

ANNUAL REPORT

2023-2024



**ALABAMA DEPARTMENT
OF CONSERVATION AND
NATURAL RESOURCES**





**The Honorable Kay Ivey
Governor of Alabama
State Capitol
Montgomery, AL 36130**

Dear Governor Ivey:

I am pleased to submit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Annual Report for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2024.

From cabin and campground renovations to road repaving projects using recycled materials and the reopening of the Gulf State Park Pier in August, Alabama State Parks have been experiencing a rebirth in recent years with many improvement projects ongoing across the state. Our State Parks System made massive strides in FY 2023-2024, as it is on its way to being one of the best in the nation. With all the progress taking place in our parks, it's no surprise the National Association of State Park Directors held its annual conference at Gulf State Park in September. The State Parks section of this report highlights many of the innovative projects that state parks directors from around the county learned about during their stay on Alabama's beautiful Gulf Coast.

For the second year in a row, more saltwater fish species caught in Alabama's coastal waters entered the record books than in previous years. This is a testament to the commitment of ADCNR's Marine Resources Division (MRD) to the management of Alabama's abundant coastal fisheries. Game and food species like red snapper, gray triggerfish, flounder and oysters are monitored closely throughout the year to balance our duty to provide access for commercial and recreational anglers with the need to conserve these important resources. This balance is crucial to maintaining those fisheries and supporting the eco-tourism and seafood industries that financially depend on them. Be sure to read the MRD feature story included in this annual report to learn about the saltwater fish records that were established during FY 2023-2024.

Our Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division continued its mission to improve access to hunting, fishing, boating, and shooting sports during the fiscal year. Improved boating access was one of WFF's top priorities, with 10 projects that were designed, permitted, and began the renovation process. Increased access to shooting sports opportunities was also a priority for WFF. In recent years, those who participate in shooting sports have become the primary funders of state conservation efforts throughout the country. To meet the public's need for increased shooting range access, ADCNR is developing a state-of-the-art public shooting sports facility in Shelby County, not far from Birmingham. Projects like these will directly benefit the public for decades to come by providing improved and increased public access to quality outdoor recreation opportunities for Alabamians and visitors to our great state.

Like our other divisions, ADCNR's State Lands Division (SLD) has a broad range of responsibilities and oversees a wide variety of projects. One of those responsibilities is providing administrative support for the disbursement of GOMESA program funds. In FY 2023-2024, SLD administered more than \$30 million in GOMESA grants for 24 projects along the state's Gulf Coast. These projects were focused on sewer infrastructure, water quality improvements, research, land acquisitions, and recreational access improvements. In addition to providing support for GOMESA projects, SLD oversees the state's Forever Wild Land Trust program, which added five tracts of land totaling 6,381 acres to the state's public land system for outdoor recreation. Other annual SLD projects include a variety of public outreach events, such as camping and fishing weekends, youth hunting opportunities, sporting dog field trials, and many more.

The items listed above are just a few highlights of the many accomplishments you will find in this report. Thank you for your continued support and leadership. We look forward to working with you again in the next fiscal year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher M. Blankenship". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

**Christopher M. Blankenship
Commissioner**

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DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW



The **Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources** is an executive and administrative department of the State of Alabama created by statute. The Commissioner, appointed by the Governor as a member of her cabinet, advises the Governor and Legislature on management of freshwater fish, wildlife, marine resources, state lands, Alabama State Parks, and other natural resources.

Scope of Operations

The Department's scope of operations includes the administration, management and maintenance of 21 state parks, 23 public fishing lakes, three freshwater fish hatcheries, one aquatic biodiversity center, 162 public boat ramps, 35 wildlife management areas, seven special opportunity areas, 12 shooting ranges, 21 archery parks, a saltwater mariculture center, and 645,000 acres of trust lands managed for the benefit of several state agencies and the state's General Fund and the Alabama Trust Fund. Other departmental functions include maintenance of a State Land Resource Information Center and administration of the Forever Wild Land Trust program and management of approximately 300,000 acres of Forever Wild land. Additionally, through its Deepwater Horizon Restoration Section, the Department has overseen more than \$1 billion in projects through FY 2023-2024.

Organization

During Fiscal Year 2023-2024, the Department had four operational divisions and eight support sections. The operational divisions were Marine Resources, State Lands, State Parks, and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. Support sections were Accounting, Engineering, Communications and Marketing, Information Technology, Legal, Personnel and Payroll, Property Inventory, and Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration. The Commissioner was advised by a 13-member Conservation Advisory Board. Division directors managed the Department's programs under their jurisdiction through authority delegated by the Legislature and the Commissioner. Throughout the fiscal year, the Department promoted wise stewardship, management, and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources. Active public education and voluntary participation programs were expanded, and new plans were implemented to achieve maximum multiple-use benefits consistent with resource conservation.

Department Goals

The Department's major goal is to promote the statewide stewardship and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources and to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy these

resources. Funding for the Department is generated through special revenues, which include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, mandated interest from endowment and federal regulations. The Forever Wild Land Trust received interest income from the Alabama Trust Fund. Specific revenue sources for the four operational divisions are as follows:

Funding

The Department's major goal is to promote the statewide stewardship and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources and to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy these resources. Funding for the Department is generated through special revenues, which include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, mandated interest from endowment and federal regulations. The Forever Wild Land Trust received interest income from the Alabama Trust Fund. Specific revenue sources for the four operational divisions are as follows:

Marine Resources: Saltwater fishing licenses, fines, marine gas tax, and federal grants. Marine Resources also has an endowment, but it has not grown sufficiently to enhance operations.

State Lands: Management fees from the sale of timber, minerals and various leases on state lands administered under the Lands Asset Management Program. Further, the division receives additional federal grants that support specific programs.

State Parks: User-generated funds in the form of entrance, rental, lodging, golf, and other recreational fees, and funds received during 2022-2025 from the State Parks Bond proceeds. State Parks received a modest amount of funding from cigarette tax revenue.

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries: Fishing and hunting licenses and permits; fines; waterfowl stamps; federal allocations from excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition, archery gear and some fishing tackle; Innovate Alabama, the State general fund and federal grants. Interest income continues to be generated by the Game and Fish endowment fund for resident lifetime hunting and fishing licenses. Direct donations and voluntary state income tax refund check-offs for the Nongame Wildlife Program continue to increase from previous fiscal years.

CONSERVATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Conservation Advisory Board, created by statute, is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor for alternating terms of six years and three ex-officio members in the persons of the Governor, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries, and the Director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The Commissioner of Conservation and Natural Resources serves as the ex-officio secretary of the Board.

The Advisory Board assists in formulating policies for the Department of Conservation, examines all rules and regulations and makes recommendations for their change or amendment. By a two-thirds vote of the members present and with the

Governor's approval, the Board can amend, make any changes, repeal or create and promulgate additional rules and regulations. The Board also assists in publicizing the Department's programs and activities.

Meetings

The Advisory Board met two times during FY 2023-2024:

- February 24, 2024, at the Auburn University College of Architecture, Design and Construction, in Auburn, Alabama
- May 18, 2024, at Pelham Civic Complex, 500 Amphitheater Rd., in Pelham, Alabama

Conservation Advisory Board Members as of Sept. 30, 2024

| Members | Hometown | Term Expires |
|-----------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Joseph Dobbs, Jr., Chairman | Livingston | March 28, 2027 |
| Greg Barksdale | Hanceville | September 30, 2029 |
| Brock Jones | Tuscaloosa | March 28, 2027 |
| Kevin Savoy | Dothan | March 28, 2027 |
| Grady Hartzog | Eufaula | March 28, 2027 |
| Raymond Jones, Jr. | Huntsville | May 9, 2025 |
| Jeff Martin | Talladega | May 9, 2025 |
| Ben C. Stimpson, Jr. | Mobile | September 30, 2029 |
| Gary Wolfe | Fairhope | March 28, 2027 |
| Tim Wood | Selma | September 30, 2029 |

Ex-officio Members

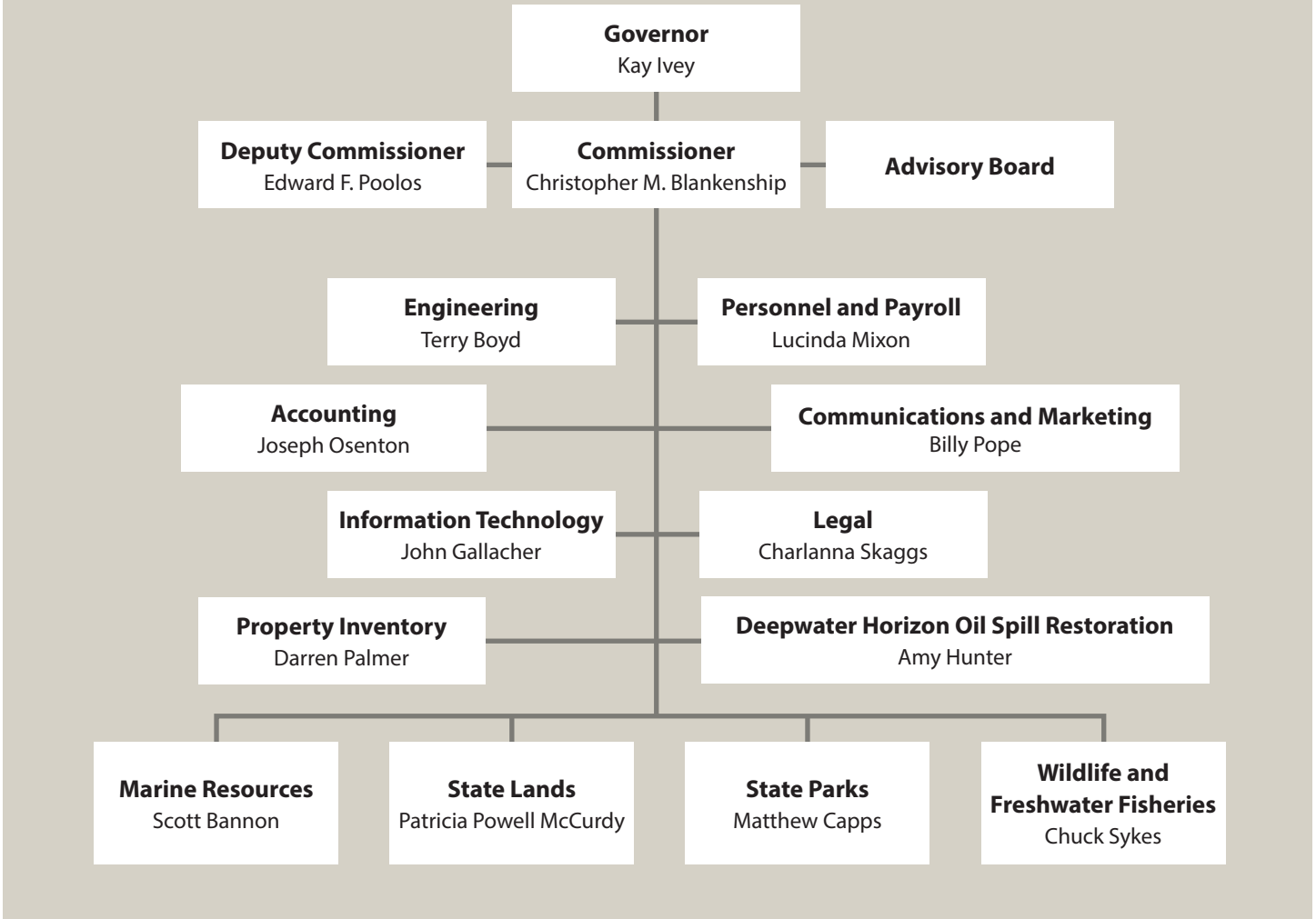
Kay Ivey, Governor, State of Alabama
 Dr. J. Mike Phillips, Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System
 Rick Pate, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries

Ex-officio Secretary of the Board

Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

| BUDGETS 2026 | ACTUAL 2024 | BUDGET 2025 | BUDGETED 2026 |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES | 994 | 1,348 | 1,262 |
| UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE FORWARD | 147,758,587 | 144,400,886 | 82,634,984 |
| Federal Funds | | | |
| 0303 Marine Resources - Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission | 1,336,023 | 1,333,000 | 1,385,000 |
| 0303 Marine Resources - Commerce | 640,511 | 761,000 | 706,000 |
| 0303 Marine Resources - Interior | 1,549,841 | 1,933,000 | 1,795,500 |
| 0304 Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries - Interior | 28,250,936 | 24,926,500 | 25,245,250 |
| 0304 Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries - Misc | 634,657 | 1,737,000 | 911,570 |
| 0305 State Lands - Commerce | 3,285,406 | 7,142,988 | 12,697,904 |
| 0305 State Lands - Interior | 2,500 | 525,000 | 525,000 |
| 1713 Restore Act | 33,532,357 | 143,161,855 | 143,161,855 |
| Total Federal Funding | 69,232,231 | 181,520,343 | 186,428,079 |
| National Fish and Wildlife Foundation | 139,652 | 0 | 275,500 |
| Licenses and Permits | 32,321,006 | 28,005,000 | 30,680,000 |
| Land Management Fees | 3,754,730 | 3,088,907 | 3,713,378 |
| User Fees | 51,616,385 | 49,385,536 | 58,371,233 |
| Timber Sales | 1,150,931 | 800,000 | 1,000,000 |
| Fines | 539,080 | 800,000 | 750,000 |
| Trust Fund Interest (MR and WFF) | 868,872 | 880,000 | 869,000 |
| Other | 29,681,056 | 8,702,169 | 13,795,524 |
| Total Departmental Related Receipts | 120,071,712 | 91,661,612 | 109,454,635 |
| Cigarette Tax | 1,790,000 | 3,000,000 | 3,000,000 |
| Gasoline Tax | 2,823,112 | 2,670,000 | 2,770,000 |
| Use Tax Discount Cap | 3,968,722 | 3,178,000 | 2,658,000 |
| Sales Tax Discount Cap | 7,915,000 | 8,240,000 | 8,578,000 |
| General Fund (Outdoor Recreation Improvements) | 7,550,000 | 9,375,000 | 6,000,000 |
| GOMESA | 39,962,882 | 35,000,000 | 35,000,000 |
| Forever Wild Land Management | 900,000 | 900,000 | 900,000 |
| BP Oil Spill/NRDA Reimbursements | 16,809,400 | 26,000,000 | 27,000,000 |
| State Reservoir Management Fund | 1,117,133 | 1,269,500 | 1,269,500 |
| Total Other Receipts | 82,836,249 | 89,632,500 | 87,175,500 |
| Administrative Transfer | 9,495,570 | 10,750,000 | 11,000,000 |
| Actual All Receipts | 281,635,762 | 373,564,455 | 394,058,214 |
| BFY 2024-2026 Expenditures or Budgeted | 284,993,463 | 435,330,357 | 455,461,675 |
| Revenues verses Expenditures--Over(Under) | (3,357,701) | (61,765,902) | (61,403,461) |
| UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE | 144,400,886 | 82,634,984 | 21,231,523 |
| | Budgeted 2024 | Requested 2025 | Requested 2026 |
| BFY 2024-2026 Expenditures/Budgeted | 284,993,463 | 435,330,357 | 455,461,675 |
| BFY 2024-2026 Federal Funding | 69,232,231 | 181,520,343 | 186,428,079 |
| BFY 2024-2026 State Funding | 215,761,232 | 253,810,014 | 269,033,596 |

Department Organizational Chart as of September 30, 2024



FY 2023-2024 Budgets and Expenditures for Administrative Division

| Section | Budgeted Amount | Actual Expenditures | Over/(Under) |
|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Accounting | 2,359,818 | 1,994,924 | (-364,894) |
| Commissioner | 860,696 | 777,000 | (-83,692) |
| Engineering | 548,110 | 403,949 | (-144,161) |
| Communications and Marketing | 1,203,844 | 911,110 | (-292,734) |
| Information Technology | 2,806,967 | 2,462,282 | (-344,685) |
| Legal | 1,215,427 | 1,091,404 | (-124,023) |
| License | 335,032 | 264,258 | (-70,774) |
| Payroll and Personnel | 1,408,746 | 1,472,869 | 64,123 |
| Property Inventory | 242,987 | 237,921 | (-5,066) |
| Contingency | 298,874 | 0 | (-298,874) |
| Totals | 11,280,501 | 9,615,721 | (-1,664,780) |

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

ACCOUNTING

The Accounting Section is the central clearinghouse for all departmental financial data. Accounting maintains and records all receipts and disbursements for the Commissioner's office, the administration sections, and each of the four operational divisions. Accounting is responsible for six internal functions: accounts payable, accounts receivable, budgeting, procurement, hunting and fishing license sales, and financial reporting.

Accounts Payable reviews and approves all payment transactions and transfer journal entries for the Department. More than 25,000 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

Accounts Receivable reviews and approves all cash receipts and investment transactions for the Department. More than 16,000 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

The **Budgeting Office** prepares and submits the annual budget. It also processes budget modifications as required during the year. The Department expenses for FY2024 were approximately \$285 million.

Procurement provides purchasing assistance to each administrative section and to all divisions. This office is the liaison between ADCNR and State Purchasing.

The **Hunting and Fishing License Office** is responsible for receiving revenues from license sales and certifying them into the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and Marine Resources funds.

Financial Reporting processes Comprehensive Annual Financial Report entries, closing entries, and reports on grants; calculates federal draws; and maintains grant budgets for the Department.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Communications and Marketing Section provided a variety of services for the Department including writing news releases; publication and graphic design; editing, proofreading, and copywriting services; website development; video production; photography; email marketing; marketing analysis; and a weekly outdoors column sent to the media and published on the Department's website. Staff also coordinated special projects and events such as Outdoor Alabama hunting and fishing nights with two minor league baseball teams. Personnel included six full-time positions.

Accomplishments

- Managed the Department's email marketing and communication platform (GovDelivery) that is used to communicate with 1,489,139 subscribers distributed among 229 interest topics. Distributed communications included press releases, annual hunting and fishing license expiration reminders, weekly outdoors articles, lapsed hunting and fishing license

marketing incentives, and more. In FY 2023-2024, section email marketing and communications efforts generated \$311,720 in revenue from 5,465 license buyers.

- Developed landing pages on OutdoorAlabama.com for various marketing campaigns, outreach programs, and licenses. Those landing pages generated \$752,901 in revenue from 15,701 license buyers.
- Helped coordinate the 2023-2024 annual hunting and fishing license auto-renewal campaign that generated \$2,311,923 in license revenue which is a 54% increase over the previous year
- Partnered with minor league baseball and collegiate sports marketing groups to advertise to a broader and more diverse market segment. Working with Auburn University Football and Playfly Sports, ADCNR received more than 600,000 advertising views (impressions) per football game for a total of 13,000,000 during the season. Game day events with the Rocket City Trash Pandas and the Montgomery Biscuits allowed the Department to meet potential and current customers in person. The events provided more than 20,000 impressions onsite and digitally through partner social media posts and email marketing. These efforts helped increase traffic to the Department's official website (OutdoorAlabama.com) by 106,416 users in FY 2023-2024. Of that increase, 79,121 individuals were new users. Partnerships like those listed above are essential to ADCNR's efforts to become more relevant to all Alabamians.
- Partnered with ADCNR's State Parks Division, Alabama Tourism Department, and the Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers Association (ACEOA) on the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest. Staff coordinated a traveling exhibit of the winning photos in locations across the state, such as state parks, museums, and libraries.
- Developed and edited 132 press releases (including weekly outdoors articles) focused on departmental programs, public events, and hunting and fishing regulations
- Managed public information requests from local, regional, and national media outlets; nongovernmental and governmental agencies; and the public
- Managed the Department's official Outdoor Alabama social media platforms including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and YouTube. Facebook continued to be the most effective social media platform to connect with our constituents. The Outdoor Alabama Facebook page has experienced steady growth over the past few years. In FY 2023-2024, the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page grew by 400 followers for a total of 58,700. The total reach of the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page for the fiscal year was 638,400 users. Outdoor Alabama's other social media audiences included 7,000 Instagram followers; 4,670 X followers; and 7,870 YouTube subscribers.

- Oversaw and maintained content for two official Department websites – OutdoorAlabama.com and AlabamaForeverWild.com.

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| OutdoorAlabama.com | AlabamaForeverWild.com |
| Users: 2,159,729 | Users: 80,897 |
| New Users: 2,127,611 | New Users: 80,089 |
| Pageviews: 5,908,854 | Pageviews: 206,900 |

- Served as the liaison with the website contractor to provide solutions for various website issues as well as administrative and troubleshooting services for the Department
- Designed various promotional items, digital and printed marketing materials, various annual species reports, advertisements, maps, calendars, signage, business cards, retirement certificates, and vehicle graphics and wraps
- Shot photographs and video both on location and in studio in support of Department programs and events. Section staff also maintained video and photo archives for various departmental projects and distribution to news media, outdoor writers, and print and digital publications.
- Created public surveys and produced reports through the Qualtrics survey platform in support of Departmental staff research

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The Information Technology (IT) Section provides computer hardware, software, and networking services for the Department. Hardware services include setup and installation of computers and mobile devices, management of Department servers, and installation and support for printers, monitors, copiers, and scanners. Software services include web-based application development and maintenance; analysis, design, and support for the Department’s E-Gov applications; support for all mainframe applications; and support and maintenance of Department websites. Networking services include support for all wired, wireless, and cellular technologies used throughout the Department. The IT Section also provides support for email and cloud storage platforms through the Microsoft Office 365 Enterprise Agreement.

Facilities and Personnel

The IT staff consists of 18 employees: IT manager, programmer analysts (3), system specialists (6), system technicians (3), account clerk (1), intern (1), contractor-filled positions (1), and retired state employees (2). There are currently eight vacant merit positions in IT.

Accomplishments

- Completed a redesign and enhancement of Hunts Admin and Public websites to utilize latest standards and technologies
- Created new labor distribution website and supporting applications required for State migration to new HRM system
- Created two new web applications for State Parks photo

admin, public photo submission, and supporting websites and applications

- Reengineered Marine Resources Division (MRD) data extraction for license sales to streamline processes and automate reports
- Created two additional processes to accommodate additional donations that greatly benefit the MRD Artificial Reef Sponsorship Program
- Enhanced the license system to improve tracking, auto-renewal, and special privileges such as non-resident baiting, Social Security Administration and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs disability
- Onboarded and trained additional technical staff to support agency needs
- Processed 8,700 support tickets for agency IT technical needs
- Continued public Wi-Fi projects for the State Parks Division as part of the bond projects
- Continued deploying ADCNR Cisco WebEx Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone hub to facilitate the conversion of both external and internal offices to modernized cloud-calling services
- Completed server infrastructure project to migrate ADCNR web environment from a cloud presence to the Alabama Office of Information Technology
- Continued to expand internet bandwidth for external office locations to facilitate cloud storage, communication, and VoIP
- Conducted IT site surveys on all non-Parks ADCNR sites
- Implemented new ADCNR policy acknowledgement system

LEGAL SECTION

The Legal Section provides legal counsel and advice to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, division directors, law enforcement personnel, and other employees of the Department.

The Legal Section also performs work related to the acquisition of real estate for the Department, including procuring title evidence (title insurance, title opinion, title research), preparing deeds, issuing Attorney General Title Opinions, closing acquisitions, recording deeds, and obtaining the final title policies/opinions, tax assessments, and payment of taxes due.

The section handles ADCNR contracts and legal instruments of all types including, but not limited to, oil and gas leases, real estate leases, personal-service agreements, construction contracts, engineering contracts, easements, lease purchase agreements, State Parks concession contracts, and other documents as requested.

The section corresponds with and meets and advises members of the Governor’s Office, the Alabama Legislature, and fellow state attorneys on matters of legal, legislative, or regulatory interest related to the Department.

The section drafts, reviews, and monitors legislation affecting the Department. It also drafts rules and regulations pursuant to the Alabama Administrative Procedures Act.

Litigation against the Department and its employees, as well as litigation initiated by the Department, is also managed by the Legal Section. This includes cases and appeals filed in state and federal courts, as well as those before state agencies and boards. Representation provided by the Legal Section includes all facets of conflict resolution and litigation, preparation of pleadings and briefs, and oral arguments.

PERSONNEL AND PAYROLL

The Personnel and Payroll Section provides personnel-related services to the Commissioner’s office, Division Directors, Section Chiefs, and each employee of the Department. The Section serves as liaison to the State Personnel Department for ADCNR’s personnel actions and activities. The Section is responsible for processing all payrolls as well as maintaining all employee files and payroll records. The Section supports the advancement of ADCNR’s employees in various ways, including facilitating training opportunities and assisting with the administration of benefits. Contact the Personnel Office at (334) 242-3501.

ENGINEERING SECTION

The Engineering Section assists the Department’s divisions with professional planning and programming, architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, surveying, cartography, and related administrative services.

Facilities and Personnel

The Engineering Section had four employees during FY 2023-2024: one Conservation Engineering Services Chief, one part-time Conservation Construction Inspector I, and two retired state employees. The section’s facilities are in Montgomery.

