What has Happened to the DNR Budget

Public support matters more than ever.

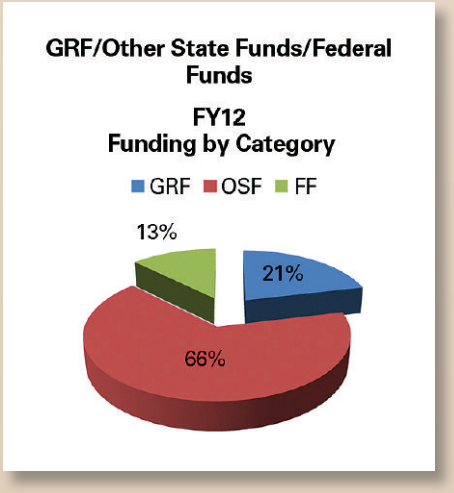
Story By Director Marc Miller

The Illinois DNR has an important mission and a wide range of responsibilities that includes more obligations than many people realize. DNR is more than camping, fishing and hunting. This state agency encompasses a number of resource management, public safety, economic and education efforts statewide.

The readers of *Outdoor*Illinois will recognize many of these functions and appreciate the duties carried out by our dedicated natural resource professionals. Included in these duties are the administration of nature preserves, forestry, public safety and law enforcement, regulation of oil, coal, gas and aggregate extraction, drinking-water allocation, floodplain management, endangered species and natural areas consultation, capital projects, grants, safety education, education and state museums, among others.

The mandated responsibilities alone are large enough that the work of the agency has a $32 billion annual economic impact on the state's economy—that's enough to support more than 90,000 jobs. This figure includes those core mission activities, such as state parks, hunting and fishing.

The status of the agency in 2009, when I became director, was dire. At the beginning of that fiscal year (June 30-July 1) then-Governor Blagojevich line-item vetoed $19 million from the General Revenue portion of the DNR budget. Cuts to DNR that began in the Ryan administration have essentially halved the amount of General Revenue dollars appropriated to the agency. For this current fiscal year, General Revenue funds are only 21 percent of the agency's total.



DNR's response to these cuts over the past decade has been to utilize every possible fund at our legal disposal to maintain essential services. It's an unsustainable depletion of funds, akin to burning one's furniture to heat the house. Yet these drastic methods have been our only option as DNR continues to do, as required by law, all the mandated work of the agency. Lacking sufficient revenues to meet even basic needs, DNR has shifted the funding of operations and payroll to other dedicated funds such as the Boating Fund, Parks and Recreation Fund, State Parks Fund and Fish and Wildlife Fund. Simply put, we have utilized every fund we have, still within its lawful purpose, but the cost has been severe: We have used funds intended for grants, maintenance at state parks and land acquisition and

The majority of DNR's current expenses are being paid through the unsustainable depletion of other state funds.

rerouted these for operations to keep programs going.

Just as burning the furniture is not sustainable, shifting funding from General Revenue to these other state funds is not a long-term, sustainable solution. DNR is spending more from these dedicated funds than we take in, and several funds are expected to go into the red within the next year.

Because of other pressures on state-government finances, we cannot assume there will be a quick turnaround for DNR. Although Governor Quinn introduced a DNR maintenance budget for the current fiscal year that would have allowed us some flexibility and protect dedicated funds, the General Assembly passed a budget last spring that was $5.7 million below what we needed to sustain ourselves. Additionally, we can expect further cuts in General Revenue for the next fiscal year.

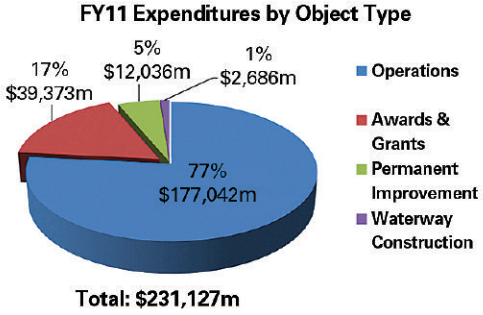
We have unequivocally reached the point where we cannot continue to perform all the tasks and programs with the financial resources we have available to us.

Unless there is relief or a change in the agency's business model, the deferred maintenance at parks will continue, staff will not be replaced when they retire or otherwise leave the agency, and there will be limited or no replacement of old vehicles and equipment. Important programs that protect resources and natural areas will diminish, and wildlife, fisheries, forestry and law-enforcement programs will decline. Our ability to monitor and regulate floodplains and industry, as well as protect public health and safety, will be reduced.

Lacking the financial resources to repair and replace broken and outdated equipment, the state of DNR-managed facilities continues to deteriorate.

What is the DNR budget spent on?

FY11 Actual Expenditures
Operating and Capital



- **Generally, about 77% of the cash is spent on our yearly operational costs.**
- **The remainder – or 23% for FY11 – is spent on capital budget items. These include payouts for grants and permanent improvement items.**

Throughout three years as director, I have pursued a vision to make DNR and our outdoor heritage stronger. We have worked to engage new constituents—such as getting youth and women outdoors—and re-engage traditional partners. Although very difficult to accomplish without financial resources, we have made progress on improving recreational access and opportunities with programs such as the Illinois Recreational Access Program, creating a fourth waterfowl zone and piecing together land acquisition by leveraging resources and partnerships.

An essential piece of this vision is to establish reliable, sustainable funding for the agency. DNR must have the financial security that allows us to plan for the future. The citizen-advisory effort known as Conservation Congress focused on these issues in 2009, and we made progress by increasing fishing and hunting license fees that year. Permit fees and other revenue ideas were dropped for lack of support in the General Assembly.

There is now support in the legislature to pursue a solution for DNR, and there are champions working on sustainable funding. What has always been out of reach may be attainable this spring, and a wide range of constituent groups are working toward this goal. While this is encouraging, there are many voices in Springfield with competing interests. What is important for DNR and the future of the nature of Illinois is that people actively engage in the debate and advocate for sustainable funding for our future.

As a student of the conservation movement, it is reassuring to look back upon the great moments in conservation and examine how progress was made—it was involvement of citizens that made these great strides possible. Thank you for your support and dedication to the outdoors.