



Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts Performance Audit Division

Greg S. Griffin, State Auditor
Leslie McGuire, Director

Why we did this review

This follow-up review was conducted to determine the extent to which the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) has addressed the recommendations presented in our November 2016 performance audit (Report #15-08).

The 2016 performance audit was conducted to evaluate the long-term strategic planning and the management of both species and properties managed by WRD. In addition, the audit determined if license fees aligned with market rates and whether WRD's internet content provided usable information on the species and properties managed by the agency, as well as the activities available on these properties.

About WRD

To achieve its mission, WRD works with the DNR board to establish rules and regulations to protect Georgia's wildlife resources, manages approximately 1 million acres of land, 500,000 surface acres of lakes, 12,000 miles of warm water streams, and 4,000 miles of cold water streams, and provides both conservation and hunter education. The game management unit manages the lands (called wildlife management areas) and game species. The wildlife management areas are used to protect habitat and to increase outdoor recreation opportunities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, camping, and conservation education.

Follow-Up Review

Wildlife Resources Division – Game Management Unit

Strategic planning, management design, and data systems have been improved

What we found

Since our 2016 performance audit, WRD has taken steps to address report recommendations, including acquiring new data systems and establishing a new strategic planning policy for properties owned and managed by WRD.

The original audit reviewed both management's design of standards and information systems, as well as its operations, including strategic (long-term) and operational (short-term) planning, execution, reporting, and monitoring. The original report noted that WRD could improve strategic planning and oversight for land and game species management, provide improved internet content, and increase license fees to align with other states in the region. It also noted that WRD could improve further by fully adopting new information systems, creating habitat and species plans for those lacking up-to-date plans, and providing better oversight of game species committees. The changes that WRD has made in design as well as operational areas are discussed below.

Management Design

WRD has addressed deficiencies related to management's design of standards and information systems. All WRD staff now have access to current policies and operating standards via the new WRD intranet site.

As shown in Appendix A, WRD acquired a web-based geographic information system (GIS) and rolled it out to all Game Management regions. This system captures and centrally stores all

land and species management activity data; staff at all levels of WRD can access and run reports on this data. However, there are no comprehensive written standards defining what data staff should capture or how it should be captured. According to staff, WRD is still determining how it will use the information system. Written operating standards will be essential to ensure all management activities, costs, outputs, outcomes, and species data are captured consistently across the state and accessible to all levels of management.

Operations

In addition to developing standards and IT systems to aid in the management of work, WRD adopted draft policies and procedures for creating long-term habitat management plans and monitoring activities and outcomes on properties. As recommended, WRD created a tracking document that identifies the lead planning unit for each applicable property. The document includes the expected completion date for properties that need a long-term habitat plan.

Currently, 37 properties have a plan and 10 have a plan under review, which demonstrates progress towards completion of the long-term habitat management plans. Additional steps are needed to address the 23 properties that still lack a plan. WRD should also update land management operating procedures to clarify how units will work together. In addition, Game Management Region 5 is the only region capturing a comprehensive record of habitat management activities. Staff indicated it plans to use the system to capture game species data as well as habitat information; however, additional steps will be necessary to achieve this goal.

With regard to species management plans, WRD has drafted a new plan for turkeys and reviewed and updated the plan for alligators. Both plans are time bound (for 10 years) and contain goals, objectives, and management strategies. According to staff, the black bear plan is currently under review. Staff indicated a basic management plan is being written for feral hogs and coyotes, but there is no draft available for review.

WRD has not established a written policy for the content, structure, and time cycles for game species management plans. In addition, it has not drafted any formal, written operating standards to establish time cycles for game species committees to meet, nor for how game species committees and upper management will decide the types, methods, and storage of species data. Finally, the three-tiered public involvement approach DNR uses when developing rules for species management is not included in either division-level operating standards or specific species management plans. This plan exemplifies best practice in public participation and, as noted in the original report, should be integrated into its operating standards.

Consumer Issues

WRD has addressed website and fee issues identified in the original audit. As shown in **Appendix B**, a new WRD website was created which, along with improvements to the GeorgiaOutdoorMap.com, has addressed a number of issues previously identified. WRD could continue to add information to each of the wildlife management areas (WMA) pages, such as descriptions and maps of hiking opportunities, water activities, and campgrounds to make the website even more useful. While staff noted that additional resources will be added next year, the website does not currently contain overall technical guidance on habitat improvement practices for private landowners.

