

DNR Logging Violations on Fisheries and Wildlife Lands

A commentary by

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Last week two articles in the Star Tribune addressed the controversy swirling around timber harvest in Wildlife and Aquatic Management Areas (WMA and AMAs) in Minnesota the past four years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service understands the issue. That's why they have recently withheld over 20 million in federal funds from the DNR. Sadly, despite the lip service they've paid to it, the DNR Commissioner's Office does not.

The Commissioner's Office has refused to make ANY changes to their timber harvest plan since it began five years ago, even though we, along with 22 other DNR Wildlife Managers, their on-the-ground experts, sent them a letter in 2019 expressing grave concern regarding the impact the timber harvest policy would have on wildlife.

The Commissioner's Office placed too much faith in decisions made because of a computer model used after the Sustainable Timber Harvest Analysis (STHA) completed in 2019.

There is nothing wrong with the analysis. The problem is that the model is not designed to benefit habitat and it is being applied on WMAs. The analysis itself declared that its implementation would damage habitat, but the DNR decided to enact it anyway to appease industry lobbyists.

The crux of the problem is the computer model is designed to maximize timber harvest and it provides a target for the amount of timber harvested every year in each area. As long as there is a target, that commercial goal becomes the primary focus for the timber harvest - not on whether or not the harvest will benefit wildlife.

Habitat goals are individualized. Timber harvest in forested habitats is an important management tool. But so is leaving enough older forest for wildlife habitat. That distribution of adequate amounts of younger, middle-aged, and older forest can't be achieved through timber harvest quotas, which is the current status quo for DNR timber harvest management on WMAs and AMAs. One size does not fit all, but that dynamic is lost with the way it is currently managed.

DNR leadership has chosen to support WMA timber harvest goals based on the mistaken belief that older rotation ages and other "constraints" to the harvest are all that is needed to provide good wildlife habitat. That is not how wildlife management in forests works and not how the law mandates that WMAs be managed.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service wishes to enforce the law, for the sake of the habitat. It would be nice if the DNR showed that same concern for the natural resources they have been entrusted to manage.