



MAFWA Director's Meeting

IL DNR Office of Resource Conservation Overview 2026

The Office of Resource Conservation (ORC) within the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is comprised of the Fisheries, Forestry, Natural Heritage, and Wildlife Divisions. The Office also administers Federal Farm Bill programs through a Private Lands Section, such as Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Recreational Access Program, and others. The Office also implements Natural Resource Damage Assessments through our Contaminants Section.

A Sample of Highlights from Fiscal Year (FY) 26

- The Office is working to increase staffing levels and improve hiring process where possible. At least (12) field biologist and five (5) administrative positions have been posted or hired this FY and several more are in process for FY27.
- Staff have been working diligently to improve procedures and gain efficiency in grant and fiscal operations. A highlight this FY was implementing a new electronic travel voucher system which will save staff considerable time.
- Efforts are underway to update websites to meet accessibility requirements pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Staff have been working to improve public outreach, communications, and building partnerships with stakeholders.
- The Office is leading a partnership with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to implement native prairie/pollinator plantings to reduce mowing and improve habitat and aesthetics at IDOC facilities.
- The Office received the *Friend of Prairie Research Institute* award in recognition of collaborative efforts to conserve hydrology and groundwater contribution areas to Illinois Nature Preservers.
- The Office continues to navigate changes to the federal grants landscape. The changes have been particularly challenging for the Forestry Division.
- The Wildlife Division is navigating a major change to our Chronic Wasting Disease program with the sharpshooting program ending in April 2026 after a valiant 23-year effort.
- Wildlife announced the new five-year revision of waterfowl season dates and zone lines. Zones were reduced from four to three with a split duck season added. While broadly supported by hunters, change drew some criticism in Southern Illinois for the agency to navigate.
- The redesigned IFish website was launched in 2025 by Fisheries. The website features an enhanced portable device interface, improved navigation, and more.
- The Heritage Division successfully implemented an update to the state's Wildlife Action Plan and the Illinois List of Endangered and Threatened Species.

-Division of Fisheries-

Statewide Fisheries Management

Bordered almost completely by water (the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash rivers, and Lake Michigan), Illinois features an intricate network of over 87,000 miles of tributary streams, crisscrossing and draining its interior. Dams on many of these interior rivers and streams form nearly 1,300 public impoundment lakes, including three large U.S. Army Corp of Engineers reservoirs. There are roughly 84,000 private ponds in Illinois. There are over approximately 701,000 licensed anglers in Illinois each year.

- 486 fish population surveys were completed
- 182 lake, river, and reservoir status summaries were completed
- 152 lake and river management reports were completed
- Fisheries staff continued to work with surrounding states on a Lake Sturgeon Conservation Plan (State – endangered). No significant updates or stocking events with the Alligator Gar reintroduction program this past year.

Stream Basin Surveys

Conducted annually statewide at established intervals for a given basin (every five years). These surveys help us monitor the quality of the river and stream fisheries and follow the progress of management efforts.

- Surveys at 116 river basin stations were completed

Habitat Enhancement in Lakes

- 39 habitat enhancement projects; this total included deployment of 1,298 individual structures in 20 lakes, planting 8.25 acres of vegetation in seven lakes and the addition of fertilizer in one lake (40 acres). Four lakes received multiple habitat enhancement projects.
- 67 lake vegetation manipulation procedures for a combined treated-area total of 1,568 acres

Professional Coordination

- 779 professional coordination activities (e.g., permit and environmental assessment reviews) of and 110 separate technical committee activities, including participation in 29 individual committees were completed
- 111 resource guidance activities were completed

Private landowner Activities

- Most private landowner contacts involve recommendations provided over telephone or by email as most issues can be diagnosed without on-site visits.
- 2,344 private and organizational landowner guidance requests were completed and 31 outreach events held 28 for private landowners

Lake Michigan Program

- Charter and non-charter recreational anglers last year expended an estimated 345,915 angler-hours to harvest 26,099 yellow perch and 105,574 trout and salmon from the Illinois waters of Lake Michigan.
- Illinois' Jake Wolf Memorial Hatchery reared and stocked 11 Illinois harbors and marinas with a total of 705,522 large fingerling salmon and trout (~5.5 inches), including 258,541 Coho Salmon, 213,869 Chinook Salmon, 64,364 Arlee strain Rainbow Trout, 85,552 Skamania strain (steelhead) Rainbow Trout and 119,196 Brown Trout. An additional 121,192 yearling Lake Trout were stocked by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Illinois' Julian's Reef.