Regarding fees, the General Assembly increased hunting and fishing license fees effective July 2017. Compared with the same period last year, license fee revenue increased by \$6.3 million (31%) and license sales declined 10%. A portion of the sales decline may be due to individuals purchasing licenses prior to the fee increase. New legislation also added a \$7 annual fee for a sportsman license for senior residents born after 1952, while retaining a free license option for those born prior to 1952. This change increases Georgia's allotment of federal grants based on registered license holders.

DNR's Response: DNR concurs with the findings in the follow-up review. It noted additional steps planned regarding the one finding that has not been addressed to date. These steps are noted on page 5.

The following table summarizes the findings and recommendations in our 2016 report and actions taken to address them. A copy of the 2016 performance audit report 15-08 may be accessed at <http://www.audits.ga.gov/rsaAudits>.

Wildlife Resources Division – Game Management Unit Follow-Up Review, July 2018	
Original Findings/Recommendations	Current Status
<p>WRD does not have a coherent and current set of written standards to guide land and species management.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD collect, update and combine old policy memoranda and operating standards into a WRD operations manual. We also recommended that WRD establish a system, such as an intranet site, that allows WRD employees statewide to access current operating standards.</p>	<p>Fully Addressed – WRD established a coherent and current set of operating standards and made them available to all WRD employees.</p> <p>WRD upper management collected all existing policy documents and operating standards and reviewed them to eliminate irrelevant policies, update policies as necessary, and identify current policy documents to retain. It established an effective date of March 1, 2018 for each policy and uploaded all documents to an intranet site accessible to all WRD employees. Game Management staff did the same for section specific policies and operating standards, and made the policies and operating standards available to all section employees through a cloud storage service.</p>
<p>WRD has not strategically and effectively adopted information technology to collect and report information on land and species.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD establish a land management database that tracks all land management activities, costs, outputs, and outcomes. In addition, we recommended WRD establish a species management database where data collected for the management of game species is accessible by all levels of government.</p>	<p>Partially Addressed – WRD acquired a cloud-based geographic information system (GIS). This information system has the ability to capture and centrally store all land and species management activity data. Staff at all levels of WRD can access and run reports on the data. Currently, all land management activities are being captured for one game management region; other regions and sections are beginning to utilize and capture management data in the new system.</p> <p>WRD has demonstrated progress towards implementing the recommendations to track all habitat management activities, costs, outputs, outcomes, and needed species data. The GIS database has the capability to do so, and WRD staff stated that is the long-term plan. However, management will need to take additional steps to ensure the benefits are fully realized. Written operating standards will be essential to ensuring all management activities, costs, output, outcomes and species data are consistently captured across the state and accessible to all levels of management.</p>
<p>WRD has not established adequate long term habitat management plans or monitoring systems to track progress toward long term goals and objectives.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD upper management adopt the draft policy for creating long term habitat management plans. We also recommended that WRD create long term habitat management plans for each applicable property. We recommended that each of these plans include an explicitly stated time period, contain similar content across the unit, and be periodically reviewed/updated. We recommended a 10-year time frame be adopted for each of these plans.</p>	<p>Partially Addressed – WRD adopted the draft policies and procedures for creating long-term habitat management plans. These policies require consistency, a stated time period of 10 years, similar content, and a review/update after five years.</p> <p>WRD has created updated long-term management plans for two properties since the audit was completed, each adhering to the new habitat planning policy. An additional 10 are in a review/pending stage.</p> <p>WRD also defined how it will prioritize existing areas without strategic plans as part of the habitat planning policy and has set completion date goals for each property that lacks a plan. Currently, 23 properties still require a plan.</p>