Accomplishments

During FY 2023-2024, the Engineering Section administered approximately \$18 million in contracts. Section programs provided the professional expertise required to reach Department goals. Those programs included outsourced and in-house design and construction, master planning, and site planning for Department facilities.

Engineering provided surveying assistance and technical advice on construction projects, boundaries, and property corners for Alabama State Parks and the delineation and location of oyster reefs, public access areas, wildlife management areas, state lakes, and other state-managed property.

The section continued to provide environmental-based assistance to the Alabama State Parks Division, including overseeing the wastewater treatment company that operates and maintains treatment facilities at Lake Guntersville, Cheaha, Wind Creek, and Lakepoint state parks.

Engineering coordinated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster activities associated with Hurricane Sally and will continue to do so in 2025. The largest of these are the repairs to Gulf State Park Pier. Engineering also coordinated the Alabama Department of Environmental Management recycled tire paving project at Joe Wheeler State Park and the Wave Attenuator project at Lake Guntersville State Park.

| Engineering Budget | Actual Expenditures | Amount Over/Under |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| \$453,626.00 | \$372,793.28 | \$80,832.72 |

PROPERTY INVENTORY

The Property Inventory Section is responsible for tracking all new assets acquired by the Department as well as the disposal of all assets once they have reached their end of service. This includes assuring that all new property is barcoded and entered into the State Inventory Database as well as tracked throughout its lifetime within the Department.

The Property Inventory Section is also responsible for coordinating and implementing the Department’s yearly internal inventory of property as well as the audit by the State Auditor’s office every other year.



PHOTO: TIMOTHY HUBER

DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL RESTORATION

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration Section (DWHRS) coordinates administrative and technical aspects of restoration in coastal Alabama associated with the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Specific activities include participating in Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council meetings, participating in Trustee Implementation Groups, conducting public meetings related to NRDA activities, soliciting public input regarding potential restoration ideas, assisting with development of draft restoration plans and implementation of early restoration projects, and representing the interests of the NRDA trustees and the Governor's office.

The DWHRS assists the Commissioner related to his service as the Governor's designee to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (GCERC), established pursuant to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012 (RESTORE Act), which directs 80% of Clean Water Act civil penalties resulting from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill for restoration projects within the five Gulf states.

The DWHRS also provides administrative support to the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council (AGCRC), which was established by the federal RESTORE Act to oversee certain funds allocated directly to the State of Alabama.

In addition, the DWHRS staff assists the Commissioner and coordinates with the Governor's office in relation to efforts by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to distribute grant proceeds for coastal restoration from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (GEBF). This fund resulted from two plea agreements entered in early 2013 resolving the criminal cases against BP and Transocean arising from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Significant accomplishments in FY2024 included:

- Completed and released NRDA Restoration Plan IV consisting of 7 projects (\$24,083,183)
 - Lower Perdido Islands Habitat Restoration – Phase II (\$9,452,000)
 - Puppy Creek-Juniper Creek-Big Creek Watersheds Nutrient Reduction (\$1,520,900)
 - Stewardship of Coastal Alabama Beach Nesting Bird Habitat (\$4,740,456)
 - Improving Resilience for Oysters by Linking Brood Reefs and Sink Reefs - Mid-Lower Mobile Bay, AL (\$2,800,000)
 - Oyster Grow-Out and Restoration Reef Replacement – 5-year Continuation (\$1,369,827)

- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvement – Phases IIa and IIb (\$2,200,000)
- Laguna Cove Little Lagoon Natural Resource Protection – Small-Scale Amenities (\$2,000,000)
- Continued support, as administrator, for the AGCRC implementing Alabama's Multiyear Implementation Plan (MIP) and State Expenditure Plan (SEP) as required under the RESTORE Act
- Coordinated Amendment 2 to the Alabama State Expenditure Plan (SEP) adding \$33 million to Spill Impact Component projects to address budget increases on previously approved projects. These budget increases were due in large part to increases in construction costs.
- Completed the acquisition of a 449-acre parcel located along the Perdido River in Baldwin County to place in State conservation management. This area is undeveloped and has been previously used for timberland and outdoor recreational activities.
- Completed the acquisition of a 79-acre parcel in Fort Morgan (Baldwin County) to place in State conservation management. This property is located on the Gulf Barrier Island and Coastal Marsh ecoregion and includes diverse habitat types such as dunes, wetlands and interior scrub. These habitats support a wide range of plant and animal life.
- Continued administrative support of implementing Alabama's Center of Excellence at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab
- Administered 22 RESTORE Council-selected projects totaling \$101,130,543. Grants focused on water quality and restoration of sensitive habitats in Mobile Bay.
- Awarded more than \$26 million to implement water quality improvement projects in Mobile and Baldwin counties. Included among these projects is funding for the continued operation of the Alabama Real-Time Coastal Observing System (ARCOS), with eight stations throughout Mobile Bay that continuously measure weather and water conditions.
- Completed restoration and renovation of Gulf State Park Pier using NRDA recreational use funding. The pier reopened to the public in the summer of 2024.

An overview of restoration projects benefiting the State of Alabama, organized by funding stream, is provided below. Additional project details are available at www.outdooralabama.com/alabama-coastal-restoration-program/alabama-coastal-restoration-about-us.

NRDA Early Restoration Projects

- Marsh Island Restoration Project (Portersville Bay) - \$11,280,000
- Dune Restoration Project (Gulf Shores and Orange Beach) - \$737,202 (complete)

- Nesting Sea Turtles Habitat Improvement Project - \$345,051
- Avian Habitat Enhancement Project - \$279,000 (complete)
- Gulf State Park Enhancement Project - \$29,221,693 (complete)
- Alabama Oyster Cultch Restoration - \$3,239,485 (complete)
- Alabama Swift Tract Living Shoreline Project - \$5,000,080
- Point aux Pins Living Shoreline Project - \$3,800,000
- Osprey Restoration in Coastal Alabama Project - \$62,580 (complete)

NRDA Restoration Plan I Projects

- Fort Morgan Pier Rehabilitation Project - \$3,256,993 (complete)
- Laguna Cove Little Lagoon Natural Resource Protection Project - \$4,400,000
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvements Project - \$1,000,000 (engineering and design complete)
- Dauphin Island Eco-tourism and Environmental Education Area - \$2,238,613
- Mid-Island Parks and Public Beach Improvements Project - \$1,210,200

NRDA Restoration Plan II Projects

- Magnolia River Land Acquisition (Holmes Tract) - \$5,138,162 (complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (East Gateway Tract) - \$3,252,192 (complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (Lloyd Tract) - \$3,606,900 (complete)
- Lower Perdido Islands Restoration, Phase I - \$994,523 (complete)
- Southwestern Coffee Island Habitat Restoration Project, Phase I - \$1,650,450
- Restoring the Night Sky - \$486,639
- Toulmins Spring Branch Engineering and Design - \$479,090
- Fowl River Nutrient Reduction - \$1,000,000
- Weeks Bay Nutrient Reduction - \$2,000,000
- Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Conservation Program - \$935,061

- CAST Triage - \$1,071,935
- CAST Habitat Usage and Population Dynamics - \$1,631,696
- CAST Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$906,874
- Enhancing Capacity for the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network - \$2,432,389
- Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$686,374
- Assessment of Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Populations and Health - \$3,245,129
- Colonial Nesting Wading Bird Tracking and Habitat Use Assessment - \$1,547,500
- Oyster Cultch Relief and Reef Configuration - \$480,262
- Side-scan Mapping of Mobile Bay Relic Oyster Reefs - \$104,229 (complete)
- Oyster Hatchery at Claude Petet Mariculture Center - \$156,159 (terminated)
- Oyster Grow Out Restoration Reef Placement - \$962,370

NRDA Restoration Plan III Projects

- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvement - Phases IIa and IIb - \$8,567,385
- Gulf State Park Pier Renovation - \$2,447,021 (complete)
- Perdido Beach Public Access Coastal Protection - \$56,013 (terminated)
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Enhancement (Mobile Street Boardwalk) - \$3,227,212
- Stewardship of Coastal Alabama Beach Nesting Bird Habitat - \$2,067,381
- Dauphin Island West End Acquisition - \$7,938,770 (complete)

NRDA Regionwide Trustee Implementation Group Restoration Plan I Projects

- Restore and Enhance Sea Turtle Nest Productivity on Gulf of Mexico Beaches - \$7,655,000 (\$1,000,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Enhancements to the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and Enhanced Rehabilitation - \$3,150,000 (\$50,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Bird Nesting and Foraging Area Stewardship - \$8,510,750 (\$800,000 allocated to Alabama)

- Reducing Marine Debris Impacts to Birds and Sea Turtles - \$7,040,000 (\$1,402,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Conservation and Enhancement of Nesting and Foraging Habitat for Birds - \$22,500,000 (\$5,630,000 allocated to Alabama for Pilot Town Acquisition and Restoration)
- Improving Resilience for Oysters by linking Brood Reefs and Sink Reefs - \$35,819,974 (\$7,123,995 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Injury and Mortality of Bottlenose Dolphins from Hook and Line Fishing Gear by Utilizing Fishery Surveys, Social Science, and Collaborative Problem Solving: Alabama Component - \$340,000
- Pilot Implementation of Automatic Information System in the Gulf of Mexico Inshore Shrimp Fishery to Better Understand Fishing Effort to Inform Efforts to Reduce Sea Turtle Bycatch: Alabama Component - \$446,225
- Reducing Sea Turtle Bycatch at Recreational Fishing Sites: Alabama Component - \$729,872
- Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase I - \$5,900,000
- Dauphin Island Conservation Acquisition - \$3,560,000
- Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase I - \$1,100,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour/Oyster Bay Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$12,500,000
- Gulf Highlands Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$36,000,000 (complete)
- Fisheries Monitoring Enhancement in Alabama's Marine Waters - Phase III - \$4,400,000 (complete)
- Little Dauphin Island Restoration Assessment - \$1,480,000

NFWF-GEBF Projects

- Restoration and Enhancement of Oyster Reefs - \$3,750,000 (complete)
- D'Olive Watershed Restoration - \$12,700,000 (complete)
- Fowl River Watershed Restoration - \$3,300,000 (complete)
- Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment - \$4,400,000 (complete)
- Alabama Marine Mammal Conservation and Recovery Program - \$1,900,000 (complete)
- Coastal Habitat Restoration Planning Initiative - \$4,200,000
- Enhancing Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$1,800,000 (complete)
- Multifaceted Fisheries and Ecosystem Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$2,200,000 (complete)
- Grand Bay Acquisition - \$5,770,000 (complete)
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition Initiative, Phase I - \$286,000
- Mobile County Conservation Acquisition - \$4,260,000 (complete)
- Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement - \$12,500,000
- Alabama Coastal Bird Stewardship Program - \$1,460,000
- Salt Aire Shoreline Restoration - \$12,700,000
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition - Phase II - \$6,900,000
- Dauphin Island Bird Habitat Acquisition and Enhancement Program - \$4,500,000
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition - \$5,900,000 (complete)
- Fisheries Monitoring Enhancement in Alabama's Marine Waters - Phase IV - \$2,800,000 (complete)
- Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement - Phase II - \$22,499,000
- Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project - Phase II - \$16,578,000
- Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island - Phase I - \$329,000
- Deer River Shoreline Stabilization - Phase I - \$750,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration - Phase I - \$1,528,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition (Three Rivers) - Phase II - \$4,423,000 (complete)
- Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline Restoration Engineering and Design - \$250,000 (complete)



PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER BAKER

- Lower Halls Mill Creek Protection - \$2,687,000
- Blackwater River South Tract Acquisition - \$5,212,000 (complete)
- Lower Fish River Watershed Restoration - \$6,554,000
- Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline and Habitat Restoration - Phase II - \$22,631,385
- Dauphin Island East End Beach and Dune Restoration - Phase I - \$1,400,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration - Phase II - \$5,100,000 (complete)
- Wolf Creek Headwaters Restoration - Phase I - \$500,000 (complete)
- Deer River Shoreline Stabilization - Phase II - \$22,855,000
- Fowl River Spits Restoration - Phase II - \$19,798,000
- Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island - Phase II (Graveline Bay Marsh) - \$6,437,000
- Dauphin Island Beach Nourishment Engineering and Design - \$1,143,000
- Beach Club West Conservation Acquisition - \$12,129,966 (complete)

RESTORE - Direct Component Projects (Bucket 1)

- Alabama State Port Authority Roll-on/Roll-off Terminal - \$29,935,331 (complete)
- Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Harbour Town - \$17,412,014
- Historic Africatown Welcome Center - \$6,375,969
- Redevelop City Docks (City of Bayou La Batre) - \$30,683,840
- Mount Vernon Water Treatment Plant - \$1,541,978 (complete)
- Mobile Greenway Initiative - \$14,284,128
- Northwest Satsuma Water and Sewer Project - \$3,938,520
- Innovating St. Louis Street, Mobile's Technology Corridor - \$11,501,990
- Bayou La Batre Water Distribution System Upgrades - \$7,990,180
- Mobile County Blueway Trail Development - \$14,264,355

- Gulf Shores Gulf Coast Center for Ecotourism and Sustainability - \$13,666,271
- Baldwin County ALDOT Capacity Improvements - \$69,649,000
- Fairhope Working Waterfront and Greenspace Restoration - \$9,975,095
- Planning Grant for Amended MIP - \$300,000 (complete)

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 1 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Coastal Alabama Comprehensive Watershed Planning Project - \$4,342,500
- Alabama Living Shoreline Restoration Program - Categories 1 and 2 - \$6,250,000
- Comprehensive Living Shoreline Monitoring Program - Categories 1 and 2 - \$4,000,000
- Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration and Monitoring Program - \$875,000
- Marsh Restoration in Fish River, Weeks Bay, Oyster Bay, Meadows Tract - Categories 1 and 2 - \$3,158,043
- Enhancing Opportunities for Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediments - \$3,000,000
- Upper Mobile Bay Beneficial Use Wetland Creation Site - \$2,500,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 2 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Alabama Commitment and Planning Support Grant - \$2,100,000

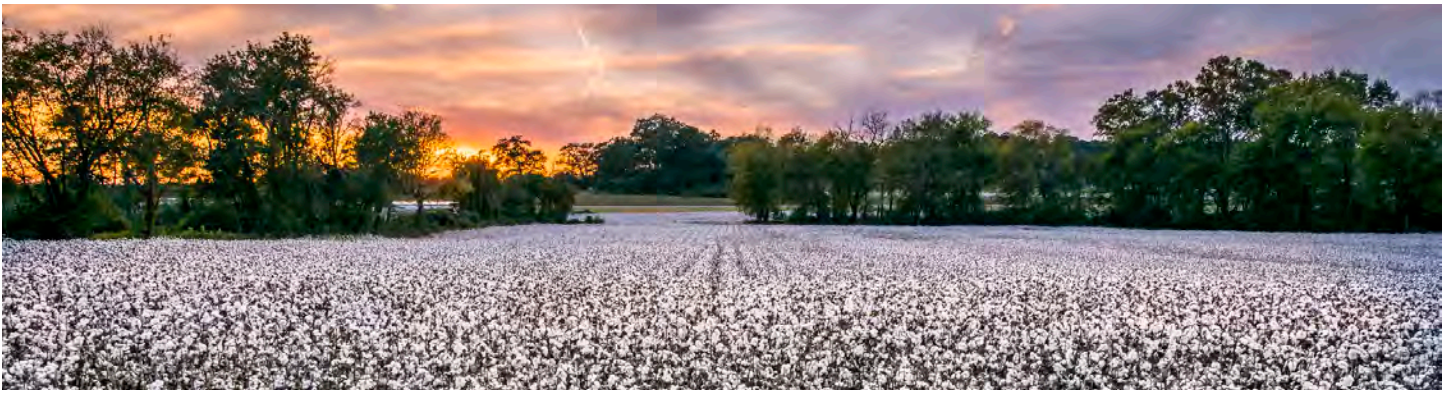
RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3a (Bucket 2)

- Perdido River Land Conservation and Habitat Enhancements - \$26,800,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3b Proposed Projects (Bucket 2)

Coastal Alabama Regional Water Quality Program:

- City of Orange Beach Stormwater Master Plan - \$250,000
- City of Fairhope Sanitary Sewer Overflow Mitigation - \$820,099
- Town of Dauphin Island Stormwater Master Plan and Drainage Improvements - \$421,470
- City of Fairhope Stormwater Infrastructure Inventory - \$487,500
- Coastal Alabama Water Quality and Sediment Baseline Monitoring - \$3,103,959
- City of Bayou La Batre North System Sewer Improvements - \$206,200
- Grand Bay Sewer Service - \$337,344



- Dauphin Island Sewer Collection Improvements - Phase I - \$975,652
- Three Mile Creek Improvements Project - USA Campus - \$154,705
- City of Loxley Corn Creek Tributary Restoration Project - \$2,123,000
- Norton Creek Sanitary Sewer Inflow and Infiltration Rehabilitation Project - \$7,425,651
- Fish River Watershed Sediment and Stormwater Improvements - \$150,000
- Justins Bay Hydrologic Connectivity Enhancement (Mobile Bay) - \$1,000,000
- Ecological Flow Decision-Support Development for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins - \$3,400,000
- Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program - \$1,500,000
- Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program - \$1,000,000
- State and Offshore Sediment Resources Inventory (U.S. Department of Interior) Alabama Component - \$3,000,000
- Mobile Area Storm Water Mapping and Resiliency Planning - \$3,899,593
- Perch Creek Area Sanitary Sewer Trunk Line Cured In-Place Pipe - \$8,670,394
- Implementing Storm Water Management Improvements for Toulmin Springs Branch and Gum Tree Branch - \$1,222,744
- One Mobile: Reconnecting People, Work, and Play Through Complete Streets - \$1,287,500
- City of Chickasaw Sewer Rehabilitation Project - \$2,887,476
- Longevity, Stability, and Water Quality Improvements (Bon Secour) - \$665,908 (complete)
- Orange Beach North Sewer Force Main Upgrade - \$6,099,389 (complete)
- Fairhope Sewer Upgrade, Phase I - \$13,515,000
- Expansion of the Orange Beach Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Program - \$1,192,255
- Environmental Restoration of Cotton Bayou and Terry Cove - \$515,000 (complete)
- Auburn University Gulf Coast Engineering Research Station - \$11,295,000
- Lillian Park Beach Habitat and Shoreline Protection - \$2,460,382

RESTORE - Spill Impact Component Proposed Projects (Bucket 3)

- Characterization and Delineation of Significant Sand Resource Areas Essential for Beach Restoration, Offshore Alabama - \$975,170
- Alabama Gulf Seafood Marketing Program - \$2,972,435
- Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for the Coastal Alabama Region - \$666,375
- Replacement of Substandard Facilities at the ADEM Coastal Office and Mobile Field Office - \$8,088,599
- Extension of Effluent Force Main from Bayou La Batre Wastewater Treatment Facility - \$21,073,770
- Three Mile Creek Watershed Restoration - \$23,866,000
- Aloe Bay/Mississippi Sound Water Quality Enhancement Project - \$26,829,000
- Mobile County Dirt Road Paving Program (Sediment Reduction) - \$10,395,914
- Bayou La Batre Collection System/Lift Station Upgrades - \$15,701,150
- Fairhope Area Community-Based Comprehensive Land Use Plan - \$742,832
- Canal Road Improvements East of SR161 - \$6,067,878
- Little Lagoon Restoration Project - \$6,175,557
- Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension - \$7,591,608
- Meaher State Park Improvements - \$4,583,500
- Alabama Point Seawall Repair - \$2,562,640 (engineering and design complete; construction withdrawn)
- Planning Grant to Amend SEP - \$300,000

RESTORE Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program (Bucket 5)

- Alabama Center of Excellence - \$7,964,464

MARINE RESOURCES DIVISION



The mission of the **Marine Resources Division (MRD)** is to manage the state's marine fishery resources through research, enforcement, and education for the maximum benefit of the natural resources and the citizens of Alabama.

MRD consists of the Fisheries, Enforcement, and Administrative sections.

The **Fisheries Section** makes recommendations of size limits, bag limits, and seasons to MRD managers based on research of growth, reproductive capabilities, environmental parameters, and abundance estimates. To meet this responsibility, section staff conduct varied monitoring programs to gather data for many species of fish and invertebrates. Programs are divided into fishery-based and science-based programs. Fishery data is collected from commercial sources such as vessels or dealers and recreational sources such as individual anglers and charter boats. Data collected includes location, trip time, number of anglers and fish lengths, weights, and aging structures. Scientific data is collected by section staff conducting long-term monitoring programs using gear such as seines, trawls and gill nets. Habitat creation and restoration focus on oyster reefs and inshore and offshore artificial reefs. Marine aquaculture located at the Claude Petet Mariculture Center (CPMC) focuses on supplemental stocking of fishes in local waters. Data collected through multiple programs, with staff

working with the public as well as with state and federal agencies along the Gulf, determines the status of state and federal marine resources.

The **Enforcement Section** is responsible for patrolling Alabama's shorelines, coastal waters, and adjacent federal waters and enforcing state and federal laws and regulations relating to the conservation and protection of marine resources. Officers also enforce boating safety as well as hunting and freshwater fishing laws and regulations. The section coordinates extensively with other state and federal agencies in cooperative enforcement operations, investigations, training, public safety, search and rescue, and other natural resource issues. In FY 2023-2024, the Enforcement Section employed 18 conservation enforcement officers.

Each year, the Fisheries and Enforcement sections partner to participate in outreach programs to educate the public on the resources and changes in management. Events vary in size and participation, with some involving a single staff member

while others include large portions of Fisheries and Enforcement staff. Staff may collect data, give presentations, or answer questions at fishing tournaments, fishing club meetings, Rotary and other civic organization meetings, school events, individual class requests, and business meetings where companies are working to make their employees more aware of conservation. MRD hosted a public oyster season informational meeting and a series of public meetings discussing a variety of potential regulation changes. These meetings are designed to provide information direct to the public with an opportunity to provide valuable input on how they may be impacted and what they are seeing in the field.

The **Administrative Section** is responsible for accounting, billing, payroll, license sales, and public inquiries. MRD is housed at two facilities, one on Dauphin Island and the other in Gulf Shores. In FY 2023-2024, the two facilities supported 65 full-time employees, one part-time and eight temporary positions.



PHOTO: LAURIE SCHAERER

FISHERIES SECTION

Staff monitored oyster densities on Alabama's public oyster reefs to assist in the development of the 2024-2025 oyster season. Divers collected and processed 190 quadrat samples from reefs planted with new cultch between 2013 through 2016 and from unplanted sections of reefs for comparison. Abundances of legal-sized oysters increased from the prior year. Commercial effort decreased by approximately 200 licensed harvesters, resulting in a 75-day season that was six days longer compared to the prior year's season.

Anglers provided staff with 706 fishes, representing multiple managed saltwater species, to sample for age structures, length, sex, and weight. This data is necessary to fishery biologists because it conveys the size at age of fish being harvested. Knowing the age distributions of the fish anglers keep assists staff with determining appropriate regulations for each species.

Staff participated in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) during FY 2023-2024. This survey gathers catch information directly from recreational saltwater anglers. That information is combined with effort information from the NOAA Fisheries mail survey to determine recreational catch estimates and stock assessments for many managed finfish. Staff surveyed 5,194 anglers at various marinas, public boat ramps, and shore sites during FY 2023-2024.

Fisheries Section staff continued to participate in an at-sea observer program that was implemented June 1, 2022, and funded by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC). The program is expected to run through 2026 and consists of a staff member riding on charter boats where marine reef fish species are targeted. Staff assesses and notes discard

methods and release conditions of fish caught and released during the trips. Priority reef fish are also tagged before being released if time allows without increasing the mortality risk for released fish. Among the priority species are red snapper, gag, red grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack. During FY 2023-2024, 74 observer trips were completed, 1,326 reef fish were tagged, and 66 of tagged fish have been recaptured and reported to MRD.

The red snapper season for private vessel anglers in 2024 was the seventh calendar year of an alternative management system whereby each state along the Gulf used data collection systems to monitor harvests against their respective harvest allocations issued by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. During FY 2023-2024 (10/1/23-9/30/24) as in prior years, harvests were monitored through Alabama's mandatory Snapper Check reporting program to ensure compliance with the 591,185-pound quota provided to Alabama in spring 2023. However, Alabama exceeded that quota by 4,898 pounds. The 2023 Red Snapper season closed October 17, 2023. The 2024 season opened May 24 with a quota of 659,654 pounds. This total included a reduction of the overage from the 2023 season. The 2024 season will close prior to December 31 if the harvest is met or projected to exceed the allocation.

The CPMC continued its fish stocking program. Three fish species were raised between October 2023 and September 2024: Florida pompano, southern flounder, and spotted seatrout. Florida pompano releases totaled 107,359 fish. The spawning of Southern flounder resulted in 1,145 fish (1-2 inches) being released in local waters during spring 2024. Spotted seatrout were spawned and 234,634 fish were released into coastal waters. Additionally, facilities upgrades were completed, which



PHOTO: BILLY POPE

included new piers for the culture ponds and the installation of protein skimmers in recirculating water systems to maintain better water quality and reduce the expense of water exchange.

