

Silver Linings: Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Welcome to Silver Linings

What a year 2020 has been for state, provincial, and territorial fish and wildlife agencies. It has been unlike anything I could have imagined at the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks or through the lens of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. This has been a year dominated by words like COVID-19, pandemic, zoonoses, and coronavirus. The implications, yet to be fully appreciated, are profound for conservation delivery, organizational capacity, and agency relevancy.

There is another word for the lexicon of our day: resiliency. I have been encouraged by how many of you are leaned into the initial chaos and continue to lean into uncertainty born on the wings of new opportunities, new learnings, and new choices for fish and wildlife conservation. These are lessons learned, for those who pause to reflect on them; these are the silver linings for conservation institutions.

This compilation is designed to document some of those very things, to create a record of how we all rose to the challenges of 2020 and, more importantly, they serve as an opportunity to adaptively apply such lessons to the challenges that remain.

Thanks to many fish and wildlife directors who took the time offer their highly personal insights.

Very best regards –



Kelly R. Hepler

President



Organizational Effectiveness

Teleworking has been normative, with office closures for 10 weeks and counting, for many of you and your staff. What have you learned that will likely remain as a new normal for your work as a government agency? Efficiencies, new technology, communications, resiliency, and customer service are some of the items you might reflect on.

As COVID-19 has upended traditional means of managing staff, agency resources, and public services, you've had to quickly adapt to new management approaches. Transitioning to work from home has required the adoption of new IT policies, hardware, and software. Survey responses mentioning the use of new technologies, such as teleconferencing platforms, new laptops and cell phones, or call centers, were grouped in the "Technology" section. These responses were further divided into "Public Facing Technology" and "Technology for Staff." Remote working has also necessitated shifts in management approaches, with a focus on flexibility, clear communication, and budgetary and safety constraints. Answers that didn't explicitly focus on technology were grouped into the "Adaptive Management" section, and were further divided into "Managing Staff" and "Working with Constituents" categories. Finally, any response mentioning the continued use in the future of new technologies, approaches of managing staff, or approaches to communicating and working with the public were grouped in the "Lessons for the Future" section.

Technology

Public Facing Technology

- Efforts to go completely on-line with license sales and other services have actually benefited from the pandemic response.¹
- Created a new Boat Ramp Finder application to facilitate the public's real-time access to boat ramp availability.
- Public-facing aspects of agency business functions were mostly maintained, but through online platforms and connectivity. Online license purchases enabled continuity of that customer service function. The State Park Customer Service Center, which primarily serves as a call-in center for customers making park visit reservations has proven to be invaluable in providing rapid communications with customers during changing conditions and altering directives. State Park visitors have adopted the use of internet reservations and pre-visit payments at a greater rate.
- We got more staff trained to support the call center and got shared email accounts set up for use in a few divisions.
- With our virtual meeting, because everyone could easily join, we had excellent attendance. I was especially pleased that several of our members from Canada were able to join the meeting as well. So, a silver lining is turning out to be an excellent/high level of Director engagement via the Virtual platforms, and I am especially pleased that our Canadian colleagues are engaging in

¹ Survey responses are presented verbatim, except in cases where references to states or agencies needed to be changed to preserve anonymity. Responses remain under the broad headers used in the survey - organizational effectiveness, outdoor recreation, and agency relevancy – and were further grouped into smaller sections and subsection within those categories.

our issues as well. I would anticipate great participation via virtual platforms hosted by AFWA as well.

