

A Plan for WNS



This coming winter almost certainly will see White-nose Syndrome increasing its devastation among hibernating bats and spreading into still more states beyond the American Northeast. Now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is presenting its draft framework for a plan to coordinate and manage the national response to this disastrous disease.

The framework, which outlines key priorities, actions and goals for a national plan, was prepared in coordination with U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service and state agencies. Other agencies, states, organizations and scientists will help develop the final plan, which, the FWS said, should be available for public review this winter.

Several scientists, including BCI President Emeritus Merlin Tuttle, testified before two congressional subcommittees in June that a coordinated federal strategy and leadership role were essential to dealing with this urgent wildlife crisis.

Since WNS was discovered in cave in New York State in February 2006, it has killed more than a million bats. The FWS reports that the population of endangered Indiana myotis in its northeast region has fallen about 30 percent since 2007. Mortality approaching 100 percent has been reported at some major hibernation sites.

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has worked passionately towards a solution to White-nose Syndrome for the past several years,” said Mylea Bayless, BCI WNS Coordinator. “Unfortunately, we expect WNS to move into the American South and Midwest in the coming years, so we are pleased to see an emerging national approach to addressing this crisis. This framework provides a good roadmap for that approach. The challenge now is funding its implementation.”

And time is running out.

“As WNS spreads, the challenges for managing the disease continue to increase,” the Fish and Wildlife Service said in its draft, which “details the elements that are critical to the investigation and management of WNS.”

Among other things, the framework calls for developing a centralized and accessible system for making WNS research, data and analyses quickly available to those involved in the WNS effort. It would provide uniform standards for data collection, interpretation and dissemination.

The document notes the need for a reliable, rapid and standardized diagnosis of WNS in individual bats and in populations. Mitigation will require the ability to “maintain existing WNS-free zones and WNS-free sites within the infected zone.” A key goal is to minimize disease impacts enough “to allow the future restoration of all species to their geographic and genetic abundance.”

The framework says the purpose of the research component “is to identify and prioritize critical research needs in areas such as disease causality, transmissibility, live-animal tests, bioassays, genotyping and population monitoring, and to assess surveillance and management-action plans.”

The FWS hopes to develop consensus standards for safe and effective surveillance efforts to identify risk factors and improve early detection and support prioritized conservation actions.

The draft framework can be viewed at the Fish and Wildlife Service's northeast region website:
www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html

BCI is refocusing its WNS Rapid Response Fund to target specific gaps in research and mitigation efforts around the country. Help win the fight against White-nose Syndrome by donating at:
www.batcon.org/wnsdonate

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