

## Release #051-09

[FEDS, 11 STATES CONTRIBUTE \\$1.37 MILLION FOR WNS RESEARCH; GAME COMMISSION URGES CLOSURES TO PREVENT SPREAD OF WNS](#)

### **FEDS, 11 STATES CONTRIBUTE \$1.37 MILLION FOR WNS RESEARCH**

HARRISBURG – The Pennsylvania Game Commission and 11 states are working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through a State Wildlife Grant to heighten an ongoing coordinated regional response to White-Nose Syndrome, a rapidly advancing disorder that has killed hundreds of thousands of bats.

“White-Nose Syndrome has spread rapidly over the past two years from its ground zero near Albany, New York, and the best course of action for the Northeast’s and Mid-Atlantic’s wildlife managers is to further combine forces and resources to search for answers to this complex problem,” said Carl G. Roe, Game Commission executive director. “Time is of the essence, because mortality has been extensive, bats aren’t overly plentiful and their reproductive rates are extremely low – one pup per adult female per year.

“The Game Commission has been working with other states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and several universities on White Nose Syndrome for more than a year. This grant will strengthen that partnership by establishing an improved region-wide coordinated response and providing additional financial support at a time when most wildlife agencies are strapped to fund core programs.”

Under the two-year State Wildlife Grant approved by USFWS, \$940,869 will be provided by the federal agency, the remaining \$431,940 will be funded by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, New York Department of Environmental Conservation, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, as well as Bat Conservation International, Metro Parks Ohio, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. Also benefiting from this comprehensive work, but not assisting with funding, are the Massachusetts Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Cornell University and the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife.

The focus of the grant is to support ongoing research and fieldwork into the WNS enigma. First and foremost, researchers will strive to find the cause of WNS, how it’s transmitted and if its spread can be controlled or contained. In addition, fieldwork will continue to monitor for new occurrences and to find ways to minimize the threat to adjoining regions and the varied species of greatest conservation need found there. These include federally-endangered Indiana, gray and Virginia big-eared bats.

“The rapid expansion of WNS poses a real threat to bat populations in states where it already has surfaced, as well as those in the southern Appalachians that are home to hibernacula wintering hundreds of thousands of bats,” explained Lisa Williams, a PGC bat biologist who has been spearheading the agency’s WNS response. “A widespread loss of significant numbers of these insect predators, particularly little brown bats, could have unforeseen effects on the health of humans, animals, crops and habitat.”

In the fall of 2008, Game Commission biologists began to suspect that WNS was in Pennsylvania, and by January 2009 they were confident it was here. Confirmation of the deadly disorder began to appear in late winter as bats began to leave hibernacula prematurely and died on the landscape. The largest mortality occurred in the state’s northeastern counties.

Sites where WNS has been confirmed to date in Pennsylvania are two abandoned mines near Carbondale, Lackawanna County; an abandoned mine near Glen Lyon, Luzerne County; an abandoned iron mine and three limestone caves in Mifflin County; and at least one limestone cave in Centre County.

When it strikes a hibernating population of bats, WNS typically has a 90 percent mortality rate in states north of Pennsylvania. But what has been seemingly unstoppable in bats, appears to have no ill-effect on humans, with the exception that folks are finding dead and dying bats around their homes and occasionally afield.

Mortality at the Mifflin County abandoned iron mine was 95 percent this past winter. On Dec. 29, the mine held 2,317 wintering bats; by March 19, that number dropped to 126. In addition, a Mifflin County limestone cave

experienced an 87 percent reduction.

“The losses in these two hibernacula were devastating and clearly illustrate the vulnerability bats have to WNS,” said Roe. “The great unknown is what’s next for Pennsylvania. But the future for bats isn’t exactly bright.”

Currently, researchers still are unsure exactly how bats contract WNS and how it initially and, ultimately, affects a bat’s body. Nor do they know positively how it is being transmitted. Although it seems a safe hunch that it’s being passed bat-to-bat, there’s still considerable concern about people shuttling WNS to new sites in unaffected areas via gear or clothing.

One odd occurrence in the manifestation of this disorder is its lack of sweeping precision as it follows the Appalachian Mountains southward. Dozens of wintering populations in mines and caves have been stricken by WNS as it streaks through the mountains, but thousands more have not. To get a feel for how much potential bat real estate Pennsylvania has, consider there are 4,000 mines and 1,000 caves. This excludes those crevices and cavities bats use but geologists haven’t mapped and managers still don’t know about.