Fisheries staff used gillnets, otter trawls, and seines to gather a variety of recreationally and commercially important marine species for information about their abundance and ages. Staff completed 260 field days with the sampling gears in Mobile and Perdido bays and the Mississippi Sound. Gillnet sets were deployed on 100 days, and 160 days were used for seine and otter trawl sampling activities. These sampling activities provided helpful data for establishing population trend information for a variety of species, including those that are key indicators of ecosystem health and those that are harvested commercially or recreationally. These sampling activities began in 1981, and the accumulated data represents one of the oldest continuous datasets of its kind for the Gulf.

Phase II of a multi-year grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) that supported multiple projects managed by the Fisheries Section was completed. Once the monitoring/research report is accepted by NFWF, MRD anticipates approximately \$8,000,000 in additional funding for artificial reef planning, creation and enhancement.

Staff continued artificial reefing activities to enhance the availability and quality of reef fish habitat and increase recreational/commercial fishing opportunities. During FY 2023-2024, 634 privately deployed artificial reefs were inspected by staff prior to deployment in the offshore reef permit zones of Alabama.

In cooperation with the GSMFC and the other four Gulf States, Fisheries Section staff continued a study to improve the quality and accuracy of commercial landings information of barracuda and king mackerel to validate, verify, and update conversions of gutted weights and other units of measurement provided by seafood dealers to whole weight. The development of updated conversion factors allows commercial landings to be accurately converted to whole weight for use in fisheries stock assessment and management.

MRD, with assistance from ADCNR's State Parks Division and the Baldwin County Commission, maintained seven public boat launch sites in Baldwin and Mobile counties. In FY 2023-2024, MRD provided financial assistance from Sport Fish Restoration Program funding to the Fort Morgan Boat Ramp, which received additional gravel and was reshaped to prevent ponding of rainwater.

The Fisheries Section conducted a pilot study to gather fishing effort data from Alabama's licensed saltwater private recreational anglers and captains of state for-hire vessels using the methodologies from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' LA Creel program. This program includes weekly phone surveys of private anglers and state for-hire licensed vessel captains/owners (not including federally permitted vessel captains/owners) to assess their fishing activities from the previous week. Effort estimates from the pilot survey will be compared to fishing effort survey estimates. During the reporting

period from January 1 to September 1, 2024, 16,942 recreational angler telephone surveys were completed. Additionally, MRD staff completed 1,416 state for-hire telephone surveys during the reporting period.

ENFORCEMENT SECTION

During FY 2023-2024, MRD enforcement officers continued their commitment to protecting Alabama's marine resources and ensuring compliance with fisheries regulations. They conducted 2,504 commercial angler inspections, 16,305 recreational angler inspections, 12,610 patrol hours, and 6,176 vessel boardings.

To educate the public about fisheries laws and management, Enforcement Section officers participated in a variety of outreach events during FY 2023-2024. These events target the recreational and commercial fishing communities, educational groups and schools, charity and special needs organizations, public service events, and seafood marketing events. MRD Enforcement officers worked to help the public understand important conservation principles as they interacted with more than 26,000 people in various contexts throughout FY 2023-2024.

In addition to their time in outreach events, MRD officers spend a lot of time educating the public during inspections of anglers and vessels. In the course of those inspections, officers encounter a small percentage of the public that is in violation of state or federal laws. For 2024, MRD officers issued more than 1,500 tickets and warnings related to conservation violations. Some more-serious violations required more in-depth investigations with some resulting in confiscation of equipment and the forfeiture of commercial fishing licenses. MRD officers partnered with other states and federal agencies to investigate interjurisdictional federal fisheries violations. The officers' dedication and work ethic played a significant role in these accomplishments and reinforced the importance of interagency cooperation in resource conservation.

During FY 2023-2024, MRD enforcement officers saw a need for better representation in the courtroom. Previously, conservation-related cases were tried between violent criminal cases in the courtroom, which diminished the perceived importance of the conservation-related cases. Officers coordinated with Mobile County district court personnel to address the problem and bring more attention to conservation law enforcement on Alabama's Gulf Coast. Meetings with the judges and the clerks were held each month, and a set day was established just for conservation-related cases. Officers were also assigned an assistant district attorney and a conservation judge when creating the conservation docket. The conservation docket has become a vital tool for increasing the efficiency of adjudication of cases, allowing officers to spend more time on patrol and reducing the amount of time a citizen would need to be in court.

The Enforcement Section entered the 22nd Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) with NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE). The JEA provides equipment and funding for officers to enforce federal laws and regulations. The most recent contract included funding for patrol vehicles, outboard engines, and vessel repairs. Additionally, it provided funding for underway and dockside patrols for federal priorities such as reef fish and turtle excluder devices and training for patrol officers.

MRD officers continued participating in joint investigations with the NOAA OLE regarding Gulf reef fish, marine mammals, sea turtle protection, and international unreported/undocumented seafood. Additionally, staff conducted joint patrols with uniformed NOAA Enforcement officers.

During FY 2023-2024, the Enforcement Section participated in several joint enforcement operations with other law enforcement partners. One of these operations was Kraken, which took place in May 2024. The operation included agencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Patrol Customs Air and Marine Unit, U.S. Coast Guard, Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA), and NOAA. The operation took place around Mobile Bay, Bon Secour Bay, the Intracoastal Waterway in south Baldwin County, and the Perdido Pass area of Orange Beach. During the operation, enforcement vessels encountered multiple commercial and recreational vessels that had the potential to have conducted activities outside of the United States. Enforcement agents and officers were tasked with doing complete vessel inspections, including checking for conservation violations, boating safety violations, trafficking of controlled substances, and even the possible trafficking of illegal immigrants. Over the two-day operation, more than 30 vessels were inspected for compliance, and the task force responded to a sailboat in distress near Dauphin Island with multiple people in the water. Responding officers successfully recovered everyone from the water and secured the sailboat. Operation Kraken and others like it are quarterly enforcement task force operations in which the Enforcement Section participates.

The Enforcement Section has also developed its training program to take advantage of unique, innovative training and to have its officers trained as instructors. This training allows the Enforcement Section to be more self-sufficient and to train other agencies. Enforcement now has specialized trainers for patrol boat operators training, survival swim training, and certified Firearms Instructors. Other training that Enforcement has been fortunate to be part of in FY 2023-2024 was the U.S. Coast Guard sponsored rescue lift training. This training helps familiarize officers with the needs and special requirements of retrieving an injured person from a boat. The training focused on preparing and handling helicopter lifts from multiple boating platforms and the needs that apply to each.

The Enforcement Section developed and currently maintains the Coastal Remote Monitoring System. This system comprises 28 strategically placed cameras in and around Mobile Bay, Perdido

Pass, and the Intracoastal Waterway. This system continues to grow and allows the Enforcement officers to monitor multiple locations from their vehicles through internet connected laptops. The system also stores high-definition video from all cameras for up to three months. This allows the officers to monitor and check multiple locations and provides secure video evidence within the camera's view for legal proceedings. This system is shared with both local law enforcement and federal partners and has helped those agencies close cases.

FUTURE ISSUES

The federal management of red snapper and other reef fish continues to be a high priority in the fishing community. MRD will begin the dockside survey component of a new survey of recreational and state for-hire charter anglers to estimate recreational finfish landings to compare with federal Marine Recreational Information Program estimates.

MRD continues to address infrastructure damage caused by Hurricane Sally. Improvement projects will continue into FY 2024-2025 that focus on office docks, boat lifts, shoreline protection, and public boat ramp improvements.



PHOTO: BILLY POPE

| Marine Resources 2023-2024 Budget | | FUND 0303 (Seafood Funding) | | FUND 1402 (NRDA Funding) | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|--|
| BUDGETED ITEM | BUDGET | EXPENDITURES | BUDGET | EXPENDITURES | |
| PERSONNEL COSTS | \$4,437,491.00 | \$3,593,286.80 | \$255,339.00 | \$64,144.87 | |
| EMPLOYEE BENEFITS | \$1,911,401.00 | \$1,527,770.91 | \$148,097.00 | \$30,413.42 | |
| TRAVEL- IN-STATE | \$36,000.00 | \$9,153.95 | \$1,000.00 | \$0.00 | |
| TRAVEL -OUT- OF-STATE | \$44,145.00 | \$14,716.20 | \$1,000.00 | \$0.00 | |
| REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE | \$1,720,000.00 | \$473,352.09 | \$2,000.00 | \$0.00 | |
| RENTALS AND LEASES | \$146,086.00 | \$55,334.73 | \$1,000.00 | \$0.00 | |
| UTILITIES AND COMMUNICATION | \$252,000.00 | \$183,499.41 | \$33,293.00 | \$1,799.09 | |
| PROFESSIONAL SERVICES | \$439,500.00 | \$262,518.88 | \$42,290.00 | \$0.00 | |
| SUPPLIES, MATERIALS & OPERATING EXPENSES | \$762,000.00 | \$519,027.79 | \$227,455.00 | \$502.61 | |
| TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT OPERATIONS | \$699,949.00 | \$435,047.86 | \$20,243.00 | \$941.37 | |
| GRANTS AND BENEFITS | \$2,159,058.00 | \$775,671.73 | \$125,526.00 | \$103,342.62 | |
| CAPITAL OUTLAY | \$6,706,431.00 | \$1,019,553.14 | \$105,300.00 | \$0.00 | |
| TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT PURCHASES | \$1,799,000.00 | \$1,060,109.14 | \$5,500.00 | \$0.00 | |
| OTHER EQUIPMENT PURCHASES | \$768,394.00 | \$210,730.47 | \$110,010.00 | \$28.27 | |
| ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER | \$893,325.00 | \$813,377.00 | | | |
| TOTAL | \$22,774,780.00 | \$10,953,150.10 | \$1,078,053.00 | \$201,172.25 | |

Fund 0303 (seafood funding) is MRD's general budget. Fund 1402 is funded through the federal Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDA Restoration Program) that distributes restoration funds from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill settlement.

* NUMBERS FROM STATE OF ALABAMA BUDGET MANAGEMENT REPORT * BUDGET FISCAL YEAR 2023 THROUGH SEPT. 30, 2024



SEVERAL SALTWATER FISHING RECORDS SET IN 2024

MORE AND MORE FISH ENTERED THE RECORD BOOKS FOR THE SECOND YEAR IN A ROW OFF ALABAMA'S GULF COAST.

In 2024, 12 saltwater records were set: bluefish, silvery John Dory, Atlantic fanfish, yellowedge grouper, rock hind, black jack, white margate, bigscale pomfret, bull shark, common snook, squirrelfish and bluefin tuna.

The yellowedge grouper, bull shark and bluefin tuna were especially notable for their sizes.

The grouper, caught by Danny Mathis of Orange Beach, was not only certified for a state record, but the 51-pound fish has also been submitted as a potential all-tackle world record.

PHOTO: BILLY POPE



Tommy Boyer of Foley caught a bull shark weighing 494.5 pounds was caught during the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo in July. The Rodeo is the largest of its type in the United States.

The monster bluefin tuna, caught by David Gaston of Sylacauga, weighed 831 pounds, 6 ounces. It shares the record with a bluefin that weighed 829 pounds, 6 ounces that was caught by John Engquist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2006. To replace a record for a fish weighing less than 25 pounds, the replacement fish must weigh at least 2 ounces more than the existing record. To replace a record for a fish weighing 25 pounds or more, the replacement fish must weigh at least one-half of 1 percent more than the existing record. To bump Engquist's fish completely from the books, Gaston's fish needed to be a little more than four pounds heavier.

The 2024 Alabama saltwater records were preceded by seven records set in 2023.

The catch that went viral, with news agencies around the world picking up the story, was the giant blue marlin caught by Best Trait, a 55-foot Viking sportfishing vessel owned by Scott Crump of Jasper. The marlin officially weighed 1,145.6 pounds, which is not only an Alabama but also a Gulf record. The Best Trait marlin, which was 145 inches long, easily eclipsed the Alabama state record of 851.9 pounds caught in 2020 by Ginger Myers. The Gulf record was set in 2002 in Mississippi by Barry Carr at 1,054 pounds.

An hour into the fight, the marlin died and began to sink. The fish was so big, a nearby boat was called to assist with getting it onboard. It took seven anglers to get the monster blue into the boat. A marlin weighing more than 1,000 pounds, known as a grander, is an extremely rare occurrence, and the fish was almost 300 pounds larger than the previous record.

Credit goes to bigger boats and the tournaments hosted out of Orange Beach. Alabama has become a destination for world-class offshore fishing tournaments, and that brings awareness to all fishing in Alabama. Our guest anglers have a sizable economic impact as they spend money in the local economy.

In 2023, another record-breaker that caused quite a stir was the gigantic tiger shark caught during the 2023 Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo by Brett Rutledge. The tiger shark weighed 1,019 pounds, bumping the 988 pounds, 8 ounces fish caught by Larry Eberly that had held the Alabama record since 1990.

Rutledge's record fish was certainly not caught by accident. He took his daughter and a friend out the day before the rodeo and started to catch jack crevalle and bonitos to use for bait as well as collecting about 400 pounds of baitfish, like menhaden, for chum. All of these species are in abundant

around petroleum rigs, artificial reefs and natural bottom off the Alabama coast. The shark was caught using 22/0 circle hook, designed for shark fishing, with a 700-pound stainless leader. Total time from hooking the shark to bringing it alongside was 36 minutes, and then it took an additional hour and a half to load it into the boat due to its size.

The shark category at the rodeo allows marine scientists from the Dauphin Island Sea Lab and the University of South Alabama access to species that are rarely available to study.

Another catch that received some recognition in 2023 was the huge bluefish that Rustin Musgrove caught while fishing at Perdido Pass. The bluefish weighed 17 pounds, 8 ounces, bumping a 20-year-old record of 17-4 from the record books.

Several of these records were deepwater species, including one that had never been submitted for a record before. This is occurring as more people are venturing farther into the Gulf to fish due to increased fuel economy on new outboard engines, satellite phones and the global positioning systems (GPS) for safety, and higher quality electronics to help identify fish and fishing locations.

A queen snapper was accepted as a first-time record fish when Gene Stock caught a queen that weighed 5 pounds, 8.6 ounces in February of 2022. That record didn't last long, though. In June of 2023, Crawford Grant Mann caught a queen that was almost double the initial record at 11 pounds, 4.6 ounces.

A sand tilefish caught by Tylor L. Finley in May of 2023 went into the record books at 2 pounds, 10.4 ounces.

Another record for a deepwater species was an escolar caught in September 2023 by Scott Page weighing in at 102 pounds, 9 ounces, which was more than 30 pounds heavier than the previous record.

Trey Taylor caught a jolthead porgy in June that went in the record books at 9 pounds, 2 ounces, and the latest record was a silvery John Dory, caught in March that weighed 5 pounds, 6.24 ounces.

Another new species for the Alabama record books in 2023 was the common snook. Dr. Richard Tarver Webb caught the snook that weighed 5 pounds, 2.6 ounces to establish the record, but Gardner Love broke that mark in 2024 with a 7-pound, 3-ounce fish.

As proven by the multitude of saltwater state records, Alabama has amazing resources that benefit all anglers who fish here. The state has an abundance of saltwater fish species to satisfy recreational opportunities as well as provide economic benefits. We encourage everyone to visit Alabama and experience the wide variety of outdoor recreation our state has to offer including the excellent fishing along Alabama's Gulf Coast. ■

STATE LANDS DIVISION



The **State Lands Division (SLD)** manages undeveloped, state-owned trust lands that are specific as to their identity as well as to the income beneficiary. The land management program includes Sixteenth Section and Indemnity School Lands of approximately 30,000 acres; approximately 7,000 acres of Department of Mental Health trust lands; Muscle Shoals Grant Lands of approximately 8,000 acres; and other state agency lands, including submerged lands (inland and coastal), of approximately 600,000 acres. Resource uses include oil and gas exploration and development, timber harvesting, farming, coal mining, hunting leases, and commercial uses. SLD continues its efforts to identify additional means of revenue generation through management of these trust lands.

The Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) program is administered by SLD at the direction of that program's Board of Trustees. Division personnel provide administrative support including coordination of the assessment and appraisal process, land acquisition transactions, budget preparation, and annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature. In addition to these administrative services, SLD manages many of Forever Wild's 293,700 acres, as well as complementary tracts owned by SLD.

SLD conducts sales and leases of excess state-owned lands pursuant to the State Land Sales and Leasing Act. This law establishes a procedure aimed at ensuring the state receives full fair market value for lands that state agencies sell or lease and that the process is open, competitive, and subject to public scrutiny.

SLD maintains the state Land Resource Information Center (LRIC), which is a database of lands owned by the State of Alabama and its departments, agencies, and institutions. The database offers search capabilities, providing members of the public the ability to readily access information about state-owned lands. The LRIC database can be found by following the state properties and then state land links on the Open.Alabama.gov website. The LRIC currently contains more than 6,691 land records.

Animal and plant species and areas of biological significance that make up the rich natural diversity of our state are identified

and inventoried as part of the Alabama Natural Heritage Database maintained by SLD. This effort, which includes more than 6.1 million records, provides important biological information to conservation organizations, developers, governmental agencies, and the public. It also complements SLD's role in evaluating land acquisition nominations submitted to Forever Wild and implementing a multiple-use management strategy designed to maximize public access to Forever Wild tracts.

SLD operates three facilities dedicated to conservation and land stewardship educational programs and a fourth dedicated to sporting dog field trials, habitat restoration, and hunting programs for youth and individuals with physical disabilities. Located in Spanish Fort, the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center serves as a gateway to outdoor recreation, conservation education, and land stewardship in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), located in Fairhope on Weeks Bay, is an estuary of national significance, and the Weeks Bay staff members conduct education and outreach, research, coastal training programs, and stewardship activities related to the estuary and its watershed. Located in the eastern portion of Alabama's Black Belt region, the Wehle Land Conservation Center in Midway (Bullock County) is funded in part through the Robert G. Wehle Charitable Trust. The M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area (FWFTA) is located south of Greensboro in Hale County.



SLD oversees the administration of Alabama's Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP), which was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979 as part of its national Coastal Zone Management Program. ACAMP's purpose is to promote beneficial management of the lands and waters located in Alabama's coastal area through a comprehensive and cooperative program designed to preserve, enhance, and develop these valuable resources for the benefit of present and future generations. SLD works in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to implement ACAMP and receives federal Coastal Zone Management Program grant funding from NOAA to support ACAMP and other federal coastal resource programs. SLD's Coastal Zone Management activities, as well as research activities and educational programs at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, complement the Division's responsibilities for managing submerged lands, including promoting public trust resource awareness and the understanding of riparian/littoral area development and associated impacts on private property and public use of Alabama's tidal waters.

SLD administers a regulatory program that manages impacts and improvements to public tidal submerged lands in conjunc-

tion with ADEM and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their respective jurisdictions on state and federal waters. The SLD regulations are designed to balance the rights of riparian property owners with the public use of those tidal submerged lands for navigation as well as fishing and other recreational uses.

SLD supports the ADCNR Commissioner and the Governor in the administration of grants and programs funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA). This act directs the U.S. Department of the Interior to distribute a portion of revenues generated from offshore oil and gas leases in federal Gulf waters for purposes such as natural resource restoration, coastal protection, implementation of conservation plans, and other efforts to mitigate impacts of Outer Continental Shelf activities. SLD staff conducts an annual solicitation for project proposals, executes grant awards for projects approved by the Governor, and monitors GOMESA project implementation and compliance.

SLD manages its responsibilities through a Land Management/Administrative Section, which includes Land Stewardship/Enforcement, Asset Management, Recreational Programs, and the Natural Heritage Program, as well as its Coastal Section, which oversees Coastal Zone Management activities and submerged land regulations, Weeks Bay Reserve, and the 5 Rivers Delta Re-

source Center. In FY 2023-2024, SLD employed 57 employees, including part-time or seasonal employees, in support of its programs.

Examples of various program and facility accomplishments during this past fiscal year follow:

ASSET MANAGEMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Generated \$36.6 million in revenue for distribution to state agency/entity beneficiaries including, but not limited to, the Alabama Trust Fund (\$22.3 million), Department of Education (\$11.6 million), State of Alabama General Fund (\$437,000), Alabama Historical Commission (\$254,000), and Department of Corrections (\$199,000)
- Assisted state agencies with revenue generation on state-owned lands through initiation of leases and sale of excess property pursuant to the Land Sales and Leasing Act's appraisal and bid process
- Administered revenue-generating activities on state-owned trust lands, including timber sales and issuance of hunting leases, shellfish aquaculture easements, riparian easements, river-crossing permits, submerged/upland pipeline rights of ways, dredge permits, farming/hay leases, oil and gas leases, and coal leases
- Continued a statewide leasing process associated with the 2020-2025 Hunting Lease Auction where a total of 145 tracts were offered for bid to generate revenue. This continued process resulted in 130 current leases which are expected to generate more than \$333,000 annually for state agency beneficiaries.

FOREVER WILD LAND TRUST ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITIES

- Administered and fully closed acquisition of five tracts across five counties adding a total of 6,381 acres to the program. These acquisitions leveraged approximately \$5,138,000 in State of Alabama GOMESA grant funds. The closed program acquisitions included the following:
 - o Heron Bay Wetlands Addition acquired by SLD with GOMESA funding (4,666 acres, Mobile County)
 - o Lake Guntersville State Park – John Doss Mountain Addition (60 acres, Marshall County)
 - o Lillian Swamp Blackwater Addition (166 acres, Baldwin County)

- o Oak Mountain State Park – Belcher Addition Phase 2 (277 acres, Shelby County)
- o Sipse River Swamp – Brownville Addition (1,212 acres, Tuscaloosa County)

- Provided administrative support to improve the awareness and understanding of FWLT and the outdoor recreation opportunities it provides Alabama's citizens
- Reviewed 55 nomination inquiries that resulted in 15 willing-seller tract nominations being processed and evaluated for potential acquisition by the FWLT Board of Trustees
- Provided administrative support to continue the Board of Trustees' initiative offering annual cooperative funding to counties in which Forever Wild acreage is located

FOREVER WILD RECREATIONAL AND LAND STEWARDSHIP ACTIVITIES

- Attracted more than 3,850 visitors to the M. Barnett Lawley FWFTA through 21 youth hunts, 13 days of physically disabled hunting, and 31 sporting dog field trial/hunt test events involving approximately 2,100 sporting dogs. Also hosted Alabama Audubon field trips, including one in conjunction with the Alabama Black Belt Festival. The FWFTA also served as a site for law enforcement training events. These activities at the FWFTA brought approximately 4,131 visitors to the tract and surrounding area.
- Furthered ADCNR's Campus Conservation Program by hosting students from the University of Montevallo and Tuskegee University at the FWFTA. Students participated in a Waterfowl Workshop and Wing Shooting Clinic, in addition to interacting with staff biologists and enforcement personnel regarding land management techniques.
- Hosted 2,321 visitors at the Wehle Land Conservation Center (WLCC) facilities for outdoor recreational and educational activities
- Expanded on existing public access opportunities by offering 36 open woods days at the FWLT Sipse River Recreation Area, and offered 25 open gate days during the hunting season at Old Cahawba Prairie, Splinter Hill Bog, and Lillian Swamp tracts
- Maintained approximately 392 miles of public recreation trails for activities such as horseback riding, hiking, biking, and canoeing at the Shoal Creek Nature Preserve, Walls of Jericho, WLCC, Splinter Hill Bog, Old Cahawba Prairie, Jacinto Port, Coldwater Mountain Complex, Dothan Park Trails, Grand Bay Savanna, Cahaba River Park, Perdido River Complex, Freedom Hills Complex, Indian Mountain Complex, Mobile-Tensaw Delta Wildlife Management Area

(WMA), Gothard-AWF Yates Lake WMA, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, Coosa County WMA, Tannehill Complex, Blakeley Addition, and Coon Creek Forever Wild tracts. For individual tract locations, visit alabamaforeverwild.com.

- Received 197 reservations for shelters and camping platforms associated with the Bartram and Perdido River canoe trails
- Performed annual informational kiosk updates including maps, guidelines of use, and hunting regulations at various Forever Wild tracts statewide
- Continued a citizen science habitat monitoring project at three locations (Grand Bay Savanna, WLCC, Old Cahawba Prairie) that invites visitors to photograph the habitat from a fixed camera bracket and share via social media, creating a long-term photo documentation of the landscape and attracting additional visitors
- Employed both chemical and mechanical methods for control of exotic plant species as well as various trapping techniques for removal of invasive animal species including the removal of approximately 684 feral hogs on various tracts throughout the state
- Nearing completion of contract services for the thinning of 481 acres and contracted for an additional 297-acre thinning at Uchee Creek Special Opportunity Area (SOA) in Russell County
- Completed harvest of a 375-acre stand of planted loblolly pine on Little River WMA to facilitate the restoration of a shortleaf pine forest. Also completed the planting of 30 acres of sand pine on Uchee Creek SOA to assist in longleaf pine restoration.
- Initiated planning efforts for a second thinning of 250 acres of loblolly pine plantation at Gothard–Yates Lake WMA
- Contracted for a first thinning of 250 acres of loblolly pine plantation and planned the first thinning of 100 acres of loblolly pine on Freedom Hills WMA
- Contracted for a second thinning of 350 acres of loblolly pine plantation on Old Cahawba Prairie Tract in Dallas County
- Conducted harvest preparation activities for second thinning of 125 acres and final harvest of 250 acres of loblolly pine plantation at Portland Landing SOA in Dallas County
- Conducted prescribed burns on almost 17,000 acres of public land statewide to maintain and enhance natural plant communities. Several fires were coordinated with ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division.