Hatcheries

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) operates three fish hatcheries that are strategically located to serve various regions across the state: Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery in central Illinois, Little Grassy Fish Hatchery in the southern part of the state, and LaSalle Fish Hatchery in the north.

- In 2025, a total of 14,016,152 fish were stocked comprising 19 different species.
- 53 (spring) and 58 (fall) sites were stocked for the catchable Rainbow Trout Program which attracts over 60,000 licensed participants each year.

Urban and Community Fishing Program (UCFP)

- Each year, the Urban and Community Fishing program provides free fishing clinics and aquatic resource programs to 75,000 Illinois residents. The program has reached 2 million Illinois residents during its 40-year history.
- The Urban and Community Fishing Program conducted 1,100 programs (fishing and non-fishing) with nearly 98,000 participants last year.
- The UCFP purchased a 2nd 5,000-gallon pond, also known as "fire tanks", for use at special events and fishing expos in Northern and Central Illinois.
- Illinois was one of several states awarded a \$25,000 grant for a First Cast Center (FCC) trailer. The grant was designed to cover costs of a box trailer, external graphics and fishing tackle for the trailer.
- The Two Rivers Family Fishing Fair is the largest youth fishing event in Illinois and celebrated its 36th year anniversary. It has attracted 142,000 people over its course, averaging 4,000 participants annually. In 2025, 3,500 participants attended, with 1,5000 children registering. Attendance was lower than usual due to rain.

Aquatic Nuisance Species Program

- In 2025, 178,528 individual invasive carps (98% Silver carp) were removed by contracted fishers in the Marseilles and Starved Rock pools of the Illinois River as part of the Barrier Defense project. The total weight of invasive carp removed is 611 tons (1,221,781 pounds).
- No invasive carp have been collected in Lockport or Brandon Road pools since the inception of this project in 2010.
- The leading edge of the invasive carp population remains near Rock Run Rookery in Dresden Island pool (approximate river mile 281; 46 miles from Lake Michigan). No appreciable change has been found in the leading edge over the past 15 years.

Contracted commercial fishers have removed more than 5,485,983 million pounds of invasive carp from below Starved Rock pool of the Illinois River in 2025.

-Division of Wildlife Resources-

More than 250,000 licensed hunters took to the field during the 2025/2026 season in Illinois to participate in hunting deer, turkey, waterfowl, bobcat, and other upland and small game species.

2025-2026 Deer Season Harvest

- Hunters in Illinois harvested a preliminary total of 174,006 deer. The preliminary total for 2024-2025 compares with a total harvest of 170,758 deer for all seasons in 2024-2025.
- Hunters took 46.4% females and 53.6% males.
- **Archery deer hunters** took a total of 73,785 deer during the season that began Oct. 1 and concluded Jan. 18. The total archery harvest was 73,605 in 2024-2025.
- **Youth deer hunters** harvested a total of 4,742 deer during the three-day Illinois youth deer season Oct. 11-13, compared to 4,057 in 2024.
- **Firearm season hunters** took a total of 81,316 deer during the firearm season Nov. 21-23 and Dec. 4-7. This compares to a harvest of 82,496 deer taken during the 2024 firearm season.
- **Muzzleloader hunters** harvested a total of 2,699 deer during the muzzleloader-only season Dec. 12-14, compared with a harvest of 2,832 deer during the 2024 muzzleloader season.
- **Late-winter seasons:** Late-winter antlerless-only and special chronic wasting disease (CWD) deer seasons concluded Jan. 18 with a combined preliminary harvest total for both seasons of 11,464 deer. Season dates for the seven-day late-winter and CWD seasons were Jan. 1-4 and Jan. 16-18. During the same seasons in 2024-2025, a total of 7,775 deer were taken.
- Twenty-two northern Illinois counties were open to the special CWD season, which is used to assist in slowing the spread of chronic wasting disease in the Illinois deer herd. And 30 counties were open for the late-winter antlerless season in 2025-2026 compared to 27 counties in 2024-2025. Counties that are at or below their individual deer population goal for two consecutive years may be removed from the late-winter season.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

CWD prevalence and distribution continues to increase and spread geographically in the state. During the period of July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025 (FY25), a total of 12,444 usable samples were collected across Illinois, yielding a total of 539 CWD positive cases.

- Disease prevalence in CWD counties for adult deer increased to 9.2% from 7.2% the prior year. The prevalence rate for hunter-harvested adult males (10.8% continues to be higher than that of adult females (7.1%). During the past seven years, Illinois saw a rapid increase in prevalence rates and a continued spread southward into central Illinois.
- The number of counties affected increased to 28 with two new counties detected in central Illinois (Effingham and Scott), well beyond the leading edge of the endemic region of northern Illinois. These recent detections are clear indicators that the disease has expanded beyond IDNR's capacity

to manage it effectively through a long-term sharpshooting program. After a valiant 23-year effort by biologists to control CWD in Illinois' deer herd, IDNR has suspended its targeted culling (sharpshooting) program. IDNR staff will continue to monitor CWD within the state, provide sampling opportunities for hunters, and engage with the public to help address management of the disease. More information here: <https://dnr.illinois.gov/programs/cwd/illinois-chronic-wasting-disease-update.html>

Turkey Harvest

- Illinois turkey hunters harvested a new preliminary record total of 20,821 during the 2026 spring turkey season. This compares to 18,189 during the 2025 spring turkey season. The 2025 total includes a new record youth spring turkey season harvest of 2,326 birds, which compares with the previous record of 2,099 birds set in 2025.
- Hunters in Illinois harvested a preliminary record statewide total of 882 wild turkeys during the 2025-2026 fall archery turkey season. The total compares to the previous year's harvest of 1,045 and the 5-year average of 824 birds harvested.
- Turkey hunters in Illinois harvested 255 wild turkeys during the 2025 fall firearm season from Oct. 18-26. This compares to 294 harvested the previous year and the record harvest was set in 2005 when 1,218 birds were harvested.

Bobcat Hunting

- The 2025-2026 Illinois bobcat season concluded Feb. 15 with 627 bobcats harvested by hunters and trappers.
- A total of 405 (62%) of bobcats were taken by hunting, while trapping accounted for 222 (34%) of the harvest. Twenty-seven (4%) were salvaged by permit holders from circumstances such as roadkill.
- The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) issued 2,000 bobcat permits in the 2025-2026 bobcat lottery out of 9,700 applicants. Bobcat permits issued were increased from 1,000 to 2,000 starting with the 2024-25 season.

Waterfowl Program

IDNR announced the new five-year revision of waterfowl season dates and zone lines. Zones were reduced from four to three, gaining the ability for a split duck season as broadly supported by hunters according to surveys. This change was not without some criticism in the now combined South and South-Central zones. A three zone and split season structure is relatively new to Illinois, and we continue to navigate this change.

The IDNR also continues to navigate challenges at some Waterfowl Management Areas (WMAs) regarding moist soil management practices and flooded corn. This FY, staff engaged with the public and other agency staff to hold habitat workshops in the field at WMAs.

-Private Lands-

Illinois Recreational Access Program

With nearly 97% of the land in Illinois is privately owned land, finding a place to enjoy the great outdoors is becoming more difficult. Developed in 2011 from its first Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) grant, the IDNR launched its first public access program, the IL Recreational Access Program (IRAP).

