

2011 White Nose Syndrome Symposium Observations

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This year's WNS Symposium took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, May 17-19. 130 federal, state, academic, and non-governmental organization folks working on WNS attended, including a few European guests. 14 attendees were NSS members, and were represented in all of the above groups. This was the fourth annual gathering. Earlier meetings took place in Albany, Austin, and Pittsburgh.

The first day and a half was dedicated to research update presentations. The two highlights here were: 1. 18 American bats were inoculated with the European *Geomyces destructans*; 18 American bats with the U.S. version; and 18 control bats were given sham inoculations. Both sets of inoculated bats developed WNS. This result gives strong support to the hypothesis of introduction from Europe. 2. Hazel Barton reported research from Kevin Keel that shows that 50° Celsius water (122 °F) for 15 minutes kills *Geomyces destructans*. This is hotter than typical wash water, but less than boiling. It provides a non-chemical alternative for decon.

The next day and a half was dedicated to working on the WNS National Plan, which was announced and publicly released on the first day of the meeting. Attendees broke in to working groups as per the Plan, and began fleshing out implementation plans.

Personally, I spent a half-day with the Disease Management working group, then split my time between the Recovery and Conservation Group/Species Recovery subgroup and a special session for state agency personnel. With this latter group, I was part of a panel presentation explaining the role of the NSS and our members/grottos etc. helping with hibernacula identification, public education, and caver education.

There was lots of networking time, too, to catch up with folks the NSS has funded and worked with across the country. Here are some highlight observations from the Symposium:

1. It seemed that most western state officials attending recognized that the USFS Region 2 blanket closure actions, and how they were initiated, were not helpful, and didn't want to duplicate them. NPS and BLM folks spoke positively about the roles cavers have played and continue to play. They and the state folks are skeptical about

cave closures, but still feeling pressure from the feds. I spent a couple hours conversing with the Colorado Division of Wildlife Species Coordinator, Tina Jackson, who had positive things to say about the Convention organizers. She expressed a little anxiety about having so many cavers descend (ascend?) at once, but I assured her we've done this before, and that many attending the Convention are busy with meetings and other activities and won't be caving. Again, she seemed very much pleased with the convention planning. I believe it is critical that we continue to build and maintain good relationships like these, with a demonstrated track record of good will and positive results.

2. The Disease Management researchers and field managers seemed to grow increasingly pessimistic about finding any sort of cure, treatment, or magic managerial bullet for stopping WNS. With federal and state budget restrictions, the ability for researchers to have a significant impact in time to affect the natural disease progression is limited. Not that anyone is giving up, but the tone was sobering. Further, there is a serious concern about a shortage of bats for research, and it is likely that some researchers will be denied access.

3. As a result of the Disease Management situation, Field Management seems to be shifting to Conservation and Recovery. How can species be preserved? What field techniques can be applied to assist survivorship, such as habitat manipulation? An example of this was described by Tom Kunz, Boston University, for maternity colonies. It used to be that we would see fairly large (500+ animals) roosts that were able to generate a lot of heat, which is necessary for successful birth, lactation, and juvenile growth. Now, with maternity colonies much smaller in the WNS-hit region, he's found that the addition of wooden baffles in the ceilings of barns, sheds, etc. can concentrate heat and help smaller maternity colonies be more successful.

4. There is still a lot of talk about artificial hibernacula, as well as captive breeding colonies. Re the former, Cory Holliday's Tennessee underground project is on its way to being built, with more than half the funds raised. Re the captive colonies, my suspicion is that lack of funding and continuing controversy over that approach will limit experiments in that regard.

5. Regarding funding, it was announced that \$1.9 million of USFWS funding was being made available from this year's base appropriation. This is NOT new congressional action, but simply USFWS taking money away from other things within its reduced budget. Next year's budget is clearly looking worse, but that's what we've been working on in DC. This \$1.9 million will be spread out to the states in an as-yet-to-be announced format. However, spread among 27 states, this is about \$70,000 per state - which won't really do much more than pay for some staff time for monitoring and surveillance. Funding realities will be the biggest damper on national Plan activities, and severely limit research.

6. Species listing: there were two impromptu sessions on the subject of listing more bat species as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act: one for the Northeast, where states are in various stages of listing certain species, and a second where one USFWS official was leading an effort to have national listing of all hibernating bat species in the U.S.. That was the subject of serious debate, with many people opposing that approach. Reasons given ranged from not enough information on various bat species, to unnecessarily riling up opponents, such as the western timber industry, to taking attention away from the importance of regional or national listing of the Little Brown Bat, which is arguably the most seriously affected and the one species for which the case could be made and a status report request has been filed.

7. A new national WNS website is being prepared for both the public and for the research and management communities. A brief presentation on this was given, but we're probably a good six months away from implementation. The goal of USFWS is to have a single place where everyone can go for information, data, outreach materials, and management policies.

Of course, there were many more details from the workshops and presentations, and certainly from the networking that takes place at these meetings. By the time you read this, the abstracts of the papers presented should be online, and further details about the WNS National Plan working groups should be available. For questions or comments, contact me at wnsliason@caves.org.