

File Code: 2300/2600

Date: Aug 27 2010

Gordon Birkhimer
President
National Speleological Society, Inc.
2813 Cave Avenue
Huntsville, AL 35810-4431

Dear Mr. Birkhimer,

This is in reply to your letter of July 29, 2010. You wrote on behalf of the National Speleological Society's membership to voice your opposition to our emergency closure of caves and abandoned mines in the Rocky Mountain Region as part of our response to White-Nose Syndrome (WNS).

You stated your opinion that the closure is an over-reaction, when WNS has not been documented anywhere within the Region. My intention is to be proactive in minimizing the potential of accidentally spreading the fungus into our area by human transfer of the spores. It is true that the primary mode of transmission is believed to be bat-to-bat and that eventually the bats themselves may move the fungus westward. However, several lines of compelling evidence suggest that humans are likely contributing to the spread of the fungus, and are the most likely source of long-distance jumps in its distribution. Based on the scientific literature pertaining to WNS, our discussions with WNS experts, input from other Regions of the Forest Service already affected by WNS, the known effects of WNS in affected areas, and the elevated risk for my Region because of the recent leaps of the fungus to Missouri and Oklahoma, I concluded that a temporary cave and abandoned mine closure is the most prudent action at this time. Our hope is that this temporary closure order will buy us some time to learn more about WNS and regional bat populations; this will help inform future management options, while we still have some flexibility in the absence of WNS.

Undoubtedly, compliance with this emergency closure order will largely be voluntary. As is the case with most of our regulations, we rely on the goodwill and understanding of the public to responsibly observe the rules put in place on behalf of their natural resources. We are providing informational materials at our offices and on the Internet, and posting signs in key areas to promote understanding and compliance. I believe that most people, confronted with the seriousness of this issue, will willingly comply with the emergency closure order and its primary goal. In some cases, members of the caving community have agreed to assist with placing signs—an extremely valuable service for which we are grateful.

During the coming year, we will continue to study the situation and work with all interested parties to explore opportunities to re-open certain caves to recreational entry, while continuing to address the primary goal of minimizing the biological risk. I very much appreciate the engagement by many members of the caving community who are offering ideas and assistance to National Forest staff throughout the Region.



We are aware of the plan to hold your national convention in Glenwood Springs in July of 2011. My staff in this office and on the White River National Forest have been in contact with Ray Keeler and others of your staff to begin working out agreements that will be mutually acceptable.

I personally regret the impact of the emergency closure order on the caving community, with its potential to negatively affect our long-standing and beneficial relationship. I ask for your patience, understanding, and involvement as together we work through this difficult situation and progress toward a strategic, long-term management approach.

Thank you again for contacting us to voice your opinions and concerns. We value your ideas and advice as we work towards crafting a more long-term strategy.

Sincerely,



For ANTOINE L. DIXON
Deputy Regional Forester,
Natural Resources

cc: Thomas Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture