



Department of Natural Resources Timber Harvest Decisions in Wildlife Management Areas

A lack of plans, poor documentation, unclear guidance, and conflicting goals have resulted in uncertainty as to whether the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has met statutory requirements to harvest timber in wildlife management areas (WMAs) only for the benefit of wildlife and related recreation.

Report Summary

Federal Grant Suspension

For many years, Minnesota has received federal grant funds to pay for administering timber sales in WMAs, among other wildlife habitat management activities. In August 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—the federal entity that oversees these grants—suspended DNR’s 2021–2023 grant, delayed approval of its 2023–2025 grant, and prohibited timber sales from WMAs due to the Service’s concerns about DNR’s compliance with grant requirements.

- From 2020 through 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service repeatedly told DNR that the department was not properly documenting the wildlife benefits of timber harvests in WMAs prior to initiating those harvests. DNR did not take the steps necessary to comply with federal grant requirements for several years, claiming that its noncompliance was due to misunderstandings. However, there were numerous opportunities for DNR to clarify any confusion it may have had regarding the grant conditions. (p. 10)

Recommendation ► DNR should ensure it understands the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s expectations for its documentation and use of federal grant funds, and it should comply with federal grant requirements. (p. 24)

Wildlife Management Area Planning

WMA plans specify the wildlife habitats a WMA is intended to protect, the goals and objectives of DNR’s wildlife habitat management in the WMA, the activities DNR will undertake to achieve its goals, and the metrics DNR will use to measure its progress toward meeting its goals.

- DNR has developed plans for a small number of the state’s WMAs. Without such plans, it is difficult to determine whether timber harvesting benefits the wildlife habitats WMAs are intended to protect. For the WMAs that have had plans, DNR did not update the plans for several decades. (pp. 25, 29)

Recommendation ► DNR should maintain current plans for all WMAs that have resident managers, as required by state statute; complete its plans for all WMAs it has designated as major units; and work with the Legislature to determine the scale, scope, and frequency of plans for all other WMAs. (p. 33)

Background

DNR manages about 5.6 million acres of land in Minnesota. WMAs constitute a large portion of this land, over 1.3 million acres.

By law, WMAs must be managed for the benefit of wildlife and related recreation. DNR policies and procedures direct staff from multiple divisions to work together to make decisions about whether, when, and how much timber to harvest in WMAs.

In recent years, federal officials, DNR staff, and other stakeholders have expressed concerns about whether DNR timber-harvesting decisions in WMAs have been consistent with legal requirements. In 2023, these concerns led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to impose additional requirements on DNR and temporarily withhold federal funding for WMA activities.

- State and federal laws have few requirements about which WMAs must have plans, what they should include, and when they must be updated. (p. 26)

Recommendation ► The Legislature should specify which WMAs should have individual plans, indicate what DNR should include in the plans, and require DNR to update plans on a specified periodic basis. (p. 33)

Leadership and Decision-Making

By law, DNR is authorized to harvest timber in WMAs only to protect, perpetuate, or reestablish habitat to produce wildlife, including for public hunting, fishing, trapping, and similar outdoor recreational uses.

- DNR’s procedures and guidelines do not provide clear direction to staff on how to prioritize the statutory purpose of WMAs when making decisions about harvesting timber in WMAs. Further, a lack of plans and poor documentation make it difficult to assess whether DNR’s timber harvesting decisions have been consistent with the statutory purpose and wildlife habitat goals of WMAs. (pp. 37, 39)
- Decisions regarding timber harvests in WMAs are a shared responsibility across different DNR divisions. However, guidance from DNR leadership about roles and responsibilities regarding timber harvesting in WMAs has been unclear and insufficient. (p. 44)
- In response to our survey, many staff expressed deep dissatisfaction with DNR’s management of timber harvests in WMAs. (p. 47)

Recommendation ► DNR should ensure that timber stands in WMAs that are identified for potential harvest are subject to additional scrutiny to ensure wildlife considerations are prioritized over other competing interests. (p. 50)

Recommendation ► DNR should amend its policies and procedures to clearly state that timber will be harvested in WMAs only to the extent that the decision to do so is consistent with the statutory purpose for WMAs and the documented wildlife habitat goals of the given WMA. DNR should also specify in its policies and procedures how the agency will ascertain and document the purpose of each proposed harvest, among other things. (p. 51)

Recommendation ► DNR should ensure that its WMA forest habitat management policies and procedures are readily available to staff and are the subject of ongoing leadership attention and staff training. (p. 52)

Summary of Department Response

In a letter dated October 10, 2025, DNR Commissioner Sarah Strommen said “DNR is confident we have met all statutory and grant requirements related to timber harvest in Wildlife Management Areas.” She acknowledged that “some members of the public and DNR staff have raised questions about compliance” and that there have been “significant differences between DNR leaders’ intent for forest management coordination and our staff’s experience with implementation.” Commissioner Strommen said DNR is working towards “revising guidance documents, developing and implementing training around forest habitat related policy and procedures, and continuing our commitment to clear and consistent communications to all staff involved in forest coordination.”

The full special review report, *Department of Natural Resources Timber Harvest Decisions in Wildlife Management Areas*, is available at 651-296-4708 or:

www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/sreview/2025/DNR-WMA-timber.htm