

DGIF Revision to the Closed Cave Policy on Agency Lands

Agency Lands Open to Cave Research and Education

In response to the discovery and rapid spread of White-nose syndrome (WNS) in the northeast, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) posted a Cave Advisory in March 2009, calling for a moratorium on caving. The purpose of this moratorium was to prevent large leaps in the spread of WNS as well as slow the spread locally. In support of the FWS request, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) closed access to caves on all their properties in 2009.

Since WNS was first documented in New York in 2006, the disease has spread throughout the northeast states, south to North Carolina, west to Oklahoma, and northwest through Quebec and Ontario. Some of the jumps have the appearance of being transported by humans, but the larger movement of WNS is believed to be bat to bat transmission.

In light of WNS now being found throughout most of the mountain areas in Virginia and bats being the primary vector for the spread, the Virginia Speleological Society (VSS) requested DGIF to revise the Closed Cave Policy on Agency lands. The VSS asked that DGIF revise its current policy from year round closure of DGIF's caves to October 15 through April 15, the bat hibernation period, allowing recreational caving and cave research during the open period.

An agency team including staff Biologists and the Agency's Wildlife Veterinarian reviewed the background issues, current status, the VSS request, and potential issues that would face the agency in revising its current policy. The recommendation provided by staff and adopted by the Agency revises the Closed Cave Policy to allow cave research and education, but maintains the closed cave policy for recreational caving. The Agency's primary mission of wildlife protection, using the best available science, was a major factor in this decision. Opening caves to research and education will allow the opportunity to study issues such as WNS and educate the public under conditions the Agency can control.

The DGIF supports recreational caving and the contributions that caving groups such as the VSS have made to our knowledge and understanding of cave resources. The Agency also understands that there are reasonable arguments for opening cave access during the non-hibernating period for recreational caving. However, the Agency felt that due to limited staff it could not control adherence to decontamination conditions that would prevent the spread of WNS. The Agency will review this policy in a year to determine if additional information warrants consideration.

Those interested in pursuing cave research or education on DGIF lands can submit a permit request through the Scientific Collecting Permit or Access Permit application at the following web address: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/permits/>