While the sheer number of potential hibernation sites in Pennsylvania makes fine-scale WNS monitoring difficult, the Game Commission is well-positioned to monitor the effects on summer roosts. Agency staff and volunteers have been conducting emergence counts of bats exiting summer roosts for almost 20 years in the state. This important baseline information will be invaluable as an additional way of evaluating WNS effects on bat populations as it spreads across the state. With affected winter populations crashing in the northeast, the push now is to determine if – and then how – WNS disrupts or disturbs summer populations as they spread out across the landscape. Gathering such data will require considerable coordination among state partners both in and out of the affected zone.

“This heightened multi-state response improves what wildlife agencies already had set into motion in the northeastern United States, but as WNS advances into more states, the potential for harm and the consequences associated with having fewer bats become greater,” explained Williams. “If the large bat colonies to the south of us encounter WNS, funding will need to rise dramatically to meet the threat head-on. At stake are our Eastern bats, with several species imperiled. What remains unclear is whether WNS can be stopped and if we have the resources needed to do it.”

For more information on bats, visit the Game Commission's website ([www.pgc.state.pa.us](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us)), select "[Wildlife](#)" and then click on the [photo of the bat](#). To learn more about WNS, visit the USFWS's website at [www.fws.gov/northeast/white\\_nose.html](http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html).

For more information on State Wildlife Grants and their importance to species of greatest conservation concern and wildlife management agencies, visit the Game Commission’s website and select “Wildlife” and then select State Wildlife Grants.

### **GAME COMMISSION URGES CLOSURES TO PREVENT SPREAD OF WNS**

With White Nose Syndrome continuing to impact bat populations throughout the northeastern United States, Pennsylvania Game Commission officials today are encouraging private landowners with caves to close entry to these sites as an added measure to prevent any spread of the fungus associated with this disease by humans. However, Calvin W. DuBrock, agency Bureau of Wildlife Management director, noted that this suggestion does not apply to commercially-operated caves.

“WNS is a serious problem that we continue to address,” DuBrock said. “As the state’s wildlife management agency, the Game Commission already has taken steps to close and gate known important bat hibernacula on State Game Lands.

“Public cooperation is critical to provide this hedge of protection for our bat population. This approach is conservative, yet reasonable and responsible given the many unanswered questions about WNS. We don’t fully understand what causes WNS, so we cannot say with certainty that attempts to disinfect or decontaminate equipment will prevent the spread of WNS. Therefore, we feel that cave closure is the safest response at this time.”

DuBrock noted that many of these privately-owned caves are accessed only through small openings, which force visitors to scrape dirty clothing, boots, cave packs and other equipment against the walls and ceilings of the

constricted passages. This contact has the potential to transmit the fungus related to WNS from one cave site to another, especially if a spelunker is using the same boots, packs or protective clothing in each cave they visit.

DuBrock also praised the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for taking the proactive steps to close access to three important bat hibernacula on their properties, specifically at Coon and Lemon Hole caves, southeast of Blairsville, Westmoreland County, and Barton Cave, near Uniontown, Fayette County.

Additionally, the Allegheny National Forest – which lies in Warren, Forest, McKean and Elk counties – has closed access to caves on its 500,000-acre property. This is part of the larger closure announcement made earlier by the U.S. Forest Service, which addressed all caves on national forest properties in the Eastern Region.

DuBrock noted that agency biologists have been working in partnership with other state agencies, as well as those in adjacent states and the federal government, to monitor WNS and search for a solution.

DuBrock stressed that this recommended closure does not apply to commercially-operated caves because of the nature of these sites.

“Commercially-run caves, generally, are ones with large openings in which visitors are only in contact with the ground and visitors to commercial caves generally do not move previously-used cave clothing or equipment from site to site,” DuBrock said. “Also, the Game Commission has briefed commercial cave operators at their recent statewide meeting. They are aware of and concerned about WNS and the impact it is having on bat populations, and many operators are taking extra precautions by incorporating footwear decontamination procedures to reduce disease transmission among commercial caves.

“In fact, with access to ‘wild’ caves on public and private lands being closed, one of the best and safest ways – for human and bat safety – to visit a cave is to visit a commercial, show cave.”

The National Caves Association highly recommends to its members that they educate themselves and their staff on WNS, and do what they can to combat the spread of WNS. To facilitate this they have created a special web page for members only on the NCA website and are encouraging members to support Bat Conservation International in its ongoing WNS research efforts.

For more information on WNS, visit the Game Commission’s website ([www.pgc.state.pa.us](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us)) and click on the “[Report Sick Bats](#)” icon in the upper left-hand corner of the homepage.

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