NATURAL HERITAGE SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Performed biodiversity survey work, conducted habitat assessments, participated in trail planning, and continued collecting detailed GPS and GIS (geographic information systems) data of existing Forever Wild tracts to aid management and research of these tracts
- Maintained GIS server software that provides the public an interactive map of Forever Wild holdings and ADCNR facilities. This software is also being used to improve geographic information transmission within SLD and the Department.
- Maintained the Natural Heritage Section database, which is partially funded by a State Wildlife Grant. The database is accessible via a secure internet website for more than 1,130 approved users and currently contains more than 6 million records of plant and animal species occurrences throughout Alabama.
- Continued to increase the number of specimens in the Natural Heritage Section Herbarium collection to 9,900. Most of those have been digitized, photographed, and databased.
- Continued coordination of Section 6 funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to support research benefiting at-risk plant species. Administered \$89,544 in federal matching funds, including subawards to Alabama universities.
- Coordinated fulfillment of grant awards for land acquisition and habitat restoration through the National Coastal Wetland Grant Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund

GULF OF MEXICO ENERGY SECURITY ACT (GOMESA) ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided administrative support to the GOMESA program by overseeing the disbursement of funds and providing support to the awarded entities
- Announced 24 new project awards totaling \$30,001,270 including the following:
 - o Alabama Aquarium Improvements (Dauphin Island Sea Lab) - \$200,000
 - o Blakeley Park Waterfront Access Improvement Project (Historic Blakeley State Park) - \$1,970,500
 - o City of Prichard Sweeney Lane Bridge (City of Prichard) - \$650,000



- o Creola Municipal Park, Conservation and Education Project (City of Creola) - \$1,000,000
- o Daphne Utilities Sewer Lift Station Permanent Bypass Pumps - Priority 1 (Daphne Utilities) - \$499,500
- o Daphne Utilities Sewer Lift Station Permanent Bypass Pumps - Priority 2 (Daphne Utilities) - \$445,500
- o Dauphin Island Sewer Collection System Improvements 2024 (Dauphin Island Water and Sewer Authority) - \$2,965,981
- o Dauphin Island Middle Beach Access Improvements (Town of Dauphin Island) - \$1,500,000
- o Dauphin Island Programmatic Dredge Permit (Town of Dauphin Island) - \$300,000
- o Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network, PHASE II (Dauphin Island Sea Lab) - \$182,461
- o Exploreum Traveling Exhibit Gallery Refurbishment (Exploreum Science Center) - \$829,012
- o Fairhope Flying Creek Nature Preserve Phase II (City of Fairhope) - \$1,328,000
- o Honor Park - A City of Spanish Fort Project (City of Spanish Fort) - \$3,000,000
- o Loxley Municipal Park Wetlands Acquisition Project (City of Loxley) - \$650,000
- o Meaher State Park Headquarters Facility Project (State Parks Division) - \$1,100,000
- o Mobile County Cedar Point Boat Ramp Phase II (Mobile County Commission) - \$2,753,440
- o Mobile County/TNC Coden Bayou Land Acquisition Project (The Nature Conservancy) - \$753,575
- o Mobile Riverfront Park Enhancements Phase II (City of Mobile) - \$3,023,667
- o National Maritime Museum Improvements (City of Mobile) - \$2,250,000
- o Orange Beach City Schools Sea, Sand, and Stars Revitalization Project (Orange Beach City Schools) - \$979,864
- o Saraland Water and Sewer System Upgrades (Saraland Water and Sewer System) - \$1,523,700
- o Summerdale Miracle League Ballfields (Town of Summerdale) - \$1,538,000
- o Town of Perdido Beach Comprehensive Drainage Improvements (Town of Perdido Beach) - \$307,670
- o University of South Alabama Lower Alabama Beach Education Facility (University of South Alabama) - \$250,000
- **Closed out previously awarded grants for the following completed projects:**
 - o Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory Oyster Enhancement Project in Little Dauphin Bay (Auburn University) - \$537,178.89
 - o Chickasaw Brooks Landing Public Access Enhancements (City of Chickasaw) - \$274,990
 - o Coastal Alabama Watershed Enhancement (Alabama Forestry Commission) - \$1,500,000
 - o Corn Creek Tributary Restoration (Town of Loxley) - \$249,920.50
 - o Dauphin Island Sea Lab Manatee Sighting Network, PHASE I - (Dauphin Island Sea Lab) - \$149,838
 - o GulfQuest Exhibit and Educational Content Improvements (City of Mobile) - \$76,800
 - o Satsuma Steele Creek Lodge Public Access Improvements (City of Satsuma) - \$1,024,141

- o Sediment Geochemistry Investigation of Mobile-Ten-saw River Delta (Geological Survey of Alabama)-\$216,300
- o US Highway 90 Sanitary Sewer Force Main Easement Stabilization - Priority Submission 1 (Daphne Utilities) - \$110,271.99
- o Windscape Lift Station Force Main Extension at D'Olive Creek (Daphne Utilities) - \$878,840.77

COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT

- Administered and provided technical support for 14 sub-awards totaling more than \$1,206,671 in NOAA grant funding to benefit projects and activities in Mobile and Baldwin counties:
 - o Promoted sustainable tourism and improved public access in Alabama's coastal area through the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau
 - o Supported multiple municipal planning efforts, including comprehensive planning, zoning, and mapping updates, stormwater management, and subdivision regulation updates (City of Robertsdale, Town of Magnolia Springs, City of Bay Minette, City of Loxley, City of Saraland, and South Alabama Regional Planning Commission)
 - o Sponsored People Against a Littered State's (PALS) annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup. Organized, in partnership with PALS, the 37th annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup. During the event, SLD staff provided volunteers with supplies to clean up waterways and shorelines across Alabama. More than 2,000 volunteers participated at 31 locations throughout Mobile and Baldwin counties. Over the life of the cleanup more than 900 tons of trash has been removed from Alabama's waterways and shorelines.
 - o Assisted Geological Survey of Alabama in its administration of the Coastal Geospatial Data Group to increase opportunities for data sharing and to improve management of coastal resources
 - o Supported aerial mapping of gulf-fronting shorelines through the Geologic Survey of Alabama
 - o Published and distributed biannual Current Connection Newsletters in partnership with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program (MBNEP)
 - o Supported research conducted at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab to understand interactions of oysters and predatory oyster drills in restored reefs
 - o Furthered watershed planning efforts undertaken by the MBNEP

- o Provided funding for ADEM's Coastal Program

- Continued integration of the Alabama Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program into the MBNEP Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan
- Secured Inflation Reduction Act funding to enhance capacity as well as conservation and resilience efforts in the coastal zone. Capacity building funds also used to initiate a masters/graduate university student intern program.

SUBMERGED LANDS REGULATORY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Coordinated with federal, state, and local governments as well as individual property owners regarding potential impacts to state-owned submerged lands
- Continued to provide information about the SLD regulations to efficiently manage uses of public submerged lands
- Received, reviewed, and/or approved 181 permit applications for activities impacting nearshore public trust submerged lands such as dredging, implementing living shorelines, and constructing structures over state-owned submerged water bottoms
- Received an additional Shellfish Aquaculture Easement application for off-bottom oyster farms as part of Alabama's Shellfish Aquaculture Program, which promotes the cultivation and harvesting of hatchery-spawned oysters for commercial purposes. There are currently 56 acres of permitted off-bottom Shellfish Aquaculture Easements in coastal Alabama.

5 RIVERS DELTA RESOURCE CENTER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted approximately 32,690 visitors from 34 states and 6 countries at more than 500 events, receptions, meetings, guided boat tours, field trips, and educational classes
- Hosted the Annual Delta Woods and Waters Expo in conjunction with the City of Spanish Fort. This three-day conservation event attracted more than 2,080 participants.
- Conducted or assisted with more than 92 educational programs serving over 3,000 participants of all ages
- Hosted statewide exhibits in the Apalachee Exhibit Hall, including the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest Exhibit and South Alabama Land Trust Photo Contest Exhibit
- Hosted the Annual Alabama Coastal BirdFest, which attracted 562 participants from 12 states and Canada for three days of guided birding tours, lectures, and workshops

- Assisted Alabama Naturalists and various other conservation groups with education specimens
- Hosted federal, state, and municipal law enforcement training sessions, including drone training
- Provided 69 days of meeting space for state or federal agencies associated with conservation
- Assisted several facilities with education programming, including Weeks Bay NERR, Meaher State Park, and WFF District IV
- Hosted two art camps for youth ages 5-12
- Hosted 28 public meetings conducted by local conservation organizations
- Hosted 225 receptions and business meetings for nearly 8,000 participants
- Continued to organize and host quarterly Outdoor Market events. These events showcase an average of 30 local vendors per event with an estimated 1,200 total visitors.
- Hosted the Spanish Fort Education Enrichment Foundation 5K trail run with approximately 400 runners
- Maintained two public boat launches on Mobile Bay
- Removed more than 96 barrels of trash and 45 illegally dumped tires
- Hosted multiple Mobile Bay Kayak Fishing Association tournaments attracting more than 35 anglers
- Attended several public events educating approximately 1,800 attendees
- Assisted Alabama Tourism Department during filming for upcoming advertisements
- Continued chemical and mechanical efforts to control exotic plant species, including cogongrass and Chinese tallow tree throughout property

WEEKS BAY NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided field experiences that introduced 3,423 students, ranging from preschool to college students, to local environmental and coastal related topics
- Conducted a two-day Teacher on the Estuaries workshop for 10 high school teachers, one middle school teacher, and one pre-service teacher. This workshop was designed to increase attendee knowledge and appreciation of local environments as well as learn the necessary skills to act as stewards of coastal resources.
- Provided 33 educational tours of the Weeks Bay Estuary for 587 participants from civic groups, educational institutions, and regional agencies
- Conducted a rain barrel workshop for 35 community mem-

bers to increase knowledge of stormwater management

- Conducted 16 workshops for 306 coastal leaders that provided 2,025 training hours related to resource management along the Gulf Coast
- Hosted 724 guest nights in the research dormitory. Guests included researchers, GulfCorps volunteers, workshop participants, visiting educators, and state personnel.
- Coordinated scientific research with universities and agencies on 18 projects within the Weeks Bay Watershed
- Collaborated on three papers submitted to peer-reviewed scientific journals for publication. Topics included wave and nutrient interactions on marsh erosion, effects of fire on soil and groundwater nutrients, and wetland methane porewater concentration across the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.
- Used high resolution digital leveling equipment to measure vertical elevation changes to Sediment Elevation Tables as part of Weeks Bay NERR Wetlands and Water Levels Plan
- Treated invasive plant species on 808 acres
- Continued work on capital improvement projects including the bog boardwalk and parking lot, visitor boardwalk, and resource center
- Received a \$3,521,843 award through the NERR Habitat Protection and Restoration Bipartisan Infrastructure Law competition for shoreline restoration to enhance coastal resilience within the Reserve
- Secured Inflation Reduction Act funding to enhance conservation and resilience efforts in Alabama's coastal zone
- Facilitated citizen science monitoring through three Reserve led programs: Alabama Water Watch, Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow Network, and Weeks Bay Phenology Trail
- Served as an Alabama Coastal Cleanup zone for 31 volunteers who removed 426 pounds of litter from Weeks Bay, Fish River, Magnolia River, and the surrounding land and roadways
- Collected continuous water quality and weather data from five sites in Weeks Bay as part of the Reserve's system-wide monitoring program
- Served the needs of coastal resource managers by providing technical training on the following topics: wilderness first aid, facilitation basics for coastal managers, water quality monitoring and training through Alabama Water Watch, introductory wetland identification and delineation, the importance of using native plants in landscaping, tools and data for resilience, nature-based solutions for coastal hazards, wetland regulations and compliance, climate and resilience grant writing success, and building risk communication skills
- Provided state leadership for three Gulf priority issue teams: Education and Engagement, Data and Monitoring, and Habitat Resources
- Conducted quarterly meetings of Weeks Bay Advisory Committee

WEHLE LAND CONSERVATION CENTER AND ELHEW FIELD STATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted 616 visitors during 16 open trail weekends
- Hosted 139 visitors associated with state and county agency meetings and events, non-governmental organization (NGO) meetings, technical workshops, and organized field trips
- Hosted 178 youths and adults for the annual Bullock County Youth Water Festival
- Hosted 106 youths and adults for the annual Bullock County Forestry and Wildlife for Youth event
- Hosted 131 participants supporting ADCNR-related programs/retreats including wildlife trapping workshops, State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) planning, Pheasants/Quail Forever R3 workshop, ADCNR Communications and Marketing retreat, and WFF-Enforcement District retreat
- Hosted 340 youths and adults for the annual Bullock County Fishing Derby, co-sponsored by WFF and Children and Mentors Outdoors (CAMO)
- Hosted 175 senior citizens for the first Bullock County Senior Citizen fishing derby co-sponsored by WFF, CAMO, and the Bullock County Sheriff's Office
- Provided 399 students in grades five through eight from schools in Bullock, Macon, and Barbour counties access to conservation and environmental outreach programs
- Hosted week-long wilderness first aid class for 10 participants led by Stonehearth Open Learning Opportunities in partnership with Alabama Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC)
- Hosted week-long fire training and recertification class for 20 participants led by TNC
- Hosted three-day chainsaw training class for 8 participants led by TNC
- Hosted students from Tuskegee University and Alabama A&M University as part of ADCNR's Campus Conservation Program
- Coordinated scientific research with Huntingdon College on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued trapping efforts to manage feral hog populations for the benefit of habitats and native wildlife
- Continued hosting an iNaturalist Project with more than 3,122 species reported to date
- Continued participation as an official stop on the Wiregrass section of the Alabama Birding Trail. The Wehle Land Conservation Center remained a popular hotspot on eBird with more than 180 species documented.
- Treated fishing ponds with herbicide to remove aquatic vegetation near banks to improve public fishing opportunities on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Treated invasive plant species infestations with spot-herbicide application on Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Administered U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey in Alabama
- Continued leading an annual bird identification workshop for U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service biologists and conservation partners at Bankhead National Forest through a cooperative cost-share agreement
- Monitored and oversaw management actions for the red-cockaded woodpecker population on the Forever Wild Coosa WMA
- Continued operation of a Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship banding station on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued nest box monitoring and management on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract

STATE LANDS 2024 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

| Section Name | * Budget | † Expenditures |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|
| Land Management & Stewardship Activities | \$5,900,561 | \$4,983,494 |
| Administrative Transfer to Department | \$744,441 | \$703,141 |
| Coastal Zone Management Program | \$2,517,301 | \$1,841,013 |
| Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve | \$5,147,047 | \$1,433,798 |
| Total per State Lands Fund | \$14,309,350 | \$8,961,446 |
| Forever Wild Land Trust Fund | \$16,150,918 | \$8,762,238 |
| Forever Wild Stewardship Fund | \$3,000,000 | \$2,507,776 |

*AMOUNTS INCLUDE REQUESTED BUDGET SPENDING AUTHORITY ASSOCIATED WITH EFFORTS TO APPLY FOR GRANT AWARDS AND OTHER LEVERAGE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

† INCLUDES EXPENDITURE OF PRIOR YEAR FUNDS THAT WERE AUTHORIZED FOR MULTI-YEAR CAPITAL OUTLAY.



WEEKS BAY COASTAL TRAINING PROGRAM PROVIDES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO EMPOWER COASTAL DECISION MAKING

Scientific knowledge related to coastal areas continues to grow and evolve, presenting both challenges and opportunities for local decision makers. As knowledge increases, new strategies are developed for those who make resource management decisions impacting coastal ecosystems, economies, and people. The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), a facility of State Lands Division (SLD) of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), strives to support these coastal decision makers by providing access to professional development training that is science-based and relevant to specific conditions existing within Alabama’s coastal and estuarine ecosystems.

PHOTO: SCOTT MURPHY



Weeks Bay NERR is a partnership between SLD and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and serves as one of 30 sites nationally within NOAA's NERR System. Located in Fairhope, the Reserve is a unique facility conserving and managing more than 10,000 acres of vital estuarine marsh and tidal habitat as well as tracts of forested wetlands. Reserve facilities and acreage also provide public access to outdoor recreation opportunities through trail systems, boardwalks, a kayak launch, and a boat launch managed in cooperation with ADCNR's Marine Resources Division. Providing ecosystem benefits and recreation opportunities is important, but as part of the NERRS, the Reserve strives to do much more.

The Reserve was designated as a NERR in 1986 through the support of then Senator Jack Edwards, who recognized the importance of land stewardship in rapidly growing coastal communities. Such growth makes understanding coastal resilience tools, potential impacts of land use changes, and sustainable development practices critical. The Reserve meets these needs in part through assisting with research and furthering youth and adult education. For example, in addition to hosting various teacher workshops, the Reserve provided field-based education opportunities to almost 3,500 students during FY 2023-2024. Staff also conducted 33 tours of the Weeks Bay Estuary for 587 participants from civic groups, educational institutions, and regional agencies.

Specifically designed for coastal professionals who work with local governments and private property owners, the Reserve's Coastal Training Program (CTP) perhaps best highlights efforts to support the balance between conservation and development. The CTP offers workshops focused on conveying available information, strategies, and tools that inform decision making and spotlight the benefit of maintaining land stewardship as an integrated aspect of planning for and adapting to growth. During FY 2023-2024, the Reserve hosted 16 workshops for 306 coastal professionals, providing 2,025 training hours. Addressing needs across both Mobile and Baldwin counties, workshop topics included Introductory Wetland Identification and Delineation, Importance of Using Native Plants in Landscaping, Tools and Data for Resilience, Nature-Based Solutions for Coastal Hazards, Grant Writing Success, Building Risk Communication Skills, Water Quality Monitoring Through Alabama Water Watch, Facilitation Basics for Coastal Managers, and Wetland Regulations and Compliance training.

The CTP often collaborates with local partners to host trainings and leverage expertise. The Wetland Regulations and Compliance

training was no exception. The Reserve worked with the Alabama Coastal Foundation, Baldwin Realtors, and the Mobile Area Association of Realtors to deliver a training session in each coastal county. These courses provided continuing education credits through the Alabama Real Estate Commission, Alabama State Bar Association, and American Planning Association. Subject matter experts from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Hand Arendall Harrison Sale Law Firm, and Thompson Engineering presented valuable insight on multiple aspects of wetland regulations and compliance.

Wetlands are crucial habitats that naturally control shoreline erosion, retain and store stormwater, improve water quality through filtration, recharge groundwater, enhance migratory bird feeding and stopover opportunities, and also provide fisheries habitat benefiting both commercial and recreational fisheries. As such, both federal and state agencies have laws and regulations in place to protect them. To better understand the importance of wetlands, participants were introduced to the different types of wetlands and how to identify them. They were then provided with information about wetland regulations and permitting to gain perspective for land use practices and the implementation of coastal zone management wetland regulations and policies. Finally, they examined compliance case studies to see how wetland regulations and permitting requirements are applied to real world scenarios.

The 98 local realtors, attorneys, and floodplain managers who attended these trainings left with a greater understanding of how to identify wetlands and, thereafter, how permitting requirements relate to the development process. After attending training, these professionals are better positioned to more effectively assist clients with evaluating property locations best serving specific development needs, while also communicating the importance of abiding by wetland regulations. Nearly all of the participants (98%) who completed the post-training survey said they learned something that they will apply in their work or future decisions.

The Reserve's CTP strives to further the ability of coastal decision makers and local communities to make informed and empowered decisions. The Wetland Regulations and Compliance training is just one example of how the Reserve serves Alabama's coastal communities. To learn more about CTP events as well as of other activities offered at the Reserve, visit <https://www.outdooralabama.com/lands/weeks-bay-reserve> or contact *Johanna Gertsch* at Johanna.Gertsch@dcnr.alabama.gov. ■



ALABAMA STATE PARKS

The **State Parks Division** administers 21 state parks in Alabama, encompassing 48,850 acres of stunning landscapes. Whether guests seek a peaceful day of hiking or a luxurious resort experience of convention lodging, restaurants, and golf courses, Alabama State Parks have something for everyone. From Gulf Coast beaches to the Appalachian Mountains, the State Parks Division offers diverse activities and amenities with individuals, groups, and families in mind.

The mission of the Alabama State Parks Division (ASPD) is to acquire and preserve natural areas; develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

Goals of the Division include:

- Providing exceptional facilities and services tailored to creating memorable experiences for guests
- Managing the parks efficiently, ensuring financial sustainability
- Creating opportunities for personal growth through outdoor experiences
- Encouraging the use of Alabama State Parks to showcase the state's natural beauty
- Preserving parks for future generations to stay, play, and explore
- Promoting goodwill and upholding Alabama's reputation through the Division's dedicated team members

In FY 2023-2024, the Division continued to complete several major renovation projects in alignment with Division goals. Staff served with excellence through every step of the improvement projects and provided access to outdoor recreation for park visitors throughout the state.

FY 2023-2024 Division highlights include:

- Welcomed more than 6.25 million guests throughout the Alabama State Parks system
- Implemented numerous system-wide design and renovation projects
- Hosted the National Association of State Park Directors Conference at Gulf State Park
- Created the Plan Your Adventure Online portal at Alapark.com to support the recently launched guest reservation system and guest experiences
- Hosted 650 First Day Hike participants covering 1,613 miles in January 2024



FACILITIES AND PERSONNEL

Of the 21 State Parks, 18 are maintained by the Alabama State Parks Division staff. Staffing is determined by each location's size, development, and operation. The total number of employees for all parks varies from approximately 700 during the peak season to around 500 during the off-season. The three remaining parks are staffed and operated through management agreements with local governments. The State Parks Division Central Office in Montgomery includes eight sections: Operations, Marketing and Communications, Natural Resources, Education and Interpretation, Recreational Trails, Planning and Visitor Services, Law Enforcement, and Management Analysis.

OPERATIONS SECTION

The Operations Section is divided into the North Region and the South Region, with each headed by an Operations Supervisor. The Operations Supervisors oversee five District Superintendents, with the North Region districts being Northeast, Northwest, and Central and the South Region including the Southeast and Southwest districts. Each Operations Supervisor oversees work in their region, including daily park operations, maintenance and more. The Operations Section manages insurance and property inventory along with the needs of 600 hardworking division team members.

