with local real estate association by collaborating on flood resilience training and education
- Served the needs of coastal stormwater managers by providing technical training on erosion and sediment control practices and revisions to the construction general permit
- Assisted with efforts to map septic systems, to identify opportunities to reduce pathogen pollution, and to identify stream/river segments for restoration with partners on the Weeks Bay Watershed Management Plan Implementation Team
- Conducted quarterly meetings of Weeks Bay Advisory Committee and coordinated with the South Alabama Land Trust in publishing quarterly newsletters on the longleaf pine restoration site.

WEHLE LAND CONSERVATION CENTER AND ELHEW FIELD STATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted 662 visitors during 16 open trail weekends
- Hosted 205 visitors associated with state and county agency meetings, technical workshops, and organized field trips
- Hosted 200 youths and adults for the Annual Bullock County Fishing Derby, co-sponsored by ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, the Bullock County Sheriff's Department, and Children and Mentors Outdoors (CAMO)
- Provided virtual educational programs supplemented with hands-on materials to 136 4th- to 7th-grade students at Bullock and Macon county schools
- Conducted a prescribed burn on 463 acres of the Wehle Forever Wild Tract to maintain or enhance the natural plant communities for the benefit of several associated wildlife species
- Continued assisting Auburn University with the out-planting of more than 100 American chaffseed plants to establish a viable population on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued trapping efforts to manage feral hog populations for the benefit of habitats and native wildlife
- Continued hosting an iNaturalist Project with more than 2,500 species reported to date
- Continued participation as an official stop on the Wiregrass section of the Alabama Birding Trail. Wehle is a popular hotspot on eBird with over 180 species of birds documented.
- Administered USGS Breeding Bird Survey in Alabama

- Continued leading an annual bird identification workshop for USDA Forest Service biologists and conservation partners at Bankhead National Forest through a cooperative cost-share agreement
- Monitored and oversaw management actions for the red-cockaded woodpecker population on the Forever Wild Coosa WMA
- Continued operation of a Monitoring Avian Productivity and

Survivorship (MAPS) banding station on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract for the 16th year

- Continued a comprehensive floristic survey of the Wehle Forever Wild Tract in cooperation with other state field botanists
- Continued Eastern bluebird monitoring and Northern bobwhite covey count surveys on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Published findings from select Elhew Field Station research projects and/or partnerships in peer-reviewed journals



STATE LANDS 2021 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Section Name	* Budget	† Expenditures
Land Management & Stewardship Activities	\$9,582,311	\$5,498,772
Administrative Transfer to Department	\$974,000	\$586,247
Coastal Zone Management Program	\$2,075,848	\$1,516,318
Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve	\$1,140,306	\$829,748
Total per State Lands Fund	\$13,772,465	\$8,431,085
Forever Wild Land Trust Fund	\$22,743,288	\$9,159,151
Forever Wild Stewardship Fund	\$1,500,000	\$1,376,878

*AMOUNTS INCLUDE REQUESTED BUDGET SPENDING AUTHORITY ASSOCIATED WITH EFFORTS TO APPLY FOR GRANT AWARDS AND OTHER LEVERAGE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

† INCLUDES EXPENDITURE OF PRIOR YEAR FUNDS THAT WERE AUTHORIZED FOR MULTI-YEAR CAPITAL OUTLAY.



RESTORING HABITAT AND ENHANCING OUTDOOR RECREATION WITH PRESCRIBED FIRE

FOREVER WILD'S GRAND BAY SAVANNA COMPLEX

Images in the news following a wildfire are a reminder of the potentially destructive power of fire. However, when harnessed in the form of a prescribed burn, this power becomes an effective tool for land managers to restore diverse, fire-dependent habitats and enhance outdoor recreation.

That's just what the State Lands Division (SLD) is accomplishing on the Forever Wild Grand Bay Savanna Complex in south Mobile County near Bayou La Batre.



After two years of intricate planning, burn crews from SLD and the Alabama Chapter of The Nature Conservancy joined forces to conduct several complicated prescribed burns at the Grand Bay Complex. With additional assistance from the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, and the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, as well as local police and fire departments, seven burns ranging from 300 acres to 1,800 acres were conducted across six sections of the complex. These efforts resulted in a total of 5,750 acres being successfully burned.

Grand Bay is a biologically rich mix of marshes, beaches, grasslands, and maritime pine forests. The location is a hotspot for migratory birds, home to some of the state's most important estuaries, and features a diversity of plant life rarely seen in other regions of the country. In addition, the rich wildlife habitat offers excellent hunting opportunities for deer, turkey, and small game since much of the complex acreage falls within the Grand Bay Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Historically, fire-dependent habitats in coastal Alabama would experience seasonal burns ignited by lightning as part of a natural process. Decades of fire suppression on the Grand Bay Complex prior to state ownership, however, had turned large areas into dense thickets of underbrush—some 10 to 15 feet tall—progressively threatening ecological diversity and the native grassland habitat.

Making matters worse, this underbrush operates as extra fuel that, when combined with the close proximity of other landowners, had long contributed to the difficulty of using prescribed fire. Challenging site conditions also significantly increase costs associated with using fire as a land management tool.

Forever Wild's recent acquisition of several critical third-party inholdings led SLD to initiate efforts to develop a fire regimen. Even with this opportunity to plan a prescribed burn across state-owned acreage, SLD staff knew Grand Bay's location, ground conditions, weather patterns, and mix of habitats combined to create some of the most dangerous and unpredictable fire conditions burn managers can encounter.

If crews wait too long for the ground to adequately dry after a rainy period, it can quickly go from dry to extremely dry and create the potential for the fire to explode and become unmanageable. However, moving forward with a burn too soon after a period of rain is ineffective and can easily result in a costly waste of time and resources. Striking the correct balance of moisture in the fuel was a key element in safely managing the burn and accomplishing specific habitat management goals.

The fact that saturated marsh soils can easily swallow an entire bulldozer eliminated the option of using otherwise routine heavy equipment and large vehicles at Grand Bay. As a result, much of the work had to be done by hand or with specialized equipment, making site prep efforts time-consuming, tedious, and extremely labor intensive.

Often by the time crews finished cutting a new fire lane, they had to recut the previous section due to new vegetation growth. Crews were forced to keep new firebreaks to a minimum and be creative when developing burn plans. Using existing roads and natural structures like waterways as safe and effective firebreaks became a necessity.

Finicky coastal winds, unpredictable weather, heavy equipment limitations, patches of impassible and fuel-loaded underbrush, and the potential for smoke to impact roadways required exhaustive advance planning. These planning efforts quickly revealed the critical need for a large number of skilled burn crew members and highlighted the need for funding support. SLD staff knew a successful outcome would not be possible without assistance from other land management and law enforcement partners.

Burn days started early with crews conducting final equipment checks and receiving operational briefings. Burn intensity and the potential for smoke to shift on to roadways had to be monitored diligently throughout the day. Burn days lasted as long as necessary to ensure the mopping up (extinguishing any remaining fires) was complete. The size and complexity of burns at Grand Bay resulted in 10- to 12-hour burn days that routinely required at least 12, and often up to 24, crew members.

In addition to helping on the ground, TNC Alabama provided administrative support related to accessing funding under a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund grant. This funding supported the cost of equipment, supplies, and staff time and allowed burn managers extra flexibility in adapting efforts to overcome the many obstacles that hindered previous efforts.

One thing is certain. The successful outcome of the prescribed fires at Grand Bay could not have been achieved without all partners consistently working as a team. The challenges were identified, analyzed, and repeatedly overcome as a result of all partners being willing to share time, resources, and expertise along each step of the way.

Planning is currently underway for the final phase of this initial round of prescribed fire. SLD will then focus its attention on planning maintenance burns every two to three years on a rotating basis. These ongoing prescribed fire efforts will allow Grand Bay's coastal grasslands to provide the critical habitat necessary to sustain both abundant ecological biodiversity and quality recreational opportunities along Alabama's Gulf Coast.

Whether continuing to be a popular stop for tourists and birding enthusiasts during the annual John L. Borom Alabama Coastal BirdFest or providing public hunting opportunities as part of a WMA, the Grand Bay Savanna Complex demonstrates how working to support Alabama's unique natural resources benefits the public and positively impacts our state's economy. ■



ALABAMA STATE PARKS

The **State Parks Division** administers 21 state parks encompassing approximately 47,000 acres of land and water in Alabama. The parks range from Gulf Coast beaches to Appalachian mountains and provide opportunities and facilities from basic day-use activities to resort convention lodging, restaurants, and golfing areas.

The mission of the Division is to acquire and preserve natural areas; develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

The Division's goals are to manage and operate the Alabama State Parks System in an economically sound and efficient manner on the most self-sustaining basis possible; to provide and maintain high-quality facilities and services to meet the needs of visitors; to provide an opportunity for personal growth and development of individuals through outdoor experiences; to promote the use of State Parks facilities; to preserve the unique natural features and integrity of our state parks for future generations; and to promote goodwill and enhance the public image of Alabama and the Alabama State Parks through dedicated, courteous employees.

In FY 2020-2021, our park system experienced many challenges and changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as multiple natural disasters. Business operations were routinely modified to deal with these circumstances. Despite those unplanned challenges, the park system was able to maintain multiple major renovations and improvement projects. Throughout the year, staff adapted to the changing dynamics of multiple situations and once again served an above average number of park guests who were seeking safe exercise opportunities and respite in Alabama's outdoors. They served with distinction and are a credit to Alabama's commitment to outdoor recreation and tourism.

Accomplishments

ADCNR's 21 state parks have typically averaged 5 million guests annually. In FY 2020-2021 our park system recorded 5.4 million guest occurrences. While that number is slightly down from the previous fiscal year, it can largely be attributed to disruptions in guest services caused by Hurricane Sally during October and November of 2020 at our coastal parks.

Alabama State Parks made significant accomplishments in improving purchasing procedures, computer systems, operation and maintenance policies, financial management analysis, advertising and marketing, natural resource management, and implementing a comprehensive, statewide State Parks renovations program.

Facilities and Personnel

Of the 21 State Parks, 17 are maintained with an internal park staff determined by the size, development, and operation of each area. The total number of employees for all parks varies from approximately 700 during the peak season to approximately 500 during the off-season. Four parks are staffed and operated through management agreements with local governments or concessionaires. The State Parks Division central office in Montgomery includes eight sections: Operations, Promotions, Natural Resources, Planning and Visitor Services, Education and Interpretation, Management Analysis, Law Enforcement, and Recreational Trails.

OPERATIONS SECTION

The Operations Section includes five district supervisors for 21 state parks and multiple lodges throughout the state. The Section is divided into North and South regions. The North region consists of the Northeast, Northwest, and Central districts. The South region consists of the Southeast and Southwest districts and the Montgomery office staff. The Montgomery Operations office has one full-time employee. The North and South regions are managed by two Operations supervisors.

This Section manages daily park operations, maintenance programs, law enforcement, property and automobile insurance programs, property inventory, fee waiver requests from nonprofit organizations, and Board of Adjustment claims. It also processes all personnel actions for approximately 600 hourly and merit employees.

NORTH REGION:

Joe Wheeler

- Welcomed 173,391 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 77 interpretive programs for 1,500 park guests
- Initiated campground repair and renovations
- Hosted dozens of social events throughout the year including trail runs, holiday packages, and "Rockin The River"

- Sold more than 15,800 rounds of golf
- Site for the Tennessee River 600 in July, an 8-day personal watercraft trek.
- Removed tornado-damaged buildings in the day-use area and developed construction plans, including ADA sidewalks
- Updated Wi-Fi at park facilities including Lodge and cottages
- Planted 75 trees in primitive camping areas
- Replaced damaged picnic tables in the day-use area
- Replaced roofs on pavilions and remaining bathhouse in the day-use area
- Repaired major leak at the Lodge that was threatening the foundation
- Renovated the marina store
- Replaced ceiling in Elk River group lodge kitchen area

Monte Sano

- Welcomed 168,327 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 3 races with the Huntsville Track Club bringing in more than 625 runners



- Hosted time trials for Huntsville Area Mountain bike Riders (HAMR) that lasted 8 weeks with more than 100 participants each week
- Hosted 2021 Monte Sano Art Festival, a 2-day event bringing hundreds of park visitors
- Hosted 51 weddings
- Completed Phase I of campground electrical upgrades
- Dedicated a new pavilion as the John Scoble Memorial Pavilion, honoring past Park Manager John Scoble

Cathedral Caverns

- Welcomed 55,647 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Provided cave tours to more than 100 school groups from across the Southeast ranging in size from 25 to 200 students per group
- Completed construction of a new campground with 25 campsites
- Contracted with Vista Recreation for four 4 new rental cabins
- Partnered with Running Lane to host three annual events. Conquer the Cave 5K, Cathedral Caverns Trail Run 5K and 15K, and the Race to the Cave Half Marathon and 10K Run average 600 runners per event.

