

## Department of Natural Resources Timber Harvest Decisions in Wildlife Management Areas

Special Review

Released October 14, 2025

OLA OFFICE OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR



## Background

- DNR manages about 5.6 million acres of land
- Over 1.3 million acres are WMAs
- WMAs must be managed for the benefit of wildlife and related recreation



OLA OFFICE OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR

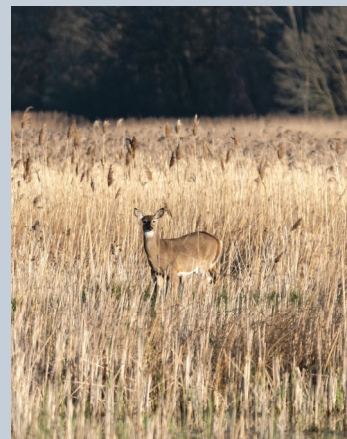
State of Minnesota  
2

## Wildlife Habitat Management

- Create, restore, and maintain habitats to achieve goals
- Habitats provide food, water, cover, and space to wildlife
- Techniques include prescribed burns, brush mowing, forest regeneration, or commercial timber harvesting

## Wildlife Habitat Management (continued)

- Goal: increase white-tailed deer population
- Management activity: harvest timber to create openings in dense forest



## Timber Harvests in WMAs

- WMAs are included in DNR's plans for harvesting timber
- 2018 Sustainable Timber Harvest Analysis
- Concerns raised by the federal government, DNR employees, and wildlife advocacy groups
- 2023 federal grant suspension

## Conclusion

- Uncertainty as to whether DNR has met statutory requirements
  - A lack of plans
  - Poor documentation
  - Conflicting goals
  - Unclear guidance

## Lack of Plans

- Plans establish goals and objectives and provide a basis for measuring performance
- DNR has developed plans for a small number of the state's WMAs
- For WMAs that have had plans, DNR did not update most plans for several decades
- Few plans makes it difficult to assess harvests' consistency with WMA's statutory purpose or DNR's goals

## Lack of Plans (continued)

"Management activities are based on managers' interests and feelings. ... If a WMA had a management plan to indicate what the goals are, **we would have something to work towards together.**"

— Forestry Division  
survey respondent

Little to no documentation [on how timber harvests could improve habitat] occurred prior to late 2023. **We need to develop WMA plans...that help define habitat goals and subsequent timber harvest opportunities that benefit wildlife.**

— Fish and Wildlife Division  
survey respondent

## Recommendation

DNR should:

- Maintain current plans for those WMAs required by law to have plans
- Complete plans for all other WMAs, consistent with its agreement with the federal government

## Few Requirements for WMA Plans

- State and federal laws have few requirements regarding WMA plans
- State law requires a plan for WMAs with a “resident manager” but does not define the term
- No specific requirements for plan contents
- No requirement for periodic plan updates

## Recommendation

The Legislature should:

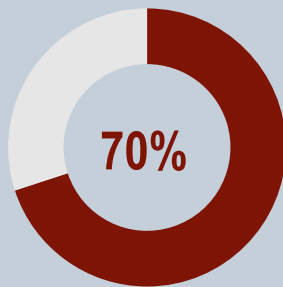
- Specify which WMAs should have individual master plans based on defined criteria
- Indicate what DNR should include in the plans
- Require DNR to update master plans on a specified periodic basis

## Poor Documentation

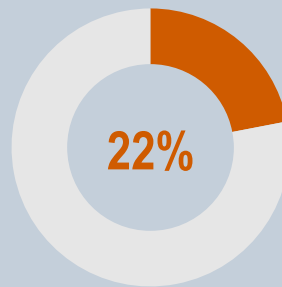
- Poor documentation makes it difficult to assess harvests' consistency with WMA's statutory purpose or DNR's goals
- Repeated concerns about lack of documentation
- Many DNR field staff indicated that wildlife benefits of timber harvests have been poorly documented

## Poor Documentation (continued)

Survey question: Since January 2022, to what extent has DNR documented—prior to approving timber harvests in WMAs—that proposed harvests would result in wildlife habitat benefits?



of Fish and Wildlife  
and Ecological and  
Water Resources  
division field staff  
responded  
"sometimes" or  
"rarely or never"



of Forestry  
Division field staff  
responded  
"sometimes" or  
"rarely or never"

## Conflicting Goals

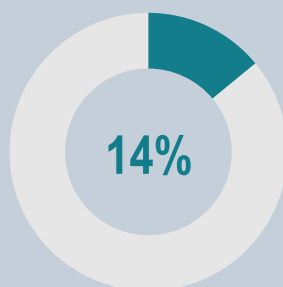
- DNR may harvest timber in WMAs only to protect, perpetuate, or reestablish habitat
- DNR policies and procedures direct staff from multiple divisions to work together
  - Forestry and Fish and Wildlife divisions
  - Ecological and Water Resources Division

## Conflicting Goals (continued)

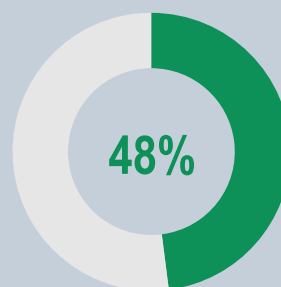
- DNR's procedures and guidelines do not provide clear direction to staff
  - None of DNR's key procedures and guidelines prioritize the statutory purpose of WMAs
- Many DNR staff thought timber harvests in WMAs have not always been consistent with wildlife habitat goals

## Conflicting Goals (continued)

Survey question: To what extent have the timber harvests since January 2022 been consistent with the goals of those WMAs for improving wildlife habitat? (Exhibit 4.1, p. 40)



of Fish and Wildlife  
and Ecological and  
Water Resources  
division field staff  
responded "always  
or almost always"



of Forestry  
Division field staff  
responded "always  
or almost always"

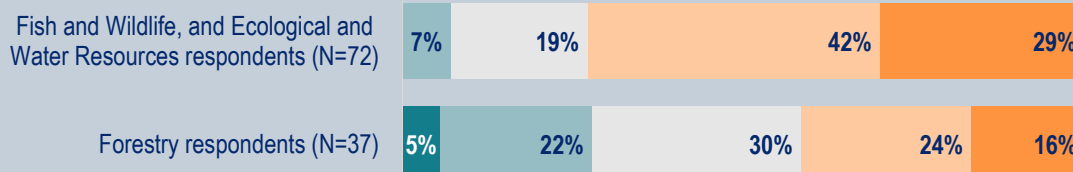
## Unclear Guidance

- Decisions are a shared responsibility
- Not clear who has authority within DNR to make WMA timber harvest decisions
- Guidance from DNR leadership has been unclear and insufficient

## Staff Dissatisfaction

Survey question: Overall, how satisfied are you with DNR's forest habitat management in the WMAs with which you regularly work? (Exhibit 4.4, p. 48)

■ Very satisfied ■ Satisfied ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ■ Dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied



## Recommendation

DNR should:

- Ensure that timber harvests in WMAs are subject to additional scrutiny
- Amend its policies and procedures to emphasize the statutory purpose of WMAs
- Ensure staff receive training and have access to WMA forest habitat management policies and procedures

## ***Department of Natural Resources Timber Harvest Decisions in Wildlife Management Areas***

[www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us](http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us)