Technology for Staff

- We're deficient in equipment (laptops, cell phones, personal mifi's, etc.) for office staff to work from home. But, not anymore.
- We learned that our investments in technology allowed us a smoother transition to remote work. Without adequate technology, we would not have been able to transition as easily.
- Microsoft Teams, WebEx, and Adobe Connect meetings are replacing conference calls and in-person meetings.
- Pushed some tech related responsibilities and costs to staff (purchase/use of home internet and phone access).
- Increased recognition of lack of access to technology for our lower paid and/or rural staff
- Quickly ramped up on VPN, and other licenses to access needed computer-based info
- Increased workload on network and desktop support technicians that were supporting teleworkers.
- Adoption of electronic signatures for many documents for faster, easier workflows.
- Electronic documents and e-signatures. This was a priority for us to move more toward before COVID-19. The pandemic forced us to get accustomed to receiving documents electronically and sending/signing them electronically very quickly. So far it has been successful and has sped up our time to respond.
- Broadband capabilities are lacking in rural areas and State Parks.
- New technology, e.g. Teams, has provided reliable and efficient conferencing abilities. This has eliminated the need (for the most part) of in-person meetings (and associated travel).
- A wide disparity exists with respect to the IT resources available to employees at their homes. A substantial number of employees live in rural settings with little or no broadband or cellular phone service.
- Video conferencing software has proven unstable and undependable.
- A method of electronic approvals or signatures must be standardized and put in place to ensure workflows continue. This is required due to the number of employees that do not have scanners, printers, or fax machines at their personal residence.
- The continuation of park business functions conducted remotely has also included maintaining the agency's park audit functions, which until 2019, relied on a large amount of "paper trail" verifications. New Park Business System software has made the business function more secure and allows remote oversight of financial processes.
- Developing new ways to communicate more efficiently between ourselves and partners. Teams and Zoom are surprisingly functional tools that are helping us work better under some difficult circumstances. This isn't just an internal thing. I think we're actually communicating better, and more frequently, with some of our external partners and AFWA was able to pull off a national Zoom meeting with Fish Chiefs last week, it was a much higher level of participation and productivity than we've ever seen on our monthly conference calls.
- The time to allow most to become accustomed to Teams and established the needed Team – channel structure. This especially important for Technical Review in coordinating Department comments on over 600 projects per year. The ability to have one place with all the supporting

files and ability to work on one single version of a comment letter will save a ton of time in version control.

- Use of new technology has definitely been a positive. We are all experts in Zoom and Teams now – and we have been much more communicative. I feel better connected to my staff than ever before – we have been having more frequent meetings (every other week for division wide meetings; every week for Diversity leadership) and I’m in touch with almost all staff every few days. In Teams, we all post at least something every day and have much better collaboration on specific projects than before.
- Prior to the COVID pandemic, working from home was not authorized for most employees. COVID forced a remarkable turnaround that was very successful in terms of productivity, morale and the health and safety of employees. There have been many other benefits from teleworking with technology for virtual meetings, cleaner air and cost savings among some big ones.
- Provided employees had adequate broadband and/or cellular phone service at home, our IT staff identified and implemented solutions to allow many employees to work from home.

Adaptive Management

Managing Staff

- If you have a good staff, there were very few problems. However, this did provide a great opportunity to see where problem staff existed.
- Expanded telework has been effective and field work is still getting done within CDC guidelines.
- Many staff were more productive working from home removed from the distractions of the office. However, the administration basically eliminated our ability to allow our staff to continue to telework.
- We have learned how nimble we are as an agency. We transitioned, in a very short time, into remote work for administrative staff. All while maintaining all aspects of business and service to the public. This was a very good thing to be a part of and it showed how adaptive our staff really are when it comes to change.
- Field staff conducted business as usual during the shutdown.
- Teleworking continued to provide essential services to the public during the stay-at-home order.
- Quickly transitioned ~95% of ~3,000 staff to teleworking within 5 days; transitioning back will likely be more difficult.
- Varied responses in adapting to teleworking (some love it, some don’t) (lots of varied reasons why).
- Experimenting with new ways to engaging with more staff via virtual meetings.
- Increased focus on what’s most important – staff well-being, designing work around staff’s well-being, and prioritization of conservation activities.
- Increased cooperation across divisions (e.g., sharing of available PPE).
- Hiring “hold” because of economic uncertainties.
- Some cost savings realized (paper, electricity, reduced travel).
- Efficiencies resulted in a slowing of “work pace” due to budgetary unknowns (e.g., reduced hiring). We have not surveyed our customers; however, we do know they experienced higher wait times through our license vendor (i.e., call center). Additionally, with so much focus on

Covid-19, it is difficult to evaluate what products or projects would have been accomplished without this distraction.