Rickwood Caverns

- Welcomed 50,432 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Welcomed 14,079 guests to the annual holiday event Wonderland Under Warrior
- Hosted the 3rd Annual Cars at the Cave event with food trucks, live music, and awards for car entries
- Purchased an additional 58 acres adjacent to the park, protecting a significant portion of the Park's cavern system
- Completed extensive pool renovations
- Renovated bathrooms at the nature center
- Completed half-mile of new trail

Lake Lurleen

- Welcomed 84,220 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Welcomed hundreds of local guests to the annual Hal loween event, Camp Fear

Oak Mountain

- Welcomed 731,862 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Sold 44,659 annual park passes
- Worked with Forever Wild Board to secure the purchase and protection of 1,644 acres of unique land known as the Belcher Tract, to include parcels of 33 acres secured by the State Parks Division
- Hosted 82 interpretive programs at the park for 1,991 guests
- Sold more than 30,200 rounds of golf
- Host site for Birmingham Urban Mountain Pedalers (BUMP) and other cyclist groups including the Alabama Interscholastic Cycling League, Southern Trails of Oak Mountain State Park (STOMP), XTERRA, local area high school mountain bike teams, and 50 BMX races each year
- Partnered with Shelby County and the City of Pelham to host the Fire on the Water fireworks show for July 4th
- Welcomed 45 participants during the annual New Year's Day First Day Hikes
- Grand reopening of the Oak Mountain Interpretive Center in May 2021
- Installed new fishing dock on Lake Tranquility near cabins
- Began Phase III road project on State Park Road, including adding bike lanes to Highway 119 and a roundabout with a grand entrance at 4-way stop
- Cleared tornado-damaged trees from Lunker Lake Flipside area
- Refurbished one pavilion and rebuilt two other pavilions at Lunker Lake area
- Installed new roof on Flipside Store and staff house
- Contracted vendor to clean up tornado-damaged trees along park boundary at Eagle Point, creating a firebreak between the park and the Eagle Point Community
- Constructed new Slingshot Mountain Bike Trail and Storyteller, a new downhill single-track connector from Boulder Ridge Trail to Thunder Trail
- Reopened Oak Mountain State Park Interpretive Center; implemented interpretive signage; added an Eastern screech owl exhibit; and offered two Legacy Partners workshops
- Initiated roadside pollinator wildflower management plan
- Constructed new interpretive outdoor classroom and firepit at the interpretive center and new platform

camping site adjacent to the Light Trail (all Eagle Scout projects)

Wind Creek

- Welcomed 348,237 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 16 interpretive programs for 264 park guests
- Hosted Alabama Bass Trail fishing tournament in 2021
- Partnered with Lake Martin Resource Association and Renew Our Rivers for a cleanup effort throughout Lake Martin
- Hosted the East Alabama Regional Spring Rally Weekend
- Replaced HVAC at B1 bathhouse in campground
- Installed dehumidifiers in C2 campground bathhouse and repaired ceilings
- Expanded naturalist program through social media, hiring of a seasonal naturalist, and partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Cheaha

- Welcomed 291,515 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 158 interpretive programs for 4,059 park guests
- Developed and implemented new themed educational weekend events including Peace, Love, and Bigfoot Mountain Treasure Hunt; Wildflower Weekend; Girl Scouts Love State Parks; and Public Lands Day
- Renovated the CCC Lake House facility into a new Cheaha Interpretive Center
- Installed Old Glory Retirement Vault for retired American flags, in partnership with American Legion Post 90 and VFW Post 7016
- Achieved national recognition for Bald Rock Boardwalk, listed as a National Recreation Trail by the U.S. Department of the Interior
- Renovated the Mountain Gate House
- Implemented new directional signs and speed/safety signs parkwide
- Installed flatscreen smart TV in the Mountain Store Information Cove to relay interpretive and hospitality information to guests
- Cleared overlooks from Cabin 1 to Cabin 16, P120 Sunrise Overlook, and Vista Cliffside Overlook
- Removed rock top of the chimney; capped and repaired roofline on staff cabin 2 (used CCC rocks from chimney

to build the Old Glory Overlook vault)

- Replaced three well pumps
- Installed new synthetic mulch at Lake Cheaha playground
- Removed and replaced boards on Bald Rock Boardwalk
- Installed eight new HVAC units in hotel rooms and one new HVAC unit for Chalet 12
- Repaired Lake Cheaha pier
- Initiated roadside pollinator wildflower management plan
- Developed and installed interpretive trailhead signs at Bald Rock, Pulpit, and Leave No Trace Trails; new interpretive kiosks at Mountain Store, Interpretive Center, and Education Village; and enriched interpretive signage on Laurel Trail, LNT Trail, and CCC Time Traveler Driving Trail
- Installed Alabama Public Television interpretive sign at Bunker Tower to explain the existence of the TV tower and green building
- Installed new bridge over Cheaha Creek flowing into CCC Reservoir and cleaned out CCC Reservoir (Eagle Scout projects)
- Developed plan with PowerSouth to implement park wide generator
- Supported firefighting efforts, including development of fire lanes and fuel mitigation measures intended to protect park facilities

Lake Guntersville

- Welcomed 317,020 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Worked to update policies for fishing tournaments to improve angler experience
- Golf course at Lake Guntersville State Park sold more than 10,600 rounds of golf
- Renovated 18 chalets including new living room furniture, larger TVs, new fireplaces, and rugs to the entrances
- Repaired Trail of Tears dock
- Renovated the Campground store
- Installed new retail shelving units in Town Creek store
- Renovated Campground D and H bathhouses
- Planted 180 trees at Town Creek campground courtesy of TVA
- Stripped and waxed the floors throughout the Lodge

Buck's Pocket

- Welcomed 9,421 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted multiple groups for survival training and K-9 Dog searches, including the Region Search and Rescue Training Organization
- Built relationships with repeat guests including 1 that filled the entire campground in February
- Installed a self-payment kiosk machine to accept credit cards for day-use and ORV trail passes
- Repaired washed-out trails with additional drain tile and rip rap (crushed rock)
- Rerouted quarter mile of trail to mitigate road wash outs and provide safer passage

DeSoto

- Welcomed 357,619 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 73 interpretive programs for 2,327 park guests
- Purchased and protected 150 acres of land adjacent to the DeSoto Falls site
- Completed Phase 1 of a multi-year project to replace railing at DeSoto Falls Overlook
- Completed structural and cosmetic repairs to the swimming pool
- Completed trailhead and parking area for a new trail to the bottom of DeSoto Falls
- Upgraded lighting and repainted interior of the country store

SOUTH REGION:

Chewacla

- Welcomed 107,188 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Partnered with Auburn University, the Auburn Tree Commission, and the City of Auburn to conduct an Invasive Plant Removal project
- Home to Central Alabama Mountain Pedalers (CAMP) who host mountain biking competitions and trail improvement workdays throughout the year
- Installed new roofs on CCC beach house, two large CCC pavilions, and two small picnic pavilions

Frank Jackson

- Welcomed 19,099 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted Scarecrows in the Park, a community event in

October and November drawing hundreds of guests, businesses, and school groups

- Designated a State Park Special Opportunity Archery (SPSOA) park

Meaher

- Welcomed 44,891 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Reopened part of the pier damaged by Hurricane Zeta
- Replaced storage area sheds damaged by Hurricane Sally

Blue Springs

- Welcomed 34,148 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Removed storm debris after Hurricane Zeta

Lakepoint

- Welcomed 182,890 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Updated and renovated 10 cabins. The remainder are to be updated and renovated next year.
- Opened a new community archery park in June 2021
- Hosted multiple local and regional fishing tournaments including the Alabama Bass Trail tournament in March 2021
- Installed new roof on Cabin 7
- Built new motorized ADA trail within the campground through a grant with ADECA
- Renovated activities building to meet ADA requirements
- Renovated pro shop to meet ADA requirements
- Converted golf course into ORV course through a grant with ADECA
- Constructed archery range in partnership with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division
- Completed Phase 1 renovations at 10 cabins

Gulf

- Welcomed 2,444,959 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Hosted 494 interpretive programs at the park for 9,628 park guests
- Partnered with Alabama Marine Resources Division and Mississippi State University for Shark Week, which attracted 1,313 guests over 4 days in July 2021

- Hosted annual First Day Hikes, attracting 32 participants
- Hosted Alabama Governor's Conference on Tourism
- Installed new playground, restroom, dog park, and parking area as part of Lake Shelby Renovation Project
- Installed 18 new roofs on facilities damaged by Hurricane Sally
- Installed 10 new parking payment stations at all public beach accesses
- Improved stormwater runoff by installing 4 new culverts in the campground
- Completed Phase 1 bathhouse renovations in the campground
- Reopened section of pier after Hurricane Sally
- Reopened campground after Hurricane Sally
- Finalized MOU agreement with the city of Orange Beach, including bathhouse maintenance, trail maintenance, and beach cleanup
- Completed repairs to State Park Road
- Repaired and reopened Eagle Cottages after Hurricane Sally
- Installed new flooring in the education building

park videos; and continued pursuit of affordable and effective marketing opportunities.

Accomplishments

- Placed advertisements in statewide magazines and other publications, including the Alabama Vacation Guide, Birmingham Home & Garden, Business Alabama, Golf Alabama, Gulf Coast Vacation Guide, and Alabama Press Association Directory
- Increased traffic over last year on our website, www.alapark.com. It was our primary source of distributing information and promoting events at the State Parks.
- Continued using our social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) throughout the year to enhance the image of the parks and promote events and activities
- Created new rack card brochures for all 21 state parks and distributed to outlets including the Alabama Welcome Centers, Convention and Visitor Bureaus, and other tourism-related organizations
- Distributed the State Parks e-newsletter to more than 350,000 subscribers each month
- Distributed brochures to various organizations and outlets to inform the public on amenities and features offered at each park
- Partnered with Alabama Tourism to promote travel and tourism in Alabama and to promote Alabama's State Parks as safe and affordable vacation destinations. Distributed brochures to eight welcome centers throughout the state.
- Increased Alabama State Park license plate sales by 49% over last year's sales
- Generated more than \$7,000 in membership dues through the Dirt Pass Trail Crew Program, and recruited volunteer involvement in the maintenance of our trail system
- Received 19 awards from TripAdvisor based on positive comments and feedback from park guests
- Continued to promote the Parks for Patriots program that offers veterans and active military free admission to our parks throughout the year
- Promoted concessionaire partnerships in the parks, including cabin rentals, zipline activities, kayak and boat rentals, equestrian facilities, and cable water skiing
- Promoted Partners Pay the Way campaign to raise awareness of individuals, user groups, civic partners, and elected officials we depend on for donations and funding
- Utilized website and social media to inform and educate the public on the status of park facilities, hours of operation, and any policies and procedures related to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Maintained YouTube video library of 113 videos, with more than 1.2 million views

PROMOTIONS SECTION

The Alabama State Parks Promotions Section coordinates the advertising, marketing, and promotional efforts of the Alabama State Parks System. The section currently employs three people in the Montgomery office, including one Advertising and Marketing Manager, one Marketing Specialist, and one Administrative Support Assistant II.