Wildlife Resources Division – Game Management Unit Follow-Up Review, July 2018	
Original Findings/Recommendations	Current Status
<p>WRD cannot efficiently and effectively evaluate habitat management activities and outcomes because managers lack access to data.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD update land management operating procedures to clarify which units are the lead planning and activity managers for all properties, and how units will coordinate work. We recommended that WRD redesign annual plans to link to long term goals and objectives and maintain a comprehensive record of activities on all properties. In addition, we recommended WRD acquire information systems to allow local, middle, and upper managers to approve, review, and coordinate activities more efficiently.</p>	<p>Fully Addressed – WRD acquired a cloud-based GIS to capture management activities for each property and make all data available to all levels of management in real time. Currently, all management activities are being tracked in one pilot region; staff indicated plans to expand statewide this summer.</p> <p>WRD redesigned annual work plans to link each activity to an objective identified in the long term habitat plan.</p> <p>WRD provided a planning tracking document that identifies the lead unit for each applicable property, as well as projected date of plan completion for those properties lacking a long term strategic plan.</p>
<p>WRD can improve species management plan design and content.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD update existing and draft new plans for all major game species and that plans be time bound, contain clear goals, objectives, and management strategies and be reviewed for success/completion of goals at the end of the period. We also recommended that WRD consider writing a basic management plan for limiting the dispersion/density of feral hogs and coyotes.</p>	<p>Partially Addressed – WRD updated the management plan for alligators and drafted a new plan for turkeys. Both plans are time bound and include goals, objectives, and strategies.</p> <p>WRD is in the process of reviewing and updating the plan for black bears. In addition, WRD is creating a management plan for feral hogs and coyotes.</p>
<p>WRD can improve species management by better coordinating oversight of game committees and making public participation approaches more transparent.</p> <p>We recommended that WRD upper management work with each game species committee to establish a consistent and appropriate planning schedule, and that committees meet at least semi-annually. We also recommended WRD develop operating standards for how game species committees and upper management will decide the types of data to collect, as well as the methods and storage of data. Finally, we recommended WRD include public participation frameworks in both division-level operating standards and specific species management plans, with each plan clearly identifying the approach used and criteria used to select the appropriate tier.</p>	<p>Not Addressed – WRD staff stated each game species committee is expected to meet semi-annually; however, there is no formal written policy to do so. Staff noted that expectations have been verbally conveyed to committees.</p> <p>WRD has not developed operating standards for how game species committees and upper management will decide the types, methods, and storage of species data.</p> <p>DNR policy requires WRD to apply one of three levels of public involvement when developing rules for species management. As noted in the original report, this three-tiered approach exemplifies best practice in public participation. However, the policy is not included in division-level operating standards and specific species management plans. The tier of public participation utilized and the decision-making process behind it should be explicitly identified in each species management plan but is not included in any current species management plans.</p> <p><i>In its response to the report, DNR noted that WRD will develop operational guidelines for each game species, with the goal for these guidelines to be approved and in place by the end of the calendar year. In addition, WRD indicated that it will continue to provide a description of the public involvement activities</i></p>

Wildlife Resources Division – Game Management Unit Follow-Up Review, July 2018	
Original Findings/Recommendations	Current Status
	<i>undertaken during the planning process and include these descriptions in each of the published species management plans.</i>
<p>WRD internet content does not effectively provide users with information on outdoor recreational opportunities on properties, nor does it provide sophisticated search features or technical guidance to local land owners.</p> <p>We recommended that DNR and WRD improve the web content, format, and function for the division. We noted that content should include information about the properties the state manages and advanced search features. We also recommended that WRD consider creating technical guidance web content to educate private and public land owners on the best land management practices to support the agency's mission.</p>	<p>Partially Addressed – As part of the DNR website project, WRD developed a new website. The new website provides substantially more information than the prior one. It includes a unique webpage for each property managed by the division with: driving directions, contact information, property descriptions, lists of activities, species information, and a map of the surrounding area. Additional steps could be taken to include more detail on activities and the property. For example, major nongame species, descriptions and maps of hiking opportunities, water activities and campgrounds, including photos, would be useful to potential users of these public properties.</p> <p>WRD also expanded the capabilities of the website GeorgiaOutdoorMap.com, including the ability to identify angling opportunities by filtering properties by fish species. However, it is still not possible to filter properties by game and nongame species.</p> <p>The WRD web content does not include overall general technical guidance for habitat improvement practices that private landowners could adopt. WRD has some technical information, but it is usually linked to a specific subsidy program (e.g. private lands programs and conservation easements) or to game species. WRD stated additional digital resources for landowners will be added during the next fiscal year and two additional biologists will be hired to assist in providing technical guidance for landowners.</p>
<p>Georgia license fees are substantially lower than other southeastern states, and fee exemptions prevent the state from qualifying for significant federal grant funds.</p> <p>We recommended the General Assembly increase licensing fees to align with industry rates in the southeastern states for all major privileges. Doing so could provide funds for systemic improvements such as an information system or improved web design. We recommended a nominal fee be charged for annual or lifetime licenses for seniors to increase Georgia's allotment of federal grants for registered license holders.</p>	<p>Fully Addressed – The General Assembly increased rates for all major privileges beginning in July 2017, to closely align with the rates in other southeastern states. The General Assembly established a \$7 fee for annual sportsman and \$70 fee for lifetime sportsman licenses for seniors born after 1952.</p> <p>When compared to the same period last year, license fee revenue increased by \$6.3 million (31%) and license sales have declined by 10%. Some of this decline may be due to individuals purchasing licenses early to avoid the fee increase. The impact on federal grant funds will not be realized for at least another year due to the federal certification reporting and grant allotment schedule.</p>
8 Findings	<p>3 Fully Addressed</p> <p>4 Partially Addressed</p> <p>1 Not Addressed</p>

