

**To: Honorable Governor Terry E. Branstad  
Members of the Iowa General Assembly**

**From: The Iowa Natural Resource Commission**

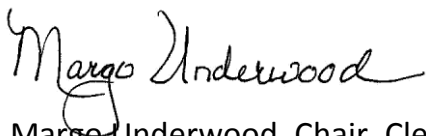
**Date: January 8, 2016**

## **2015 Annual Report and Recommendations**

The Iowa Natural Resource Commission (NRC) respectfully submits its Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly of Iowa. The report represents the major activities and accomplishments of the NRC for 2015 and includes the commission's recommendations for policy and legislative changes for 2016.

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

Sincerely,



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

Dr. Sally Prickett, Vice-Chair, Glenwood, IA  
Kim Francisco, Secretary, Lucas, IA  
Marcus Branstad, Adel, IA  
Conrad Clement, Cresco, IA  
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Dennis Schemmel, Grimes, IA

**Iowa Natural Resource Commission  
2015 Annual Report and Recommendations**

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

The NRC implores the Governor and General Assembly to hold the protection and enhancement of Iowa's natural resources in the highest regard during the legislative process. The NRC regards natural resources management to be an inherent duty of decision-making legislators, and the preservation and enhancement of the state's natural wonders should also be viewed as economic development tools.

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

Public polling continues to illustrate that the majority of Iowa's citizens want broader recreational opportunities and restored natural resources. The electorate overwhelmingly approved the Iowa Land & Water initiative in 2010, sending the message that they are willing to pay the price for cleaner air, soil and water. Similarly, Polk County voters authorized its Conservation Board to borrow \$50 million to be spent over the next 20 years on natural resource enhancements and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Yet while the DNR continues to face stiff challenges in its charge to protect and enrich Iowa's inherent resources, department under-funding remains the most daunting obstacle. **Two key fiscal challenge areas for FY2016-2017 are operating Iowa's state parks and recreation areas with fewer park staff and maintaining solvency of the Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund.**

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

## Iowa Natural Resource Commission 2015 Major Accomplishments

- Twenty-eight Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) city and county grant projects were approved in the amount of \$3,641,145. If REAP had been fully funded at \$20 million, which was the original legislative intent upon passage, another 7 projects worth \$822,497 could have been approved in FY16.
- Forty-three state park improvement projects in 29 different parks were approved in the amount of \$5,788,067. These projects included upgrading aging and storm damaged infrastructure, improving wastewater treatment and sewer lines, repairing roads and damaged infrastructure, renovating existing park facilities and adding new facilities such as ADA compliant restrooms.
- The NRC approved 8 Lake Restoration Program contracts and 9 engineering projects. The Lake Restoration Program has 21 lake restoration projects in progress and 14 projects in initial evaluation or planning stages throughout the state.
- Under the Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP), the NRC approved habitat restorations on 22 sites totaling 3,200 acres. Since the IHAP began, there are now 61 sites totaling 9,250 acres that are open for public hunting during the 2015-16 hunting season.
- Educational programs to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) continued in 2015. Seventeen seasonal AIS staff conducted 10,000 watercraft inspections reaching over 26,000 people with the message to prevent AIS. Two hundred access point surveys were completed at boat ramps and fishing jetties on high use water bodies to identify any new infestations of AIS.
- The NRC approved public land and conservation easement acquisitions totaling 4,150 acres, protecting the natural resources and providing Iowans with new and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities. 3,800 of these acres directly impact water quality and watershed improvement efforts. In 2015, the DNR paid \$934,519 in property taxes on public land.
- The Forestry Bureau's Woodland Health Initiative continues to provide technical assistance to communities and rural landowners. Assistance was provided to 137 communities and 27 community tree inventories were completed. Forty one Emerald Ash Borer Workshops were held with 1,634 attendees.
- A Teal Waterfowl hunting season was held September 5-20, 2015. This was the second year of an experimental 3-year teal season in Iowa. Feedback from hunters was largely positive and overall compliance was very good.

**Iowa Natural Resource Commission  
2015 Major Accomplishments (continued)**

- Youth participation in mentored hunting and fishing programs, hunter education classes and shooting sports in schools continued to expand across Iowa in 2015: 87,442 youth learned about Iowa's natural resources through local school and community-based programs, and 63,834 youth participated in school and community-based fishing programs.
- The NRC continued its vigilance in approving 98 engineering, construction, and public capital improvement projects totaling \$12,191,436.96 on DNR public lands and Wildlife Management Areas. The NRC encouraged green construction practices and the implementation of Low Impact Development (LID) techniques. \$1,480,942.60 of the above projects total was associated with lake restoration, watershed, and water quality improvement projects.
- The NRC established hunting and fishing seasons and regulations and secured land management issues including leases and conservation easements.

## Iowa Natural Resource Commission 2016 Legislative Recommendations

As the new General Assembly convenes, the NRC urges the Iowa Legislature to lend due recognition in its decision-making process to the DNR. Recommendations of the NRC are:

- **Fund the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) at \$20 million which was the original legislative intent of the program.** The original REAP formula used to allocate the REAP funds for a variety of programs should be maintained. REAP grants are time-tested to be highly successful avenues for the state, counties and cities to fund conservation, recreation, historical, and infrastructure projects.
- **Fund the DNR's Lake Restoration and Water Quality Improvement Programs at \$9.6 million annually.** Iowans value healthy lakes and respond to restoration projects by significantly increasing recreational usage. The highly successful lake restoration projects add to the state's overall water quality, currently an important topic with the Environmental Protection Agency.
- **Continue the multi-year funding for state park infrastructure improvements.** The Legislature's annual \$5 million appropriation, which began in 2012 to upgrade aging and deteriorating infrastructure in the state parks system, should be maintained, leveraging resources by partnering with the Iowa Parks Foundation.
- **Educate the appropriate resource user groups and decision makers of the impacts of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) and the importance of preventing the introduction and spread of AIS.**
- **Support the Woodland Health Initiative** and provide \$1,900,000 in Community Woodland Health for grants, technical assistance, and education to an additional 75-100 Iowa communities.
- **Recognize and support the DNR's communication and outreach programs** designed to increase younger Iowans' connections with the State's natural resources. Youth participation in mentored hunting and fishing programs and hunter education and shooting sports in school programs are vital in keeping future generations interested in, and working for, outdoor recreational opportunities.
- **Support and expand the Iowa Habitat Access Program (IHAP).** Currently 9,250 acres are voluntarily enrolled in the program at 61 sites.
- **Raise the state sales tax by one percent, automatically devoting 3/8 of each penny to the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund for the betterment of Iowa's natural resources.** This is prescribed by the passage of the 2010 Iowa Constitutional ballot initiative, which resulted in the addition of Article VII, Section 10, to the Iowa Constitution. This funding, as recommended by the Sustainable Funding Advisory Committee, would dedicate an estimated \$150 million annually to the state's woefully under-funded conservation, habitat, water quality, and recreational initiatives.

## Conclusion

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

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

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

We encourage the Governor and Iowa Legislators to discuss solutions to two key fiscal challenges for FY2016-2017: operating Iowa's State Parks and Recreation Areas with fewer staff and maintaining the solvency of the Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund.

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

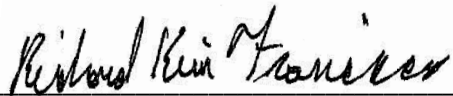
Respectfully Submitted,  
The Iowa Natural Resource Commission



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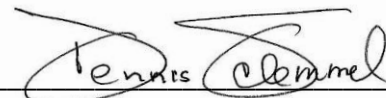
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