Administrative functions include the coordination of radio and television public service announcements; preparation and distribution of promotional literature; coordination of print and photographic material for magazines, campground directories, and newspaper articles; cooperation and coordination with the Alabama Department of Tourism, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, Alabama Department of Transportation rest areas (ALDOT), tourist associations, and special events promoters; evaluation of advertising opportunities; purchasing of advertising space; production of ads and advertising material; assistance with promotional efforts at individual state parks; special events and various promotional exhibit expos; continuous updating of photos; presentation of programs for various organizations; continued operation of a toll-free nationwide phone line; social media marketing, website management and promotion, and digital mobile-ready marketing; development of promotional

Future Efforts

We will launch the Alabama State Park Passport in 2022, which will encourage guests to visit each of our 21 parks. Promoting our conference rooms and meeting facilities will continue to be a priority as we encourage groups to return for corporate functions. We will also launch a new online merchandise program in 2022 to include State Park logo-branded clothing and other products. Some of these items will be available at the parks in gift shops, camp stores, and marina stores. Proceeds will go to improve facilities and amenities in the parks.

NATURAL RESOURCES SECTION

The Natural Resources Section was created in 1982 to enhance the aesthetic, biological, historical, and recreational aspects of our land and water resources and to increase the public's understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of those resources. This section uses the latest science and technology to assist the parks with diverse natural resources objectives each year. The section also administers and coordinates grants for natural resources improvement projects.

Accomplishments

- Continued restoration efforts at Gulf State Park using prescribed fire on approximately 280 acres in the lakeside cabin area and the pitcher plant bog. These fires help reduce wildfire risk, enhance wildlife habitat, control brush thickets, and keep the forest canopy open for better visibility and airflow for visitors. This prescribed fire was a partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Facilitated the acquisition of a Marsh Master – an amphibious marsh buggy that is designed for working in the wetlands. This much-needed equipment is being used to refresh firebreaks along the many miles of boardwalks located in Gulf State Park to defend the facility from both wildfire and prescribed fires. It is also being used for other natural resource projects such as view scaping and ecosystem enhancements.
- Continued restoration of existing longleaf/loblolly pine ecosystem at Lakepoint State Park using prescribed fire on approximately 110 acres. The benefits of prescribed fire at Lakepoint include a reduction in the density of the young sweetgums, allowing an increase in sunlight and encouraging the growth of native grasses. This prescribed fire is a partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Facilitated restoration of old-growth montane longleaf pine habitat at Oak Mountain State Park through prescribed fire on 285 acres. The montane longleaf pine forest is a critically endangered component of the longleaf pine forest of the Southeast. The purpose of this prescribed fire was the re-

duction of wildfire risk and to enhance wildlife habitat. The restoration project is a collaborative effort between Alabama State Parks, The Nature Conservancy, and the Alabama Forestry Commission.

- Facilitated a 111-acre prescribed fire in the campground and day-use areas at Frank Jackson State Park. The dual purpose of this prescribed fire was the reduction of wildfire risk and the restoration of the loblolly ecosystem. This prescribed fire was in partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission and the City of Opp.
- Supported Park staff in a 40-acre prescribed fire at DeSoto State Park. The prior lack of prescribed fire had allowed for a thick understory of competing vegetation, suppression of native plants, and buildup of fuels. This prescribed fire was needed to reduce wildfire risk and restore native habitat for rare plants found within the park.
- Facilitated a 20-acre prescribed fire near Cheaha Lake at Cheaha State Park. This prescribed fire was to eliminate debris that had accumulated after several storms. This prescribed fire was a partnership with Alabama Forestry Commission.
- Continued to support park staff with a robust Integrated Pest Management Plan to reduce and control the invasive Argentine ant population in the Southeast and Southwest districts. The Argentine ant population is at a level that negatively interferes with guests' enjoyment of the parks. An evaluation of the Argentine ant population was conducted in both districts that determined the best course of control was to add personnel. The Integrated Pest Management Plan has been successful at Meaher State Park. It was expanded to include all the southern parks.
- Continued support for the Special Opportunity Area (SOA) hunting program at Oak Mountain State Park, in partnership with the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF). The SOA program allows more public access to hunting on public land and will help with the management of the deer herd in an urban park setting. Additionally, the SOA program was expanded to include Frank Jackson State Park, providing another 400 acres of public access to hunting.
- Assisted with the continued use of herbicides for invasive and otherwise undesirable vegetation control. This management tool was used at several parks including Gulf, Wind Creek, Frank Jackson, DeSoto, Cheaha, Chewacla, and Oak Mountain.
- Collaborated with the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF) to develop lake management plans for both Lake Lurleen and Lunker Lake at Oak Mountain State Park.
- Assisted with land encroachment and boundary line disputes/discrepancies and other conflicts with private landowners. Also continued to work with local and state officials on specific projects regarding State Park land boundary management and projects that could have impacts on the long-term sustainability of our natural resources. The Section

continues to develop Alabama State Park deed files to maintain verified boundaries.

- Continued to work with academic researchers to issue permits for conducting research or collecting scientific data within a State Park
- Facilitated the administration of two ADECA grants issued to Lakepoint State Park for the development of an ORV Park and a motorized diverse use trail
- Assisted the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division with the grant to build an archery range at Lakepoint State Park
- Continued to manage the design and engineering phase of the Fort Morgan Parkway Trail, an extension of the Backcountry Trail within Gulf State Park
- Continued to participate in the Forever Wild Land Acquisition Program, resulting in the procurement of 1,644 acres for Oak Mountain State Park
- Facilitated Parks Field staff to attend Prescribed Fire Certification Classes and become Burn Managers. Eight new Certified Burn Managers were added to facilitate a more robust fire program across the park system.
- Facilitated annual training for current park naturalists. This past year all naturalists were trained in Exploring Bow Hunting, presented by the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF). This training provided our naturalists with basic skills used to bow hunt and focuses on understanding the outdoors. This program was designed to provide the skills and understanding needed to teach this course and offer classes to utilize the growing trend of archery parks within the State Park System.

Future Efforts

The section continues to deal with the best options to address lake fertility at numerous parks, the addition of fish habitat structure, and controlling nuisance wildlife populations of invasive plant and animal species.

PLANNING AND VISITOR SERVICES

The Planning and Visitor Services program has focused largely on the implementation and evaluation of a new guest reservation system. Transitions in 2020 and 2021 to the US eDirect based system for campground operations has dominated the work over the past year. Efforts continue to evaluate the system for service to the lodge and conference programs.

Future Efforts

The coming year will likely see advances in reservation system options and operational performance metrics that aid in better planning for guest services and customer satisfaction.

EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION

Our Education and Interpretation staff consists of a part-time Education Coordinator located in Cheaha State Park, two District Interpretive Naturalists located in Oak Mountain and Gulf State parks, and seven Interpretive Naturalists in field locations at DeSoto, Gulf, Lake Guntersville, Cheaha, Oak Mountain, Joe Wheeler, and Cathedral Caverns state parks. In addition to educating guests on the natural environments found within our parks, naturalists assist with safety communications, supporting recreational projects, and park-specific interactions with the media.

In FY 2020-2021, our Educational and Interpretation staff entertained and educated many guests and visitors within the parks through in-house recreational activities, interpretive environmental education programs, and special events throughout the year. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, park naturalists designed new programs that could be easily provided via our Division's Facebook pages and worked to provide in-person programming that followed safety guidelines. Program topics included flora and fauna identification, livestreams of hiking trails, habitat needs and management, and other environmental topics.

Additionally, staff contributed to new trail construction, maintenance of existing trails, and upgrading trail maps. Park Naturalists also contributed to a relatively new public relations initiative, coordinating programs and events for inclusion into social media sites within the Department/Division for public viewing.

MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS SECTION

The Management Analysis Section provides general administrative direction and coordination for management control, administrative cost analysis, performance reporting, data processing, general accounting, budgeting, payables, receivables, and purchasing.

Accomplishments

Section personnel received, processed, and analyzed 2,184 performance reports for all state parks; prepared Park System Performance Reports as required by the Budget Management Act; received, processed, and analyzed operations plans, budget reports, and related reports; prepared Park System Operation Plans and fiscal year budgets; processed approximately \$54,697,000 in revenue and approximately 14,851 payments; and disbursed approximately 14,166 payments to vendors. The total number of documents processed for State Parks by Management Analysis was 19,919.

Section staff also continuously monitored data-processing output, distributed it to statewide park cost centers, and monitored managerial audits as well as personnel actual versus budget for each park. Management Analysis continues to work with the State of Alabama Accounting and Resource



System to develop detailed monthly financial statements of the State Parks System and specific operations. Management Analysis continues to revise resale inventory procedures to promote better accountability.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Each State Parks District now has a District Ranger who coordinates law enforcement and guest safety programs with the respective district parks. Rangers within each park report to the District Ranger, who handles scheduling, training, evaluations, and other related operational coordination.

Rangers also play a large role in our emergency response through District Strike Teams. These teams lead emergency recovery efforts after storms, serving to clear roads of debris and support utility crews and other teams in coordinated recovery efforts.

RECREATIONAL TRAILS

Parks filled the vacant statewide trails coordinator position in 2021. Progression of the program includes the relocation of equipment to a more centralized location at Oak Mountain State Park, and a focus on trail assessment and analyzing trail conditions at all 21 parks.

Future Efforts

Work will now focus on building a small and flexible staff structure that can support the maintenance and construction of new and existing trails. The State Parks trail system will also continue to benefit from coordinated volunteer efforts among the parks. A project to survey trail use and better understand its value to the park system will also be a priority.

STATE PARKS 2021 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Section Name	Budgeted	Expenditures
Parks Revolving Operations	\$ 39,213,711.00	\$38,170,698.15
Parks Revolving Capital Outlay	\$ 7,300,000.00	\$5,481,716.73
Administrative Transfer	\$3,776,000.00	\$ 3,101,807.00
Parks Fund Repairs and Maintenance	\$2,700,000.00	\$948,535.89
Parks Fund Capital Outlay	\$ 7,382,454.00	\$6,718,153.22
Total	\$60,372,165.00	\$54,420,910.99

THE IMPORTANCE OF MODERN CAMPGROUNDS

The Alabama State Parks System operates 21 state parks with a wide variety of recreational opportunities. Like many state park systems in our nation, Alabama has a history of serving the public in our park settings for more than 80 years. Looking back at eight decades of customer service, several activities stand out as “core services” that are iconic not only to Alabama’s State Parks, but to all public parks. When we further examine how we accommodate guests who stay overnight in our parks, one activity stands out above the others – camping.





To appreciate the importance of camping to our parks and park guests, we need to highlight the different types of camping throughout the years. In the 1930s and 1940s, park visitors would load their cars and relocate to a park campground with an assortment of gadgets and goods – sometimes even packing an actual kitchen sink. That era conjures the image of the canvas wall tents still used today at youth camps and by backcountry campers. While RVs existed at the time, they were uncommon.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, truck campers, camping vans, pop-up campers, and travel trailers became more common and started a camping movement among families that increased visitation to America's state parks. Along with that movement came the response from many states to create or expand designated campgrounds within the parks to accommodate this new wave of campers.

In the 1970s, state parks began to develop a campground model that included community bathhouses and gravel camping pads. These improved campsites included a concrete picnic table and a water faucet. The best campgrounds even offered electrical outlets, and some had dump stations for RVs with built-in bathrooms.

The camping industry evolved dramatically through the 1990s. Backpacking became a popular activity, which led to huge advances in the development of light, compact, and more durable camping equipment. This was especially true for tents, sleeping bags, and the backpacks that carried these items. This movement also supported an expansion of car campers that could carry more people and gear than the typical family station wagon or van. This development also generated an expansion of group camping best demonstrated by the growth of Boy Scout and Girl Scout programs.

The RV camping sector also experienced dramatic growth during that period with larger towed RVs as well as larger self-powered motor homes. Those technological advances led to increased demands for better campground designs and amenities, which

included asphalt or concrete parking/camping pads, water spigots, 30-amp electrical outlets, and sewer hook-ups.

More than 50 years after the initial expansion of camping as an outdoor activity, Alabama State Parks is in the planning phase to renovate many of its campgrounds, including designing and engineering new campgrounds to accommodate larger RVs and mobile homes with higher electrical demands. The RV community has mixed opinions on the surfacing of campsite pads, which can vary from gravel to concrete or asphalt. However, they agree the pads need to be level from side to side. Today, pad width and length are typically 40 feet by 60 feet to accommodate the longer gooseneck trailers with pull-out sides as well as the largest motor homes. Along with standard water spigots, sites now offer 30- and 50-amp plugs and 120-volt outlets for other electrical needs. Improved sewer hook-ups remain a premium feature, but we still see the need for dump stations to accommodate all guests. Each new campsite will also offer a picnic table and fire ring adjacent to the camping pad. Campgrounds still feature bathhouses, but many park systems like Alabama's are trending toward family-style bathrooms that offer more privacy to the guests. HVAC units are often standard in modern bathhouses.