Operational highlights for FY 2023-2024 include the following:

SOUTHWEST REGION:

Gulf State Park

- Welcomed 3,129,664 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Received Best Recreational Trail by USA Today 10Best Readers' Choice Awards (Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail) for the second year
- Worked with Jacksonville State University on geofencing and tracking 1,600,000 unique trail visitors
- Reopened Gulf State Park Education and Fishing Pier
- Renovated and opened new lakeside cabins
- Remodeled beach pavilion restrooms and lighting
- Remodeled park headquarters office exterior
- Resealed and striped Cotton Bayou Beach parking lot
- Replaced dune crossover boardwalks at Alabama Point
- Provided 482 interpretive programs for 17,988 park guests
- Provided field trips for 856 K-12 students
- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension System

- Procured Alabama Tourism Department Legislative Grant for annual A Very Merry Grinchmas
- Received Alabama Association of Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils grant for the construction of the Sensory Trail Pollinator Garden
- Awarded with the Bronco Wild Fund Grant to support inclusivity and accessibility
- Hosted the 2024 National Association of State Park Directors Conference
- Hosted the 9th annual Ballyhoo Festival at Lake Shelby, welcoming 118 vendors and 15,000 attendees
- Hosted annual Shark Week and Turtle Fest pier programs with 4,500 attendees
- Hosted the 5th annual Grinchmas children's Christmas program welcoming 2,000 attendees
- Hosted the 3rd annual Dive for Debris at the Gulf State Park Pier
- Hosted the 2nd annual Breakfast with the Grinch welcoming 300 attendees
- Hosted Big Beach Marathon, We Run This Beach Marathon, Good Life Ride, MS Ride, and the Coastal Half-Marathon with a combined 6,000 participants
- Hosted a Planting for Protection event, positively impacting 372 local school students

Meaher State Park

- Welcomed 60,219 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Started the Meaher State Park Campground Expansion and Park Headquarters building projects
- Procured \$1.1 million in Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) funding for park enhancements
- Provided 110 interpretive programs for 900 park guests
- Received RC&D grant for the construction of five pollinator gardens
- Hosted 3rd annual First Day Hikes
- Presented youth and adult nature programs and fishing days drawing over 850 participants
- Hosted the Spanish Fort Fire Department 5K and Bras Across the Causeway 5K races
- Hosted the South Alabama Land Trust Coastal Cleanup, drawing 100 participants

Roland Cooper State Park

- Welcomed 20,822 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Dedicated the T-pier in honor of James "Big Daddy" Lawler
- Procured Bronco Wild Fund Grant to support inclusivity and accessibility
- Received RC&D grant for the Education Village Pollinator Garden
- Awarded with the Big Cedar Education Foundation Grant for Bats, Bugs and Biodiversity Program
- Provided data for the Governor's Black Belt Heritage and Ecotourism Strategic Development Plan
- Enhanced overnight cabin and tiny home accommodations
- Introduced retail merchandise at camp store
- Hosted the 7th annual Big Crappie Fishing Tournament
- Hosted the annual Catfish Juggin' Open tournament

SOUTHEAST REGION:

Lakepoint State Park

- Welcomed 147,997 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Began lodge renovation
- Hosted Fins, Feathers, and Flowers Weekend
- Hired two Interpretive Education Park Naturalists
- Hosted the first Gator Jeepin' Fest with a live band and more than 100 participants
- Partnered with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) for 50-amp power service upgrades to Clark Loop
- Hosted events, conferences, and programs for multiple civic, business, and regional groups
- Hosted the 1103rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion deployment
- Hosted Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) event with 100 participants
- Installed new air conditioning at the lodge and cottages
- Hosted more than 70 weddings, holiday events and family reunions
- Hosted more than 40 local, high school and regional fishing tournaments with more than 5,000 participants
- Hosted Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club, the Mercyhurst Rowing Team, and Yoshukai Karate Camp
- Hosted annual Lakepoint State Park Fourth of July celebration

- Served 1,200 guests for Thanksgiving and Christmas meals

Chewacla State Park

- Welcomed 106,509 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Hosted the Chewacla Classic Camper Stay Event
- Hosted Merit Badge University for local Boy Scout troops
- Hosted USA Cycling Mountain Bike Race with 279 participants
- Provided more than 30 programs for more than 1,000 participants
- Partnered with Central Alabama Mountain Pedalers (CAMP) for park trail improvements
- Expanded community connections with Auburn-Opelika Tourism
- Welcomed the Alabama Legislative Parks Oversight Committee for an on-site park tour

Frank Jackson State Park

- Welcomed 17,605 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Hired a new park manager
- Hosted Scarecrows in the Park with 1,372 visitors, highlighting local community partnerships
- Hosted Fourth of July fireworks event in partnership with the City of Opp
- Hosted Opp High School Cross Country competitions, welcoming 28 school teams to the park
- Added new central heating and cooling units to guest cabins
- Hosted C.A.S.T for Kids fishing event for children with special needs, welcoming more than 200 participants

Blue Springs State Park

- Welcomed 41,223 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Hosted annual Polar Plunge
- Hosted annual Easter Egg Hunt
- Installed new gravel, tables and grills within the campsite area
- Added coin-operated washers and dryers to the laundry center
- Implemented fiber internet service
- Opened a seasonal camp store to sell refreshments

CENTRAL REGION:

Oak Mountain State Park

- Welcomed 843,136 guests during FY 2023-2024
- Sold 44,931 rounds of golf with a total revenue of \$1,848,496
- Processed 2,545 cabin and 1,589 pavilion rentals
- Hosted 186 interpretive programs for 5,843 guests
- Provided 13 field trips for 817 K-12 students
- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension
- Hosted Fresh Air Family's summer environmental education camps for kids
- Awarded with the Bronco Wild Fund Grant to support inclusivity and accessibility
- Received RC&D grant to complete the Pollinator Garden and Interpretive Storybook Trail
- Hosted 252 events, including triathlons and mountain bike races, color runs, the annual Fire on the Water fireworks show, Spring Market, Harvest Festival, and Campoween
- Completed numerous enhancement projects, including the grand opening of the completely renovated campground and repaving initiatives
- Finalized work at the restroom and parking lot trailhead at the Forever Wild Belcher Tract
- Installed island at Forever Wild Belcher Tract for automated pay gate
- Installed new HVAC system in the Oak Room and new roofing at the Alabama Wildlife Center
- Installed new golf driving range
- Repaired storm damage to Equestrian Campground bathrooms
- Rebuilt Kingfisher Pavilion
- Built new trails on the Forever Wild Belcher Tract to include the Longleaf Trail and Breezy Trail
- Added new Beaver Lake Trail to connect with renovated campground
- Installed 27 waypoint arrows to help with park guest trail navigation
- Collaborated with Auburn University on Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) track chair storage solutions and testing an accessible container design
- Managed International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) Silver Level Ride Center Status with professional trail-building plans in place

- Initiated a new trail map and trail signage plan to enhance navigation and safety for trail users

Cheaha State Park

- Welcomed 238,302 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Participated in community programs serving 1,489 people
- Participated in the filming of the Discovery Channel series *RV There Yet?*, featuring the park as Alabama's highest peak
- Engaged in community partnerships such as Choccolocco Watershed Career Day, Herpfest at Anniston Museum of Natural History, Shinbone Valley Volunteer Fire Department community connections, Pinhoti Fest, and numerous local library programs
- Hosted the Alabama Blackburn Institute and Level 1 Leave No Trace training
- Served 19,911 participants through 277 weddings, reunions and birthdays, church gatherings, meetings, pavilion rentals, races, memorial rides, and antique car clubs
- Received 6,491 Interpretive Center visitors
- Hosted 357 programs for 4,855 guests, developing 29 new interpretive programs and receiving three new grants for a refurbished pollinator garden, scholarship field trips, and new program supplies
- Conducted 11 field trips with 388 participants
- Planned and conducted the inaugural Hop into Spring Festival with 350 participants
- Received 12,271 visitors to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Museum
- Received new CCC Museum donation of gears from a Bald Rock plane crash, a CCC lead smelter/iron heater and a CCC metal nameplate
- Received 1,805 visitors to the Walt Farr Native American Relic Museum and a donation of a Native American tomahawk replica from the Walt Farr family
- Began the content review process to ensure continued adherence to federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) guidelines
- Implemented continuing staff education through venomous snake handling, chainsaw operations and safety, cogon grass identification and management, Leave No Trace management, Alabama Master Naturalist, Alabama Water Watch, and certified burn manager training opportunities
- Partnered with the Alabama Forestry Commission to conduct prescribed burns on eastern and central park areas, including a park progression photo project to describe the benefits of prescribed fire
- Partnered with local beekeepers to install seasonal hives on-

site and sell honey in the mountain store

- Replaced Pinhoti steps on steep eastern trail slope
- Reblazed, cleaned, lopped and removed hazards from 90% of park trails
- Repaired or installed new signs at main trail junctions
- Implemented clean-up days at Bunker Tower, bath houses, boardwalk, bathrooms and pavilions
- Repainted inside of Bunker Tower and sections of the boardwalk
- Received new overnight lodging unit amenities
- Continued plans for a new hotel, additional prescribed burns, and water improvements

Wind Creek State Park

- Welcomed 437,454 guest visits during FY 2023-2024
- Hosted First Day Hike guests on 1.8-mile Campfire Trail
- Participated in the Tallapoosa County Tourism's annual River Fest by providing logistical support and programming as the host site
- Served as Vulcan Orienteering Club and Southern Trails Equine Competition Endurance Race host site
- Partnered with the Alabama Forestry Commission for prescribed burns of large tracts of park acreage and prescribed burning classes
- Continued partnership with Lake Martin Resource Association and Renew Our Rivers for cleanup efforts on Lake Martin and the surrounding roadways
- Served as the host site for more than 40 fishing tournaments serving high school and college teams as well as professional anglers
- Strengthened partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension through the Water Festival, serving 400 Tallapoosa County 4th graders
- Served as host site for the Alabama Cooperative Extension Longleaf and Alabama Master Naturalist courses
- Hosted Fresh Air Family's summer environmental education camps for kids
- Awarded with the Bronco Wild Fund Grant to support inclusivity and accessibility
- Received RC&D grant to complete pollinator garden and Interpretive Storybook Trail
- Began campground renovation project, B and C sections
- Started construction on five three-bedroom, three-bath cottages in the north picnic area of the park

- Welcomed the Alabama Legislative Parks Oversight Committee for an on-site park tour

NORTHEAST REGION:

Lake Guntersville State Park

- Welcomed 336,451 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Completed viewscaping project behind the lodge and chalets
- Held ribbon cutting ceremony for new eagle statue installation at the lodge
- Hosted two Eagle Awareness weekends with 400 guests and 100 lodging packages sold
- Hosted 240 events for social gatherings, corporate groups, faith-based organizations, state conferences, and various associations
- Hosted Marshall County Sports Hall of Fame and Mountain Top Roundup
- Hosted 132 family reunions, weddings, receptions, and retreats
- Held 22 live music performances in the Pinecrest Dining Room
- Hosted New Year's Eve Party with 86 overnight packages sold and 200 in attendance
- Hosted an Elvis-themed clambake with hundreds in attendance
- Served nearly 800 guests through holiday buffets in the Pinecrest Dining Room
- Finalized Beach Pavilion updates with new lighting, painting, and fan installations
- Completed Wi-Fi installation in the campground, cabins, and chalets
- Began new golf course cart path construction and purchased 20 E-Z-GO golf carts
- Installed two kayak launches at Town Creek and Short Creek through a North Alabama Trails and Recreation grant
- Purchased new mattresses for camper cabins
- Provided 72 interpretive and educational programs for 3,304 park guests
- Presented International Environmental Education Day photography workshop for more than 100 participants
- Received Bronco Wild Fund Grant supporting inclusivity and accessibility
- Awarded with the RC&D grant establishing the Pollinator Garden in the Education Village

Buck's Pocket State Park

- Welcomed 10,032 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Opened community space with picnic tables, cleared grounds, and lighting for enhanced camper experience
- Implemented staff training for trails and maintenance equipment
- Completed service day clean-up effort below Point Rock and near the campground
- Implemented safe removal of 10 trees at a reduced cost for the Parks System
- Welcomed annual Super Bowl group park reservation, reserving the entire park for the weekend
- Provided 15 interpretive and educational programs for 302 park guests
- Received Bronco Wild Fund Grant supporting inclusivity and accessibility

DeSoto State Park

- Welcomed 306,967 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Provided 167 interpretive and educational programs for 4,578 park guests
- Hosted several annual signature park events, including Wildflower Saturday, Spookapalooza, Creative Spirit Art Market, Moonlight Meandering Guided Paddles, and the DeSoto State Park Fourth of July celebration
- Partnered with Jacksonville State University Field Schools to support more than 200 educational programs at DeSoto State Park and in Little River Canyon National Park
- Planted 334 endangered green pitcher plant seedlings into the conservation bog
- Awarded with the RC&D grant establishing the Pollinator Garden with a new walking path, more than 300 new plants planted, and the Interpretive Storybook Trail featuring 20 interpretive signs
- Opened the Stanley H. Sims Native Plant Area, a 15-year cooperative ongoing project between the park and Dekalb County Master Gardeners, including mosaic benches and an entry kiosk
- Received grant from Dekalb County Master Gardeners for continued planting of native species in the Stanley H. Sims Native Plant Area
- Hosted and mentored AmeriCorps student team that completed five weeks of restoration work on CCC-built structures, trails, and additional park projects
- Hosted 600 guests at the CCC museum

- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension
- Hosted Lost Falls Trail Run with more than 100 participants

NORTHWEST REGION:

Joe Wheeler State Park

- Welcomed more than 230,000 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Hosted 132 interpretive and educational programs and hikes for 1,839 park guests
- Provided K-12 field trips for 205 students
- Hosted nearly 100 groups at the Lodge Convention Center
- Repaved 4.5 miles of park roads with rubber-modified asphalt using Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) grants and park funds
- Implemented new roadway and parking lot striping in all park areas
- Replaced flooring and subflooring in four park cabins
- Implemented new point of sale system in restaurant and a new online payment system for long-term slip holders at the marina
- Installed heaters in utility spaces to prevent freezing pipes in all cottages
- Replaced water lines on the largest covered dock at the marina
- Installed new sewer lift station at the beach
- Repaired and refinished the large pool at the lodge
- Upgraded golf pro shop roof with new shingles and repairs
- Installed new basketball goal at the picnic area
- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension
- Hosted Fresh Air Family's summer environmental education camps for kids
- Received Bronco Wild Fund Grant supporting inclusivity and accessibility
- Awarded with the RC&D grant establishing the Pollinator Garden and Interpretive Storybook Trail

Monte Sano State Park

- Welcomed 122,795 guests in FY 2023-2024
- Hosted North Alabama Japanese Garden Festival
- Collaborated with local mountain bike club to build new mountain biking trails

- Completed campsite refurbishment with new gravel and timbers
- Added new inventory to the camp store
- Hired new District Naturalist
- Partnered with Huntsville Public Library and Land Trust of North Alabama to host a bilingual program on Monarch Butterflies during Latino Conservation Week
- Hosted Legacy Partners in Environmental Education Darryl Gates Memorial Internship student from the University of Alabama to assist with programs
- Hosted 60 interpretive and educational programs and hikes for 516 park guests
- Provided K-12 field trips for 170 students
- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension
- Partnered with the University of Alabama in Huntsville to provide two Osher Lifelong Learning Institute series
- Received Bronco Wild Fund Grant supporting inclusivity and accessibility

Cathedral Caverns State Park

- Welcomed 89,921 guests during FY 2023-2024
- Increased gross profits by 9% from the previous year
- Hosted a bat blitz where an endangered bat species was found
- Provided cave tours to more than 174 school groups
- Hosted 55 groups, including summer camp groups, scout groups, senior groups, and a variety of additional touring groups
- Hosted annual Running Lane events such as the Race to the Cave Half Marathon and 10K Runs, Conquer the Cave 5K, Cathedral Caverns 5K, and the 10K Trail Run, averaging 700 runners per event
- Hosted monthly search dog training
- Hosted two cavern weddings
- Hosted annual Easter egg hunt with 200 participants
- Developed a group campsite
- Installed cave generator for emergency lighting
- Received Legacy Partners in Environmental Education Grant for a new interpretive Bat Cave Trail and K-12 Educational Learning Station
- Provided Alabama Master Naturalist field days in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension

Rickwood Caverns State Park

- Welcomed 57,274 guests during FY 2023-2024
- Welcomed more than 22,000 guests to the 6th annual Wonderland Under Warrior holiday cave tour event
- Welcomed more than 8,000 guests to the swimming pool during the summer months, averaging three private pool parties weekly
- Welcomed 3,356 students through cavern field trips
- Participated in the First Day Hike program with 57 participants
- Held 4th annual Cars at the Cave event with more than 70 cars participating
- Hosted four cavern weddings and two covered bridge weddings
- Lengthened Karst Trail by a half mile for expanded hiking options
- Installed a new group-sized grill for the large pavilion
- Added and improved paved ADA parking spaces at the small and large pavilion and pool areas
- Implemented renovations to the pool pump house, including a new pump for the pool and slide
- Installed new metal roofing for both pavilions
- Hosted an Alabama Master Naturalist class in coordination with Alabama Cooperative Extension System
- Hosted seven interpretive and educational programs and hikes for 109 park guests

Lake Lurleen State Park

- Welcomed 70,127 guests during FY 2023-2024
- Hosted 3rd annual Mount Olive Fire Department Car Show with more than 1,200 visitors
- Hosted Kids Triathlon with more than 1,500 visitors
- Hosted 2nd annual Santa in the Park with 2,000 visitors
- Hosted Camp Fear Halloween event, with hundreds attending as park guests and event participants
- Hosted the inaugural Phoenix Trail Race
- Hosted the inaugural Iron Turtle Race
- Hosted interpretive programs for 43 park guests
- Awarded with the RC&D grant establishing the pollinator garden and education station

MARKETING AND PROMOTIONS SECTION

The Marketing and Communications Section coordinates the marketing, communications, and promotional efforts of the Alabama State Parks System. The section includes four team members based in Montgomery, including the Marketing, Communications and Promotions Manager, Administrative Support Assistant II, Public Relations and Communications Coordinator, and Marketing Field Liaison.

Administrative functions include coordinating radio and television communications; preparing and distributing Division and park promotional literature and press releases; evaluating and purchasing advertising opportunities across print and digital media; coordinating with the Alabama Department of Tourism, local chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) rest areas, tourist associations, and special event promoters; assisting with marketing and communication efforts for each ASPD section and at individual state parks; attending special events and various promotional exhibit expos; maintaining seasonal photos for all park marketing needs; operating the toll-free nationwide phone line (1-800-Alapark); managing social media marketing for 46 social media pages; updating and curating the Alapark.com website; rebranding promotional park materials; ensuring mobile-first digital marketing; and continuing the pursuit of affordable and effective marketing and communication opportunities.

Accomplishments

- Implemented the Division's Plan Your Adventure Online portal, providing a consistent end-user experience for guests seeking reservations in all 21 Alabama State Parks
- Rebranded Division e-newsletter, reaching a monthly audience of 428,083 subscribers
- Served hurricane evacuees with expanded accommodation options and public information updates shared nationally via social media and news media outlets
- Launched the Stay, Play, and Explore – It's Natural campaign, promoting reservations, events, and programs for 21 parks
- Continued marketing efforts for the Alabama State Parks license plate, with \$433,834.25 in sales revenue for park improvements
- Promoted and raised \$8,164 in contributions for the Parks for Patriots program offering veterans and active-duty military free admission to Alabama State Parks
- Promoted membership in the Dirt Pass Trail Crew Program, encouraging increased volunteerism and garnering donations of \$1,860 to aid in the maintenance of Division trails
- Maintained 46 robust social media park and Division pages

via Facebook and Instagram platforms with consistent increases in engagement, reach, and followers across the Division

- o Improved social media analytics for primary Alabama State Parks pages:
 - Facebook - 15.1% reach and 21.4% visit gains
 - Instagram - 16.2% reach and 100% content interaction gains
- o Moved all content toward industry best practices, ensuring compliance, engagement, and consistency in all digital touchpoints
- Maintained the Alabama State Parks website (alapark.com):
 - o Reported 6,855,322 views and 1,898,326 new users in the new Google Analytics 4 reporting platform
 - o Created park-specific program and event landing pages to ensure ease of guest planning and reservation experiences
- Created the Alabama State Parks Ambassador program to involve digital media influencers and park guests in park and Division marketing campaigns across social media platforms
- Created Pics in the Parks: An Alabama State Parks Photo Series platform as a photo repository for park guests and an internal photo repository for park leadership and staff
- Created Division Learning Library for system stakeholders, training all section team members who interact with media, digital, and print opportunities
- Managed advertising and interviews in regional magazines, newspapers, podcasts, and radio segments
- Redesigned rack cards for all 21 state parks and continued distribution of the Alabama State Parks overview brochure, creating a cost- and time-saving distribution system for the future
- Attended and equipped other sections to attend trade shows and conferences as exhibitors with updated career flyers, expanded promotional giveaway items, and new banners for each park
- Promoted park concessionaire partnerships, including cabin rentals, zip line activities, kayak and boat rentals, equestrian facilities, and water cable skiing
- Promoted the Partners Pay the Way campaign and created park awareness with community groups, civic partners, and elected officials for donations and funding
- Equipped section and park teams with needed design and digital project management platforms to align with industry best practices

- Collaborated with Natural Resource Section for public information notices on prescribed burns in eight parks
- Collaborated with the Education and Interpretation Section to promote 2,300 educational programs for 63,000 guests and connected K-12 field trip efforts to support the Governor's Turnaround Schools Initiative
- Fulfilled marketing and communication requests for Natural Resources, Recreational Trails, Planning and Visitor Services, and Education and Interpretation sections for applicable grant and project collaborations
- Supported construction and renovation efforts by providing public information updates on bid processes and progress

Future Efforts

- Redesign division business and conference marketing print materials
- Evaluate and refresh alapark.com to update and archive applicable information
- Launch the State Park Ambassador Program and Pics in the Parks: An Alabama State Parks Photo Series campaigns to encourage digital influencers and guests to share their park experiences
- Continue expanding diversity, accessibility, and inclusion efforts to ensure park usage increasingly engages and reflects the communities parks are housed in while proactively reaching underserved communities
- Further collaborate with the Parks Law Enforcement Section on the Division's mental health campaign
- Expand technology platforms, section staffing, and internal Division processes to best elevate programs, reservations, public information updates, and park events
- Continue the section's cross-departmental and park collaboration and support efforts for media interviews, digital marketing, print media, advertisements, graphic design, reputation management, and relationship-building with brand voice and systems in mind

NATURAL RESOURCES SECTION

The Natural Resources Section plays a vital role in preserving the natural integrity of Alabama State Parks by conserving ecosystems, managing wildlife, and protecting water resources while balancing recreational use. Its core responsibilities include habitat restoration, invasive species control, prescribed burning, and wildlife monitoring, all focused on maintaining biodiversity and ecological health. The section monitors research initiatives, over-

sees real property matters, and secures funding through grants and partnerships. The section is staffed by a Natural Resource Supervisor based in Montgomery and a Natural Resource Planner based in Pelham. Together, they spearhead efforts to protect and manage the parks' diverse natural resources.

Accomplishments

In FY 2023-2024, the Natural Resources Section made significant strides in conservation and resource management across Alabama State Parks, focusing on habitat restoration, prescribed fire, invasive species control, community engagement, and educational initiatives. Those achievements are outlined below:

Prescribed fire is a tool used by the Natural Resources staff to manage forests, grasslands, and other ecosystems. Its purpose is to restore fire-adapted habitats, reduce wildfire risks, and promote native plant growth. The following are the prescribed fire accomplishments:

- **Gulf State Park: 170 Acres**
- **Lakepoint State Park: 155 Acres**
- **Wind Creek State Park: 158 Acres**
- **Blue Springs State Park: 92 Acres**
- **Oak Mountain State Park: 372 Acres**
- **Lake Guntersville State Park: 270 Acres**
- **DeSoto State Park: 107 Acres**
- **Cheaha State Park: 463 Acres**

Habitat Restoration is the process of repairing and bringing back natural areas such as forests, wetlands, or grasslands to their original healthy condition. The section managed the 188-acre longleaf pine restoration at Frank Jackson State Park to restore critical habitat for the gopher tortoise.

Wildlife Management is conserving, protecting, and managing wildlife populations. The Natural Resources staff managed archery hunts at Oak Mountain and Frank Jackson state parks.

Invasive Species Management:

- Monitored the Integrated Pest Management Plan to control Argentine Ants and other invasive species across southern parks
- Partnered with volunteers at Chewacla State Park to combat invasive plants and restore native habitats through the Hearts of STIHL grant
- Applied herbicides to manage invasive vegetation at several parks

Lake Management:

- Fertilized Lunker Lake at Oak Mountain State Park to enhance recreational fishing
- Managed catfish stocking at Lake Lurleen, Oak Mountain, and Chewacla state parks

Educational and Community Engagement:

- Installed interpretive panels and trailhead kiosks at Lakepoint State Park through a Legacy in Environmental Education grant
- Hosted Learn to Burn workshops at Wind Creek State Park, providing hands-on training for private and public landowners
- Designed pollinator gardens and interpretive storybook trails in 12 parks with grant funding to promote pollinator conservation
- Hosted Fins, Feathers, and Flowers Weekend at Lakepoint State Park

Research, Planning, Collaboration, and Land Acquisition:

- Acquired Beach Club West, 79 acres of conservation land acquired protecting the endangered Alabama beach mouse habitat
- Advanced the Fort Morgan Parkway Bike Trail Extension project under the RESTORE Act
- Enhanced data collection using ArcGIS to map invasive species and prescribed fire objectives
- Partnered with academia to facilitate research permits, collaborated with local stakeholders to resolve land disputes and boundary issues, and facilitated land use permits with private parties

Public Contributions and Outreach:

- Supported ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division State Archery Championship
- Facilitated Parks field staff attending prescribed fire certification classes, adding four certified burn managers to strengthen prescribed fire capabilities
- Engaged in and served on the host team for the National Association of State Park Directors Conference
- Participated in the Association of Southeastern State Park Directors Conference
- Participated in the Forever Wild land acquisition program
- Participated in the Alabama Invasive Plant Council Annual Conference
- Participated in the Prescribed Fire Council Annual Meeting

Through these efforts, the Natural Resources Section reinforced Alabama State Parks' commitment to ecological stewardship, guest education, and long-term sustainability.

Future Efforts

The section continues to focus on funding opportunities for ecosystem restoration projects within Alabama State Parks. Efforts will include the use of prescribed fire, innovative ideas for wildlife habitat improvements, adding fish habitat structures, and controlling populations of invasive species.

EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION

The Education and Interpretation Section fosters public understanding and appreciation of Alabama's natural environments through engaging educational initiatives. This section focuses on place-based education, natural resource interpretation, outdoor recreation, wellness in nature, accessible experiences, safety awareness, and creating natural connections and unforgettable moments for park guests. Staff includes a Chief of Education and Interpretation, three District Naturalists, and eight Park Naturalists.

