



NAFWS Pandemic Impacts to Tribal Fish and Wildlife Programs

Virtual Roundtable Discussions Summary

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September 2020

INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society (NAFWS) hosted a week of virtual roundtable discussions on how the Pandemic has affected Tribal Fish and Wildlife programs and natural resources. NAFWS hosted a total of 5 zoom meetings for 40 total participants during the week of July 14 – 17, 2020. The following report contains responses and generalized themes captured during the discussions.

Participants:

Each session averaged 8 participants. Every NAFWS region was represented except for Alaska. Several federal agencies were represented including the US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Nongovernmental organizations represented included, The Wildlife Society, American Indian Higher Education Consortium and the World Wildlife Fund. Tribal Natural Resource professionals were well represented with Program Directors, Fish and Wildlife Biologists and Technicians, Conservation Law Enforcement Officers (CLEO), Climate Liaisons, Policy analysts and administrators. We also had a student and biological consultant participate.

Themes:

The Roundtables were informal discussions with the Executive Director providing question prompts. Example question topics included, existing Tribal Pandemic Planning, staffing impacts, food sovereignty, climate impacts, strategies to combat impacts, operations and ways NAFWS can assist Tribes.

None of the Tribes indicated that they had an existing Pandemic Plan in place prior to 2020. One participant stated their Tribe had an overall Emergency Management Plan, but it was based more on EPA funding.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS:

One of the most dominant themes from the discussions was the impacts to staffing and operations. Tribes have varied in their staffing response throughout the Pandemic. Some Tribes have staggered staff schedules, some have placed the majority of staff on administrative leave and others have been forced to lay employees off. One department stated 7 of their 10 employees were furloughed. Many Tribes are functioning with limited operations. The change in revenue has affected staffing, with decreases in hunting and fishing revenue and casino revenue. One Tribe reported 25% of their revenue comes from fishing and recreation; which had been closed to nonmembers. Another Tribe reported a 50% decrease in their operations budget due to loss revenue.

Many Tribal professionals also reported a change in their duties. Defining “essential” was a challenge one Tribe described as was a hiring freeze. CLEOs are doing more domestic law enforcement and emergency management type duties leaving little time for conservation law

enforcement. Another issue was with employees becoming ill with COVID and further impacting the staffing levels.

FIELDWORK

Many participants reported delayed or no fieldwork being performed. For example, one participant reported on a project involving turtles with radio telemetry devices that are not monitored. Essentially this means a whole year's worth of fieldwork data lost.

Discussion was held on animals that have been identified as vulnerable to COVID-19, such as bats and weasels. Most bat fieldwork was suspended very early in the year due to public perception of the link between the pandemic and bats. Black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts have been impacted due to their increased susceptibility to COVID-19.

HUNTING AND FISHING

As previously mentioned, Tribes have made changes to their hunting and fishing activities. Many Tribes discovered early in the Pandemic that Reservations were seen as a "safe haven" from COVID-19. The increase of hunters and fishermen presented health risks to Tribes resulting in the hunting and fishing and sometimes Reservation boundaries being closed to nonmembers and/or nonresidents. One Tribe stated they were moving forward with their hunting and fishing seasons mainly as a needed management tool to combat Chronic Wasting Disease threats to their cervid populations. A Tribe reported closing their lake boundaries for fishing, which has resulted in more Tribal usage.

FOOD SECURITY

A lot of participants described an initial fear of food shortage on their Reservations. Many stated people were requesting wildlife be harvested to feed the people. Several Tribes developed local food banks through their Tribal Bison herds and/or local producers. Several participants spoke of Tribal members fishing, hunting and gathering for others, particularly for the elders. An increase in self-subsistence was a dominant theme. Many reported an increase in local gardens, community gardens, fishing, gathering, greenhouses and traditional medicines. These activities also garnered Tribal political support thru planning, partnerships and funding.

POSITIVE IMPACTS

It was identified that the Pandemic has produced some positive impacts, primarily environmental. For example, one Tribe reported a spike in spawning of cutthroat trout. Another stated their lake had cleaner water, better fishing and an increase in birds. Participants identified an increase in local political support for natural resources as a result of the Pandemic. The overall carbon footprint has also decreased due to the pandemic restrictions. Several other positive impacts are found in the above themes, such as food security.

TRIBAL CONSULTATION

Although most Tribes are not operating at full capacity, the Federal Government continues much of their work. Discussion was held on the amount of email communication Tribes were receiving from Federal agencies. With many Tribal professionals working from home, a staggered schedule or other duties, this has presented an overwhelming feeling. The typical 30 day turn around for Federal communication and some Federal funding is a challenge for many Tribes during normal conditions and is extremely difficult during the Pandemic.

Many Tribes are hesitant to participate in formal Government to Government consultation virtually. Some have expressed a fear it will set a precedent for virtual consultation after the Pandemic. A USFWS Native American Liaison stated there is an internal guidance document on government to government consultation during COVID-19; a main point is “silence [from a Tribe] is not a yes”. There is an understanding that some things must continue despite the Pandemic, however, there is a varying level of comfort among Tribes with the use of virtual consultation.

NAFWS ACTIONS

Participants were asked what the NAFWS can do to assist Tribes during the Pandemic. The major response was to provide networking opportunities and technical assistance. It was suggested the NAFWS could serve as a clearinghouse for Pandemic Plans. Connecting people was also suggested. The importance of the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act was identified as a priority for NAFWS to focus on and encourage Tribes to plan for.

Several participants suggested NAFWS increase their virtual presence through webinars and providing virtual opportunities for Tribal natural resource professionals to interact. One suggestion was to “take people with you virtually” through videos and social media. The importance of including culture in planning was encouraged.

CONCLUSION

The Pandemic has impacted the way we interact and provide services for our membership. The Pandemic Impacts to Tribal Fish and Wildlife programs roundtables were the NAFWS’ first attempt at virtual interaction with membership. Although the attendance was lower than hoped, it was a good representation of NAFWS regions. The irony is attendance was undoubtedly affected by the challenges caused by the Pandemic. The presence of Federal Agency and Non-governmental Organization staff was beneficial to help them better understand challenges from a Tribal perspective.

NAFWS has followed through with some of the suggestions. The Fish and Wildlife Biologists conducted a webinar on Wildlife Management Planning. The Executive Director did a Facebook Live tour of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe’s buffalo herd. We continue to build our technical assistance resources and expand partnerships.

While we hope to return to some level of “normalcy” in 2021 with in person interaction, this experience helps us prepare for the alternative. NAFWS continues to strive to fulfill our mission to assist Native American and Alaska Native Tribe with the conservation, protection and enhancement of their fish and wildlife resources in whatever challenging circumstances.