

**WNS Liaison Report
to the
NSS President and BOG**
February 27, 2011

Introduction:

White Nose Syndrome continues to expand. Indiana and North Carolina have now been added to the list of states with confirmed cases of WNS. Many more sites in Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania have also been reported as of this writing. Given that we are mid-winter, we expect reports to continue through the spring bat emergence – typically through late April until the lab analyses are completed. So far, no new distant “jumps” of WNS have been reported.

In New York, winter bat counts seem to have stabilized. Does this mean we’re seeing some resistance or recovery in the bats six years into the disease? It’s too soon to tell, and research on the subject is just beginning.

Several states are moving on the issue of listing hibernating bat species as endangered or threatened, including Wisconsin, Vermont, and Massachusetts. There has been no action to date on the federal petitions filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, but the publication in 2010 of the research predicting the likely northeast regional extinction of the Little brown bat has fueled additional pressure.

State and federal wildlife and land management officials have moved to prevent the potential spread by human transport by enacting a variety of either targeted or blanket closure orders and WNS management plans. We expect this trend to continue, especially as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s draft national WNS plan is revised, adopted, and implemented. With research funding in short supply, most activity can be expected to take place on the management side of things, affecting access to caves.

Progress:

- Attended the North American Symposium on Bat Research, Denver, CO, October 26-30. Networked with bat researchers the NSS has funded and may fund; attended and participated in all WNS-related presentations on the latest research. Met with numerous Colorado cavers.
- Filed detailed comments for the NSS on the USFWS draft national WNS plan at the end of December. Thanks to John Hoffelt, Allen Padgett, Chrys Hulbert, and Lynn Buffkin for their excellent work on this, and to many others who provided input. Over 9000 comments were received by the USFWS – still being reviewed.
- Coordinated with Val Hildreth-Werker, John Hoffelt, and Rod Horrocks to recruit NSS members with a variety of expertise for participation in the WNS National Plan Working Groups. This was submitted by Rod, through the Conservation Division, at the time of the draft national WNS plan comments.

- Worked with USFWS to update their cleaning and disinfecting protocols, which were posted in January. Continued to consult with Aaron Bird, Chair of the Safety and Techniques Committee, which has produced an excellent series of NSS WNS Decon videos. Links to all of the above have been posted on the NSS' WNS website.
- Awarded one new WNS Rapid Response Fund grant, bringing our total grant awards to thirteen projects. We hit a milestone at the end of 2010, with over \$100,000 donated to the RRF (\$102, 084.50 as of Jan. 11, 2011), and over \$80,000 awarded.
- Submitted major WNS article to NSS News for April's Conservation issue.
- Submitted Hellhole Cave, WV, WNS bat survey project article and photo collage to NSS News for same issue.
- Continue to consult frequently with cavers in many states over evolving management issues. This includes work on state plans, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, USFWS, and U.S. Forest Service plans and activities (including the MOU between the NSS and the USFS), the 2011 NSS Convention, and requests for public or conference talks on WNS.
- Met and consulted with Vermont's Secretary of Natural Resources on WNS issues, including the addition of the Little brown and Northern Long-eared bats to the state's Endangered Species list.
- Continued to coordinate advocacy in Congress for WNS research funding.
- Continually update the NSS WNS website, with superb support from Alex Sproul
- Continue to handle media inquiries and do interviews.

Problems:

- In our October report, we wrote that "the USFWS caving Advisory is 18 months old and woefully out of date and not reflective of the science that has evolved since its original issuance." This is still true, now 4 months later. When WNS was reported in Indiana, a cave owner threatened to bulldoze shut her historical, beautiful, non-bat cave. A local caver with a good relationship with the owner intervened, but it prompted a stern letter to USFWS that these are the sorts of unintended consequences an unbalanced approach to cave and cave resource management can have, if all anyone is paying attention to is bats.
- As of this writing, Wisconsin's controversial rule-making on WNS management continues to be an issue, with the state legislature about to hold hearings on its agency activities, prompted by the response from the caving community. The strategy of sealing caves in Wisconsin has now just been suggested for a cave in Colorado in a preliminary management document, so this bears close watch.
- Congressional research funding for WNS has disappeared. As I write this report on Feb. 27, Congress is struggling not to shut down the federal government, not having yet passed a budget for the federal fiscal year 2011, which began October 1, 2010. No new designated funding for WNS is forthcoming in the 2011 federal budget, and no new WNS funding was proposed in the Administration budget submittal for federal fiscal year 2012. The fiscal and political climate in Washington is not conducive to additional funding. What this means for the ambitious undertakings envisioned in the USFWS draft national WNS is certainly questionable.
- The spread of WNS continues. While some potential treatments are being tested, there is no cure to date – and none seems likely. Resistance is perhaps showing up in

northeastern bats, but populations are decimated. Several states have added bat species to their endangered species lists, and more are pending. With those additions, wildlife managers will be looking to develop habitat designations, recovery plans, and other management initiatives. How all this will affect access to caves for other purposes remains to be seen, but any plans enacted are likely to be long-lived, so up-front input from the caving community is critical.

- With the higher national profile of WNS, and federal ownership of vast amounts of land in the western U.S., access to caves on those lands will continue to be threatened by management decisions. Active plans are in place already on some National Forest, BLM, and National Park lands. Local caver involvement is critical as these plans develop. Outside pressure from environmental groups, such as the Center for Biological Diversity, will continue to push both state and federal agencies to close caves.
- Access to caves for non-bat scientific research is a problem. We have several instances where academic researchers working on biology, hydrology, and geology have been denied access or access threatened.
- Caver unrest over WNS is at an all time high, presenting challenges for our external relations, as well as internally. The NSS risks losing influence and relevance unless the Society and its members remain continually engaged at the ground level with local agencies and their representatives, at the policy level, and with the media and public. We could do a far better job as a Society in educating the public about caves and all their resources – including bats – and what we do as cave experts to promote and enhance the appreciation of everyone for these magnificent resources. I believe the Society leadership – officers and board – need to model appropriate actions and to support and encourage individual participation in WNS efforts, and to become much more proactive in public relations. That will take commitment and resources at the board level.

Plans:

- Working with Cheryl Jones to complete development of a conference/event portable display on WNS and the NSS for educational and public relations purposes.
- Attend the May 15-17 annual WNS Symposium in Little Rock, Arkansas. The latest in WNS research and management plans will be presented and discussed, especially the USFWS response to draft national WNS plan comments and the roll-out of national plan working groups and activities.
- Continue to foster NSS and caver participation in WNS planning, management, field activities and public and educational outreach efforts. It is critical for the long-term viability of caving that our membership stays involved and visible at the local level. Maintaining and building these local and regional relationships are critical to the health of the NSS as an organization, and caving as an activity.
- Work with 2011 NSS Convention staff on a WNS program.
- Continue regular activities regarding the updating of the website, managing the WNS grants, responding to the media, and being the go-between for the caving and science and management communities.
- Monitor congressional budget activity on WNS funding and encourage and guide individual contact with representatives and senators.
- Monitor any federal response to the CBD petitions and comment accordingly.

Conclusion:

I believe the next year will be extremely critical for WNS activities. What we're continuing to learn about the disease will inform both management and science decision-making. Both, for better or for worse, will be driven by budgetary considerations. The coming year will also be critical for access to caves for all purposes, particularly as management increases focus on the western U.S.

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