Accomplishments

- **Statewide Staff Expansion:** Expanded the educational team by establishing and filling new roles for a Central District Naturalist, Northwest District Naturalist, Southeast District Naturalist, and Park Naturalists at Joe Wheeler and Lakepoint state parks
- **Program Growth and Reach:** Presented 2,300 educational programs to over 63,000 guests and visitors— a 15% program and 9% participant increase from the previous year. Provided field trips for 13,669 K-12 students, a 12% increase from the previous year.
- **Secured Essential Funding for Educational Programs:** Secured grants from The Caring Foundation of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, Big Cedar Education Foundation, Bronco Wild Fund, and Legacy Partners in Environmental Education, funding:
 - o Free K-12 field trips for 4,000 Alabama students
 - o Outdoor education and park passes for 1,500 K-12 students and their families
 - o Interpretive signage for Cathedral Caverns and Wind Creek state parks trails
 - o Statewide outreach programs for schools and libraries highlighting careers in conservation, Alabama's geological regions, biodiversity, and nature-based education
 - o Summer internships for college students at Monte Sano, Chewacla, and Gulf state parks
- o Teacher resource kits and programmatic supplies for Alabama State Parks programs
- o Support for Governor's Turnaround Schools Initiative through field trips and outreach
- **Environmental Literacy:** Coordinated with the Natural Resources Section to launch a 12-park pollinator garden project funded by the Alabama RC&D Councils. This project includes the native wildflower pollinator gardens, interpretive storybook trails, and a developed teaching resources kit to be used in the gardens with students, culminating in a festival event in central Alabama during National Pollinator Week.
- **Training, Professional Development, and Outreach**
 - o Participated in the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont naturalist training
 - o Created an Alabama State Parks annual training program for Park Naturalists to build teamwork, improve the quality of programs, and ensure a consistent visitor experience across all parks
 - o Created a best practices guide covering operations, field trips, live animal care, and biofact use for Park Naturalists
 - o Conducted in-depth national training sessions for the education team, including Leave No Trace Level One Instructor Course, Project Wild training, and the inaugural Park Naturalist Bootcamp
 - o Participated in the Southeastern State Parks Programs Seminar and the Association of Southeastern State Park Directors Conference
 - o Presented at the Environmental Education Association of Alabama (EEAA) Conference and co-led sessions with Dr. Steve Jones for the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
 - o Partnered with the Southeastern Environmental Education Alliance and the Environmental Education Association of Alabama to support K-12 and environmental education programming statewide
- **Engaging Expanded Program Audiences**
 - o Conducted Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) and Wilderness Women's Weekend event sessions, reaching over 1,000 participants
 - o Collaborated with the Marketing and Communications Section to share weekly content promoting educational programs
- **Educational Partnerships and Camps**
 - o Partnered with Alabama Cooperative Extension System to support the Alabama Master Naturalist Program through State Park field days

- o Collaborated with Fresh Air Family to provide environmental education programming to hundreds of camp students at Oak Mountain, Joe Wheeler, Wind Creek, Cheaha, and Frank Jackson state parks
- o Partnered with Alabama Audubon to offer statewide birding walks
- **Statewide Themed Programs:** Developed and delivered themed programs such as First Day Hikes, #Hike24in24AL, Girl Scouts Love State Parks, Windows to Nature Fairy House workshops, nature photography workshops, Interpretive Storybook Trail programs, and Bats, Bugs, and Biodiversity programs
- **Nature Awareness Weekends:** Hosted Lake Guntersville State Park Eagle Awareness Weekend and Lakepoint State Park Alligator Awareness Weekend programs, bringing an educational focus to Alabama’s native wildlife
- Completed the first phase of the closed road clean-up at Monte Sano State Park, supported by a \$5,000 materials donation from Vulcan Materials
- Continued development of climbing trails at Buck’s Pocket State Park in collaboration with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition (SCC)
- Partnered with Monte Sano State Park and Huntsville Area Mountain Bike Riders (HAMR) to design and develop three new downhill mountain biking (MTB) trails built by Barry Smith Trail Builders
- Constructed D Breaze Way (0.2 miles) as a climbing trail at Monte Sano State Park
- Installed 27 miles of navigation arrows at Oak Mountain State Park to improve visitor wayfinding, with additional arrows installed at Lake Guntersville State Park
- Continued work with Oak Mountain State Park Volunteers in Parks (VIPs) to clear trail obstructions, enhancing accessibility

Future Efforts

The section aims to expand place-based environmental education in Alabama’s State Parks, providing engaging interpretive outdoor activities that deepen visitor connections to nature and support park operations. Key initiatives include hiring additional naturalists to enhance program quality, building strong partnerships with schools to grow a robust intern and volunteer base, and establishing a structured internship program to develop future environmental educators. Efforts will focus on securing grants and corporate funding for program sustainability, expanding K-12 field trips and community outreach, and offering professional development to keep the education team aligned with best practices, fostering meaningful visitor engagement and conservation awareness.

RECREATIONAL TRAILS

The Alabama State Parks Trail Crew has made significant progress through trail expansion, accessibility promotion, and strengthened community partnerships. The section’s emphasis on inclusivity, community engagement, and sustainable practices sets a solid foundation for continued growth and improvements. In FY 2023-2024, the section made the following strides:

Trail Construction and Maintenance

- Implemented the Trail Crew District Maintenance Program, with Alabama Trail Crew team members performing routine trail maintenance and asset collection across all five districts
- Constructed new trails on the Forever Wild Woodlands (Belcher tract) at Oak Mountain State Park, including the Longleaf Trail (0.7 miles) and Breezy Trail (2 miles), with an additional 2 miles under construction

Accessibility and Inclusivity Programs

- Conducted Action Trackchair Program demos with the Lakeshore Foundation, Auburn University, and the Governor’s Office on Disabilities
- Awarded an adaptable golf cart by the Lakeshore Foundation for Oak Mountain State Park golf course
- Hosted the Adaptive MTB Trails Project in which more than 30 miles of trails were evaluated for modifications to increase accessibility
- Set goals to expand accessibility programs by securing additional devices and collaborating with park staff for training and program-specific equipment suited to park terrain

Youth and Community Engagement

- Supported multiple projects at DeSoto State Park through AmeriCorps partnership including clearing 24 miles of trails, removing over 1,000 pounds of invasive plants, and conducting building repairs and bridge maintenance
- Organized two Trail Crew workshops to provide sustainable trail-building training for staff and local community volunteers

Key Projects and Collaborations

- Coordinated Oak Mountain State Park’s International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) Silver Level Ride Center status discussions and planning
- Collaborated with Auburn University on a track chair storage solution, testing an accessible container design
- Initiated an Oak Mountain State Park map and trail signage plan in collaboration with the Marketing and Communications Section to enhance navigation and safety for trail users

Environmental and Equipment Management

- Partnered with the Natural Resources Section on habitat improvements, including sinking Christmas trees in Oak Mountain State Park lakes for fish habitats and conducting controlled burns
- Supported prescribed burns and pollinator garden projects at Oak Mountain and Lakepoint state parks
- Procured additional equipment and performed ongoing maintenance on Alabama State Parks Trail Crew machinery and power tools, ensuring operational readiness

Future Efforts

- Launch the 2025 Round Up for Trails fundraiser initiative
- Launch the track chair program at Oak Mountain, Gulf, and Lakepoint state parks in 2025
- Further develop the Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) course at Lakepoint State Park, with potential additions including a 3D archery course and sporting clays
- Explore additional trail projects, including motorized trails, downhill flow MTB trails, and district sensory trails
- Collaborate with Huntsville Area Mountain Bike Riders (HAMR) and Monte Sano State Park to address signage needs and strengthen relationships with trail users
- Continue system-wide discussions on e-bike use on trails

PLANNING AND VISITOR SERVICES SECTION

Planning and Visitor Services manages the Alabama State Parks reservation system. In FY 2023-2024, ASPD implemented a new reservation system.

Itinio software replaced the campsite reservation system, becoming the primary system for cabin and day-use facility reservations. Staff worked closely with the Itinio project team to build a customer-friendly online portal. All retail items sold in parks, as well as boat slip rentals and day-use boat rentals, are sold utilizing Itinio. The software also provides new online reservations for cave tours at the two cave parks, Cathedral Caverns and Rickwood Caverns state parks.

The Maestro Property Management System was installed at the five lodge parks managed by Alabama State Parks. This system provides conference, group sales, and hotel reservations at the lodges.

Aloha restaurant software was implemented for park restaurants at Joe Wheeler, Lake Guntersville, DeSoto, and Lakepoint State Parks.

These systems offer an enhanced user experience, moving Alabama State Parks reservations a step closer to hospitality industry standards.

Future Efforts

Planning and Visitor Services is actively planning the implementation of new mobile devices for restaurant and gate staff to improve the guest experience while optimizing rates.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION

The Law Enforcement Section ensures guest safety and enforces regulations across the Alabama State Parks Division. In FY 2023-2024, the section expanded its leadership by adding a Chief Law Enforcement Officer and support staff to oversee daily operations. Each of the five park districts is managed by District Rangers who supervise Park Rangers. This dedicated team logged over 26,000 patrol hours, ensuring safety, enforcing regulations, and leading emergency responses. Through District Strike Teams, they also assist with storm recovery as needs arise.

Future Efforts

Plans for the upcoming fiscal year include filling the fifth (currently vacant) District Park Ranger position and upgrading existing equipment.

MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS SECTION

The Management Analysis Section provides general administrative direction and coordination for management control, administrative cost analysis, performance reporting, data processing, general accounting, budgeting, payables, receivables, and purchasing.

- Received, processed, and analyzed 2,244 performance reports for all Alabama State Parks
- Prepared Parks System performance reports as required by the Budget Management Act
- Received, processed, and analyzed operations plans, budget reports, and related reports
- Prepared Parks System Operation Plans and fiscal year budgets
- Processed \$77,975,937 in revenue and \$63,900,323 in expenditures
- Processed 16,024 payment documents
- Disbursed 19,637 checks to vendors
- Worked with the Alabama Office of State Treasurer to consolidate State Parks bank accounts
- Monitored data-processing output and distributed it to statewide park cost centers
- Monitored managerial audits

Future Efforts

Management Analysis will continue to work with the State's Accounting and Resource System to develop detailed monthly financial statements of the State Parks System and specific operations. Management Analysis will also continue to revise resale inventory procedures to promote better accountability.

PHOTO: BRAD LACKEY



STATE PARKS 2023-2024 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

| Section Name | Budgeted | Expenditures |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Parks Revolving Operations | \$51,672,689 | \$49,652,758 |
| Parks Revolving Capital Outlay | \$1,000,000 | \$354,107 |
| Administrative Transfer | \$4,069,950 | \$3,556,436 |
| Parks Fund Repairs and Maintenance | \$2,940,030 | \$1,508,856 |
| Parks Fund Capital Outlay | \$9,152,708 | \$8,828,166 |
| Total | \$68,835,377 | \$63,900,323 |

ALABAMA HOSTS NATIONAL STATE PARK CONFERENCE AND CELEBRATES LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

PHOTO: BILLY POPE



The Alabama State Parks System recently took center stage as Gulf State Park hosted the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD) Conference. Leaders from nearly every U.S. state and representatives from Parks Canada gathered at The Lodge, a beachfront venue uniquely built to withstand hurricane conditions, for a week of camaraderie, learning, and sharing of best practices.

Attendees arrived as Hurricane Francine sent its outer bands over the coast, offering an unexpected lesson in tropical weather safety planning. From the safety of The Lodge at Gulf State Park, attendees experienced Gulf winds and churning waves, further solidifying the value of a Leed-certified building and the importance of teams that can shift plans in real-time with safety and best-in-class guest experiences in mind.

Outgoing Alabama State Parks Director Greg Lein, who wrapped up a 12-year tenure during the conference, saw it as a showcase of resilience and innovation. "Hosting this event after decades felt like the right moment to share all we've accomplished," Lein said, nodding to the park's rebirth post-Hurricane Ivan and continued enhancements funded by the Deepwater Horizon settlement.

Conference guests explored Gulf State Park's expansive features, from new cabins and trails to the Learning Campus and Timberline Glamping's new village at Rosemary Dunes. The tour spotlighted the park's transformation and investments aimed at

modernizing facilities while preserving the natural beauty visitors love.

Governor Kay Ivey's video message and Commissioner Chris Blankenship's remarks underscored Alabama's strategic use of the first \$1.1 billion in BP settlement funds. "It's a game-changer for a state our size," Blankenship noted, emphasizing the significant economic impact of outdoor recreation on Alabama's economy.

The conference was also a platform to celebrate leadership. Greg Lein, who led during challenging financial times and championed critical initiatives like Amendment 2 to secure park funding, was honored as NASPD's Distinguished Director of the Year. Matthew Capps, the former Deputy Director with a conservation and parks management background, now steps into the role with a focus on growth and sustainability. He aims for national recognition as a Gold Medal-winning park system in the future.

With Lein's legacy of innovation and Capps' vision for future enhancements, Alabama's State Parks are poised for continued success. "We're at a high right now," Capps said. "It's about maintaining momentum and exceeding guest expectations while aiming for accreditation and excellence."

The NASPD Conference highlighted Alabama's forward-thinking park system and marked the start of an exciting new chapter under Capps' leadership.

BOND SUPPORT IN ACTION:

On May 24, 2022, Alabamians voted in favor of the State Parks Bond Amendment, which allocated \$80 million to enhance the Alabama State Parks System. In November of 2022, the bonds were sold, allowing the dedicated Alabama State Parks team to move forward with planned projects.

The Alabama State Parks Division has enlisted the services of ten design professionals, each tasked with working on projects across the state. With approximately 80 individual projects at different stages of development, progress is well underway.

The Division also collaborated with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to secure approximately \$48 million in grant funding to upgrade the Parks System's drinking and wastewater facilities.

Completed Projects to Date Include:

- New beach pavilion at Joe Wheeler State Park
- Road resurfacing at Joe Wheeler State Park with support from ADEM and the recycled tire program
- Cabin renovations at Lakepoint State Park
- Romar Beach improvements at Gulf State Park
- Cabin renovations at Gulf State Park
- Beach renourishment project at Gulf State Park and surrounding communities
- Campground renovations at Oak Mountain State Park
- Construction of the Gulf State Park Pier
- Renovations of the Beach Pavilion at Gulf State Park
- Renovations to the campground at Monte Sano State Park

Notable ongoing or upcoming park construction projects include:

- Lodge renovations are underway at Joe Wheeler State Park
- Lodge room renovations are underway at Lakepoint State Park
- Campground renovations are underway at Wind Creek State Park
- New cabins are under construction at Wind Creek State Park
- Renovation of the cabins at Monte Sano State Park are underway
- Pool house renovations at DeSoto State Park are ongoing
- The campground store at Meaher State Park is under construction
- The campground expansion at Meaher State Park is ongoing
- The golf course cart path at Lake Guntersville State Park is under construction
- The new Cheaha State Park Lodge is under construction
- Ongoing Wi-Fi projects at various locations

The Alabama State Parks Division also has two large projects under contract with construction slated to begin soon. The Division will begin the construction of a new campground at Gulf State Park for 100 campsites, along with the addition of an event center, pool, splash pad, and other amenities. Major renovations are also planned for Lake Lurleen State Park, including a new gatehouse, restrooms, an enhanced day-use facility, and improved campsites throughout the park. ■

PHOTO: WILL CHILDERS



WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES



The **Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division**, charged by law with protection, management, and enhancement of the state's freshwater fish and wildlife resources, is composed of the Administrative, Enforcement, Fisheries, and Wildlife sections. The Division meets its responsibilities by carrying out coordinated, scientifically sound enforcement, management, research, development, and educational programs designed to ensure protection and enhancement of freshwater fish and wildlife populations and habitats for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama.

ADMINISTRATIVE SECTION

Wildlife Grants

State Wildlife Grants and the Landowner Incentive Program are two federal funding sources intended to focus management on declining wildlife species and avoid their eventual listing under the Endangered Species Act. Both programs are administered by one biologist, the Habitat and Species Conservation Coordinator, who works closely with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries staff. Both programs interact with a broad range of partners, including federal and state agencies, universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private landowners.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS FUNDED INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

State Wildlife Action Plan Revision: State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP) serve as the blueprints for conserving our nation's fish and wildlife and preventing endangered species listings. A major revision of the Alabama SWAP began in FY 2023-2024 and will be completed by September 2025. This plan addresses eight required elements identified by the U.S. Congress. The plans are developed in collaboration with leading scientists, conservationists, private landowners, and other members of the public. Meetings with experts from mussel, snail, crayfish, fish, mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian, and plant taxa groups have been conducted to review and rank all Alabama species under these taxa groups. An evaluation of their habitats, threats, and conservation actions are underway. Broader public outreach has been established, with recent results posted at <https://www.outdooralabama.com/2025-swap-update>.

Reintroduction of the Eastern Indigo Snake: Forty snakes were released in May 2024, bringing the total release number to 295. After being released, the Eastern indigo snakes and other fauna are monitored throughout the year.

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC): was established in 2004 to promote clean water and to restore rare freshwater species. This is accomplished through the propagation and reintroduction of rare aquatic species. See Fisheries Section for details.

Statewide Stream and River Assessment Program for Aquatic Species of Conservation Concern: This project collects statewide information on the distribution, abundance, species composition, and habitat requirements of at-risk aquatic species in Alabama.

Black Bear Research: Trapping and tagging of black bears is conducted in the Mobile River basin. Once trapped, the bears receive a general physical exam and yellow tags in each ear, and they are injected with a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag. Female bears are fitted with GPS-enabled radio-telemetry collars to track their movements. Staff visit bear dens during winter months to document location, characteristics, and the number of cubs. Cubs receive an expandable collar to track their movements. In FY 2023-2024, 16 adult females, and 18 cubs were collared to monitor and understand the reproductive ecology of this bear population.



PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER BAKER

WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

| Section | Budgeted Amount* | Expenditures |
|---|---------------------|------------------------|
| Admin | \$7,731,000 | \$6,165,125.79 |
| Law Enforcement | \$23,894,226 | \$19,290,898.92 |
| Fisheries | \$10,335,992 | \$10,710,552.61 |
| Wildlife | \$24,713,309 | \$22,073,463.49 |
| Wildlife Diversity | \$930,000 | \$1,112,401.63 |
| Transferred to Department Administrative Expenses | \$4,911,675 | \$4,422,616 |
| TOTAL | \$72,516,202 | \$63,775,058.44 |

* The budget figures on this report reflect the approved spending authority for Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. They are not a representation of the available cash.

Funding includes Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration monies apportioned to Alabama based on the state's geographical size and hunting and fishing license sales.

Seventy-seven percent of the variance between the total budget and expenditures is unspent capital outlay monies that have been retained and carried forward to the subsequent fiscal year.

WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES DIVISION STAFFING

| | FILLED | VACANT** |
|---------------------|--------|----------|
| FULL-TIME POSITIONS | 301 | 41 |
| PART-TIME POSITIONS | 28 | 0 |

** Vacancy count is based on the 2024 operations plan.

Habitat and Population Restoration of Gopher Frogs:

The gopher frog is ranked as a Highest Conservation Concern species and is currently petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Gopher Frogs are state listed as imperiled due to low populations and are at a high risk of extinction. They were historically known to exist in multiple locations across the eastern portion of Alabama but now are only found at two wetlands within the Conecuh National Forest. Research and monitoring activities have been completed at these locations and a final report is currently being compiled to analyze project results.

Flattened Musk Turtle: The flattened musk turtle is a small, aquatic, freshwater turtle endemic to the Upper Black Warrior River drainage of northwestern Alabama. Since receiving a federal listing status of threatened in 1987, studies indicate it has continued to decline throughout the range in spite of federal protection. Objectives are to perform a habitat suitability model, identify areas with threat and areas with potential for population reintroduction, conduct field visits to assess sites, collect tissue samples from across the range to analyze genetic variability across the range and within populations. A final report is being compiled to analyze project results.

Black Belt Prairie Assessment: Black Belt prairies have been devastated by land use alterations with less than 1% remaining, and these are small and highly fragmented. This study will acquire baseline data on rare species and perform an ecological assessment to assist managers with making conservation decisions.

Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3): With state wildlife agencies' funding model relying on the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) of license buyers and participation in hunting, fishing, shooting sports, and trapping is of utmost importance to the future of conservation. For that reason, a full-time R3 Coordinator focuses on R3 efforts across the WFF Division. Staff training and outreach engagement opportunities continue to be a priority for R3. In FY 2023-2024, staff completed quarterly training about R3, hunting, trapping, shooting sports, conservation history, customer service, and how to increase community engagement. Training and outreach engagements help staff to further the ADCNR's mission to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance Alabama's wildlife and aquatic resources for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama. This mission can only be accomplished with a concerted effort and a focus on the future of conservation.

Adult Mentored Hunting (AMH) Program: The AMH Program is designed to provide participants with little or limited experience an opportunity to learn basic hunting skills and receive one-on-one guidance from experienced mentors. New skills taught through the program include firearm safety and handling, woodsmanship, scouting, identifying where to hunt, tracking, game cooking, cleaning, and preparation. The learning process starts at one of the Hunting 101 workshops, which are hosted around the state at Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). Afterward, participants are randomly selected to participate in 1-day or 3-day mentored hunting opportunities. In FY 2023-2024, WFF hosted three Hunting 101 Workshops, one 1-day mentored hunt, and four multi-day hunts with a total of 135 participants – 29% were female and 19% were minorities. Four events were conducted in Dallas County, three in Shelby County, and one in Limestone County. These events were conducted in partnership with the Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTFF).

Go Fish, Alabama! Program: WFF staff conducted one Go Fish, Alabama! event in July 2024. Participants learned basic fishing skills, from knot tying and lure selection to finding places to fish and how to cook their catch. The total number of program participants for FY 2023-2024 was 453 individuals. Of those, 85% were minorities and 55% were female. Several participants caught their first fish during the event.

Firearms 101 Program: WFF Law Enforcement staff conducted 27 four-hour firearms classes that introduced new shooters to firearm safety and marksmanship skills. In addition to handgun, rifle, and shotgun focused classes, archery classes were added

to the list of options. The classes were taught throughout the state at WMA public shooting ranges and other locations with community partners. These classes were in response to the national surge in new firearm ownership, and they have been well received by the public. In FY 2023-2024, 260 participants took at least one of the four-hour courses. Many of the participants enjoyed it so much that they took additional courses. Of those 260 participants, 66% were female and 33% were first-time license buyers.

Campus Conservation Program (CCP): The CCP was developed to increase engagement and involvement from Alabama's colleges to include community colleges, public and private universities and colleges, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and culinary institutes. The top 20 largest colleges in Alabama have a combined student population of almost 250,000. These students will be future community leaders, workforce professionals, and decision makers. The CCP aims to increase their involvement, awareness, and participation in hunting, fishing, targeting shooting, trapping, and other outdoor recreation activities so they prioritize conservation throughout their careers and lives. In addition to recruiting, retaining, and reactivating participants, this program helps serve as an important recruitment tool for future agency employees and personnel. In FY 2023-2024, 30 events were held to engage with 703 students from nine colleges and universities. Of those, 36% were persons of color and 38% were female. Program events included lectures, mentored hunts, workshops, and job shadowing opportunities created through the CCP. Participating campuses included Alabama A&M University, Auburn University, Tuskegee University, Alabama State University, Jacksonville State University, Montevallo University, University of West Alabama, University of Alabama Huntsville, and Calhoun Community College. Events were held in various locations throughout the state including Bullock, Calhoun, Hale, Lee, Limestone, Macon, Madison, Shelby, Sumter, and Tuscaloosa counties. Two participants were hired as full-time agency employees, and one participant completed an internship with WFF. Many of the students were first-time license buyers. Many of them also experienced the outdoors for the first time in their lives.

Conservation Outreach: WFF's Conservation Outreach Program provides public communication, outreach, and education services to proactively increase awareness of the Division's wildlife management programs, accomplishments, policies, and related topics. The program is also designed to encourage interaction between the public and the Division.

The Conservation Outreach Coordinator directly aids the public via phone, mail, online, and in person regarding hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, species' natural history, and all associated laws and regulations by responding to questions and offering information to those who would like to know more about Alabama's wildlife and fishery resources. Additionally, the

TABLE 1:**FISH STOCKED DURING FY 2023-2024 INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS THROUGH THE FISHERIES SECTION'S PROGRAMS**

| Species | Inch Groups | Number |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Striped Bass - Gulf Race | 1 inch | 700,869 |
| Hybrid Striped Bass | 1-2 inches | 419,284 |
| White Bass | 1 inch | 125,900 |
| Channel Catfish | 7-16 inches | 57,024 |
| Bluegill Sunfish | 1-6 inches | 2,046,376 |
| Redear Sunfish | 1-3 inches | 211,520 |
| Rainbow Trout | 8-14 inches | 31,812 |
| Redeye Bass- Cahaba | 1 inches | 400 |
| TOTAL | | 3,593,185 |

TABLE 2:**FISH STOCKED BY PERMIT HOLDERS INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS DURING FY 2023-2024**

| Species | Location | Date | Number or Weight |
|---------------------|---|----------------|------------------|
| Rainbow Trout | Black Creek (Gadsden) | Jan. 10, 2024 | 1,800 pounds |
| Rainbow Trout | Mill and Mud Creeks at Tannehill State Park | April 25, 2024 | 600 pounds |
| Triploid Grass Carp | Neely Henry Reservoir | May 15, 2024 | 10,000 pounds |
| Channel Catfish | R.L. Harris Reservoir (Lake Wedowee) | May 22, 2024 | 500 pounds |

coordinator accepts feedback from the public and shares policy recommendations with Administration as appropriate.