- Early preparation such as identifying and ordering PPE and other preparedness items is essential. It is better to have something and not need it, than visa vi, for emergency circumstances.
- Communication is another essential. Deciphering EOs and other guidelines must be done in a timely manner and communicated to the staff. It is critical that changes are communicated across agency boundaries to ensure uniformity and/or proper messaging to staff.
- Health and safety of staff - Ensuring that staff health and safety is priority one is also essential.
- Teleworking can be a very effective mode of operating. Over the past several years we have seen teleworking change from a tightly regulated work option to a much more widely accepted and flexible system that allows staff to handle unpredictable schedules, reduce driving time and air pollution, deal with family and societal demands, and actually devote more of the work day to work.
- We have learned that many of our employees can do their job remotely and do it effectively. Many people have been able to get back a half hour and some as much as two hours that would otherwise be spent in commute time. This is time that they can spend with their families.
- Good communications, follow-through, and trust inspire confidence and promote teamwork and are important to organizational effectiveness in normal times, but even more so while working remotely and through a crisis.
- We are still overly tied to the paper medium in our business processes, which led to inefficiencies when transitioning to working remotely. Converting to digital technologies will greatly increase our efficiency in the office and make us more resilient to disruptions that might again force us to work remotely.
- Documentation is lacking for: Alternative processes; Instruction sets for technology use for things like network connectivity; Disaster recovery plans; Cross-training.
- Teleworking has been effective in maintaining communication and even improving efficiency in some cases.
- This has been a crash course in learning for much of our agency in virtual meetings and paperless processes, however we adapted quickly to the new reality and really never skipped a beat.
- In the middle of this office disruption and increased demand our employees have stepped up to the plate to serve each other and to serve our constituents. Even more than normal our staff has demonstrated determination, flexibility and professionalism.
- We are better prepared for any future office closures should COVID-19 or other emergency require staff to work remotely in the future.
- Work-from-home is far less efficient and requires employees to have discipline; this is not consistent. Some employees do well, other do not. This will require management to put in place better ways to track outputs of work-at-home staff.
- Work-from-home does reduce collaborate work approaches across disciplines.
- Teleworking has been problematic, although popular with staff.
- It is important to establish a clear tree of communication between leadership and staff. This includes at what level will decisions be made; what approvals are required for crisis related

work, and how will information be distributed. It is important that supervisors are provided with expectations of frequency and staff with the methods which to expect communications.

- Plans and procedures must be written and maintained to outline emergency/crisis protocols. This includes procedures for the purchase of urgent needs (such as computers, laptops, cell phones or tablets), network accessibility to ensure staff can access vital files, essential employees and services that must be maintained during time of otherwise work stoppage, and continuation of service.
- Webinars have some clear shortcomings as compared to an office environment or to situations where meeting agendas require complex dialogue and decision-making.
- Teleworking was not conducive for all job classifications, necessitating use of emergency leave for employees meeting established criteria or others assuming higher personal health risks when asked to perform essential functions outside their home. Quickly establishing, communicating, and adapting guidance documents and FAQs, as well as adding flexibility in review, approval, and tracking of remote work and leave agreements helped significantly alleviate many staff concerns. In addition, telework has the potential to increase productivity and impact office space needs by reducing occupied space.
- Massive disruptions to work environments, increased uncertainty, and rapid shifts to remote work connectivity necessitated more frequent communication among work teams. Leadership needed to be available, present, and empathetic to their employees who occupied the entire continuum of concern related to the pandemic. Leaders often needed to reach further down and across the organizational hierarchy in virtual meeting invitations to accelerate vertical and horizontal communication. Leaders had to balance competing values of safety and productivity, convey that they didn't have all the answers or a playbook for this unprecedented experience, and establish an experimental and adaptive mindset, as well as a greater operating tolerance for uncertainty. Close coordination and communication with elected state and local leaders was critically important to seek and remain aligned with guidance and to communicate actions planned and taken.
- Zoom Meetings have been an extremely effective and efficient means of communicating with staff and other colleagues under some situations. These virtual meetings eliminate travel time, and they tend to focus attention on important agenda items.
- Staff have demonstrated remarkable dedication during these uncertain times, and they adapted well to the changing work environment.
- As an agency, we had the opportunity to test our Continuity of Operations Plan which performed well.
- We expanded relationships, collaboration and trust between all executive branches of state government in a way I've not experienced in my career.
- We approved and implemented teleworking procedures resulting in more robust utilization of virtual communication tools, decreased travel-related expenses and greenhouse gas emissions—and we proved teleworking is a viable alternative to increased infrastructure.
- We used this time to ask hard questions if we need to continue to deliver programs/services in the same way (in-person versus virtual) or if a program was needed at all.
- We also learned that our agency can adapt quickly, and that effective, consistent and timely communication with staff is critical during such a time.

