

Minutes
Legislative Audit Commission
October 14, 2025

Members Present:

Senator Calvin K. Bahr
Senator D. Scott Dibble
Senator Mark W. Koran
Senator Ann H. Rest
Representative Rick Hansen
Representative Steven Jacob
Representative Fue Lee
Representative Duane Quam

Members Absent:

Senator Steve S. Drazkowski
Senator Tou Xiong
Representative Patti Anderson
Representative Emma Greenman

Senator Ann H. Rest, Chair, called the Legislative Audit Commission (LAC) meeting to order at 11:03 a.m. in room 1100 Minnesota Senate Building. The meeting's purpose was to hear the key findings and recommendations of the special review, *Department of Natural Resources Timber Harvest Decisions in Wildlife Management Areas*. Senator Rest introduced Judy Randall, Legislative Auditor; and Katherine Theisen, Deputy Legislative Auditor, Special Reviews Division, from the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA).

Ms. Randall began her remarks with the statutory background for the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR's) management of Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). She then briefly explained the suspension of a federal grant in 2023 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service due to DNR's management of WMAs, adding that in December of 2023, the grant was reinstated but with several conditions placed on DNR related to timber harvesting. These concerns and others led OLA to initiate a special review of the program. Ms. Randall then introduced Katherine Theisen to present the review's key findings and recommendations.

Ms. Theisen provided background on Minnesota's WMAs, saying that DNR managed about 5.6 million acres of land, with WMAs constituting about 1.3 million acres. By law, WMAs must be managed for the benefit of wildlife and related recreation, and that depending on DNR's goals for a WMA, it can use different management techniques to affect the habitat, such as harvesting timber to create an opening for additional food sources for deer, or using brush mowing or prescribed burns to affect other habitats. She said that in 2018, DNR set strategic timber harvest amounts for the next 10 years for WMAs and added that there was uncertainty as to whether DNR met its statutory management requirements due to a lack of plans, poor documentation, conflicting goals, and unclear guidance.

Ms. Theisen said formal plans can help clarify what DNR hopes to accomplish on a given WMA, help assess WMA performance and wildlife benefits, and allow staff to coordinate timber harvests more effectively. However, DNR developed plans for only seven of the state's 1,500 WMAs and did not update most of them for several decades. She said OLA recommends the Legislature specify which WMAs should have plans and require DNR to update them on a specified basis.

Ms. Theisen said that poor documentation makes it difficult to assess if timber harvests are consistent with WMA's statutory goals, adding that conflicting goals between timber harvests and wildlife habitats have also been a concern among DNR staff. Finally, guidance from DNR leadership has been unclear and insufficient, and this has also affected staff satisfaction with forest habitat management in WMAs. She said OLA recommends that areas identified for potential harvest be subject to additional scrutiny to ensure wildlife-related purposes are prioritized over other competing interests and to emphasize the statutory purpose of WMAs, and that DNR staff receive training and have access to WMA forest habitat management policies and procedures.

Senator Rest opened the meeting to members' questions. Further discussion took place regarding the survey of staff at DNR by OLA, federal funding for WMAs, how WMA plans could be made more accessible to the public, how more plans could be developed for more of the state's WMAs, and federal and legislative oversight of work done at DNR.

Senator Rest then welcomed Sarah Strommen, DNR Commissioner; Bob Meier, Assistant Commissioner; and Kelly Straka, Fish and Wildlife Division Director. Commissioner Strommen thanked OLA for the work on the review, which she said generally aligned with the areas of improvement DNR previously identified and is working to address. She added that DNR believes the matter with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be resolved and DNR to be in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and grant agreements. She said in early 2022, she directed DNR's Fish and Wildlife Division to complete major WMA unit plans, which were completed in June 2025, and that DNR has initiated a system-wide planning effort to cover the remaining areas. She said public engagement for a system-wide plan is to begin yet this year, with a scheduled completion of the plan in December 2027. The commissioner added that DNR is revising guidance documents, developing and implementing training around forest management policy and procedures, and continuing its commitment to clear and consistent communications to all staff involved in forest coordination.

Senator Rest asked for member discussion. Members asked about previous state goals of cords of wood for timber harvests and what was realistically sustainable for the purpose of wildlife management, if the goals to harvest about 870,000 cords of wood yearly had been set to meet a purpose or to manage wildlife, and whether there were competing interests in the cordage goals. Members also asked how much influence regional managers have to say no to a harvest, where the timber harvest revenues go, such as to school trust land or reinvestment in wildlife management, and how DNR can develop more measurable outcomes of its management of WMAs.

With no further discussion, Senator Rest adjourned the meeting at 12:26 p.m.

Senator Ann H. Rest, Chair

Maureen Garrahy, Recording Secretary