Throughout the year, the program coordinator monitors the Division's printed and personal interactions with the public and makes recommendations based on public needs and requests from the Division to continually streamline and simplify communications between the Division and the public. The program coordinator also provides guidance and support to other ADCNR staff who are interacting with the public at a variety of outreach events in order to foster positive relationships and encourage sustainable use of Alabama's abundant natural resources.

Outreach efforts during FY 2023-2024 included the following:

- Appeared on various television and radio broadcasts throughout the state to discuss WFF-related topics
- Provided interviews to print and online media throughout the state
- Interacted with the public through WFF's social media to promote public engagement with the Division
- Represented the Division at various trade shows, expos, and professional meetings
- Responded to landowner and media questions regarding wildlife identification and other WFF-related topics
- Assisted hunters with details regarding usage of Wildlife Management Areas throughout the state
- Assisted non-resident hunters and anglers with planning their trips to Alabama
- Helped promote the Division's Firearms 101, AMH, and Go Fish, Alabama! programs
- Assisted with R3 programs and provided mentorship and support to new hunters
- Determined gaps in communication by evaluating frequently asked questions and then revised printed materials to provide needed clarity
- Recommended regulation updates based on feedback from the public that aligned with the Division's goals
- Highlighted photographs and narratives provided by the public on social media in order to foster positive relationships between the Division and its constituents
- Participated on an advisory board for a county school system to foster natural resource management-related education in the classroom

FISHERIES SECTION

Responsibilities and Functions

The mission of the Fisheries Section is to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the freshwater aquatic resources of Alabama.

Accomplishments

Technical Assistance: Fisheries biologists conducted 223 biological checks of private ponds and offered written solutions for identified issues. Staff provided technical assistance to government and non-government agencies 371 times. District biologists investigated 22 reported fish kills and pollution cases, and sent formal reports to the appropriate agencies.

Environmental Affairs: Staff reviewed, investigated, and provided feedback on 62 projects across the state to assess their impact on aquatic resources. They offered recommendations on how to avoid, minimize, or offset potential environmental damage from these activities.

Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs): During FY 2023-2024, Alabama's PFLs hosted 87,880 angler trips, resulting in the harvest of 55,021 fish weighing a total of 50,636 pounds from 15 lakes. Angler participation at PFLs increased by 25% compared to the previous fiscal year due to the reopening of Walker County PFL in 2024 and Geneva County PFL in 2023. Eight PFLs remain temporarily closed due to manager resignations, financial challenges, and infrastructure issues, including the Barbour PFL dam failure. While PFL usage surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, angler participation at the lakes has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Fisheries biologists and staff conducted 69 visits to PFLs to evaluate fish populations and perform maintenance. Hatcheries stocked 2,324,768 fish, including bluegill sunfish, redear sunfish, channel catfish, and hybrid striped bass. Additionally, 3,000 pounds of rainbow trout were stocked at Madison County PFL for a winter fishery.

PFL Operational Changes in FY 2023-2024

- Barbour County PFL: Closed after underdrain failure. Future options are under evaluation.
- Chambers County PFL: Closed for renovations. Scheduled to reopen on February 1, 2025.
- Crenshaw County PFL: Management reverted to WFF in May 2022. The lake was drained in fall 2022 and stocked with bluegill in spring 2024. Largemouth bass will be stocked in 2025.
- Escambia County PFL: Renovations were completed and bluegill stocked in spring 2024. Largemouth bass will be stocked in 2025.

TABLE 3:**FRESHWATER MOLLUSK STOCKING ACTIVITIES BY AABC STAFF IN FY 2023-2204**

| Species | Locality | Date of Release | Number Stocked |
|---|--|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Hamiota perovalis</i> - T Orange-nacre Mucket | Locust Fork, 5 localities near Wallstown Bridge, Blount Co., AL | June 5, 2024 | 5,100 |
| <i>Hamiota perovalis</i> - T Orange-nacre Mucket | Locust Fork at shoal-runs near Dean's Ferry, Blount Co., AL | July 16, 2024 | 3,000 |
| <i>Hamiota perovalis</i> - T Orange-nacre Mucket | Locust Fork below Mount Olive Bridge Road, Jefferson Co., AL | Aug. 21, 2024 | 7,000 |
| <i>Hamiota perovalis</i> - T Orange-nacre Mucket | Locust Fork upstream of Fivemile Creek, Jefferson Co., AL | Aug. 22, 2024 | 3,433 |
| <i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput | Duck River, Venable Spring, Maury Co., TN | Sept. 3, 2024 | 500 |
| <i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput | Duck River, Hooper Island, Maury Co., TN | Sept. 3, 2024 | 500 |
| <i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput | Paint Rock River, 3 shoals on Jones Property, Jackson Co., AL | Sept. 4, 2024 | 2,250 |
| <i>Venustaconcha trabilis</i> - E Tennessee Bean | Paint Rock River, 3 shoals on Jones Property, Jackson Co., AL | Sept. 4, 2024 | 1,581 |
| TOTAL | | | 23,364 |

- Walker County PFL: Reopened under new management in spring 2024.
- Monroe County PFL: Reopened without on-site management in February 2024.
- Marion County PFL: The lake was drained and major renovations to the dam and underdrain are planned for spring 2025.
- Coffee County PFL: Closed in September 2023 for operational changes. The lake will be managed jointly by the City of Elba and Coffee County.

Access Areas: Throughout the year, staff conducted routine maintenance inspections of 115 access areas, which included 145 boat ramps with 191 launch lanes, 121 courtesy piers, and 4,001 parking spaces. Fisheries personnel also serviced, repaired, and maintained equipment, as well as ordered materials for ongoing maintenance tasks. Additionally, staff completed general construction, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades, and other maintenance projects at 76 access areas statewide. Maintaining these access areas accounts for a significant portion of the annual boating access budget.

In total, 126 repairs were completed at access areas statewide, including tree and debris removal, resurfacing and striping of parking lots, erosion damage repairs, signage replacement, storm damage cleanup, and repairs to launching slabs, piers, parking lots.

While no new construction was completed in 2024, several projects across the state were designed, permitted, and begun during the year, including:

- Mount Vernon (Mobile County) – Major facility expansion
- McIntosh Bluff (Washington County) – Repaving parking lot
- Chocolatta Bay (Baldwin County) – New piers and parking lot repaving
- McCarty's Ferry (Choctaw County) – Major facility expansion
- Claiborne (Monroe County) – Major facility expansion
- Riverview (Tuscaloosa County) – Ramp replacement and new pier
- Brown's Creek (Marshall County) – New launching slab and new access pier
- Cotaco Creek (Morgan County) – New access pier
- Triana (Madison County) – Access pier extension
- McFarland Park (Lauderdale County) – Launching slab replacement and new access pier

Fish Hatcheries: Fish production goals for FY 2023-2024 were met or exceeded for several species. Section staff stocked a total of 3,593,185 fish into public waters statewide, including PFLs (Table 1). The need for hatchery infrastructure improvements is ongoing, primarily due to aging facilities.

Routine upgrades are made at all three state fish hatcheries. Carbon Hill Fish Hatchery is adding a modular home for resident housing and completed the installation of an aeration system to improve fish culture. Eastaboga Fish Hatchery expanded its aeration system and installed ultraviolet lighting to help prevent fish pathogens. Marion Fish Hatchery now has full pump capacity thanks to a new well installation, offering more flexible water control during the culture season. The Marion hatchery is also nearing completion of new electrical supply lines, which will allow for more efficient use of paddlewheel aerators and has installed ultraviolet lighting at its fish holding facility.

Public Water Fish Stockings by Permit Holders: Four permits for stocking fish in public waters were issued to individuals representing agencies and organizations. A list of the fish species and sites stocked by permit holders is provided in Table 2.

Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS): The introduction of species outside their native ranges can negatively impact native species in Alabama's aquatic environments. The spread of silver carp into the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers via the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is currently the most immediate threat to Alabama's waters. ANS staff are actively conducting field sampling and collaborating with state fisheries agencies in Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to monitor the expansion of silver carp populations in these rivers.

Fisheries staff spent 129 field days sampling for invasive carp on the Tennessee River. Primary sampling methods included lake and tailwater electrofishing. Additionally, staff installed 86 carp signs at 81 locations, set up and monitored telemetry receivers, assisted with acoustic/loop tagging, performed benthic trawling, and conducted reconnaissance. Staff also participated in 102 events, such as agency meetings and reviews, to support decisions on the placement of bioacoustic fish fence deterrents at seven proposed locks on the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers. Significant support was also provided to the Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association Invasive Carp Advisory Committee's initiatives.

Staff carried out tasks funded by a USFWS grant supporting Alabama's ANS Management Plan. This included 19 field and non-field days of zebra mussel monitoring in five lakes on the Tennessee and Black Warrior rivers. Other invasive aquatic plants and invertebrate species were also documented, researched, and reported. Educational materials were developed, and improvements were made to the Fisheries Section's information on ADCNR's website.

Publications: Fisheries Section staff prepared several scientific journal articles for publication. Staff also provided their knowledge to outdoor writers upon request for information pertinent to Alabama's vast aquatic resources.

Fisheries Research: Through the Investigation and Management Techniques for Public Waters Project (formerly Sport Fish Restoration F-40), one study was completed in collaboration with the Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences (AU-SFAAS): "Estimating Population Impacts of Fishing and Natural Mortality of Black Bass at Neely Henry Reservoir, Alabama."

Two studies continued with AU-SFAAS investigators: "Evaluation of the Statewide 229-mm Minimum Length Limit for Crappies in Alabama" and "Recruitment and Growth Dynamics of Riverine Sport, Food, and Forage Fishes Related to Flow Operations and Temperature Conditions of the Lower Tallapoosa River."

Additionally, one new study was launched with AU-SFAAS investigators: "Population Density, Demographics, and Food Consumption of Largemouth Bass in Small Impoundments Managed Under Three Different Strategies."

Reservoir Management: Staff sampled fish populations, including largemouth bass, Alabama bass, black and white crappie, bluegill, redear sunfish, threadfin shad, skipjack herring, walleye, and striped bass, using methods such as electrofishing, trap netting, gill netting, prod pole, and hook-and-line. Sampling took place across numerous water bodies: Pickwick, Wheeler, Little Bear, Upper Bear, Wilson, Mitchell, Harris, Weiss, Jordan, Jones Bluff, Martin, White Plains, Demopolis, Warrior, Oliver, Gainesville, Aliceville, Holt, Eufaula, Gantt, Bartlett's Ferry, and Claiborne reservoirs, as well as the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, Bouldin Dam tailrace, and the Fish and Magnolia rivers.

At Buck Creek and Eufaula and Gantt reservoirs, staff conducted bass spawn checks. Collected specimens were measured, weighed, and aged to study growth rates. Staff also determined the sex and maturity of many fish to analyze population dynamics. Thermal and oxygen profiles were recorded for most reservoirs mentioned.

Reconnaissance surveys were completed in the following areas: the tailraces of Guntersville, Wheeler, and Neely Henry Dams; Eufaula, Neely Henry, Logan Martin, and Yates Reservoirs; the Perdido, Styx, Fish, and Blackwater rivers; and Blackwater Creek.

General Surveys: General surveys were conducted at the Magnolia River, and redear bass were sampled from nine streams across the state. Staff completed aquatic vegetation surveys at Neely Henry Reservoir (two surveys), Black Creek, and the upper Tallapoosa River. Yellow perch broodstock were assessed at Yates Reservoir, and white bass broodstock were evaluated at Martin Reservoir.

Aquatic Education Program: Staff, with assistance from other WFF sections and partner organizations, conducted 258 aquatic education events, reaching 22,638 participants. These included 51 community fishing events with 7,955 participants and 39

fishing classes attended by 2,577 people. Casting classes were offered to 3,147 participants during 54 events.

In addition, staff gave 80 presentations on Alabama's aquatic resources to 4,045 attendees and hosted 11 display booths that engaged 4,036 people. One fishing instructor training was held for eight participants, and 22 other educational presentations reached 870 attendees. Information about fisheries careers was shared with 5,565 people during 37 events.

Rivers and Streams Fisheries Program: Staff conducted 111 biological sampling trips during the fiscal year and reviewed 395 general and 142 state-protected scientific collection aquatic permit applications. They also processed 383 permit collection notifications, 85 collection reports, and issued 11 permit amendment letters.

Efforts to establish a broodstock of Southern walleye continued with collections from Hatchet Creek and Lake Mitchell, which host the only viable population of the eastern clade in the state. However, only one male was collected in 2024. Sampling in the Conecuh River to locate a remnant walleye population yielded no specimens.

Staff implanted nine-year acoustic transmitters in 18 Gulf sturgeon from the Choctawhatchee River near Geneva. This research aims to compare movements and migrations of fall-spawning versus spring-spawning fish, study habitat use and spawning in the Pea River above the breached Elba Dam, and examine responses to low water levels in summer and fall.

Three Alabama shad specimens were collected in the Choctawhatchee River and tagged with internal acoustic transmitters then released back into the river. No specimens were found in the Conecuh River. A 33-receiver acoustic array in the Choctawhatchee River/Bay watershed will track movement and habitat use of this species, which is under review for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Annual sampling of the Choctawhatchee and Conecuh rivers will continue to estimate spawning population sizes.

Sampling efforts for Alabama sturgeon and Gulf sturgeon in the Mobile River Basin yielded no specimens. However, three acoustically tagged Gulf sturgeon from other systems were detected via the Mobile River Basin's acoustic array.

Staff sampled 90 streams and river sites statewide to assess the index of biotic integrity (IBI), which measures stream health based on fish species and abundance. They also evaluated the distribution and abundance of river chubs (*Macrhybopsis* spp.) during these surveys.

The final stage of assessing the occurrence of the saltmarsh topminnow in the Mobile Delta began this year. Staff tagged bowfin collected during these surveys with T-bar anchor tags to evaluate exploitation. Bowfin tournaments and potential commercial harvesting for eggs highlight the importance of this study for future management.



PHOTO: BILLY POPE

Additionally, staff submitted three manuscripts that were published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Freshwater Mollusk Management and Research: Staff conducted 51 biological field trips to sample streams statewide, focusing on mussels and snails. These efforts documented species distribution and population health, identified broodstock for the Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC), and provided specimens for genetics studies.

Staff assisted and consulted with multiple organizations on mollusk-related issues, including the USFWS, TVA, USGS, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Smithsonian Institution, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, University of North Alabama, Appalachian State University, McClung Museum (University of Tennessee), North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, Tennessee Technological University, and Mississippi Museum of Natural Science. Additionally, staff worked with 10 consultants and private individuals.

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC): Staff contributed to a wide range of research, recovery, and monitoring activities. AABC personnel collaborated on research projects with the USFWS, USGS, Auburn University, University of Alabama, University of Georgia, University of Mississippi, and University of Michigan.

A total of 23,364 mussels were stocked into freshwater bodies (see Table 3), and staff conducted 78 biological trips statewide to support aquatic species research and recovery efforts. AABC staff provided technical assistance on 156 occasions to state and federal agencies as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Staff participated in 42 technical meetings and 29 outreach activities with government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs. AABC's educational efforts engaged 317 college students. Additionally, staff contributed to two published scientific articles, two articles currently in press, and four technical reports.

Endangered Species (Section 6) Aquatic Studies: Under the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act), staff conducted studies on sturgeon, mussels, snails, and crayfish across Alabama's waterways. Key projects included monitoring Gulf and Mobile River Basin sturgeon, assessing mussel reintroduction efforts in the Paint Rock River, surveying rare species like the round ebonyshell and Coosa creekshell, and evaluating habitat for the slabside pearly-mussel and rare crayfishes. Additional assessments focused on the tulotoma snail and spotted rocksnail in the Alabama River. Reports were submitted to relevant agencies.

Future Issues

Fishing License Sales: Declining fishing license sales, which are essential for funding conservation efforts, creates challenges for ADCNR's fisheries programs. This revenue has not kept pace with inflation, threatening the continuation of significant programs. To address this, the agency has focused on increasing license sales through casting and fishing classes, supporting other agency programs, and enhancing marketing efforts to attract new buyers and to encourage existing anglers to renew lapsed licenses.

Employees: The agency is facing significant challenges in hiring and retaining new employees, which could lead to staffing shortages and hinder its ability to perform critical tasks in the future.

Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS): Invasive species remain a significant biological and economic threat to Alabama. Staff will continue statewide monitoring, emphasize public education for prevention, and implement regulations or recommend control methods when appropriate.

Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs): Aging infrastructure at these lakes is becoming an increasing challenge. Without additional funding for costly repairs and maintenance, many locations may close or fall into disrepair. Contracting qualified lake managers at rural lakes is also an ongoing issue. Low visitation rates and rising costs at many rural PFLs continue to be problems. Alternative management options are being considered on a case-by-case basis, especially for lesser-used PFLs.

Fish Hatcheries: Alabama's state fish hatchery system faces significant maintenance and renovation challenges due to aging infrastructure. Critical components such as production ponds, drain kettles, water supply lines, drainage systems, buildings, and electrical supplies require repair or replacement. The framework for a long-term improvement plan has been developed. Its implementation is contingent on securing additional funding to address the high costs.

Riverine Habitat: Habitat loss and population fragmentation in Alabama driven by river impoundments, altered flow/temperature regimes, poor water quality, and sedimentation have severely impacted aquatic species. The agency will continue documenting habitat loss and advocating for mitigation strategies, including promoting regulated systems to mimic natural flow/temperature regimes, improving water quality standards, and enhancing fish passage. A statewide comprehensive water plan emphasizing instream flow protection remains a priority.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

The Law Enforcement Section provides assistance in the protection and management of Alabama's wildlife resources and the safety of the public through a fair and balanced enforcement program.

Accomplishments

With the 2023 purchase of Trijicon RMR red dot sighted Glock Model 45 9mm handguns, the Law Enforcement Section began transitioning away from the previously issued Glock Model 19, which was equipped with standard sights. During FY 2023-2024, a training course was developed for the transition to the new red-dot-sighted handguns. In addition to the new sights, each handgun issued was equipped with a Streamlight weapon-mounted light. The new weapons were well-received by section officers, and qualification scores went up approximately 8% with the new weapons. Supervisors and specialty unit personnel were issued the more compact Glock Model 43X 9mm

handgun that is also equipped with Trijicon RMR red dot sights. The Law Enforcement Section replaces handguns on a five-year rotation and has issued Glock handguns for the last 15 years. Though Aimpoint red dot sights have been issued on every patrol rifle for the last six years, the new handguns represent the first red-dot-sighted handgun issued to our personnel.

The utilization of Alabama's Public Shooting Range System continued to increase in FY 2023-2024. This system is owned by WFF and is managed by the Law Enforcement Section. To address the increased traffic on our ranges, conservation enforcement officers (CEOs) have been tasked with providing a greater presence on each range. This presence includes active firearms instruction to range patrons. To better prepare our officers for this new task, a Range Safety Officer course specific to our facilities was developed and continues to be taught to all new officers of each enforcement district. Though our section has more than 30 FBI Certified Firearms Instructors, much of their previous training in range operation was specific to Law Enforcement qualifications. With the safe operation of a public range being different than what they have traditionally experienced on law enforcement ranges, this training successfully bridged the experience gap. The public response to the increased presence of our officers on the ranges has been positive.

Nine new officers were hired during FY 2023-2024. With the most recent round of hiring, the section is nearing its full staffing goal of 135 officers. Retirements and the previous year's promotions necessitated the largest promotion of sergeants in 20 years. Ten CEOs were promoted to the rank of sergeant in May 2024. Every district in the state and both WFF Law Enforcement Special Task Units received new sergeants. Additionally, three captains and two lieutenants were promoted this year. Lieutenant Bryan Fisher was promoted to the rank of captain in the Montgomery administrative office. Captain Fisher will aid in the daily operations of the command staff and will be instrumental in the accreditation process of the Law Enforcement Section.

The Nighttime Feral Swine and Coyote License set forth by the legislature, which went into effect on July 1, 2021, continues to be very popular and has given a new source of funding that has assisted with previous budget issues.

Over the last three years, cost of living adjustments have been enacted for all state employees by the State Legislature. This latest round of cost-of-living adjustments is hoped to have a positive effect on recruitment. However, courting qualified officer applicants continues to be a struggle.

Awards

Several Law Enforcement Section CEOs were honored with awards in FY 2023-2024. CEO Senior Brad Hasamear was selected as the Mississippi Flyway Council Officer of the Year. Sergeant Joe Johnston was selected as the Alabama Wildlife

Federation Officer of the Year. CEO Senior Johnny Johnson, Jr., was selected as Alabama's Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) Officer of the Year. And CEO Senior Brett Makemson was selected as the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) Officer of the Year for 2024.

Two of the section's most recent officers won awards while attending the 190th session of the Northeast Alabama Law Enforcement Academy. CEO Trainee Michael Bunn won the Top Marksman Award. This award is presented to the recruit who consistently outperforms all others during the firearms portion of the academy. CEO Taylor Deyampert was awarded the Director's Award. This award is given to the recruit who shows the highest traits of leadership to the staff of the academy throughout the session. It is the highest award presented to any recruit attending the law enforcement academy.

Future Issues

In October of 2020, supervision of WFF's Hunter Education Unit transitioned to the Law Enforcement Section from the Wildlife Section where it had operated since its inception in 1973. This transition paved the way for a much more aggressive shooting range development program. In May 2022, the Law Enforcement Section closed on the purchase of a 200-acre parcel of property located in Shelby County. This property is being developed into an all-inclusive state shooting range that will offer rifle, pistol, shotgun, and archery ranges as well as fishing opportunities at one facility.

With approximately 75% of all Pittman-Robertson Act funds generated by target shooters, the development of state-owned shooting ranges has become a priority. Three more parcels of land adjoining the Shelby Range have been purchased that will increase the footprint of that facility to nearly 1,000 acres. A robust public shooting range system is one way ADCNR can meet the high demand for public target shooting opportunities and increase license sales, maximizing the return on Alabama's contributions to the Pittman-Robertson Act.

WILDLIFE SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

The mission of the Wildlife Section is to manage and enhance the wildlife resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the resources and the people of Alabama.

Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs): Staff managed more than 790,000 acres within the WMA and Special Opportunity Area (SOA) system. During FY 2023-2024, staff held 7,313 managed hunt days on the 35 WMAs and 11 SOAs. WMAs also provided opportunities for trapping, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping, research, and nature study. To support public recreation

opportunities on the WMA/SOA system, staff maintained 145 office and operation support buildings, maintained equipment, painted, and placed signs on 166 miles of property boundaries, maintained boat ramps, applied aggregate (crushed rock) to refurbish 1,378 miles of WMA public access roads, and maintained 99 access, parking, and campground areas.

Additionally, staff conducted prescribed burns on 44,686 acres of wildlife habitat, maintained 298 miles of fire lanes associated with prescribed fire activities, maintained 3,138 acres of wildlife openings and early successional habitat, and performed invasive species control for both plants and animals to enhance habitat for wildlife populations and public enjoyment.

Physically Disabled Hunting Areas: The Hunting Trail for People with Physical Disabilities continued to be a well-utilized program. The trail has 19 hunting areas located in 17 counties. This innovative program provides opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities to participate in hunting in an environment developed to meet their needs.

Youth Hunting Programs: Staff conducted 24 youth dove hunts across the state in 17 counties. The hunts are a cooperative effort between ADCNR, Auburn University, NWTF, local vendors, and private landowners. The 2024 youth dove hunts had 600 youth participants with 15% of those participants being first-time hunters. Additionally, 24 WMAs hosted youth deer hunts and 27 WMAs hosted youth turkey hunts on the weekends prior to the opening of regular gun seasons.

Land Acquisitions for FY 2023-2024

- Acquired 1,842 acres in Shelby County, 1,193 for a new Special Opportunity Area, and 649 acres for the Shelby County Shooting Range
- Acquired an additional 20.48 acres for the Shelby County Shooting Range

Forest Management Activities: WMA biologists and foresters worked to promote forest health and enhance habitats within the WMA system to benefit wildlife year-round. Revenue generated from timber sales on Wildlife Section-owned lands was used for general management efforts such as tract reforestation and/or utilized to fund additional land acquisitions.

Forestry actions for FY 2024 included the following:

- Autauga WMA: 190 acres recently clearcut of storm damage was planned for longleaf pine restoration. Currently, the acres have been treated with herbicide and will be site-prepped, burned and replanted with longleaf pine in fall and winter of FY 2024-2025.
- Barbour WMA: The final 10% of harvests on 1,700 acres of mixed pine/hardwood thinning was completed and a 107-acre fuelwood chip thinning sale was completed. Addition-

ally, 57 acres of recent clearcut was planned for longleaf pine restoration. Currently, the acres have been treated with herbicide and will be site-prepped, burned and reforested with longleaf pine in the fall and winter of FY 2024-2025.

