

VERMONT FISH & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

Wildlife Management Area Report



2007 Annual Report

The Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department owns 83 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) totaling over 118,000 acres. WMAs play an important role in meeting the department's mission. Management of these areas emphasizes the conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats, and the properties provide important public access for hunting, fishing, trapping and other fish and wildlife-based activities as well. Recent national surveys have documented that public lands play an integral role in providing opportunities for the public to hunt, fish and trap. The amount of time people spend in these activities often hinges on having a place to go afield to engage in the activity. Vermont's WMAs equal more than 184 square miles of lands that provide this public opportunity.

Fish & Wildlife has purchased WMAs using several funding sources, including funds from hunting license sales, US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Fund, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Management and administration of all WMAs are primarily paid for through USFWS Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds.

Assistance from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation (FPR) staff is essential for completing WMA long range management planning, property administration, land acquisition, and habitat management projects. Wildlife habitat enhancement activities are conducted through commercial and noncommercial means to provide the rich diversity of habitat types and forest ages necessary to meet the needs of many wildlife species.

As with other Vermont Agency of Natural Resources lands, the management of WMAs is guided by Long Range Management Plans (LRMP). LRMPs are based on a thorough natural resources inventory and public input gathered through various methods and stages. Management activities primarily focus on providing a diversity of fish and wildlife habitat as well as quality opportunities for fish and wildlife-based outdoor activities.



Bill Crenshaw

Recent efforts to increase the amount of young forest habitat on WMAs are beginning to bear fruit – and grouse, woodcock, and numerous non-game birds as well.

Wildlife Management Areas and the Effects of Public Land on Local Tax Revenues

Fish & Wildlife owns over 118,000 acres in dozens of towns throughout the state. This totals more than 184 square miles of land open to hunting, fishing, trapping and other wildlife related outdoor activities. When the department examines properties to potentially buy lands to become WMAs, it follows a lengthy process including internal reviews on the suitability of the lands for the various purposes. Part of the process includes approval by the towns in which the lands are located. Sometimes local officials ask how the lands will be managed, or what the effects may be on town services or their tax income.

While each property and situation varies, often the town *gains* more revenue from the state than if the land were privately owned. When the Fish & Wildlife Department owns land in a town, the town receives an annual payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) at one percent of the Fair Market Value¹ (FMV) of the parcel, as determined by the state Division of Property Valuation and Review. While this can get technical, in many cases the municipal rate is less than the 1% of FMV paid by the state, so in fact the department land actually pays more per acre in some cases.

In 2005, the state funded a study to determine tax implications and other effects in order to answer these types of questions. The study is entitled “Tax Consequences of Land Conservation in the Town of Reading, VT. A report by Deb Brighton, Consultant, Salisbury, VT for the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), Waterbury, VT. 14pp.”

Some of the findings in the report include:

- Although commercial and industrial development is often sought to lower taxes, in general, towns with more commercial and industrial property have higher, rather than lower taxes.
- Vermont municipal tax rates tend to be higher in the towns that are most developed and lower in the towns that are most rural.
- More rural towns have lower tax rates because they have fewer people to serve. VFWD lands require minimal municipal services, and contribute no students to local schools. A high proportion of conserved land does not drive a town to an exorbitant tax rate, but rather has the opposite beneficial effect.

Table 1 reports the PILOT payments made by VFWD to Vermont towns for **WMAs and Fishing Access Areas** for the period 2003 to 2007.

Table 1. Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department Lands PILOT Payments Summary 2003 – 2007.²

YEAR	ACRES	FMV	PILOT ¹
2003	123,485.4	\$46,042,400	\$398,809
2004	119,318.4 ³	\$44,956,200	\$388,293
2005	119,518.6	\$59,778,100	\$511,802
2006	119,738.6	\$59,712,900	\$513,267
2007	119,673.2	\$59,780,200	\$515,756
5 YEAR TOTAL			\$2,327,929

¹Thirty seven VFWD properties enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal (UVA) Program prior to Act 60 are assessed at 1% of the UVA value rather than Fair Market Value. This accounts for a statewide PILOT payment annual total approximately 16% below FMV, totaling \$82,046 less than 1% FMV in 2007. **Under Act 60, new ANR land is ineligible for UVA.**

²Excludes Fish Culture Stations and Conservation Camp.

³VFWD sold 4,223.5 acres (Stamford Meadows WMA) to US Forest Service in 2003; purchased 56.5 acres elsewhere.

Fish and Wildlife lands provide a host of benefits to towns, including:

- Timber to support a viable forest products economy that retains local jobs (forestry, harvesting, trucking, product manufacturing). See Table 3 for active stumpage values.
- Contracted services (excavating, infrastructure repairs and construction, brush mowing, habitat work, etc.) and



John Hall

Dead Creek WMA in Addison is the best place in New England to view over 10,000 greater snow geese that stop to feed in mid-October during their southward migration.

agricultural leases also contribute to the local economy statewide.

