

## 2011 WNS Symposium Summary:

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This year's WNS Symposium took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, May 17-19. 130 federal, state, academic, and non-governmental organization folks working on WNS attended, including a few European guests. 14 attendees were NSS members, and were represented in all of the above groups. This was the fourth annual gathering. Earlier meetings took place in Albany, Austin, and Pittsburgh.

The first day and a half was dedicated to research update presentations. Many of these were continuations of papers presented in prior years' meetings or at the North American Symposium on Bat Research. The two major highlights here were:

1. 18 American bats were inoculated with the European *Geomyces destructans*; 18 American bats with the U.S. version; and 18 control bats were given sham inoculations. Both sets of inoculated bats developed WNS. This result gives strong support to the hypothesis of introduction from Europe.

2. Hazel Barton reported research from Kevin Keel that shows that 50 degree Celsius water (122F) for 15 minutes kills *Geomyces destructans*. This is hotter than typical wash water, but less than boiling. It provides a non-chemical alternative for decon.

Several of the papers presented are pending publication. One interesting one, "Little Brown Myotis Persist Despite Exposure to White-Nose Syndrome," by Christopher Dobony, et al at Fort Drum, New York, has just appeared in the *Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management*. Its primary topic discusses how bats that show wing damage from WNS can heal, survive, and reproduce. However, the study also shows for the first time that viable conidia from the *Geomyces destructans* fungus are found on the bats at the summer maternity colony (bat house).

The next day and a half was dedicated to working on the WNS National Plan, which was announced and publicly released on the first day of the meeting. Attendees broke in to working groups as per the Plan, and began fleshing out implementation plans.

Personally, I spent a half-day with the Disease Management working group, then split my time between the Recovery and Conservation Group/Species Recovery sub-group and a special session for state agency personnel. With this latter group, I was part of a panel presentation explaining the role of the NSS and our members/grottos etc. helping with hibernacula identification, public education, and caver education.

There was lots of networking time, too, to catch up with folks the NSS has funded and worked with across the country. Here are some highlight observations from the Symposium:

1. It seemed that most western state officials attending recognized that the USFS Region 2 blanket closure actions, and how they were initiated, were not helpful, and didn't want to duplicate them. NPS and BLM folks spoke positively about the roles cavers have played and continue to play. They and the state folks are skeptical about cave closures, but still feeling pressure from the feds and from the threat of lawsuits from CBD. I spent a couple hours conversing with the Colorado Division of Wildlife Species Coordinator, Tina Jackson, who had positive things to say about the Convention organizers. She expressed a little anxiety about having so many cavers descend (ascend?) at once, but I assured her we've done this before, and that many attending the Convention are busy with meetings and other activities and won't be caving. Again, she seemed very much pleased with the convention planning. I believe it is critical that we continue to build and maintain good relationships like these, with a demonstrated track record of good will and positive results.

2. The Disease Management researchers and field managers seemed to grow increasingly pessimistic about finding any sort of cure, treatment, or magic managerial bullet for stopping WNS. With federal and state budget restrictions, the ability for researchers to have a significant impact in time to affect the natural disease progression is limited. Not that anyone is giving up, but the tone was sobering. Further, there is a serious concern about a shortage of bats for research, and it is likely that some researchers will be denied access.

3. As a result of the Disease Management situation, Field Management seems to be shifting to

Conservation and Recovery. How can species be preserved? What field techniques can be applied to assist survivorship, such as habitat manipulation? An example of this was described by Tom Kunz, Boston University, for maternity colonies. It used to be that we would see fairly large (500+ animals) roosts that were able to generate a lot of heat, which is necessary for successful birth, lactation, and juvenile growth. Now, with maternity colonies much smaller in the WNS-hit region, he's found that the addition of wooden baffles in the ceilings of barns, sheds, etc. can concentrate heat and help smaller maternity colonies be more successful.

4. There is still a lot of talk about artificial hibernacula, as well as captive breeding colonies. Re the former, Cory Holliday's Tennessee underground project is on its way to being built, with more than half the funds raised. Regarding the captive breeding colonies, my suspicion is that lack of funding and continuing controversy over that approach will limit experiments in that regard.

5. Regarding funding, it was announced that \$1.9 million of USFWS funding was being made available from this year's base appropriation. This is NOT new congressional action, but simply USFWS taking money away from other things within its reduced budget. Next year's budget is clearly looking worse, but that's what we've been working on in DC. This \$1.9 million will be spread out to the states in an as-yet-to-be announced format. However, spread among 27 states, this is about \$70,000 per state - which won't really do much more than pay for some staff time for monitoring and surveillance. Funding realities will be the biggest damper on national Plan activities, and severely limit research.

6. Species listing: there were two impromptu sessions on the subject of list more bat species as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act - one for the Northeast, where states are in various stages of listing certain species, and a second where one USFWS official was leading an effort to have national listing of all hibernating bat species in the U.S.. That was the subject of serious debate, with many people opposing that approach. Reasons given ranged from not enough information on various bat species, to unnecessarily riling up opponents, such as the western timber industry, to taking attention away from the importance of regional or national listing of the Little Brown Bat, which is arguably the most seriously affected and the one species for which the case could be made and a status report request has been filed.

7. A new national WNS website is being developed for both the public and for the research and management communities. A brief presentation on this was given, but we're probably a good six months away from implementation. The goal of USFWS is to have a single place where everyone can go for information, data, outreach materials, and management policies. The general public would have access on some levels, and the research and management community would have additional access through passwords, etc. It's not clear how access would be determined, but the federal government tends to be highly protective of information, despite working for the public.

Of course, there were many more details from the workshops and presentations, and certainly from the networking that takes place at these meetings. Last year, the WNS Symposium was held in Pittsburgh, PA, and the abstracts were posted. However, unlike the Austin, Texas and Albany, New York conferences, no work product was produced. This is unfortunate, as those work products were extremely helpful in sharing understanding of the status of WNS and its current research and management, as well as expressing consensus priorities for efforts in both of those areas. We have no such product from last year, and it's unclear what will be forthcoming from this year. We have requested that the abstracts be posted, but there is nothing as of this writing.

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