Additional campground amenities are more important today than in the past. Swimming pools, splash pads, community spaces, playgrounds, and game courts are all important considerations for a modern resort-style campground. Perhaps the most requested campground amenity is currently associated with technology. Today, fast reliable Wi-Fi available throughout the campground is an absolute must. Most guests say that Wi-Fi service is as important as power, water, and sewer accommodations – and we agree.

The campgrounds at Alabama's State Parks continue rich history of serving the public's interest in outdoor recreation with their 2,300 modern campsites. Our goal is to offer camping options that suit the needs of all Alabamians and out-of-state visitors. The improvements and investments we make within our campgrounds in the next few years will greatly benefit the public and the parks over the next 50 years. ■

WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES



The **Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division**, charged by law with protection, management, and enhancement of the state's fish and wildlife resources, is composed of the Administrative, Enforcement, Fisheries, and Wildlife sections. The Division meets these responsibilities by carrying out coordinated, scientifically sound enforcement, management, research, development, and educational programs designed to ensure protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife populations and habitats for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama.

ADMINISTRATIVE SECTION

Wildlife Grants

State Wildlife Grants and the Landowner Incentive Program are two federal funding sources intended to focus management on declining wildlife species and avoid their eventual listing under the Endangered Species Act. Federal funding for the State Wildlife Grants program in FY 2020-2021 was \$852,983. These funds are used to support research and restoration efforts. Both programs are administered by one biologist, the Habitat and Species Conservation Coordinator, who works closely with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries staff. Both programs interact with a broad range of partners, including federal and state agencies, universities, NGOs, and private landowners. Conservation efforts funded include the following:

Reintroduction of the Eastern Indigo Snake

The federally threatened Eastern indigo snake is considered to be absent from the state with the exception of snakes released at the Conecuh National Forest. The goal of this project is to reestablish a self-sustaining population. Eleven snakes were released in May 2021, bringing the total release number to 212. After being released they are monitored throughout the year.

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC)

AABC was established in 2004 to promote clean water and to restore rare freshwater species. This is accomplished through the propagation and reintroductions of rare aquatic species.

Statewide Stream and River Assessment Program for Aquatic Species of Conservation Concern

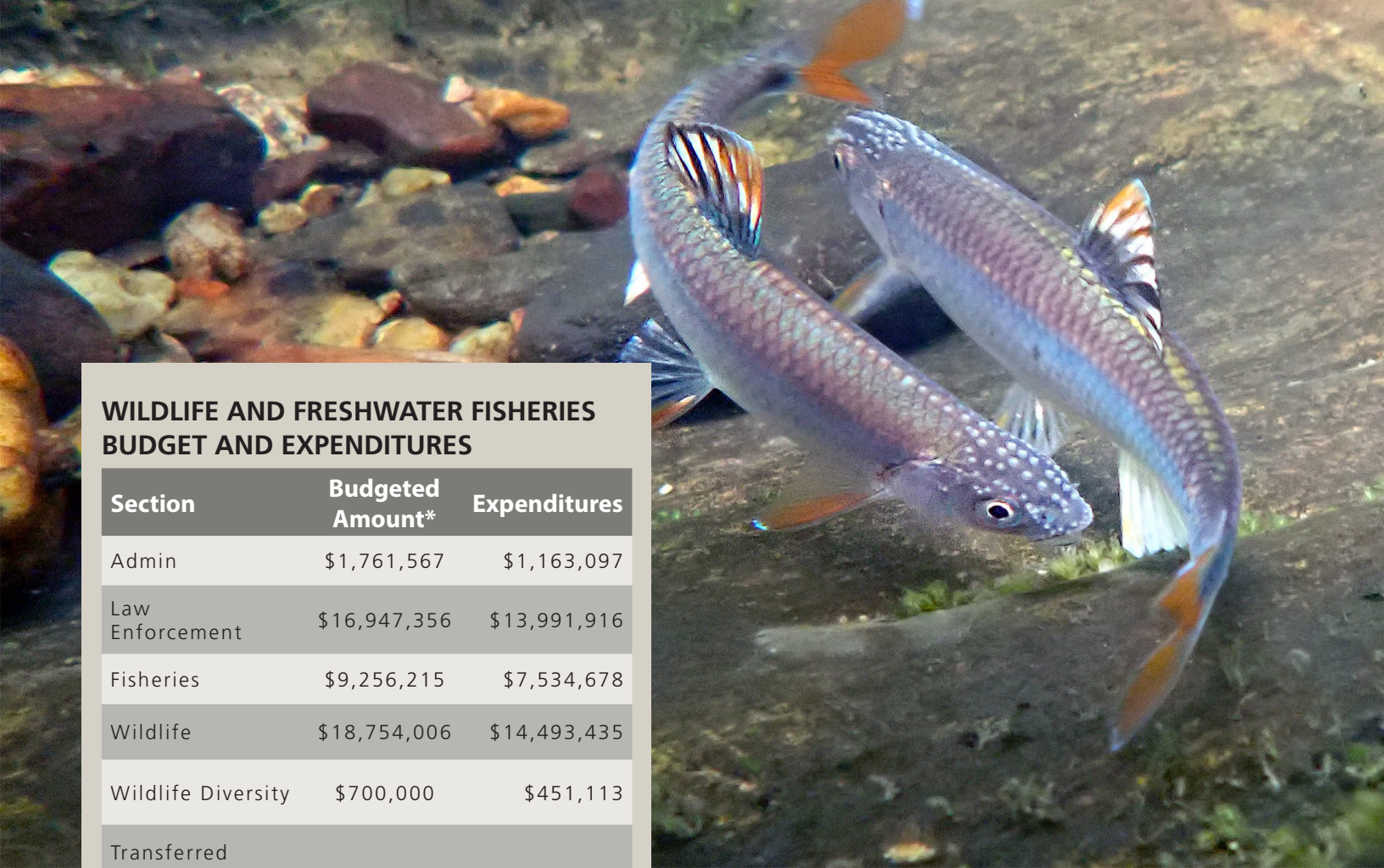
This project collects statewide information on the distribution, abundance, species composition, and habitat requirements of at-risk aquatic species in Alabama. Data generated from this project enables ADCNR to better plan for the management and protection of aquatic at-risk species.

Black Bear Research

Trapping and tagging of black bears is conducted in the two main reproducing populations, located in the Mobile River basin and in northeast Alabama. Once trapped, the bears receive a general physical exam and yellow tags in each ear, and they are injected with a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag. Female bears are fitted with GPS-enabled radio-telemetry collars to track their movements. Staff visit bear dens during winter months to document location, characteristics, and the number of cubs. Cubs receive an expandable collar to track their movements.

Habitat and Population Restoration of Gopher Frogs

The gopher frog is ranked as a Highest Conservation Concern species and is currently petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Gopher Frogs are state-listed as imperiled due to low populations and are at a high risk of extinction. They were historically known to exist in multiple locations across the eastern portion of Alabama but now are only found at two wetlands within the Conecuh National Forest. Research and monitoring activities are underway at those locations.



**WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES
BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES**

Section	Budgeted Amount*	Expenditures
Admin	\$1,761,567	\$1,163,097
Law Enforcement	\$16,947,356	\$13,991,916
Fisheries	\$9,256,215	\$7,534,678
Wildlife	\$18,754,006	\$14,493,435
Wildlife Diversity	\$700,000	\$451,113
Transferred to Department Administrative Expenses	\$4,453,000	\$3,955,293
TOTAL	\$51,872,144	\$41,589,532

* The budget figures on this report reflect the approved spending authority for Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. They are not a representation of the available cash.

Funding includes Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration monies apportioned to Alabama based on the state's geographical size and hunting and fishing license sales.

Seventy-seven percent of the variance between the total budget and expenditures is unspent capital outlay monies that have been retained and carried forward to the subsequent fiscal year.

**WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER
FISHERIES DIVISION STAFFING**

	FILLED	VACANT**
FULL-TIME POSITIONS	302	41
PART-TIME POSITIONS	18	12

** Vacancy count is based on the 2021 operations plan.

FISHERIES SECTION

Responsibilities and Functions

The Fisheries Section's mission is to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the freshwater aquatic resources of Alabama.

Accomplishments

Technical Assistance: Fisheries biologists conducted 225 biological checks of private ponds and provided practical solutions in writing for identified issues. Staff members participated in several meetings and conference calls concerning the licensing and relicensing of hydroelectric projects. Staff personnel provided technical assistance to government and non-governmental agencies (NGO) on 578 occasions. District biologists investigated eight reported fish kills and cases of pollution. Formal reports prepared by the investigators were sent to the appropriate agencies.

Environmental Affairs: Staff reviewed, investigated, and commented on 86 water-related permits and environmental impact statements with potential adverse impacts to state aquatic resources.

Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs): During FY 2020-2021, a total of 243,849 anglers harvested 267,658 fish weighing a total of 213,325 pounds from 20 of the 23 state-operated PFLs. Each angler averaged 0.91 fish per trip that weighed an average of 1.3

pounds each. The number of anglers fishing at Alabama's PFLs increased by 22% over the previous fiscal year. That increase is likely related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fisheries biologists and support staff made 97 visits to PFLs to evaluate the condition of fish populations and to conduct various operational and maintenance activities. The Carbon Hill, Eastaboga, and Marion fish hatcheries stocked 1,221,828 fish into Alabama's PFLs. This included forage fish stockings by district staff. Species stocked included bluegill sunfish, channel catfish, hybrid striped bass, redear sunfish, and threadfin shad. Additionally, 4,000 pounds of rainbow trout were stocked into Madison County and Walker County PFLs for a winter fishery.

Barbour County PFL was drained this fiscal year to repair a drain valve and to enhance future fishing opportunities. The drain tower was replaced with a new fiberglass drain tower along with a new drain valve. Fisheries staff also built a new courtesy pier near the boat ramp to allow easier access for anglers to enter and exit their boats. Additionally, the lake was replenished with new fish habitat to enhance future fishing opportunities.

Major spillway, dam, and parking lot renovations were conducted at Washington County PFL. In preparation for the lake's reopening in the spring of 2021, staff stocked the lake with 2,180 channel catfish. The lake was also stocked with threadfin shad to provide additional forage for predatory fish species such as largemouth bass.

Access Areas: During the year, Fisheries Section personnel conducted routine maintenance and inspection visits at 114 fishing access areas. The amenities at these locations included 143 boat ramps with 185 launch lanes, 123 courtesy piers, and parking spaces for 3,958.

Fisheries personnel completed routine tasks such as servicing, repairing, and maintaining project equipment and ordering materials to complete various maintenance activities. In addition, staff completed general construction as well as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and maintenance inspections at 95 access areas statewide. Maintaining access areas makes up a large portion of the annual boating access budget. At access areas statewide, staff remedied 117 maintenance issues, including launching slab repairs, pier upkeep, tree/debris removal, parking lot repairs, parking lot resurfacing and striping, erosion control and corrective action, replacing signage, storm damage cleanup, etc.

New construction is another vital part of the boating access area program. A large renovation was completed at the Claysville access area, which included an expanded launching slab and parking lot, an overflow parking lot, and three new access piers. Construction of a new 400-foot wharf-style pier was also completed at the Leesburg access area.

Fish Hatcheries: Fish production goals in FY 2020-2021 were met or exceeded for Florida largemouth bass, channel catfish, striped bass, hybrid striped bass, white bass, white crappie, southern walleye, bluegill, and redear sunfish. Section staff

stocked these and other fish species into public waters statewide, including PFLs, for a total of 2,549,992 fish (Table 1). Improvements were made at two of the three state fish hatcheries, including replacing water supply lines, replacing water valves, adding new roofs, and installing LED lighting.

Public Water Fish Stockings by Permit Holders: Four permits for stocking fish in public waters were issued to individuals representing agencies and organizations. A list of the fish species and sites stocked by permit holders is provided in Table 2.

Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS): These are species introduced outside of their native ranges that can create negative impacts to endemic species in aquatic environments. ANS pose a significant threat to the State of Alabama. ANS are a direct threat to recreational and commercial fishing resources and can have significant adverse impacts to local economies dependent on aquatic recreational activities.

The expansion of silver carp moving upstream in the Tennessee River from the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is the most immediate threat to Alabama waters. Our agency is currently conducting field sampling and cooperating with the state fisheries agencies of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky, as well as the USFWS and the USGS, to monitor silver carp expansion in the Tennessee River. Fisheries staff performed 103 field days sampling for invasive Asian carp and associated work on the Tennessee River. The primary sampling methods utilized were electrofishing and gillnetting. Section staff also revised the Alabama ANS Management Plan and formally submitted it to the National ANS Task Force for final approval.

Staff were involved in discussions with the TVA and other relevant agencies regarding the need for several types of deterrents on the locks of the Tennessee River dams. Research is still being conducted on the effectiveness of these barriers.

Publications: Fisheries Section staff prepared several scientific journal articles for publication. Staff also provided their knowledge to outdoor writers upon request for information pertinent to Alabama's vast aquatic resources.

Fisheries Research: Through the Investigation and Management Techniques for Public Waters Project (formerly Sport Fish Restoration F-40) and other related projects, three studies concluded with investigators from the Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences (AU-SFAAS): "Exploring the Use of Hard Part Microchemistry to Evaluate Fish Movement Among Areas in the Harris Dam Tailrace," "B.A.I.T. Program Genetic Assessment," and "Distribution, Status, and Genetics of Stream Dwelling Black Bass in Alabama." One ongoing study continued with investigators from AU-SFAAS: "Fish Kill Loss Valuation Through Estimation of Angling Effort and Use Valuation on Three Mid-Size Alabama Rivers." One study was concluded with investigators from the University of West Alabama: "Status Survey of Southern Walleye." During the fiscal year one new study was initiated with AU-SFAAS: "Development of a Database and Tools for Analysis of Alabama Reservoir Fisheries Data."

TABLE 1:**FISH STOCKED DURING FY 2021 INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS THROUGH THE FISHERIES SECTION'S PROGRAMS**

Species	Inch Groups	Number
Largemouth Bass - Florida	more than 14 inches	17
Striped Bass - Gulf Race	1 inch	612,595
Hybrid Striped Bass	1-1.25 inches	496,380
White Bass	1-3 inches	23,600
Channel Catfish	4-20 inches	124,336
Bluegill Sunfish	1-3 inches	1,012,911
Redear Sunfish	1 inch	72,520
Southern Walleye	2-10.5 inches	131,699
White Crappie	2-4 inches	44,100
Rainbow Trout	8-14 inches	31,834
TOTAL		2,549,992

TABLE 2:**FISH STOCKED BY PERMIT HOLDERS INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS DURING FY 2021**

Species	Location	Date	Number or Weight
Rainbow Trout	Black Creek (Gadsden)	11/17/2020	850
Rainbow Trout	Black Creek (Gadsden)	2/8/2021	850
Rainbow Trout	Mill and Mud Creeks at Tannehill State Park	4/28/2021	600 pounds
Largemouth Bass	Guntersville Reservoir	5/29/2021	100,000

Reservoir Management: Largemouth bass, Alabama bass, spotted bass, black crappie, white crappie, skipjack herring, redear sunfish, sauger, threadfin shad, and gizzard shad populations were sampled by several methods, including electrofishing, trap netting, prod pole, seining, and/or trawling in the following water bodies: Wheeler, Wilson, Pickwick, Guntersville, Cedar Creek, Harris, Weiss, Jones Bluff, Jordan, Holt, Warrior, Demopolis, Aliceville, Gainesville, Eufaula, Gantt, and Claiborne reservoirs as well as the Mobile Delta. Specimens were collected, measured, and weighed. Many were also aged to determine growth rate and sexed to determine sexual maturity and ratios. Thermal and oxygen profiles were collected from most of the previously mentioned reservoirs. Reconnaissance surveys were completed on some reservoirs where standardized sampling was performed. The results are incorporated into reservoir management reports. Relative values of angler harvest, effort, and pressure were collected by creel surveys on selected reservoirs. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, creel survey effort was significantly reduced to protect the health of Division employees and the public.

General Surveys: Staff completed general surveys at Neely Henry, Lay, and Holt reservoirs as well as Lake LU, Buttahatchee Creek, and several small streams in Tuscaloosa, Cullman, Blount, and Bibb counties. They sampled redeye bass at Little Wills, Enitachopco, and Crooked creeks. Blackwater Creek and the Sipsey River were sampled to determine the abundance of Southern walleye. Genetic samples and inventories of largemouth bass were obtained from Cowikee and Barbour creeks (Lake Eufaula).

Aquatic Education Program: Section staff, with assistance from other Division sections, conducted 129 aquatic education events for 3,279 participants. These included 62 community fishing events offered to 1,294 participants. Staff also conducted 25 fishing classes for various audiences, serving a total of 407 participants. Staff taught casting classes for 347 participants during 16 events. Staff presented 20 talks about Alabama's aquatic resources to an audience of 540 participants. Additional fisheries-related information was presented to 691 attendees at 3 display days and 3 other events throughout the state.

Rivers and Streams Fisheries Program: Staff conducted 150 biological sampling trips during the year and reviewed, approved, and/or disapproved 359 general and 168 state-protected scientific collection aquatic permit applications. Southern walleye from Hatchet Creek, Lake Mitchell, were collected to establish broodstock. In addition, staff conducted Southern walleye sampling in the Conecuh, Coosa, and Tallapoosa rivers, although no fish were collected.

Staff collected fall-spawned Gulf sturgeon eggs in the Choctawhatchee River in October 2020. Staff also implanted 10-year sonic tags in 23 Gulf sturgeon to examine movements and spawning migrations of spring- and fall-spawned fish. A passive acoustic array has been established in the upper Choctawhatchee and Pea rivers of Alabama to monitor their movements and habitats. Staff collected water samples in the lower Tombigbee River to determine if Alabama sturgeon are still present through the extraction and detection of DNA (i.e., environmental DNA) in

these water samples. These detections will guide future sampling efforts for Alabama sturgeon of when and where to sample for the world's most rare and endangered sturgeon species.

Staff conducted stream index-of-biotic-integrity (IBI) sampling at 32 sites in 21 streams throughout the Cahaba River basin in collaboration with Auburn University to determine the health of streams inhabited by Cahaba bass.

Collecting of American eel specimens along with gathering citizen scientist reports to assess the species status in the freshwaters of Alabama continued. Staff continued to collect bowfin as part of other sampling activities to gather basic biological data as this species is becoming more important in the caviar industry.

Freshwater Mollusk Management and Research: Section staff conducted 40 biological field trips to sample streams throughout the state. These focused on mussels and snails to document distribution, locate broodstock for use at the AABC, and provide specimens for various genetic studies. Staff provided assistance and consultation regarding mollusk issues to the USFWS, TVA, USGS, Geological Survey of Alabama, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Alabama Power Company, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, Auburn University, University of Tennessee, University of North Carolina Charlotte, and the University of North Alabama.

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC): Staff assisted with numerous research, recovery, and monitoring activities in FY 2020-2021. AABC assisted in research projects with USFWS, USFS, USGS, USEPA, University of Alabama, and Auburn University.

Because FY 2020-2021 was an extremely wet period, staff also completed monitoring of selected conservation targets throughout the state. Staff stocked 1,650 individual mussels of two different freshwater mussel species into a single drainage and 2,082 individual snails of three different freshwater snail species into two different drainages (Table 3). AABC staff completed 61 biological trips in support of aquatic species research and recovery activities statewide, and provided technical assistance to other state and federal agencies as well as NGOs on 156 occurrences. AABC staff also participated in 30 technical meetings across the state and were involved in nine outreach activities with other government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs. Additionally, AABC staff assisted with the publication of three scientific articles.

Endangered Species (Section 6) Aquatic Studies: Through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act), staff participated in the following studies: Project 194 "Recruitment, Abundance and Habitat of Juvenile Gulf Sturgeon in the Upper Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers," Project 195 "Assessment of Gulf Sturgeon Spawning Races in the Choctawhatchee River, Alabama," Project 196 "Using Environmental DNA to Detect Alabama Sturgeon in the Tombigbee and Alabama River," Project 197 "Stream Bed Assessment for Alabama Pearlshell," Project 206 "Assisting with the Collec-

**TABLE 3:
FRESHWATER MOLLUSK STOCKING ACTIVITIES BY AABC STAFF IN FY 2021**

Species	Locality	Date of Release	Number Stocked
<i>Epioblasma capsaeformis</i> - E Oystermussel	Paint Rock River (PRRM 20.1), above Butler Mill, Madison County, AL	10/2/2020	500
<i>Lemiox rimosus</i> - E Birdwing Pearlymussel	Paint Rock River (PRRM 33.3), Jones Property, Jackson County, AL	10/2/2020	575
<i>Lemiox rimosus</i> - E Birdwing Pearlymussel	Paint Rock River (PRRM 20.1), above Butler Mill, Madison County, AL	10/2/2020	575
<i>Leptoxis foremani</i> - E Interrupted Rocksnail	Terrapin Creek, downstream of CR 71 Bridge crossing, Cherokee County, AL	7/6/2021	681
<i>Leptoxis picta</i> - P1 Spotted Rocksnail	Cahaba River, gravel upriver of AL 82 Bridge crossing, Bibb County, AL	9/13/2021	656
<i>Leptoxis compacta</i> - P1 Oblong Rocksnail	Cahaba River, Mohan Forever Wild Tract, Bibb County, AL	9/13/2021	745
TOTAL			3,732



tion of Environmental DNA Water Samples for the Detection of Alabama Sturgeon," Project 207 "Warrior Pigtoe Survey in the Locust Fork of Black Warrior River," Project 208 "Diet Analysis to Determine Relative Food Sources of *Fusconaia escambia*," Project 209 "Using Environmental DNA to Detect and Monitor Alabama Cavefish and Alabama Cave Shrimp," Project 215 "Using DNA to Verify the Identity of Gulf Sturgeon Eggs Collected from the Choctawhatchee River," Project 216 "Pale Lilliput (*Toxolasma cylindrellus*) Survey in Paint Rock River Tributaries, Alabama," Project 217 "Oblong Rocksnail (*Leptoxis compacta*) Status Survey, Culture and Reintroduction Effort in the Cahaba River Basin," Project 218 "Epioblasma penita Distribution and Potential Habitat in the Buttahatchee River of Alabama," Project 219 "Updated Surveys and Status Assessment for *Ptychobranchius jonesi*, in addition to other Federally and State-Listed Species, in the Pea River Watershed." Formal final and interim reports prepared by the investigators were sent to the appropriate agencies.

Future Issues

Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs): Contracting with qualified lake managers at rural lakes is an ongoing issue. Low fishing rates at some rural public lakes and aging lake facilities also remain a concern. Alternative management options are being evaluated for the lesser-used PFLs. Maintaining a consistent algal bloom remains a continual challenge at some of the public fishing lakes, which in turn can cause dense aquatic vegetation growth. Experimenting with various fertilization rates, fertilizer types, and distribution methods will be utilized to assist in these issues.

Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS): These species will continue to pose a significant biological and economic threat to the state. Staff will continue to monitor their prevalence statewide and implement regulations or recommend control methods where applicable.

Riverine Habitat: The loss of riverine habitat due to water flow and/or temperature-related issues in Alabama has resulted in the decline or loss of numerous fish, snails, and mussels. Therefore, our agency will continue to document habitat loss and advocate for hydropower companies to provide remediation measures. A statewide comprehensive water plan that emphasizes instream flow protection for the benefit of aquatic wildlife and habitats would be very beneficial.

Fish Hatcheries: The entire state fish hatchery system (Eastaboga, Carbon Hill, and Marion) has many maintenance issues and renovation needs due to age. Many production ponds, drain kettles, water supply lines, drainage lines, facility buildings, and electrical power supplies need to be repaired or replaced. A long-range plan has been developed with prioritized issues to address these concerns over time.

