

White Nose Syndrome Liaison Report
to the
NSS President and Board of Governors
September 24, 2011

Introduction:

In the short time since the NSS Convention, little has occurred on the WNS front. Bats are on the summer landscape, so no new WNS reports have come in. There has also been a loud silence on the management front, with little to no reported activity regarding cave closures or the WNS National Plan. I expect things will pick up in the fall.

Progress:

- Made a presentation “Eastern Lessons for Western Consideration” and participated on the discussion panel for WNS at the NSS Convention.
- Made a presentation “**WNS Research Update and Wildlife Management: Where We Are, and Where We May Be Headed**” at the annual convention of the National Caves Association, Luray, Virginia, September 20.
- Awarded three new research grants through the NSS Rapid Response Fund: establishing baseline data on cave microbiota in New Mexico; tracking WNS progression and fungal changes in New Brunswick, and testing a time-released bat pit tag fungicidal treatment in the lab, bringing to 16 the number of grants we've funded.
- Continue to update the NSS WNS website, including the posting of the WNS presentations from the NSS Convention
- Not sure if this is progress or a problem, but a federal judge approved a huge settlement agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the the Center for Biological Diversity and WildEarth Guardians. In exchange for the dropping of hundreds of lawsuits, parties agreed to a multi-year timetable for the review of some 757 pending Endangered Species Act listing petitions. Two of these are the Northern Long-eared bat and the Eastern Small-footed bat, the subject of CBD's 2010 petition. They aren't scheduled for review now until 2013. On one hand, this means there won't be any federal listing for these bats until at least 2014; on the other hand, it may put more pressure on states to list the bats. At least USFWS won't be buried underneath Freedom of Information Act requests and lawsuits. Relieving that pressure may permit them to take a less defensive posture regarding WNS.

Problems:

- Bat mortality numbers from states and provinces remain unreported, despite our calls.
- U.S. Geological Survey issues Sept. 22 Wildlife Health Bulletin saying human transmission of WNS is likely (but citing no new evidence), and that because we can't control bat movement, Universal Precautions, such as decontamination, restricted equipment, and cave closures, are the only viable management tools for wildlife managers.
- Despite announcing in May \$1.9 million re-allocated funds from U.S. Fish and Wildlife for research, no further news of these funds has been forthcoming. This may be due to the high level of fiscal unrest at the Congressional level. Indeed, a House bill that would have completely eliminated any funding for Endangered Species Act activities threatened the agency, but a bi-partisan coalition defeated it. Nonetheless, the debt ceiling deal calls for extensive cuts in federal spending across the board and the agencies working on WNS are unlikely to avoid the budget ax.

- With little prospect for new federal research funding, emphasis will be on management, such as recommended in the USGS Bulletin.
- With a higher level of government ownership of land in the West than in the East, pressure on access to caves will increase, underscoring the necessity for proactive engagement and relationship-building and maintenance between the caving community and the agencies.

Plans:

- Attend and present at the National Caves and Karst Management Symposium in Midway, Utah, October 3-7.
- Complete display on WNS and the NSS for educational and public relations purposes.
- Attend the North American Symposium on Bat Research in Toronto, Ontario, October 26-29, to hear the latest research results on WNS and meet with researchers we have funded or may fund.
- 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.
- Continue regular activities regarding the updating of the website, managing the WNS grants (three inquiries pending), responding to the media, and being the go-between for the caving and science and management communities.

Conclusion:

Bats are just now swarming and mating and beginning to head into hibernation. Our biggest fear is that the toe-holds WNS has in places like Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio mushroom. The multitude of bats and caves in Missouri are definitely threatened. Our biggest hope is that we see little spread of WNS this year. With little new funding for WNS research, the only likely activities will be on the management side. These include pressure to close caves in the West, and recovery activities in the Northeast. The South will likely continue to stand in monitoring mode unless WNS moves into places like Alabama, Arkansas, and Georgia. With field monitoring becoming more sensitive to hibernating bats and the observed progression of the disease within bat colonies, reports on new sites are likely not to come until later in the winter. While those are not optimistic scenarios, the NSS and its members can continue to be critically involved at the state and federal levels, working to lend our expertise to the reasoned development of responses that protect all of the cave resource and our access to it. That access will require work and involvement in things like state WNS plans, federal forest and national park plans, and national working groups. Keeping the NSS in the news through local grotto or regional conservation events, including but not limited to WNS activities, will help maintain and build our image as the experts on caves and conservation.

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