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Convincing Congress



Courtesy of Cheryl Jones.

Federal funding to combat White-nose Syndrome is a sound investment, even in a tough economy, Bat Conservation International Executive Director Nina Fascione told a congressional subcommittee. The continued loss of America's bats will "affect all of us as consumers, taxpayers and residents of a planet further impoverished of biological diversity."

She was among witnesses who described the impact of White-nose Syndrome (WNS) at a June 21 hearing of the U.S. House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs. The panel's chairman, Rep. John Fleming (R-Louisiana), said federal and state agencies have spent more than \$16 million since the disease was first reported in 2007. It has now spread to "18 U.S. states from Maine to Kentucky"

and killed more than 1 million bats, he said.

Fascione urged Congress to appropriate \$11.1 million for WNS research and mitigation for the 2012 fiscal year.

"Congressional support is critical for addressing WNS," she testified. "Other funding sources are extremely limited. State budgets have been drastically reduced and, especially given the spread of the disease, federal agencies' existing resources are not sufficient to meet the need.

"Congress is facing a difficult financial climate, so we underscore the fact that money spent on WNS is a wise investment."

Fascione and other witnesses noted that a report in the journal *Science* concluded that the value of insect-eating bats to American farmers ranges from \$3.7 to \$53 billion a year in reduced pesticide use and limited crop damage. Bats also consume insects that damage forests and that spread disease.

WNS raises the imminent risk that additional bat species will require listing under the federal Endangered Species Act, requiring millions of dollars in recovery costs, as well as regulatory impacts on a wide range of industries, she said. Commercial show caves and the local economies that often depend on them could be damaged by WNS across the continent.

"In this case," Fascione testified, "an ounce of prevention truly is worth a pound of cure."

She also said the recently approved *National Plan for Assisting States, Federal Agencies, and Tribes in Managing White Nose Syndrome in Bats* "represents a commendable step in combating WNS and addressing the urgent need for a national approach to our WNS response. BCI agrees with the overall framework, but we must stress that implementation is critical. We encourage the agencies to quickly identify detailed, concrete actions for fighting WNS."

Other witnesses at the hearing included Dr. Gabriela Chavarria, Science Advisor to the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Jim Peña, U.S. Forest Service Associate Deputy Chief; Jonathan Gasset, Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources; Peter Youngbaer, White-nose Syndrome

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Liaison, National Speleological Society; and Justin Boyles, University of Tennessee.

In May, Fascione, BCI Director of Programs Ed Arnett and Conservation Scientist Michael Baker were at the Annual White-nose Syndrome Symposium in Little Rock, Arkansas, which BCI helped organize and support. Among research results reported at the symposium were some significant signs of progress.

One of the most hopeful reports emerged from site-by-site population surveys from 2007 through 2011 in the northeastern states. Although many hibernating colonies suffered declines of 50 percent to more than 90 percent in the first two years after the arrival of WNS, the diminished populations seem to have stabilized – at least for now. The surveys offer tantalizing hints that survivors of the initial infection may, in fact, survive, perhaps with the potential to re-establish these battered populations.

Two researchers offer what could be a partial explanation. These scientists confirm that at least some bats with WNS-ravaged wings (a common result of the disease) were recovering on their own.

Nathan Fuller of Boston University photographed and attached identifying bands on little brown myotis with severe wing damage after hibernation. Those that were subsequently recaptured showed significant healing within as little as two weeks.

U.S. Army Biologist Chris Dobony described a colony of little brown myotis at the Fort Drum Military Installation in northern New York that has been monitored by Army biologists for years. When WNS hit, he said, the populations plummeted.

But over the next few years, Dobony said, biologists found that "individual bats that had been monitored for years were not only healing from wing and other damage associated with WNS, ... but they were seen again the following spring and summer."

Many questions remain about the long-term prospects for these survivors, he said, but "right now it is a silver lining in the dark cloud that is White-nose Syndrome."

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