

White Nose Syndrome Liaison Report to the NSS President and Board of Governors

February 19, 2012

Introduction: The major WNS developments since my last report have occurred on the research front. Topping that list was the publication of the study confirming the fungus *Geomyces destructans* as the cause of WNS. Next most notable was the paper confirming the first few WNS bat deaths in Europe, although no mass mortality. In January, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a news release upping its estimate of bat deaths from WNS to “at least 5.7 million to 6.7 million.” The NSS has made a formal request for the data and methodology used to arrive at this estimate, as none was given. The first reports of new WNS sites have just started appearing this winter, and many more are likely by the time the Board of Governors meets. Hopeful signs are the numerous reports of surviving bats are coming in from the Northeast.

Progress:

- Attended the National Caves and Karst Management Symposium in Midway, Utah, October 3-7. Gave the Thursday banquet speech using the theme of “Balance.” At Val Hildreth-Werker's request, recreated that speech as an article for the April Conservation Issue of the NSS News.
- Attended 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 and hear about proposals we may fund.
- Awarded one new research grant through the NSS Rapid Response Fund - "Monitoring Gray Bat (*MYOTIS GRISESCENS*) Populations at a Priority 1 Hibernaculum in Missouri," bringing to 17 the number of projects we've now funded.
- Completed the new NSS/WNS traveling display. Many thanks to Cheryl Jones and Mike Dale for their efforts. This display focuses on the NSS on two side panels and a large center panel - “We Explore,” “We Study,” and “We Conserve.” The Conservation panel actually has two interchangeable panels. One focuses on our WNS efforts; the second is a broader conservation message. It will reside at my house, since I will be taking it to various events, but it will be available for others to use, as well. Interested parties may contact me for scheduling availability. They will be required to pay for shipping costs, sufficient notice to get the display on time, and returning it promptly.
- Congress allocated \$4 million for WNS research and management in the Consolidated Appropriations Bill approved late December. The President's 2013 budget request includes WNS funding for the first time - \$1.87 million in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service submittal.
- Filed a formal letter of request to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asking them to release the data and methodology behind their new estimate of bat deaths from WNS. A concurrent press release drew media attention, including a nationally-distributed AP story and interviews with several journalists.
- Continued to update the NSS WNS website with news, published research, links, and public educational materials. Posted frequently on Cave Chat, and responded almost daily to requests from cavers, scientists, media, and the public.

Problems:

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's newly-released estimate of bat mortalities had no supporting data or methodology. As of this writing, now a month after we sent a formal request for that information, there is no response. In a USFWS WNS blog, USFWS WNS National Coordinator

Jeremy Coleman said, "**The methods we used for this exercise preclude the generation of confidence estimates ...**" which is quite troubling. Perhaps more important than the raw number, however, is whether or not the spread of WNS is accelerating or slowing down. The USFWS release is silent on whether or not the majority of bat deaths occurred in the earlier years of WNS infection, or later. As we continue to examine the details behind the gross number, it will be important to understand these details to help guide intelligent research and management decisions and investments, and to evaluate the results of those decisions.

- The silence is deafening on news or progress on the WNS National Plan. The long-awaited and frequently promised update to the cleaning and disinfecting protocols is still not out. We've made multiple requests, including another recent plea to get these out so that spring caving event planners can have adequate time to plan and post information. Also, despite several requests and promises, USFWS is still resisting adding the NSS-recommended experts to the various WNS working groups.
- The initial USFWS caving advisory remains unchanged, again despite repeated requests and evolving science.
- The ad hoc liaison budget was insufficient to cover our activities this fiscal year. The additional trip to Washington, D.C., and the cost of some of the conferences use up funds well before the end of the year. This despite aggressive cost-sharing and sponsorships for some of the events. It would be good to return to the funding level of past years. Thanks to all who pulled funds together from other sources to help out.
- As we've learned through the regular conference calling with other NGOs working on WNS in Congress, USFWS is not happy that the WNS funding has been allocated out of existing recovery funds, rather than being new money. This is true even for the President's budget request. That may be a moot issue, given election-year politics and the unlikely prospect for anything other than another Continuing Budget Resolution coming out this year.
- Pressure for cave closures continues.

Plans:

- Continue to monitor and report on WNS disease progression through the winter and spring.
- Develop and send out information on use of the new traveling display.
- Coordinate with the new NSS public relations efforts to increase NSS visibility and public understanding of the Society.
- Coordinate with Mayacon 2012 organizers for WNS sessions at the Convention and appropriate decon messages and station for the Convention.
- Attend the WNS Symposium June 4-7 in Madison, Wisconsin.
- Continue working with researchers through administration of the WNS Rapid Response Fund. One research proposal is pending as of this writing.
- Continue to encourage NSS members, grottos, regions, and affiliated organizations to actively participate in cave and bat monitoring with state and federal agencies. This is a mutually beneficial relationship, and can help with broader cave conservation goals and support the NSS' targeted versus blanket closure strategy.
- Work with NSS IT people to reorganize and update the NSS website.

Conclusion:

Early signs this winter are that WNS continues to spread along its geographic edges. Details on the numbers, speed, and other things like species-specific data are in short supply. State and federal agency responses are varied and ever-evolving. News of WNS National Plan activities is virtually non-existent. We pushed for the NSS and cave conservancies to participate in a recent USFWS webinar for land

managers, but were turned down on the rationale that it was too “agency-specific.” After removing agency-specific information and proprietary research (unpublished), links have been put up on the web. A future webinar was promised to be open. Western land agencies appear to be taking a more cautious approach, given no WNS yet in the West. Monitoring bats, developing baseline data, educating the public, and screening and decon are typical activities.

We must continue to stay engaged on multiple levels, and continually evaluate our roles and strategies. Some have called for various legal actions by the Society – such as use of Freedom of Information Act requests, to lawsuits over access to public lands. Our WNS Policy and strategies have guided our actions. Adaptations to those are appropriately debated and adopted at the Board of Governors level, which can take into account the various interests, relationships, and resources within the Society.

The status of WNS has evolved to a national one, but there are now clearly different regions with differing response needs. In the Northeast, WNS seems to have done its worst, and there is evidence bat populations are stabilizing. It's premature to say they are rebounding; that may not be evident for years. At the front lines, such as Indiana, Kentucky, and some Canadian provinces, WNS is hot, and agency and caver responses should adapt accordingly. In the Deep South, and West, we're still in watch and wait mode. All of these specifics present opportunities for effective engagement of our members to both help protect bats, protect access to caves, and enhance the visibility and role of the NSS.

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