- Biologists have been able to get caught up on training requirements, something that always seems to fall through the cracks in a normal year and work schedule.
- The requirement for purposeful connection has probably been the single greatest positive out of this time. Making an effort to reach out when normally you would not. This has come up more than a few times how much it is appreciated.
- Reflection on what works and what does not under stress shows very clearly. It gives great perspective on where to improve and how being more proactive in certain areas is a must going forward.
- Being innovative. We are thinking outside the box and questioning “why” we have certain processes. Instead of just accepting this as the way it has always been, we are questioning what the administrative code actually says. Do we need this form actually notarized or not; and we are making processes better now to work under the circumstances?
- Since we are all remote, some of the geographically barriers have come down. We are interacting with staff in other offices more on call. I think supervisors are checking in on staff more often too.
- We have had some meaningful bonding by sharing our own frustrations and experiences with each other during virtual meetings. I’ve learned some things about staff I didn’t know before. I also think it has shown we are all in this struggle and we’re all equal regardless of position or title.
- It has also shown staff’s true colors and who are Rock Stars. Under stress, the natural stepped up and just took off with the attitude “how can I help?” This is true on the flip side, but I’m going to stay positive and say that it allowed the “cream of the crop” to rise to the top and shine.
- This experience also has shown how interdependent we are on one another, not only as co-workers but on a social level as well.
- COVID-19 has given my staff the chance to revisit old programs and look at new ways to deliver them or improve them.
- Having a workstation at home gives the flexibility to work when you are the most productive. There are a lot fewer distractions, and the flexibility of being able to go do something else and come back and finish whatever project, etc. without being confined to a standard workday when motivation waxes and wanes.
- We do not know if this is true for everyone, but we feel like our division has been a lot more collaborative than before. We also feel like our division adapted SUPER quickly to the technology, opportunities, and some of the constraints that were thrown or way.
- We have had the opportunity to draft, review and modify the Divisions work performance standards at a time where greater discussion between supervisor and employee could occur.
- This has provided an opportunity for folks to adjust their perspectives to realize what is truly important in their lives – the people and the time they have with them (despite being in quarantine for weeks on end).
- Taking the opportunity to streamline and revise our internal approval process for Scientific Collection Permits, including tracking permits (working on developing a database), creating a guidance document to increase consistency, and developing questions to help staff provide appropriate input into decisions.
- Initiating projects that have been on the backburner that we never seem to get to due to the tyranny of the urgent.

Working with Constituents

- Our education and communications team very quickly developed new products and transitioned into new education delivery methods to reach the public. We now have a virtual nature center that provides video content about native wildlife, outdoor experiences and skills and even wild game recipes. We realize nothing replaces an in person educational activity, but we are also seeing a much further audience reach through social media. We have also implemented drive through aquatic education programs at our hatchery systems and city festivals that were very successful.
- Held an on-line commission meeting with a reduced agenda; Some stakeholders were not happy with this and are filing lawsuits.
- Pre-commission meeting comment gathering presented an opportunity for more people to participate in decision making.
- Increased gathering of rule-making related comments on-line.
- We need to be mindful to not over-do virtual stakeholder engagement; in-person interactions are still important to many of our stakeholders.
- Adapted license issuance processes to assist customers on license types that were previously issued at in-person locations.
- Heavy increase in FWC customer service staff duties.
- Heavily emphasized safety and online issuance options when messaging about licensing.
- Customer complaints during our teleworking directive have been few if not non-existent proving the effectiveness of the statewide call center accessible to staff from any location.
- Officers are finding innovative ways to make wildlife violation cases by researching social media.
- We were largely able to conduct agency business successfully in a teleworking environment, including holding a formal public quarterly Board meeting.
- LE found the use of cell phones and laptops gave the officers much freedom and flexibility in responding to the questions from the public. And helped accomplish the need to work remotely.
- The public has readily adapted to the use of online services (which were previously available in the state). The further acclimation of the public to conducting business online will increase efficiency and reduce staffing needs for certain business functions.
- We have been able to maintain customer service using skeleton crews in our offices and teleworking.
- We have learned that appointments for paperwork are helpful for making sure we have enough time and staff to provide the best service.
- A teleworking policy was finally established for our State government. The staff was more productive teleworking as interruptions were minimized (i.e., answering phone calls, interacting with the public).