Fishing License Sales: The typical trend of stable to decreasing revenue from the sale of fishing licenses remains a concern since this funding is the lifeblood of the Fisheries Section's conservation efforts. Efforts to reverse this trend include staff conducting casting and fishing classes as well as increased assistance with other agency programs. Renewed and increased marketing efforts are

being conducted to encourage new fishing license buyers and increase lapsed license renewals.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION

The Law Enforcement Section of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF-LE) provides assistance in the protection and management of Alabama's wildlife resources and the safety of the public through a fair and balanced enforcement program.

Accomplishments

During 2020, 39.5 million new guns were sold in the U.S. This record number of first-time gun buyers sought out educational opportunities related to their firearms. To meet that demand, the Law Enforcement Section's Hunter Education Unit began teaching firearms safety and marksmanship courses in 2020 at the Division's public shooting ranges. The courses have continued and have been wildly successful, garnering national attention and being recognized by the National Shooting Sports Foundation as an effective method to reach and benefit new constituent groups, secure future funding opportunities, and increase relevancy. The only requirement for participation in these courses is the purchase of a hunting, fishing, or Wildlife Heritage license.

In FY 2020-2021, WFF-LE discovered that staffing our shooting ranges increased use, providing outdoor recreational opportunities to a very diverse user group and helping to increase license sales. This drove the Law Enforcement Hunter Education Unit to seek out property for new range development. Land was identified in south Shelby County that will become the future site of a state-of-the-art shooting sports complex. The purchasing process was started in late 2021 and is expected to close in early 2022.

The Rural Operations for Law Enforcement Training that WFF-LE's Training Staff conducts continued to be a successful tool in the coordination of efforts with other law enforcement agencies. The training was taught to three different groups of county sheriffs' deputies during the year. However, the pinnacle of success was reached when the training staff traveled to Arkansas early in the year and taught the inaugural Instructor Trainer course to a group of instructors representing the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. This course proved even more successful when, a few days after the course concluded, a student put those methods into practice. He joined other Arkansas wardens in the life-saving rescue of a lost hiker in a wildlife management area in below-freezing temperatures. The Rural Operations Training Program continues to be a valuable tool for the education of WFF-LE staff as well as providing much-needed training to other law enforcement agencies.

WFF-LE hired 12 new employees last year, including welcoming our first officer of Asian descent. This continues WFF-LE's trend

toward diversification of its force. WFF's efforts have been recognized nationally by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The Dispatch Center, created through a partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission, continues to work well for WFF-LE officers. This system provides officers with reliable, around-the-clock contact with the Dispatch Center for all necessary assistance. Officers continue to build relationships with local police departments and sheriffs' offices and utilize their dispatchers when necessary in the coordination of efforts to provide services to the public.

Training on the five Ruger precision rifles purchased in 2020 with restitution monies was completed in late summer 2021. These firearms were issued to firearms instructors and those officers proficient with bolt-action rifles and will be used to collect Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) samples from deer.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic continued to pose significant challenges to all aspects of WFF-LE operations in FY 2020-2021, including to the educational tools of outreach and training, an Advanced Waterfowl Enforcement class was taught, with the aid of the USFWS agent stationed in Alabama, at outdoor venues in all enforcement districts during the spring and fall. This training focused on recognizing and identifying violations involving migratory bird species and the protection of those resources.

Awards

The Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers Association selected Conservation Enforcement Officer (CEO) Ben Kiser of Calhoun County as its 2021 Officer of the Year. The Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation presented its Conservation Officer of the Year Award to Senior CEO Drake Hayes of Shelby County. The Mississippi Flyway Council's Officer of the Year Award winner for Alabama was Senior CEO Kirk Smith of Montgomery County. The Shikar-Safari International Club presented Senior CEO Aaron Green of Russell County its Officer of the Year Award. Officer Green was also recognized as the Alabama Officer of the Year by the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The Alabama Wildlife Federation presented Senior CEO Rodney Knight of Marion County with its Conservation Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award.

Future Issues

Hiring 12 new law enforcement officers in February 2021 helped relieve some of the burden on the section after nine full-time officers retired in 2020. Training and retaining new officers continue to pose challenges due to the low number of qualified applicants seeking employment in the field of law enforcement. WFF-LE continues to operate at a historically low staffing level.

Concerns related to the pandemic will continue to be a challenge for WFF-LE as first responders are constantly engaged

with members of the public. The safety and health of our law enforcement officers is a priority so that they can effectively respond to the public's complaints and concerns.

WILDLIFE SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

The mission of the Wildlife Section is to manage and enhance the wildlife resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the resource and the people of Alabama.

In 1937, legislation for the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, became law under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This Act placed a 10% excise tax on arms and ammunition to provide secured funding to states for the sole purpose of funding state wildlife conservation/restoration and hunter education programs. These federal dollars pay up to 75% of approved projects as matching funds with state hunting license dollars completing the remaining 25% of required funding. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) disburses these monies to states based on the size of the state and the number of hunting licenses sold. This funding mechanism represents one of the few "user pay" government agency programs, primarily funded directly and indirectly by its users and participants.

PUBLIC HUNTING OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

Wildlife Management Areas: Wildlife Section staff managed more than 790,000 acres within the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Special Opportunity Area (SOA) system. During FY 2020-2021, section staff held 6,323 managed hunt days on the 35 WMAs and 10 SOAs. WMAs also provided opportunities for trapping, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping, research, and nature study. To support public recreation opportunities on the WMA/SOA system, staff maintained 139 office and operation support buildings, maintained equipment, painted and placed signs on 249 miles of property boundaries, maintained boat ramps, applied aggregate (crushed rock) to refurbish 87 miles of WMA public access roads, and maintained 86 access, parking, and campground areas.

Additionally, staff conducted prescribed burns on 24,941 acres of wildlife habitat, maintained 278 miles of fire lanes associated with prescribed fire activities, maintained 4,368 acres of wildlife openings and early successional habitat, and performed invasive species control for both plants and animals to enhance habitat for wildlife populations and public enjoyment.

Physically Disabled Hunting Areas: The Hunting Trail for People with Physical Disabilities continued to be a well-utilized program. The trail has 19 hunting areas located in 21 of Alabama's 67 counties. This innovative program provides opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities to participate in hunting in an environment developed to meet their needs.

Youth Hunting Programs: Staff continued supporting the section's youth hunting programs by conducting 23 youth dove hunts across the state in 15 counties. The programs are a cooperative effort between ADCNR, Auburn University, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), local vendors, and private landowners. The 2021 youth dove hunts had 603 youth participants with 122, or 19.4%, being first-time hunters. Additionally, 22 WMAs hosted youth deer hunts and 23 WMAs hosted youth turkey hunts on the weekends prior to the opening of regular gun seasons.

Land Acquisitions for FY 2021:

- Acquired 955 acres for the Cedar Creek SOA (Dallas County) through a partnership between the Wildlife Section and FWLT
- Acquired 165.78 acres for the Prairie Glades SOA (Montgomery County)
- Acquired 223 acres through the Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) for the Mobile-Tensaw Delta & W.L. Holland WMAs (Mobile and Baldwin counties)
- Acquired 2,245 acres through FWLT for the Thigpen Hill SOA (Butler County)
- Acquired 23 acres through FWLT for the Perdido River WMA (Baldwin County)
- Acquired 3.77 acres for the Coosa WMA for shooting range access (Coosa County)

Forest Management Activities: WMA biologists, in coordination with Wildlife Section foresters, worked to promote forest health and enhance habitats within the WMA system to benefit wildlife year-round. Revenue generated from timber sales on Wildlife Section-owned lands was used for general management efforts such as tract reforestation and/or utilized to fund additional land acquisitions. Forestry actions for the 2020-2021 fiscal year included the following:

- Autauga WMA: 215 acres were reforested with longleaf pine. An additional 115 acres of recently harvested timber reserve were treated with herbicide with plans to reforest with longleaf pine in winter 2022.
- Barbour WMA: 400 acres of recent clearcuts were treated with herbicide with plans to reforest with longleaf and loblolly pine in the winter of 2022. Right at 660 acres of timber were sold, encompassing 425 acres of pine and hardwood thinning and 234 acres that will be clearcut. Also, harvests on 1,700 additional acres of thinning and final harvest timber sales approached 60% completion.
- Cedar Creek SOA: 116 acres of recently harvested timber reserve were reforested with slash and longleaf pine, and the additional 1,070-acre timber sale targeting cedar trees reached approximately 40% completion.

- Geneva State Forest WMA: A 900-acre thinning and micro-chipping project and the stand treatment contract for 350 acres of understory mulching were both completed. An additional 772 acres of microchipped pine plantation thinning was sold.
- Lauderdale WMA: Harvests on 1,400 acres of thinning approached 35% completion.
- Lowndes WMA: Contractors have completed approximately 85% of a 380-acre thinning sale.
- Portland Landing SOA: The 940-acre pine plantation's first thinning sale reached approximately 60% completion.
- Skyline WMA: 225 acres of pine clearcut and hardwood thinning harvest reached approximately 65% complete, and an additional 418 acres of pine and hardwood thinning were sold.
- Upper State SOA: 88 acres of hurricane salvage was sold.

Timber stands on the WMA system will continue to be evaluated and monitored for emerging forest health issues. Treatments will be implemented as needed to ensure forest resources remain healthy and supply ample wildlife habitat to meet the section's needs. Thinning sales are being planned for specific tracts located on Autauga, Freedom Hills, and Geneva State Forest WMAs, as well as Upper State and Portland Landing SOAs.

Invasive species such as tallow tree, Japanese climbing fern, and bicolor lespedeza were scouted and treated throughout the WMA system. Additionally, the aggressive nature of Cogongrass has made Wildlife Section staff more vigilant in spotting and treating infestations statewide. Scattered areas of the grass have been undergoing treatment on the Fred T. Stimpson and Upper State SOAs, as well as the Upper Delta, Geneva State Forest, and Barbour WMAs. The infested areas have been significantly reduced, but monitoring and chemical control will continue.

GAME SPECIES PROGRAMS

White-tailed Deer Management: Information was collected on various WMAs and other sites to determine deer hunter participation and success, the physical condition of deer, and the status of deer populations. A hunting activity telephone survey was conducted that supplied valuable data. The data were used in determining recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits and evaluating the success of each hunting season.

Hunters reported 195,122 deer harvested through the mandatory deer and turkey harvest reporting system (Game Check) during the 2020-2021 hunting season. The 2020-2021 season was the fifth year for mandatory reporting of all deer harvests.

Samples from 2,164 deer were collected and tested for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) as part of WFF's statewide CWD surveillance efforts with no detections of the disease. Staff completed revisions of WFF's CWD Strategic Surveillance and Response Plan.

Wild Turkey Management: Wild turkey observation, harvest, and reproduction information was collected statewide through the Avid Turkey Hunter Survey (ATHS) and wild turkey brood survey. Data on gobbling activity (number of gobblers and gobbles heard), turkeys seen, and gobblers harvested for each day hunted during the spring season was collected by 259 avid turkey hunter survey participants. ATHS data was used to monitor trends in gobbling activity, population, sex and age structure, harvest timing, and harvest rates. Wildlife Section personnel and volunteers collected observational wild turkey brood data in July and August 2021. They reported 879 observations of turkeys (hens, poults, and gobblers), and each observation during any day was recorded separately. The data were separated by five WFF districts, by six ecoregions (Piedmont, Southeastern Plains, Ridge and Valley, Southwestern Appalachians, Interior Plateau, and Southern Coastal Plain), and by public or private lands. Brood survey data was used to monitor trends in reproduction and the associated survival of poults being recruited into the population. The results of the ATHS and brood survey were published in the annual Full Fans & Sharp Spurs wild turkey report. The ATHS and brood survey data was also used in combination with results from the Game Check harvest reporting system and Responsive Management post-season harvest survey to structure recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits.

Hunters reported 14,915 harvested male turkeys through the mandatory Game Check system for the 2020-2021 hunting season. The Responsive Management post-harvest survey estimated 25,468 male turkeys were harvested in the 2020-2021 hunting season.

In addition, section staff continued to conduct game camera brood surveys in July and August 2021. These surveys were conducted on Autauga, Barbour, Blue Spring, Cahaba, Coosa, David K. Nelson, Freedom Hills, Geneva State Forest, Lauderdale, Little River, Lowndes, Mulberry Fork, Oakmulgee, Skyline, and Yates Lake WMAs. Staff also conducted surveys on Portland Landing and Uchee Creek SOAs. The game camera survey results will be compared to incidental observation results. These projects will continue in the coming years.