- More than 27,000 acres in 52 counties have been leased for outdoor recreational activities. Thousands of outdoor enthusiasts have accessed these sites for spring turkey, archery deer, youth firearm deer, squirrel, rabbit, quail, pheasant and waterfowl hunting. Several sites are also available for pond and riverbank fishing as well.
- IRAP plays an important role in implementing plan habitat projects on leased acres by providing guidance, manpower and up to a 60% cost-share to implement needed habitat improvement projects. Most management practices include nonnative invasive species control, timber stand improvement, prairie prep/planting, tree plantings, and prescribed burning.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) provides landowners with an IDNR-approved management plan preferential tax treatment on the enrolled acres in exchange for the landowner's commitment to conservation habitat work on the CSP acreage.

- There are over 2,500 active CSP enrollments in over 90 Illinois counties, amassing over 100,000 acres with habitat management plans.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

The Illinois Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a successful private lands partnership between the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). Illinois CREP offers financial incentives to landowners for the establishment of long-term conservation easements that improve water quality, capture nutrient runoff, reduce stream sedimentation and establish critical fish and wildlife habitat on private lands within Illinois and Kaskaskia River Watersheds.

- IDNR is currently processing 45 new easement enrollments that will establish conservation practices and wildlife habitat on 2000 acres of frequently flooded cropland and environmentally sensitive acres.
- Established in 1998, Illinois CREP has recorded over 1300 conservation easements, totaling over 90,000 acres.

-Division of Natural Heritage-

- Illinois completed a required five-year revision to the list of Illinois endangered and threatened species in 2025 in coordination with the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board. This is a

rigorous procedure involving petition and expert reviews, and public comment opportunity during the Administrative Rule update process. The revised Illinois list of threatened and endangered species went into effect October 31, 2025.

- During the reporting period, the Department analyzed the results of voluntary conservation efforts directed at monarchs and state's goal of adding 150 million new stems of milkweed to Illinois by 2038. Between 2014 (the year of proposed federal listing)- 2024 (ten years later), Illinois added an estimated 102 million stems of new milkweed to the landscape. A detailed report of the analysis is available upon request.
- The Department's focus on recovery of species on Illinois endangered and threatened species list continues to be reenergized. During the past year, 22 species entered the recovery process for a total of 74 species in various stages of review and planning. During the past year, Species Status Assessments were completed for 17 species, and planning documents were completed for 5 species.
- The Natural Heritage Database staff (IDNR is part of the NatureServe network) initiated conversations with agency, conservation organizations, and academic institutions on information and mapping practices for bird data. Current mapping standards were reviewed. Topics related to migratory birds, wintering records, historic timeframes, and data sources were discussed.
- Field staff continue to implement management strategies on Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves to maintain these high-quality natural communities found across the State.

-Wildlife Action Plan-

The Department has completed the comprehensive review and revision of the Illinois State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This Wildlife Action Plan identifies three major Goals to work towards over the next 20 years – (1) increase the extent and quality of shared lands (by 30%), (2) maintain native wildlife and plant species populations (no loss), and (3) increase the connection and appreciation by the public of native species and their habitats (by 30%). The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan includes a variety of Conservation Action Strategies that allow public agencies, private landowners, and community members to participate. See: <https://dnr.illinois.gov/conservation/iwap.html>

-Illinois Nature Preserves Commission-

The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), in partnership with IDNR, protects lands in perpetuity for landowners such as the IDNR, forest preserve and park districts, not-for-profit organizations, corporations, land trusts, and individuals. Lands protected include high quality natural communities, habitats that support endangered and threatened species, geological features, and archaeological sites. The INPC is a public-private partnership that has been successful in permanently protecting high-quality natural areas for over 60 years and is supported by staff members employed by the IDNR.

- In calendar year 2025, the INPC permanently protected 21 sites, including 13 new, or additions to, nature preserves and 8 new, or additions to, land and water reserves.
- The total acreage dedicated was 1,357 and the total registered was 402.

- Adding these 21 sites into the Illinois Nature Preserves System brings the statewide, total number of dedicated Illinois nature preserves to 424 comprising 65,368 acres, and the total number of registered land and water reserves to 216 with 60,055 acres.
- Altogether, at the end of 2025, there were 640 sites comprising 125,423 acres.