- Public access for fish and wildlife based activities (hunting, fishing, trapping, viewing, photography) and a host of compatible activities (boating, snowmobiling, hiking). These activities contribute to the economy of rural communities, often during “off season” periods of early spring and late fall.
- Aesthetic values (views, foliage) of undeveloped mountains, waters, fields and wetlands contribute to the quality of life enjoyed by Vermonters and visitors, and the Vermont tourism brand and economy.
- Ecological values provided by habitat for common and rare plants and animals, groundwater recharge, flood abatement, and a host of ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, temperature moderation, etc.
- Educational values for schools and communities.

Although only a portion of the WMA acreage is suitable for active management practices (such as timber management, wetland water level control, agriculture, or wildlife opening maintenance), **all** of the land is highly valuable wildlife habitat. Natural wetlands, high elevation summits, cliffs and steep slopes, stream and pond buffers, and rare or fragile natural communities comprise a significant portion of the WMAs and contribute greatly to their diversity. Managing for habitat diversity conserves both rare and common plants and animals, enriching the experiences of all WMA users. Barred owls hooting under March moonlight, spring peepers announcing warmth on the way, and trilliums bursting with color catch the notice of turkey hunters and birdwatchers alike. As Vermont continues to be fragmented into smaller parcels and developed for human infrastructure, landscape level habitat management becomes increasingly difficult. The habitats provided by WMAs—both managed and “unmanaged”—will become increasingly valuable to the state’s wildlife, as well as to humans who enjoy wildlife-based activities.

Property Administration

An essential component of any land management program is the maintenance of the property's boundaries and infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and signs. Without these efforts, the habitat management and public use goals of each area may not be achievable. The 83 WMAs routinely require boundary line surveying and maintenance, building maintenance, signage, trash removal, and responses to encroachments and other trespasses.

The following maintenance activities were completed on WMAs during the 2007 calendar year:

- Installed or repaired **8** culverts or bridges
- Maintained **7** buildings
- Mowed/maintained **31** dams, dikes and levees
- Maintained **38.6** miles of forest roads
- Maintained **2,940** feet of fence
- Improved/maintained **18** parking areas, and constructed **3** new ones
- Maintained **55** WMA signs/kiosks
- Maintained **7.7** miles of property boundary lines
- Maintained **9** gates and installed **1** new one
- Finalized **3** Long Range Management Plans
- Conducted **31** cultural resource reviews
- Purchased **130.7** acres and inspected **15** sites
- Addressed **54** policy issues (encroachments, etc.)
- Conducted **13** presentations or press releases



Eric Sorenson

In 2007, VFWD scientists visited at least 15 WMAs and conducted 26 inventories for rare plants and animals, covering more than 7,030 acres of terrain.

Friends of Wildlife Management Areas

In October 2007 Vermont Fish & Wildlife Commissioner Wayne Laroche and Vermont Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs President Roy Marble signed a Memorandum of Agreement creating a new partnership between the two organizations. The "Friends of Wildlife Management Areas" project will leverage the strengths of both organizations for the good of wildlife and wild places statewide. Eric Nuse has been assigned project coordinator by the Federation. The agreement opens the door for hunters and anglers to help improve the land for the benefit of wildlife and everyone who enjoys Vermont WMAs. The goal of the project is to improve fish and wildlife habitat and the future of hunting, fishing and trapping in Vermont by:

- Building cooperation and enthusiasm among sportsmen, the department, landowners, conservationists and other outdoor enthusiasts by working together for the stewardship of WMAs and streamside department lands.
- Strengthening the conservation interests of the Federation and the department by leveraging resources through partnerships to benefit wildlife, sportsmen and the citizens of Vermont.
- Providing additional shooting range opportunities in Vermont.

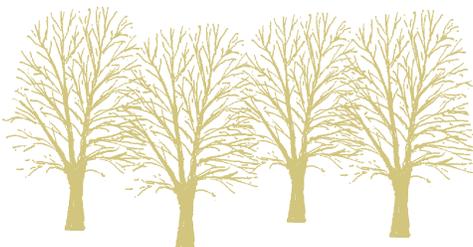
Some of the work may be ongoing, such as maintaining current signage on kiosks, clean up, trail maintenance, species surveys, and nest box maintenance. Other projects could include replacing bridge planking, apple and mast tree release, patch timber cuts, nest box installation, and installing signs and gates.

All of these projects will enhance the outdoor experience for hunters, anglers, bird watchers and wildlife viewers, and many of the projects will directly benefit wildlife.



Paul Hamelin

In 2007, the VT Federation of Sportsman's Clubs and VFWD launched the "Friends of WMAs Program" in which club volunteers conduct improvements such as the maintenance of about 40 apple trees on East Hill WMA.