Mourning Dove Management: The annual mourning dove study, as part of a nationwide project, consisted of trapping, banding, and releasing mourning doves. For this project, 1,354 mourning doves were banded and released, and the data was submitted to the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). USFWS will analyze data from reported band returns to provide parameters needed for dove population modeling such as band return rates, migration, harvest rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Waterfowl Management: Annual biological surveys and research continued throughout the state to obtain information on waterfowl and their habitats to inform management of species. Aerial waterfowl censuses were not conducted in FY 2020-2021 due to unforeseen plane and pilot circumstances. Hunter bag checks were continued in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the Tennessee River Valley during fall and winter. As part of the

nationwide project, 550 wood ducks were banded and released in Alabama, and data was submitted to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory. USFWS will analyze data from band returns to provide parameters needed for wood duck population monitoring such as band return rates, migration, kill rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Research: For FY 2020-2021, \$1.2 million in Wildlife Restoration Federal Assistance funds and approximately \$150,000 in external sponsorship funds were used to support seven cooperative research projects between WFF and five different universities. Of these cooperative research projects, 12 were ongoing from previous years, and two new projects were established this past year. Agency staff worked with Auburn University, Mississippi State University, the University of Tennessee, Eckerd College, and Cornell University.

NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Bald Eagle Population Monitoring: Since the bald eagle was removed from the Threatened and Endangered Species List in 2007, Alabama bald eagle nests have been randomly monitored for productivity and survivorship. Biologists continued to record newly discovered or reported eagle nests and monitored the number of bald eagles overwintering in Alabama as part of the nationwide 2021 Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey. The number of bald eagles wintering in Alabama remains stable.

Golden Eagle Migration Project: Golden eagle camera surveys were conducted in Alabama on six WMAs, three SOAs, and one national forest with assistance from Wildlife Section staff and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff to assess the eastern population of golden eagles. The presence of golden eagles was confirmed at six camera sites, including the newest southerly location of Upper State SOA. These surveys are revealing more information on the winter ecology of golden eagles to allow for better management efforts. Biologists did not attempt to trap golden eagles during the 2021 season due to travel restrictions. Biologists continued to track the eagles with active transmitters. Data gathered from the tracked birds will help to assess wintering golden eagle habitat in Alabama as well as provide information about their migration pathways and breeding habitat.

Annual Breeding Bird Surveys: Nongame Wildlife Program biologists participated in the continent-wide Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) program administered by the USGS in 2021. Surveys were halted temporarily in 2020 due to concerns over COVID-19. Over the last 26 years, our nongame biologists completed 205 BBS routes. The BBS program is the most important census program for tracking the population trends of landbirds across the landscape.

Christmas Bird Count: Conducted annually during December and January for more than a century, the Christmas Bird Count serves to gather winter population data on all bird species in the U.S., Canada, and many countries in the Western Hemisphere. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists assist by conducting one

Christmas Bird Count in south Alabama on Dauphin Island. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists also lead the Montgomery County Christmas Bird Count.

Wading Bird Rookery Surveys: Wading bird rookery surveys were conducted across the state to monitor known breeding locations and to survey for additional sites. A total of 31 rookeries were surveyed with 18 of those being active. During the surveys, five wading bird species were detected. Surveys will continue to better assess trends of breeding wading birds in Alabama.

Coastal Shorebird Surveys: Mobile County contains all the important shorebird nesting sites in the state with Gaillard Island being the single most important site. The island is home to nearly 10,000 nests of brown pelicans and laughing gulls. Also nesting on the island are at least 375 pairs of royal terns, Caspian terns, gull-billed terns, and black skimmers. In the Mississippi Sound, over 450 pairs of royal terns, Caspian terns, and black skimmers nested on Cat Island. On nearby Marsh Island, 2,000 pairs of royal terns, 100 pairs of sandwich terns, and 50 pairs of Caspian terns nested. Two miles to the west of Marsh Island is Isle Aux Herbes. During 2021, 110 black skimmers, Caspian terns, and gull-billed terns nested there along with four pairs of American oystercatchers. For the second consecutive year, tropical weather events impacted nesting in Alabama. Tropical Storm Claudette in June and Hurricane Ida in August disrupted and destroyed tern and skimmer nests on Marsh Island and Isle Aux Herbes. While a majority of royal terns hatched before flooding caused by Claudette, many nests were still lost. Caspian tern nests were nearly totally lost, and black skimmers were not successful nesting on Marsh Island at all. On Isle Aux Herbes, nesting was severely impacted as well. The nearby completed Lightning Point restoration project at Bayou La Batre has favorable habitat for shorebird nesting, but flooding from tropical storms thwarted efforts there as well in 2021.

Bat Population Monitoring: Field work involving bats was greatly curtailed in 2021 due to concerns about human to bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19 disease). A panel of experts convened by the USFWS and USGS determined the virus represents a credible, non-negligible risk to bats in North America. These bats do not carry the virus but potentially could become a reservoir. Until a better understanding of the risk to bats is understood, handling and close contact with bats will be avoided unless critical to promote the conservation of the species. No capture of bats by mist-netting was conducted in 2021. A partnership was entered with USFWS and USFS to conduct passive acoustic monitoring on national forests in Alabama with known populations of Indiana bats and/or northern long-eared bats. The purpose of the research is to refine the level of effort required by the USFWS to detect these species, listed under the Endangered Species Act, when conducting summer presence/absence surveys for regulatory compliance. WFF's bat biologist coordinated this effort in Alabama. Results are pending.

Bat Conservation Outreach: WFF's nongame biologist for north Alabama serves as the leader of the Alabama Bat Working Group (ABWG). The mission of the ABWG is to communicate, collabo-

rate, and coordinate efforts to conserve bats in Alabama. ABWG undertakes two major events each year to promote bat awareness and conservation in Alabama – an annual meeting and a Bat Blitz. These events were cancelled in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eastern Spotted Skunk Research: The Nongame Program continues work to better understand the distribution and habitat use of eastern spotted skunks in Alabama. Once considered common, the size and stability of the population in Alabama is now unknown. WFF nongame wildlife biologists conducted camera surveys for spotted skunks in north Alabama from November through May. Sites surveyed were Black Warrior WMA (Bankhead National Forest) in Lawrence County, Freedom Hills WMA in Colbert County, Lauderdale WMA in Lauderdale County, Riverton WMA in Colbert County, Joe Wheeler State Park in Lauderdale County, The Nature Conservancy's Sharp-Bingham Mountain Preserve in Jackson County, and the Land Trust of North Alabama's Bethel Spring Preserve in Madison County. In these areas, cameras were placed at 49 distinct locations. Ten additional sites in Bankhead National Forest were surveyed by Rollins Jolly, a biologist with the USFS. Eastern spotted skunks were detected at Lauderdale WMA and Black Warrior WMA. The skunk captured on camera at Lauderdale WMA was wearing a collar. It was previously captured in 2019 and collared for research. An extensive effort was made to capture the skunk and remove the collar to retrieve the data, but it was not seen again after initial detection on camera.

Endangered Species (Section 6) Research: WFF received \$438,482 in federal funds for projects on fish and wildlife species eligible for funding under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act. Approximately half of the total funds were for projects administered by the Wildlife Section. Population and status surveys for the gopher tortoise, red-bellied turtle, Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, and Black Warrior waterdog, along with red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) translocation and habitat restoration on state lands, are examples of projects made possible by those funds.

American Alligator Populations: American alligator population and harvest surveys are conducted annually throughout its range in Alabama. Data from these surveys are used to manage our alligator resources and make harvest recommendations for each of the state's five hunt zones. Population surveys are used to evaluate overall trends in alligator abundance, and hunter harvest data is also collected annually from all alligators harvested within each zone to evaluate the health of the population. Harvest information such as body weight, length, sex, and harvest location are collected. This information provides insights regarding trends in health as well as sex and age structure of our alligator populations. Long-term trends from harvest and population surveys continued to indicate that Alabama's alligator population is stable, and a conservative harvest is sustainable. Interest in the hunts increased in 2021, with a total of 5,829 applications being received for the 260 available tags. This was a 9.6% increase from the 5,321 applications received in 2020. Hunter success

rates decreased 3.9% from 2020, with a 58.5% success rate throughout the five hunt zones. Success rates within each hunt zone are as follows: Southwest 65% with 65 harvested, Coastal 56% with 28 harvested, West Central 64% with 32 harvested, Southeast 45% with 18 harvested, and Lake Eufaula 45% with nine harvested. The hunts continue to increase in popularity, providing hunters with additional opportunities to enjoy a unique hunting experience. To further understand and manage alligator resources in Alabama, WFF initiated a collaborative research project with other state agencies and universities to obtain information regarding hunter harvest management, public satisfaction, and baseline population health within the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Falconry Permits: The Nongame Wildlife Program administers falconry permits in the state and provides technical assistance to permit holders, which involves administering falconry exams, performing facility and equipment inspections, allocation of permits, and data entry into the federal database. As of September 30, 2021, Alabama had 70 individuals permitted to practice falconry in the state. Of the 70 falconry permit holders in Alabama, four are apprentice class, 33 are general class, and 33 are master class.

In FY 2020-2021, four previously permitted falconers did not renew their permits. Four new apprentice falconers were issued permits after successfully passing written examinations and after having equipment and facilities approved. Three falconers from other states moved to Alabama and transferred their permits. Madison County has 12 falconers, the highest number in the state.

PRIVATE LANDS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Technical Assistance: The Wildlife Section employs seven biologists dedicated to providing technical assistance to private landowners, corporations, hunting clubs, and government agencies. Throughout the year, biologists made contacts and provided onsite inspections, reviewed and drafted management plans, and conducted various other management outreach activities to enhance wildlife management of Alabama's wildlife resources. One of the most popular avenues for dispensing wildlife management advice is through the agency's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). DMAP included 137 landowners and hunting clubs with 422,028 acres enrolled last year.

Providing landowners and land managers technical assistance in implementing strategies to improve wildlife habitat on their lands continued to grow in importance. As a result, a mutually beneficial 10-year partnership continued with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This partnership helps private landowners with obtaining farm bill program assistance while delivering better wildlife management advice. Under a cooperative agreement, technical assistance biologists worked out of NRCS offices and worked with NRCS personnel to deliver the programs. Seven section biologists worked in this partnership in FY 2020-2021. Biologists met with landowners to develop conservation

plans and contracts. Biologists also participated in numerous workshops, tours, presentations, working groups, and training sessions that reached hundreds of landowners and dozens of natural resource agency personnel. This partnership with NRCS will continue in FY 2021-2022.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Meetings: Wildlife staff continued meetings and site visits with personnel from Alabama Power Company (APC) associated with the Coosa Wildlife Management Plan, Harris Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project, and Martin Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project. Staff reviewed documents regarding the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for the hydroelectric projects at Martin, Jordan, Mitchell, and Weiss lakes. Plans are required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Staff will continue active involvement in the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for all projects associated with hydroelectric power generation.

East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture: Wildlife Section personnel continue to participate in various aspects of the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture, a partnership of 13 state, federal, private and academic organizations that lead a regional habitat conservation movement founded on a science-based, landscape-scale strategy. The partnership can more effectively secure a sustainable future for birds and habitats.

Nuisance Wildlife: Nuisance wildlife information was disseminated to the public through a variety of media outlets, educational workshops, technical literature, and personal correspondence. Due to their destructive nature and negative impact on wildlife habitat, feral hogs are of serious concern in Alabama. Partnerships continued across the state with personnel from ADCNR, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and USDA Wildlife Services to provide informative workshops regarding feral hog biology, impacts of feral hogs on wildlife habitat, disease implications, current control methods and techniques, and the need to eliminate relocation of this species. Control of other nuisance and predator species, such as beavers, coyotes, and raccoons, also generates many requests for assistance from landowners and land managers due to their potential impacts on game species, including white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. Personnel conducted and assisted with numerous workshops and seminars around the state to educate landowners, hunting clubs, forestry owners, etc., with information to be proactive in their nuisance wildlife management activities. Additionally, informative articles about dealing with these species were made available to the public online through the www.outdooralabama.com website. Personnel utilized the ADCNR nuisance manual to provide the public with current information on nuisance wildlife species and ongoing nuisance issues across the state.