-Division of Forestry-

IDNR Nursery Program (Mason Nursery)

- In FY26, the nursery produced 900,000 native bareroot trees and shrubs of 32 different species, an additional 1200 native containerized trees, 4000 containerized native wildflowers and prairie grasses of 30 different species; 2200 pounds of cleaned wildflower of 50 different species; 120 pounds of cleaned prairie grass seed of 3 different species; 500 pounds of Monarch/Pollinator native wildflower seed mix consisting of 30 different species.
- Over 1300 orders for this plant material were processed from individuals and groups across Illinois with the majority being private landowners interested in habitat restoration.

Illinois Forestry Development Act (IFDA) Forest Management Program

IFDA requires landowners to have an IDNR-approved forest management plan.

- Illinois has over 10,000 forest management plans covering nearly 600,000 acres. This equates to approximately 15% of non-industrial private forestland in Illinois being managed for wildlife, timber, recreation, clean water, carbon, and long-term forest health. Recommended forest management practices vary parcel to parcel. Enrolled parcels receive a reduced property tax rate.
- To date, we have obligated \$2,545,000 since the initial sign-up period in October 2025. Applications have obligated funding for invasive species control, timber stand improvement, and tree planting across the state.

Illinois Forest Health Program (IFHP)

IDNR implements its Forest Health Program in partnership with Morton Arboretum. The Forest Health Program deploys monitoring traps for walnut twig beetle (WTB), and exotic bark beetles and wood-boring insects on over 100 sites annually. In addition, aerial and visual surveys are conducted for native and exotic insects and diseases including, but not limited to, spotted lanternfly (SLF), elm zigzag sawfly (EZZSF), insect defoliators, oak wilt, bur oak blight, stress and weather-related diseases and events (i.e. tornadoes, flooding, derechos, ice storms).

- Ongoing statewide issues included herbicide injury to oaks and other hardwood tree species, decline of spruces and pines, and decline and rapid mortality of oaks.
- Throughout the field season, the Illinois Forest Health team was on the lookout for diseases such as Sudden Oak Death (SOD) and Laurel Wilt (LW); neither one was detected. However, several new spotted lanternfly (SLF) infestations were detected in Cook County adding to the one found in September, 2023.
- Additionally, a statewide invasive plant survey was expanded to determine the presence and environmental conditions favoring the establishment and spread of a number of herbaceous and woody invasive plants. The survey will continue for the next several years.

See: https://dnr.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dnr/conservation/forestry/documents/2025_final.pdf

Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCFP)

- IDNR's Urban and Community Forestry Program touched roughly 10.5 million Illinois residents through community, guidance, programming, and financial assistance.
- Illinois' Tree City USA application portal closed on April 10th with 509 total applications and 359 applications fully approved. The total awards for this program are 230 Tree City USA, 103 Growth Awards, 15 Tree Campus USA and 3 Tree Line USA, 8 Tree Campus Healthcare USA.

Illinois Forest Utilization & Marketing Program (IFUP)

- DNR Forestry bonded/licensed 338 timber buyers during the year. Approximately 70 sawmills and a few dozen additional hobby mills are currently operating in the state.
- Verified sales of timber products, primarily as hardwood logs from private forests, were reported at 35.7 Million Board Feet for the year from 90,637 acres harvested. Top species harvested were Black Walnut, White Oak and Red Oak.
- The total economic value of the forest products industries in Illinois, including all primary and secondary sectors, is estimated at over \$20 billion annually.
- The IFUP partners with Stewardship and other forestry programs to expand the multiple-use philosophy of forest management which includes wildlife, timber, carbon, protected species, recreation, soil, and water conservation.

Wildland Fire Programs

- IDNR staff conducts prescribed burning on approximately 20,000 acres per year.
- IDNR sent fire crews and engines to assist with wildland fire response and suppression to Colorado for two assignments, as well as Oregon, California, and Montana. Illinois also has representation on the NASF Wildland Fire Committee and a representative on the Big Rivers Fire Compact. All expenses and salaries incurred during assistance to other states are reimbursed by the U.S. Forest Service.