- Freedom Hills WMA: A 235-acre pine and hardwood thinning was completed.
- Geneva State Forest WMA: A 772-acre microchip pine plantation thinning sale and a timber sale encompassing 272 acres of second pine thinning and 43 acres of final harvest were completed. Additionally, 216 acres of recently clearcut reserve stands were reforested with longleaf pine and 125 acres of recently clearcut reserve stands were aerially sprayed and will be site-prepped, burned and reforested with longleaf pine in the fall and winter of FY 2024-2025. Also, a 706-acre microchip pine plantation thinning was sold.
- Lauderdale WMA: Harvests on 1,747 acres of first pine thinning were completed, and harvests in an additional sale of 93 acres of second pine thinning and 33 acres of final harvest were completed. Additionally, 51 acres of recently clearcut pine stands were treated with herbicide and will be site-prepped, burned and reforested to shortleaf pine in the fall and winter of FY 2024-2025
- Portland Landing SOA: The first thinning sale encompassing 940 acres of pine plantation was completed.
- Skyline WMA: 418 acres of pine/hardwood thinning was completed, and an additional 220 acres of mixed pine/hardwood thinning is approximately 50% complete.
- Fred T. Stimpson SOA: 160 acres of mixed pine/hardwood first thinning was completed.

Timber stands on the WMA system will continue to be evaluated and monitored for emerging forest health issues. Scattered, light mortality has been noted in early- and mid-rotation pine stands at Lauderdale and Autauga WMAs. These areas will be monitored to ensure the stands remain viable in the future. Silvicultural prescriptions will be planned and implemented as needed to ensure forest resources remain healthy and supply ample wildlife habitat to meet the section's needs. Future thinning sales are being planned for specific tracts located on Geneva State Forest, Cedar Creek SOA, and Lauderdale, Barbour, and Lowndes WMAs.

Invasive species such as tallow tree, Japanese climbing fern, and bicolor lespedeza were scouted and treated throughout the WMA system. Additionally, the aggressive nature of cogongrass has made section staff more vigilant in spotting and treating infestations statewide. Scattered areas of the grass have been undergoing treatment on the Fred T. Stimpson, Upper State, Cedar Creek, and Portland Landing SOAs, as well as on the Upper Delta, Geneva State Forest, and Barbour WMAs for several seasons. The infested areas have been significantly reduced, but monitoring and chemical control will continue.

GAME SPECIES PROGRAMS

White-tailed Deer Management: Information was collected on various WMAs and other sites to determine deer hunter participation and success, the physical condition of deer, and the status of deer populations. A hunting activity telephone survey was also conducted that supplied valuable data. During the 2023-2024 hunting season, 235,205 deer hunters harvested 314,496 deer. The data were used in determining recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits and evaluating the success of each hunting season.

Hunters reported 202,160 deer harvested through Game Check, Alabama's mandatory deer and turkey harvest reporting system, during the 2023-2024 hunting season.

Samples from 3,375 deer were collected and tested for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) as part of WFF's statewide CWD surveillance efforts. Two additional CWD-positive deer were detected in Lauderdale County as part of these surveillance efforts.

Wild Turkey Management: Wild turkey observation, harvest, and reproduction information was collected statewide through the Avid Turkey Hunter Survey (ATHS) and wild turkey brood survey. Data on gobbling activity (number of gobblers and gobblers heard), turkeys seen, and gobblers harvested for each day hunted during the spring season was reported by 189 avid turkey hunter survey participants. ATHS data was used to monitor trends in gobbling activity, population, sex and age structure, harvest timing, and harvest rates. Section staff and volunteers collected observational wild turkey brood data in July and August 2024. They reported 865 observations of turkeys (hens, poults, and gobblers), and each observation during any day was recorded separately. The data were separated by five WFF districts, by six ecoregions (Piedmont, Southeastern Plains, Ridge and Valley, Southwestern Appalachians, Interior Plateau, and Southern Coastal Plain), and by public or private lands. Brood survey data was used to monitor trends in reproduction and the associated survival of poults being recruited into the population. The results of the ATHS and brood survey will be published in the annual Full Fans & Sharp Spurs wild turkey report. The ATHS and brood survey data was also used in combination with results from the Game Check harvest reporting system and Responsive Management post-season harvest survey to structure recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits.

Hunters reported 18,273 harvested male turkeys through the Game Check system for the 2023-2024 hunting season. The Responsive Management post-season harvest survey estimated 35,906 male turkeys were harvested in the 2023-2024 hunting season.

In addition, section staff continued to conduct game camera brood surveys. These surveys were conducted on Autauga, Barbour, Blue Spring, Cahaba, Coosa, David K. Nelson, Freedom Hills, Geneva, Lauderdale, Little River, Lowndes, Mulberry Fork, Oakmulgee, Red Hills Skyline, and Yates Lake WMAs. Staff also conducted surveys on Portland Landing and Uchee Creek SOAs.

The game camera survey results will be compared to incidental observation results. These projects will continue in coming years.

Mourning Dove Management: The annual mourning dove study, as part of a nationwide project, consisted of trapping, banding, and releasing mourning doves. For this project, 1,081 mourning doves were banded and released, and the data was submitted to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Bird Banding Laboratory. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will analyze data from reported band returns to provide parameters needed for dove population modeling such as band return rates, migration, harvest rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Waterfowl Management: Annual biological surveys and research continued throughout the state to obtain information on waterfowl and their habitats to better inform management decisions. Aerial waterfowl censuses were continued on the Tennessee River, Mobile Bay, and Delta in the fall and winter. The winter count is conducted in conjunction with other states and USFWS as part of the annual mid-winter waterfowl survey to assess wintering waterfowl populations. Hunter bag checks were continued in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the Tennessee River Valley during fall and winter. As part of the nationwide project, 846 wood ducks were banded and released in Alabama, and data was submitted to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory. USFWS will analyze data from band returns to provide parameters needed for wood duck population monitoring such as band return rates, migration, kill rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Research: For FY 2023-2024, \$2.54 million in Wildlife Restoration Federal Assistance funds and approximately \$521,910 in external sponsorship funds were used to support five cooperative research projects between WFF and three different universities.

Of these cooperative research projects, four were ongoing from previous years, and one new project was established this past year. Staff worked with Auburn University, University of Tennessee, and Cornell University.

NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Bald Eagle Population Monitoring: Since the bald eagle was removed from the Threatened and Endangered Species List in 2007, Alabama bald eagle nests have been randomly monitored for productivity and survivorship. Biologists continued to record newly discovered or reported eagle nests and monitored the number of bald eagles overwintering in Alabama as part of the nationwide Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey. The number of bald eagles wintering in Alabama remains stable.

Golden Eagle Migration Project: Golden eagle camera surveys were conducted in Alabama on two WMAs and one national forest with assistance from section staff and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff to assess the eastern population of golden eagles. These surveys are revealing more information on the winter ecology of golden eagles to allow for better management efforts. In addition to camera surveys, Trish Miller of Conservation Science Global, Inc., and Mike Lanzone of Cellular Tracking Technologies assisted WFF and USFS personnel in trapping of golden eagle



PHOTO: KIM MCFRY

adults. Trapping occurred at Skyline WMA, Oakmulgee WMA, and the Shoal Creek Ranger District and was successful at each location. Biologists continued to track the eagles with active transmitters. Data gathered from the tracked birds will help to assess wintering golden eagle habitat in Alabama as well as provide information about their migration pathways and breeding habitat.

Annual Breeding Bird Surveys: Program biologists participated in the continent-wide Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) program administered by the USGS in 2023. Over the last 27 years, our nongame biologists have completed 240 BBS routes. The BBS program is the most important census program for tracking the population trends of landbirds across the landscape.

Christmas Bird Count: Conducted annually during December and January for more than a century, the Christmas Bird Count serves to gather winter population data on all bird species in the U.S., Canada, and many countries in the Western Hemisphere. Program biologists assist by conducting one Christmas Bird Count in south Alabama on Dauphin Island. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists also lead the Montgomery County Christmas Bird Count.

Banding Stations: WFF biologists operated a banding station consisting of nine mist nets on Autauga (WMA) from May 16 to August 5, 2024, in order to gather migration and breeding bird data for the area. During the survey, a total of 52 species were detected. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists also assisted with a migration bird banding station on Fort Morgan peninsula during spring migration in 2024.

Southeastern American Kestrel Nest Box Program: Program biologists continued to monitor Southeastern American kestrel nest boxes placed at three WMAs, one SOA, the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area (FWFTA) and in the Conecuh National Forest. A total of 35 boxes were monitored. Unfortunately, no boxes were utilized by kestrels.

Swallow-tailed Kite Surveys: Swallow-tailed kite surveys were conducted by plane along the Mobile River to monitor breeding populations of kites. Two aerial surveys were conducted in July 2024 with a total of 11 individual kites observed along the river.

Wading Bird Rookery Surveys: Wading bird rookery surveys were conducted along the Tennessee River to monitor known breeding locations and to survey for additional sites. A total of two rookeries were surveyed with both being active. During the surveys, four wading bird species were detected. Double-crested cormorants were also observed nesting at these survey sites in large numbers. Surveys will continue to better assess trends of breeding wading birds in Alabama.

Coastal Shorebird Surveys: The most important sites for nesting shorebirds in Alabama are located within Mobile County. These sites include Gaillard Island, Cat Island, Marsh Island, and Isle aux Herbes. North of Isle aux Herbes on the mainland coast is the Lightning Point Shoreline Restoration area at Bayou La Batre. Completed in 2021, this habitat creation project hoped to attract

nesting shorebirds. During the 2024 breeding season, no surveys were conducted on these coastal areas due to personnel changes.

Bat Population Monitoring: After success in May 2023, efforts were made to again capture northern long-eared bats in the coastal plain of Alabama. In recent years, populations of northern long-eared bats have been discovered in coastal North and South Carolina where they are active year-round. This means these bats are not hibernating in caves and therefore not exposed to the deleterious effects of white-nose syndrome (WNS) that led to the species being listed as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 2022. Additional attempts were made during 2024 to capture northern long-eared bats on sites from previous years, but the weather was unseasonably cold and none were captured this year.

The Alabama Bat Working Group's (ABWG) Bat Blitz was conducted May 7-May 9 in Jackson and Marshall Counties. Each year the Blitz targets a different location in the state to inventory the bat species present. Nongame personnel were extensively involved with the selection of areas, planning, preparations and participation involving this Blitz. The target species in this area during this Blitz was the eastern small-footed bat. This species had never been documented by live-capture in Alabama, though it was suspected to occur in northwest Alabama. During late April, concerted effort was made to locate potential areas that might contain eastern small-footed bats. Sites were selected for survey in suspected eastern small-footed bat habitat and where acoustical signatures were believed to have been obtained. During the event, one ABWG team, mist-netting at Cathedral Caverns State Park, captured an eastern small-footed bat – the first documentation in Alabama by live-capture. The Blitz was abbreviated somewhat this year by severe weather.

Evening emergence counts of gray bats were conducted at selected caves. The focus of these counts was on caves that had recently received new bat friendly gating or were soon to receive new gating. Caves surveyed included Weaver, Georgetown, Alabama Bat Cave # 1 (Hollyberry Cave), Cave Mountain and Honeycomb Quarry. New gating was installed at Cave Mountain Cave in Marshall County. Additional gray bat caves were surveyed that included Sauta, Hambrick and Cave Springs. At Weaver Cave, cameras were installed through the winter of 2023-2024 on locations within the cave known to be hibernation chambers of Indiana bats, in an effort to define the seasonal beginning and ending of Indiana bat hibernation at this cave. This knowledge will be important should this site be used in the future to radio-tag bats before they emerge from hibernation.

Eastern Spotted Skunk Research: Program biologists conducted camera surveys for Eastern spotted skunks (ESS) in north Alabama from mid-December to mid-April.

Areas surveyed by Nongame staff were Bankhead National Forest (North), Natches Trace Parkway, Skyline WMA, and Mulberry Fork WMA. Cameras were placed at 40 distinct locations across these areas. ESS were detected on three areas: Skyline WMA, Mulberry Fork WMA, and Bankhead National Forest (North). On Mulberry

Fork WMA, ESS were detected at two new locations. At one site two ESS were detected in the same photos and video. This is the second year skunks have been detected at this WMA. On Bankhead National Forest, ESS were detected at two new locations near previous sites where ESS were caught in live herp traps in 2005. This confirms that ESS were still inhabiting this portion of Bankhead. On Skyline WMA, the first ESS detection was made after four seasons of surveys.

Biologists continue to occasionally receive reports of ESS from the public generated by our outreach flyer and information on outdooralabama.com. Since the beginning of that campaign in 2016, we have received 48 verified observations.

Long-tailed Weasel Research: Program biologists continue to receive reports of long-tailed weasels from the public after launching the citizen science campaign in 2021. Since the launch of that campaign, we have received over 40 verified reports, with a statewide distribution and frequency of reports suggesting long-tailed weasels may not be as rare as previously believed. Continued outreach is needed to obtain additional reports in the future.

Allegheny Woodrat Research: Efforts continue to further define the range and genetics of the Allegheny woodrat in Alabama. This is being done to augment the knowledge of its genetic distinction from the Eastern woodrat. Another objective has been to obtain data to possibly review this species' conservation status and consider if additional research is warranted. Woodrat scat was opportunistically collected by Nongame personnel from several sites across north Alabama and sent to Dr. Jeff Ray at the University of North Alabama for DNA studies. Results from this effort are found in the paper "Genetic Evidence of Allegheny Woodrats in Alabama: Continued Existence at the Southern Extent of its Range" published in *Southeastern Naturalist* 23. This paper was coauthored by ADCNR nongame personnel.

Endangered Species (Section 6) Research: WFF received \$437,188 in federal funds for projects on fish and wildlife species eligible for funding under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act. Approximately half of the total funds were for projects administered by the Wildlife Section. Population and status surveys for the gopher tortoise, flattened musk turtle, and Black Warrior waterdog, along with red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) translocation and habitat restoration on state lands, are examples of projects made possible by those funds.

American Alligator Populations: American alligator population and harvest surveys are conducted annually throughout the most populated portions of its range in Alabama. Data from these surveys are used to manage our alligator resources and make harvest recommendations for each of the state's five Alligator Management Areas (AMAs). Population surveys are used to evaluate overall trends in alligator abundance. Hunter harvest data is also collected annually from all alligators harvested within each AMA to evaluate the health of the population. Harvest information such as body weight, length, sex, and harvest location is collected. This information provides insights regarding trends in health

as well as sex and age structure of our alligator populations. Long-term trends from harvest and population surveys continued to indicate that Alabama's alligator population is stable, and a conservative harvest is sustainable. Interest in the hunts remains stable. Section staff received 11,823 applications from 3,838 applicants and provided 260 harvest permits for the harvest program. Hunter success rates increased 2.7% from 2023 with a 66.5% success rate throughout the five hunt AMAs. Success rates within each hunt AMA are: Southwest – 79% with 79 harvested, Coastal – 58% with 29 harvested, West Central – 78% with 39 harvested, Southeast – 35% with 14 harvested, and Lake Eufaula – 60% with 12 harvested. To further understand and manage alligator resources in Alabama, WFF initiated a collaborative research project with other state agencies and universities to obtain information regarding hunter harvest management, public satisfaction, and baseline population health within the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Falconry Permits: The Nongame Wildlife Program administers falconry permits for the state and provides technical assistance to permit holders. Staff administers falconry written examinations, conducts required falconry facility and equipment inspections, issues permits and inputs data to the federal falconry database. As of September 30, 2024, Alabama had 68 individuals permitted to practice falconry in the state. Of those 68 falconry permit holders, five are apprentice class, 35 are general class, and 28 are master class. In FY 2023-2024, five permitted falconers did not renew their permits, which expired on August 30. Two new permits were issued representing two apprentice falconers. Additionally, five apprentice falconers advanced to general class and one general class falconer advanced to master class.

PRIVATE LANDS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Technical Assistance: The Wildlife Section employs six biologists dedicated to providing technical assistance to private landowners, corporations, hunting clubs, and government agencies. Throughout the year, biologists made contacts and provided onsite inspections, reviewed and drafted management plans, and conducted various other management outreach activities to enhance management of Alabama's wildlife resources. One of the most popular avenues for dispensing wildlife management advice is through the agency's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). DMAP included 146 landowners and hunting clubs with 386,592 acres enrolled last year.

Providing landowners and land managers technical assistance in implementing strategies to improve wildlife habitat on their lands continued to grow in importance. As a result, a mutually beneficial 10-year partnership continued with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This partnership helps private landowners with obtaining farm bill program assistance while delivering better wildlife management advice. Under a cooperative agreement, technical assistance staff worked with NRCS personnel to deliver the programs. Seven section biologists worked in this partnership in FY 2024. Biologists met with landowners

to develop conservation plans, contracts, and monitor wetland easements. Biologists also participated in numerous workshops, tours, presentations, working groups, and training sessions that reached hundreds of landowners and dozens of natural resource agency personnel. This partnership with NRCS will continue in FY 2024-2025.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Meetings: Staff continued meetings and site visits with personnel from Alabama Power Company (APC) associated with the Coosa Wildlife Management Plan, Harris Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project, and Martin Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project. Staff reviewed documents regarding the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for the hydroelectric projects at Martin, Jordan, Mitchell, and Weiss lakes. Plans are required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Staff will continue active involvement in the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for all projects associated with hydroelectric power generation.

East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture: Section personnel continue to participate in various aspects of the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture, a partnership of 13 state, federal, private, and academic organizations that leads a regional habitat conservation movement founded on a science-based, landscape-scale strategy. The partnership can more effectively secure a sustainable future for birds and habitats.

Nuisance Wildlife: Nuisance wildlife information was disseminated to the public through a variety of media outlets, educational workshops, technical literature, and personal correspondence. Due to their destructive nature and negative impact on wildlife habitat, feral hogs are of serious concern in Alabama. Partnerships continued across the state with personnel from ADCNR, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife Services to provide informative workshops regarding feral hog biology, impacts of feral hogs on wildlife habitat, disease implications, current control methods and techniques, and the need to eliminate relocation of this species. Control of other nuisance and predator species, such as beavers, coyotes, and raccoons, also generates many requests for assistance from landowners and land managers due to their potential impacts on game species, including white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. Personnel conducted and assisted with numerous workshops and seminars around the state to provide landowners, hunting clubs, forestry owners, and the public with information to be proactive in their nuisance wildlife management activities. Additionally, articles about dealing with these species were made available to the public online through ADCNR's website, www.outdooralabama.com. Personnel utilized the ADCNR nuisance manual to provide the public with current information on nuisance wildlife species and ongoing nuisance issues across the state.

Trapper Educational Workshops: Staff conducted 10 furbearer trapping education workshops in FY 2023-2024. Workshops were held in Butler, Montgomery, Bibb, Escambia, Jackson, Jefferson, Baldwin, Covington, Barbour, and Pike counties. The

two-day program begins on a Saturday morning with classroom presentations on trapping history, furbearer management, responsible trapping and conservation, and trapping regulations. Presentations continue with additional discussion on trap and snare types, trapping equipment and lures and baits, and hands-on trap-setting familiarization. Saturday afternoons are devoted to trap line scouting and making sets with mentors. On Sunday mornings, the students meet at predawn to check traps and pull their trap line. The remainder of the day is devoted to demonstrating fur-handling methods and techniques. Student participation in the FY 2023-2024 workshops included 124 youth and 197 adults. Most of the youth participants were accompanied by a parent or guardian.

FUTURE ISSUES

Public Hunting: The loss of leased land in the WMA system is a continued concern. Land acquisitions supported with federal grant programs are pursued each year to help offset losses in our private land leases. During FY 2023-2024, Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Federal Grant Assistance funds were used to purchase 1,193 acres for a new SOA. More leased land is likely to be lost in the future as private and corporate landowners withdraw from their contractual agreements. WFF will attempt to contractually lease or fee-simple purchase other lands and provide additional incentives to encourage landowners to include lands in the program. WFF will also continue to work with the Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) to acquire land for public hunting.

Nuisance Wildlife: The occurrence of nuisance wildlife problems and conflicts continues to rise, especially as we deal with an increasingly urbanized society. This portion of the public is inexperienced in dealing with wildlife issues. Also, the urban/suburban setting limits common solutions to deal with many of these problems. At the district level, a considerable amount of time is spent providing assistance on nuisance wildlife calls. As the Division becomes more active in dealing with these non-traditional wildlife issues, time management and funding will become more challenging. The Division's Wildlife Section has issued approximately 83 nuisance wildlife control operator permits across the state. These permits allow private companies/individuals to deal with nuisance wildlife issues.

State Funding: Federal funding associated with the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act has continued to be in higher amounts during the past 10 years. The matching state dollars required to fully utilize all the federal dollars (25%/75%) have been limited and could lead to reversions of federal dollars if matching opportunities are not available. WFF staff has collaborated with the FWLT Board of Trustees and worked cooperatively to utilize Forever Wild funding as a state matching source. This assists in capturing the federal apportionment that is beyond the amount our traditional state dollars can match, thereby providing aid for land acquisitions into the WMA system. We are exploring other options to fully utilize our federal dollars through partnerships with outside entities and third party, in-kind matching funds.

ALABAMA'S PUBLIC SHOOTING RANGES



By Chuck Sykes, Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

WHO IS ACTUALLY FUNDING THE LION'S SHARE OF CONSERVATION IN THE NATION?

In February of 2024, the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF) of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources completed the final phase of a land purchase in Shelby County that will ultimately become a state-of-the-art public shooting range. State Shooting Range (SSR) Shelby will be the newest of 13 public shooting ranges the Division operates. Over the last few years, the Division's public shooting ranges have become very popular, seeing tens of thousands of visitors annually. You might ask yourself why a state conservation agency is concerned with providing target shooting opportunities to the public. The answer is simple but little known to many Alabamians: Target shooters pay to conserve Alabama's natural resources at a greater rate than anyone else.

PHOTO: BILLY POPE



To understand the system that protects Alabama's natural resources today, you must investigate the past. In 1937 the federal Pittman-Robertson Act was passed into federal law and provided the federal funds framework needed to better protect the nation's fragile natural resource wealth. The Pittman-Robertson Act was a reallocation of an existing excise tax on firearms supported by the firearms manufacturing industry aimed at restoring wildlife populations across the nation. This goal served a mutual benefit for the states and the firearms industry as wildlife populations would be protected and enhanced and manufacturers would see an increase in arms and ammunition sold as hunting became more successful. At the time of this law's enactment, hunters were the overwhelming contributor to Pittman-Robertson funds collected by the federal government. One must remember that hunting at that time was a subsistence act and what fed American families, far different from where we are today.

Many years of balanced resource protection came because of this effective legislation; however, the only constant is change. Change came in the form of a slow decline in hunting across America and the explosion of recreational target shooting. When the Pittman-Robertson Act was first authored, target shooting was insignificant in its impact on funds collected through the act, but by the 1990s target shooting had evolved into a massive outdoor recreation option. It had begun contributing millions of dollars that were being used to enhance wildlife populations nationally.

Today, 75 cents of every dollar contributed to the Pittman-Robertson fund comes from a target shooting activity that has little or no connection to hunting. This fact delivers the motivation to provide public shooting opportunities across our state. Simply put, recreational target shooters are the reason that Alabama can continue to protect and enhance its natural resource wealth so effectively. Providing public shooting ranges to those who provide the bulk of the funds that protect our wildlife resources is simply a good investment. In addition to ranges, Alabama leads the nation in public archery parks and has a robust program that introduces kids to archery competition with the National Archery in Schools Program.

In 2021, WFF's Hunter Education Unit, the group chiefly responsible for public shooting range and archery park development, began engaging the public and actively teaching beginner shooting courses across our state.

In its first full year, the Hunter Education Unit's "Handgun 101" course was wildly successful. Hosted at our State Shooting Ranges, this program takes first-time firearms owners and teaches them the fundamentals of safety, marksmanship, and public range etiquette. This 4-hour course has the goal of reaching new constituents in the ever-growing pool of first-time firearms owners. More than 13 million people became new gun owners in 2021 alone. Each course ends with a short talk explaining the Pittman-Robertson Act and how the funds generated by target shooters conserve the natural resource wealth of our nation. On the heels of the success of the Handgun 101 course, four additional courses were developed: Handgun 102, Rifle 101, Shotgun 101, and Archery 101. Our Handgun 102 course is designed to take students who have successfully completed the 101 course and expand on that base of knowledge. It covers safe storage, cleaning, and a host of additional subjects that students of the 101 course requested.

The Rifle 101, Shotgun 101 and Archery 101 courses follow the exact four-hour format that the Handgun 101 course follows. They are first step courses designed to impart the same level of knowledge and familiarity with rifles, shotguns, and archery equipment. Each of the additional courses have been very successful, and all firearms, ammunition, archery equipment and safety equipment are provided free of charge. The only thing needed to take any of these courses is a wildlife heritage license, hunting license or fishing license.

The North American Model of wildlife conservation wouldn't be the overwhelming success it has been without proper funding. WFF wants to thank our hunters for their support and contributions to the Pittman-Robertson account over the past decades, and we definitely are not going to stray from our mission to provide quality public access for hunting.

However, just as we've provided hunting access and flourishing wildlife populations for our hunting constituents, we must now also provide quality shooting range access to the thousands of recreational shooters in Alabama. So, be looking for big things to come on the state shooting range front over the next several years. For locations of all our state shooting ranges and community archery parks as well as more information on the 101 courses, visit www.outdooralabama.com. ■



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