Trapper Educational Workshops: The Wildlife Section conducted eight furbearer trapping workshops for youth and one for adults. Workshops were held in Escambia, Jackson, Jefferson, Baldwin, Butler, Covington, Talladega, and Barbour counties. Student participation in the workshops included 138 youth with average age of 10.4 years old. Of the 138 students, 32.6% were

female. Sixty-four adults also attended the workshops. Many of our youth student participants were accompanied by a parent or guardian, creating an extended reach that benefited both students and parents/guardians who participated.

The two-day program begins on a Saturday morning with classroom presentations on trapping history, furbearer management, responsible trapping and conservation, and trapping laws and regulations. Presentations then continue with additional discussion on trap and snare types, trapping equipment and lures and baits, and hands-on trap-setting familiarization. Saturday afternoons are devoted to trapline scouting and making sets with mentors. On Sunday mornings, the students meet at predawn to check traps and pull their trapline. The rest of the day is devoted to fur-handling methods and techniques.

Plans for FY 2021-2022 are to conduct nine two-day workshops throughout Alabama: November 6-7, 2021, in Hamilton; December 4-5, 2021, in Greenville; December 11-12, 2021, in Talladega; December 18-19, 2021, in Centreville; January 8-9, 2022, in Leeds; January 15-16, 2022, in Piedmont; February 12-13, 2022, in Hollywood; February 19-20, 2022, in Spanish Fort; and February 26-27, 2022, in Troy. Workshops are conducted in a two-day format to improve attendance and decrease the travel time and expenses of attendees.

FUTURE ISSUES

Public Hunting: The loss of leased land in the WMA system is a continued concern. The leased acreage within the WMA/SOA system experienced a 0.85% decrease in FY 2020-2021 over the previous hunting season. Land acquisitions supported with Federal Grant Programs are pursued each year to help offset losses in our private land leases. During FY 2020-2021, Pittman-Robertson Federal Assistance funds were used to purchase 955 acres that were added to the Cedar Creek SOA. Additionally, 166 acres were purchased creating the new Prairie Glades SOA. More leased land is likely to be lost in the future as private and corporate landowners withdraw from their contractual agreements. The section will attempt to contractually lease or fee-simple purchase other lands and provide additional incentives to encourage landowners to include lands in the program. WFF will also continue to work with the FWLT to acquire land for public hunting.

Nuisance Wildlife: The occurrence of nuisance wildlife problems and conflicts continues to rise, especially as we deal with an increasingly urbanized society. This portion of the public is unfamiliar in dealing with wildlife issues. Also, the urban/suburban setting limits common solutions to deal with many of these problems. At the district level, a considerable amount of work time is spent providing assistance on nuisance wildlife calls. As the Division becomes more active in dealing with these non-traditional wildlife issues, time management and funding will become more challenging. The Division's Wildlife Section has issued approximately 103 nuisance wildlife control operator permits across the state. These permits allow private companies/individuals to deal with nuisance wildlife issues.

State Funding: Federal funding associated with the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act has increased significantly during the past five years. The matching state dollars required to fully utilize all the federal dollars (25/75) have been limited and could lead to reversions of federal dollars if matching opportunities are not available. WFF staff has collaborated with the Forever Wild Board and worked cooperatively to utilize Forever Wild funding as a state match source. This assists in capturing the federal apportionment that is beyond the amount our traditional state dollars can match, thereby providing aid for land acquisitions into the WMA system. We are exploring other options to fully utilize our federal dollars through partnerships with outside entities and third-party, in-kind match.

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND REACTIVATION

Public Hunting: R3 is short for Recruitment, Retention, and Re-activation. This concept applies to every facet of the Department from its educational outreach efforts to recruiting new hunters and anglers through programs such as Go Fish! Alabama and the Firearms 101 workshops. R3 also focuses on the retention and reactivation of hunters and anglers by providing quality outdoor recreational opportunities at Special Opportunity Areas. These are just a few of the examples of ongoing R3 efforts.

The Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries' (WFF) mission to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the wildlife and aquatic resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama relies heavily on a funding model supported by the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. For this reason, recruiting new license buyers, retaining existing license buyers, and reactivating lapsed license buyers is vital to ensuring the future of conservation stands on solid ground for generations to come.

In FY 2020-2021, WFF hired a full-time R3 Coordinator and conducted Division-wide training to ensure R3 was top of mind for everyone. Moving forward, the Division will continue conducting outreach events, improving user experiences, providing access, focusing on customer service, and managing the wildlife and aquatic resources for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama.

Go Fish! Alabama (GFA) Program: WFF Aquatic Education staff conducted 25 Go Fish, Alabama! events using the Mobile First Catch Center from May to December 2021. These efforts included 16 instructional events and nine promotional events. The total number of program participants for this period was 435 individuals. Instructional events reached 212 participants under 16 years of age (non-license holding individuals), 170 licensed individuals between the ages of 16 and 64, and 53 individuals over the age of 64 (non-license holding). These instructional events included 86 presentations, each 20 minutes in length.

Adult Mentored Hunting (AMH) Program: The AMH Program is designed to provide participants with little or limited experience an opportunity to learn basic hunting skills and receive one-on-one guidance from veteran mentors. One-day Hunting 101 workshops were offered throughout the state at wildlife



management areas (WMAs) and mentored hunts were hosted at Special Opportunity Areas (SOA) throughout hunting season. In FY 2020-2021, WFF hosted six Hunting 101 workshops and five multi-day mentored hunts with a total of 135 participants – 18% were female and 15% were minorities. Four events were conducted in Dallas County, three in Shelby County, and one each in Barbour, Mobile, Madison, and Autauga counties. These events were conducted in partnership with the Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Firearms 101 Program: WFF Law Enforcement staff conducted 40 four-hour firearms classes that introduced new shooters to firearm safety and marksmanship skills. The classes were taught throughout the state at WMA public shooting ranges. These classes were in response to the recent surge in new firearm ownership, and they have been an overwhelming success. In 2021, 350 participants took at least one of the four-hour courses. Many of the participants enjoyed it so much that they took additional courses. Of those 350 participants, 123 were male, 227 were females and 194 were first-time license buyers.

CONSERVATION OUTREACH

WFF's Conservation Outreach Program provides public communication, outreach, and education services in an effort to increase awareness of the Division's wildlife management programs, accomplishments, policies, and related topics. The program is also designed to encourage interaction between the public and the Division.

The Conservation Outreach Coordinator assists the public regarding hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, and any associated laws and regulations by directly answering questions from those who would like to know more about Alabama's wildlife and fishery resources.

Throughout the year, the program coordinator monitors the Division's interactions with the public and makes recommendations regarding public needs and requests from the Division. The

program coordinator also provides guidance and support to other ADCNR staff who are interacting with the public at a variety of outreach events.

The program coordinator's outreach efforts during FY 2020-2021 included the following:

- Appeared on various TV broadcasts throughout the state to discuss WFF-related topics
- Provided interviews to print and online media throughout the state
- Interacted with the public through WFF's social media in an effort to promote public engagement with the Division
- Represented the Division at various trade shows, expos, and professional meetings
- Responded to landowner and media questions regarding wildlife identification and other WFF-related topics
- Assisted hunters with locating Wildlife Management Areas throughout the state
- Assisted non-resident hunters with planning their trips to Alabama
- Helped promote the Division's Firearms 101 and Go Fish, Alabama! programs
- Reviewed printed materials for distribution to the public and made recommendations to make those products more informative and easier to understand
- Helped produce educational videos about Alabama's wildlife, fisheries, and regulatory topics



RECRUIT
RETAIN
REACTIVATE

THE NEXT STEP IN ALABAMA'S RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND REACTIVATION (R3) PROGRAM

By Chuck Sykes, Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

Like many other states, Alabama has taken an active role in the nationwide R3 movement. Organized sports, ballet and gymnastics, video games, and many other activities have pushed time in the woods or on the water out of the limelight for many families. Combine that with the mass exodus of people leaving rural locations, moving into urban and suburban environments, and losing their connection with the land, and it's no wonder that for decades hunting and fishing participation has been on a steady decline nationwide.



However, the COVID-19 pandemic has given relevancy back to the outdoor pastimes many of us hold dear. Thousands of Alabamians discovered – or rediscovered – the outdoors as a safe place of fun and beauty, exercise and respite during the pandemic. As a state agency, our biggest challenge is to remain relevant with this new user group while not alienating our core groups of hunters and anglers. In other words, we still need to dance with who brought us here. But we can't squander the opportunity to bring new users into the fold.

That is where R3 comes into play. R3 is the recruitment, retention, and reactivation of hunters, anglers, and recreational shooters. Alabama has been on the leading edge of many of these efforts. The Alabama Adult Mentored Hunting Program is getting bigger and better as it begins its fifth year. For more information on this program, visit www.outdooralabama.com/hunting/adult-mentored-hunting-program.

With this program proving its worth in the R3 area, it's time to introduce the next step in our R3 program, the Adult Mentored Shooting Events.

During 2020, 39.5 million new guns were sold. This was the single largest firearms purchase year in American history. According to FBI background check statistics, 8 million of those firearms were sold to first-time gun buyers. This provided a unique and much-needed opportunity for conservation agencies to recruit new constituents and better educate them about how their gun purchases help to protect the natural resources of our nation. It provided the opportunity to make them aware of their role in conservation efforts through their Pittman-Robertson Act contributions and to educate them about what those funds are being used for in their individual states.

The shooting community is diverse. Those who take up the sport do so for reasons as individually different as the backgrounds and communities they come from. Consistencies among these new shooters do exist, though. All beginning shooters want and need two things: first, a place to shoot their new firearm and second, proper instruction in safe gun handling and marksmanship. The men and women of the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division Hunter Education Unit have been addressing those specific needs for nearly 50 years.

Since 1973, Hunter Education staff have promoted safe hunting practices through educating Alabama's youth. Firearms safety is a crucial subject in all hunter education classes. Additionally, the Hunter Education Unit maintains and operates a robust network of public shooting ranges and archery parks across our state. Being distinctly prepared to address the influx of first-time shooters, Hunter Education decided to begin reaching out to the new user group gained during the pandemic and provide them with the facilities and instruction that they were seeking.

In March 2021, the Mentored Shooting Program was formally added to Alabama's R3 program. That month staff conducted the first of a series of Firearms 101, reaching out to our new shooter group through advertised 4-hour beginner shooting courses hosted at our public shooting ranges. The courses were basic, low-cost (the only fee for the course was the cost of the Wildlife Heritage license that is required to shoot on the range), and fulfilled the shooters' need to learn safety and marksmanship.

The first course was an immediate and overwhelming success. Two sessions were conducted that day, and both were at maximum capacity for the class with an additional 50 students on the waiting list. All the necessary safety gear, firearms, and ammunition were provided. Students learned where their local public shooting range was located and what license was required for its use, and they overcame their fears of stepping out on the range for the first time by learning the etiquette of how to use a public range.

Students received one-on-one instruction from a local Conservation Enforcement Officer, which provided a great opportunity for our staff to make connections in the community. For many in the class, this was their first interaction with a "game warden." At the conclusion of the class, the students learned how their license and equipment purchases had provided for everything in use that day, including the salaries of the men and women who instructed them. All in attendance were amazed to learn that they contribute 100% of the funds used to protect and enhance wildlife simply by purchasing a license and equipment and enjoying their sport.

As the new shooters learned, so did we. We discovered that 95% of course participants had never purchased any form of license in the past. We were immediately bombarded with requests for more classes so that friends and family members could share the same experience. Many emailed with stories of return trips to the range and with new firearms purchases. Courses continue to be scheduled and held each weekend at our public shooting ranges across the state. To date we have yet to have a single vacant slot in any course.

To say this series of courses has been a success is a gross understatement. We have found a way to become connected with a diverse and massive new user base and to enhance our relevance by providing things the public needs. Courses continue to be added weekly, and future rifle and shotgun classes are in development. If early success is any indicator, the Mentored Shooting Program will continue to grow. Our only challenge is keeping up with the demand. ■



Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
64 N. Union St., Montgomery, AL 36130
334-242-3151

OutdoorAlabama.com