Appendices

Appendix A: ArcGIS Online Example for Chickasawhatchee WMA

The screenshot displays the ArcGIS Online interface for the Chickasawhatchee Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The map shows the WMA boundary in orange, with various management areas and infrastructure layers overlaid. The interface includes a search bar, a layer list, and a data table.

Layer List:

- Operational layers
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Culverts
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Fords
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Water Control Structure
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Gates
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Bridges
 - Game_Management_Master_Audit - Infrastructure

Data Table:

GM Region	Property Name	Comp Number	Stand Name	Acres	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	County	Dominant Species
5	CHICKASAWHATI WMA	Chic016	Chic016-0031	13.77	July 1, 2017					Dougherty	HH
5	CHICKASAWHATI WMA	Chic013	Chic013-0026	30.57	January 16, 2018					Calhoun	Longleaf
5	CHICKASAWHATI	Chic018	Chic018-0015	28.50	January 16,					Baker	Longleaf

Source: WRD

Appendix B: Sample of New WRD Wildlife Management Area Webpage

[DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES](#)
[STATE PARKS & HISTORIC SITES](#)
[LAW ENFORCEMENT](#)
[HISTORIC PRESERVATION](#)
[ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION](#)
[COASTAL RESOURCES](#)
SEARCH:





[REGULATIONS](#) - [BUY A LICENSE](#) - [REGISTER A BOAT](#) - [LOCATIONS](#) - [EDUCATION](#) - [RESOURCES](#) -

CHICKASAWHATCHEE

WMA
Albany

Chickasawhatchee Wildlife Management Area is located 12 miles southwest of Albany. This 19,700-acre property boasts the Mike Commander Shooting and Chickasawhatchee Archery Range, a managed dove field and campsites for tents and RVs. The property is a managed pine savannah that supports variety of hunting including deer, turkey, dove, quail, small game, waterfowl, and furbearers. Birding enthusiasts can enjoy watching the variety of species supported on the property.

Accommodations & Facilities

- Mike Commander Shooting Range
- Chickasawhatchee Archery Range
- Canoe Access
- Hiking Trails
- Primitive Campsites

Activities

- Archery
- Camping
- Canoeing
- Fishing
- Geocaching — not allowed during managed hunts or before 10 a.m. during turkey season
- Hiking
- Hunting
 - Quota Hunts
 - Youth Hunts
- Shooting
- Wildlife Watching

Nearby Properties

- Albany Nursery WMA
- Doerun Pitcherplant Bog WMA
- Elmodel WMA
- George T. Bagby State Park & Lodge
- Georgia Veterans State Park & Resort
- Kolomoki Mounds State Park
- Lake Seminole WMA
- Lake Walter F. George WMA
- Steve Cocke Hatchery

Phone Numbers

Region Office 229-430-4254

Fees & Passes

Land Access

- Hunting License
- Fishing License, or
- Lands Pass

[Purchase License](#)

Address

GPS Coordinates
N 31.47235, W -84.4233

View larger map



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Questions: 770-918-6400
 Licenses: 800-366-2661
 Boat Registrations: 800-366-2661
 Ranger Hotline: 800-241-4113



Source: WRD

The Performance Audit Division was established in 1971 to conduct in-depth reviews of state-funded programs. Our reviews determine if programs are meeting goals and objectives; measure program results and effectiveness; identify alternate methods to meet goals; evaluate efficiency of resource allocation; assess compliance with laws and regulations; and provide credible management information to decision makers. For more information, contact us at (404) 656-2180 or visit our website at www.audits.ga.gov.