Non-commercial Wildlife Habitat Management

Non-commercial fish and wildlife habitat management activities include projects where the habitat is enhanced through methods other than standard timber sale contracts. In most cases, department wildlife biologists, other Agency of Natural Resources staff, volunteers, or private contractors perform these management activities.

The following non-commercial wildlife management activities were conducted during the 2007 calendar year:

- Installed/maintained **3** beaver wetland devices
- Mowed or maintained **920** acres of grassland and cropland
- Cleared competing brush from **622** apple trees
- Released (thinned) **27.7** acres young oak trees
- Burned, brush-hogged or reclaimed **32** acres of old field habitat
- Restored **2** acres and **1,320** linear feet of stream bank by planting **520** trees
- Managed water levels on **962** acres of waterfowl habitat
- Maintained **769** waterfowl nest structures
- Installed **3** eagle or osprey nest structures
- Treated **41** acres to control invasive exotic plants
- Thinned saplings on **13** acres of future deer winter habitat
- Conducted **38** habitat/wildlife inventories
- Planted **8** acres of high quality forage plots

Commercial Wildlife Habitat Management

Commercial wildlife habitat management activities can enhance forest wildlife habitat by removing merchantable wood products. Commercial logging operations also improve public access for fish and wildlife based activities by helping the department develop or maintain WMA roads, culverts, bridges, and herbaceous openings. All revenue generated by the commercial sale of timber on WMAs is reinvested into the management or acquisition of these lands. Timber sale receipts from commercial forest management activities on WMAs have increased sharply in recent years. In 2003 the department entered into a partnership with the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) to address a backlog of pending timber harvests on WMAs, and to accelerate the level of commercial habitat management activities. The 2004 Legislature appropriated \$40,000 in capital funds to the department to facilitate these activities. An additional \$50,000 was appropriated in 2005. The RGS partnership and the capital appropriations have been productive, resulting in a dramatic increase in WMA timber harvests and noncommercial habitat management activities during FY05, FY06 and FY07.

WMA maps with a written narrative describing each WMA are available on the department website (www.vtfishandwildlife.com) and also compiled in a statewide atlas, *Guide to the Wildlife Management Areas of Vermont*.



Dave Pape

Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's 2007 land acquisitions will provide increased angler access, preserve remote fishing and paddling experiences, and protect habitat for the state endangered spotted turtle as well as white-tailed deer and wild turkey.

Nick Fortin



Mast Stand Release Roy Mtn. WMA Pre-Treatment Photo

Although not as visible as timber harvesting, many non-commercial habitat projects are conducted on WMAs every year. These young oaks will produce mast (nuts) sooner if released from competing trees.

Nick Fortin



Mast Stand Release Roy Mtn. WMA Post-treatment photo

Reducing competition for sunlight and nutrients accelerates the growth of young oaks, providing valuable mast for many wildlife species. Piled brush provides cover for small mammals.

Table 2 reports the commercial wildlife habitat management activities on WMAs in FY07. Variations in harvesting volumes across different regions of the state are a result of disparities in State-owned timber acreage and accessibility on WMAs, staffing levels, stand conditions, and work priorities. Table 3 indicates the acreage and minimum projected income for 17 timber harvests that were active, sold, or about to be sold on 11 WMAs as of January 1, 2008.

**Table 2. Wildlife Habitat Timber Harvests on Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department WMAs
FY07**

	District I Springfield	District II Rutland	District III Barre	District IV Essex Jct.	District V St. Johnsbury	State Totals
Fee Acres Harvested (#)	113.0	0.0	7.5	14.0	309.0	443.5
Board Feet (MBF)	484.0	0.0	32.4	0.0	382.0	898.4
Cords (#)	613.0	0.0	608.0	74.3	1,252.0	2,473.0
Program Income (\$)	\$35,737	\$6,779 a	\$5,900	\$743	\$131,327	\$180,486
Non-fee Acres Harvested (#) b	110.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	110.0

a Includes pre-harvest payments

b Timber rights privately owned

**Table 3. Seventeen Timber Harvests Active, Sold, or Ready to Sell on 11
Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department WMAs as of January 1, 2008**

District	Number of Sales	Clear-cut Acres	Selective Acres	Acres Total	Minimum \$ Bid or Sold Value*
1-Springfield	4	65	178	243	\$125,153
2-Rutland	1	0	45	45	\$10,779
3-Barre	1	0	117	117	\$60,000
4-Essex	1	38	107	145	\$75,213
5-St. Johnsbury	10	116	853	969	\$346,068
Totals	17	219	1,300	1,519	\$617,213

*Based on actual price of purchased sales or minimum acceptable bid for sales ready to sell. Revenues subject to winter operating conditions; total income may not be realized until June 30, 2010.

