

WNS Liaison Report  
to the  
NSS President and BOG  
June 23, 2011

**Introduction:**

White Nose Syndrome continued its spread over the winter and spring. Indiana, North Carolina, Maine, Ohio, and Kentucky were added to the list of states with confirmed WNS, as well as Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Most of these sites were already closed to human visitation, underscoring the predominant method of transmission of the disease as bat to bat. On a positive note, both Missouri and Oklahoma reported no WNS or *Geomyces destructans* this year, meaning WNS has yet to spread to the Western U.S. or the Deep South.

While reports of new sites come in, there has been little reporting of the numbers of bat deaths. We have pushed for data, as this is critical to measuring the progression and intensity of the disease. Several of the Canadian sites reported significant mortalities in large colonies, and Pennsylvania and the Virginias, leading edge states, report increased mortalities, as we would expect in second and third year infections, but overall, all we can still say is that more than a million bats have died.

In new published research, European scientists have found *Geomyces destructans* to be prevalent across the continent, but it has not been connected to mass mortalities. In a Czech Republic and Slovakia study it is noted that bat colonies in Europe roost solitary or in small clusters, not the very large colonies that are seen in North America. This is believed to be a factor in preventing disease transmission. It is also important to note that none of the European bat species are the same as those in North America, but that the species in Europe most seen with *Geomyces destructans* is a *Myotis* (*Myotis myotis*), suggesting genetic predisposition has something to do with susceptibility to the disease.

**Progress:**

- Wrote two articles for the April NSS News Conservation issue – one an annual update on the status of WNS, related research and management actions; the second on the photographic bat survey of Hellhole cave, West Virginia, including photos by all participating photographers. This was a joint project of the NSS, WVDNR, and USFWS.
- Western Region chose Claude Koch as their regional WNS Liaison. He has participated in the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee work and been an active presence in the Western Region, interfacing with grottos and state and federal officials.
- Sent abstract for presentation at WNS session at July 2011 NSS Convention.
- Attended the May 17-19 WNS Symposium in Little Rock, Arkansas. Filed report with the BOG and posted detailed version on the NSS WNS website.

- Prepared formal NSS response to the Letter of Intent to Sue various federal agencies by the Center for Biological Diversity, which went out over NSS President Gordon Birkhimer's signature.
- Participated via conference call in the June Willamette Valley Grotto meeting, along with Ad Hoc Committee members Claude Koch and Jennifer Foote. Topics included working with U.S. Forest Service on cave and bat inventory for Washington and Oregon, responses to potential cave closure actions by agencies, and to the CBD Intent to Sue, as well as general updates on WNS research.
- Was invited to testify to Congress again June 24. Submitted extensive written comments in advance of the hearing.
- Continue to consult frequently with cavers in many states over evolving management issues. Colorado, Montana, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, and Missouri are current hot spots.
- Consulted with Mammoth Cave NP and Carlsbad Caverns NP on their WNS plans. Cheryl Jones and Mike Davis updated the US Forest Service WNS brochure.
- Continued to collaborate in advocacy in Congress for WNS research funding.
- Continually update the NSS WNS website, with superb support from Alex Sproul, Cheryl Jones (maintaining the NSS WNS downloadable brochure current), and Mike Warner (maintaining the updated Media Digest).
- Continue to handle media inquiries and do interviews, with notable mentions in the L.A. Times, Earth Magazine, Missoulian (Montana).

### **Problems:**

- USFWS' advisory is still unchanged since its initial issuance in March 2009
- USFWS Final WNS National Plan changed little from its original draft, ignoring many comments. They have informed us they will not be posting replies to comments in the Federal Register, which would inform us and the general public as to the rationale for their decisions. I checked with all the individuals the NSS recommended for membership on the various working groups, but only three have apparently even been contacted – one actively participating, and one having sent comments.
- The spread of WNS to new states and provinces continues, but data on actual bat mortalities is generally unreported. This has resulted in a lot of skepticism as to how intense the disease actually is. I've pushed all state agencies and USFWS to update the numbers, but no update has been forthcoming as of this writing.
- Caver unrest over WNS continues to increase. We are aware of instances of cavers filing Freedom of Information Act requests and threatening legal action against agencies. There is increased activity on the Internet, with a new Facebook WNS advocacy site, and another large ghost advocacy website that is pending launch. While CBD filed a Letter of Intent to Sue a year ago, which garnered little response, this year's letter caused quite an uproar, reflecting the increased sensitivity to loss of access to caves, frustration with the progress of WNS and management responses to it.

- With a higher level of government ownership of land in the West than in the East, pressure on access to caves will increase, underscoring the necessity for proactive engagement and relationship-building and maintenance between the caving community and the agencies.

**Plans:**

- Testify to Congress June 24 and continue to monitor budget and policy actions.
- Complete display on WNS and the NSS for educational and public relations purposes.
- Attend 2011 NSS Convention. Be available for presentation to BOG at Monday meeting, and to present and be on the panel at the Wednesday PM WNS session.
- Continue to monitor the progress of the WNS National Plan and working group activities, including participation by NSS members.
- Continue to foster NSS and caver participation in WNS planning, management, field activities and public and educational outreach efforts. It is critical for the long-term viability of caving that our membership stays involved and visible at the local level. Maintaining and building these local and regional relationships are critical to the health of the NSS as an organization, and caving as an activity.
- Continue regular activities regarding the updating of the website, managing the WNS grants (three inquiries pending), responding to the media, and being the go-between for the caving and science and management communities.
- Attend the National Caves and Karst Management Symposium in Utah early October and North American Symposium on Bat Research late October. Working with Diane Gillespie, present an educators' workshop at NASBR.

**Conclusion:**

I believe we are at a turning point for WNS in terms of management response. How Congress and the agencies respond in terms of funding and policy decisions will be key to determining the environment in which we must operate. Researchers are frustrated at being unable to stop the disease, so attention may shift to conservation and recovery. Past history tells us that WNS reports all but halt during the summer, but that doesn't mean summer surveillance isn't going on, nor that agencies aren't moving forward with planning and management actions. The NSS and its internal and affiliated organizations need to continue to stay engaged for the long haul.

I also wanted to take this opportunity to especially thank outgoing NSS President Gordon Birkhimer for his support and assistance over these past three and a half years. The Liaison works under the auspices of the President, which has been extremely helpful in the issuance of formal NSS documents and positions on the WNS situation, and in developing and supporting the budget for our WNS work. Gordon has also been part of the review team that approves funding requests for the NSS' WNS Rapid Response Fund, and enables the NSS to provide critical, timely, and much-appreciated assistance to the scientific research community. Thank you.

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