Lessons for the Future

- We implemented a new call center for the entire agency that will be able to eliminate the need for desk phones. This will be a cost savings to our agency.
- We have also learned that the work of conservation can be done without the need for everyone to have office space. We have funding currently being focused on office space that could be used on the landscape for conservation. We will be exploring this into the future.

- Expanded Telework and virtual meetings will continue on after the pandemic response. Technology has proven very effective for virtual huddles and metric tracking as well as product/service delivery and communicating with customers.
- Potential increase in the number of staff teleworking part or full time in future; opportunity to reduce agency facilities footprint.
- Hiring managers may be more open to hiring new staff away from HQ or established offices or even out of state to get the best candidate.
- Increased awareness, patience and flexibility with home-work balance.
- Reinforced need for a centralized customer relation management system.
- May result in increased use of laptops vs. desktop computers in future.
- Recognition that we need to find a balance between automated licensing options and the ability to offer manual processes as needed.
- Crisis was a catalyst for long-term tech improvements for call centers.
- Utilization of shared services such as Microsoft Teams have provided a platform for real-time document review and editing among multiple staff. Moving forward, we plan to continue using this service as it is an efficient use of time and resources for our Division.
- We are much more comfortable with video meetings. This will likely stay as an option. Because of busy schedules, many times meetings have to be scheduled weeks in advance. Video meetings require less travel time and tend to be to the point.
- Teleworking with appropriate equipment (such as laptops with cameras and wi-fi) can bring teams together (almost) anyplace and anytime. Information technology tools were underutilized before COVID but will likely play a much more prominent role even after things return to normal.
- There are jobs and people either well-suited or ill-suited to teleworking. Correctly matching people and jobs to work model can lead to increases in efficiencies and effectiveness. More extensive use of teleworking could become a new normal.
- We recognized the need for security redundancy in systems and processes to ensure a safer transfer and storage of sensitive data.
- Our ability to operate effectively over virtual meetings is something we'll carry forward post pandemic.
- We implemented greater customer service than ever before – including weekend call centers, streamlining on-line purchases, and shift work to process boat registrations in a timely fashion without jeopardizing staff health and safety – that were very well-received and will continue to be refined.
- The pandemic has resulted in increased adoption of teleworking and usage of web-conferencing platforms to remotely convene work groups. In many circumstances, use of webinars has resulted in time and cost savings (e.g., reduced travel time, reduced travel costs) and increased information-sharing and coordination/collaboration among work groups and agencies. These tools will remain an important communications platform and likely replace some recurring in-person information-sharing meetings, especially lecture-style seminars and roundtable updates.
- The use of desktop computers will likely be diminished in favor of portable laptops and tablets in order to facilitate employee teleworking, and other hardware upgrades should be considered in order to assist employees working remotely. Some in-house operations, including call centers, that were not conducive to telework were transitioned to a remote environment

quickly and successfully. Without having approved digital signature software in place, a few business processes that relied on actual signature routing hindered complete remote working ability. Established cross-divisional partnership groups proved to be helpful for efficient communication on new procedures and tools, as a result of shifting to working remotely.

- Teleworking has actually increased staff productivity in some measurable areas. We will retain teleworking for many staff areas that had been traditionally office positions.
- Virtual meetings have reduced staff travel expenses and time commitments while still allowing business to proceed. We will plan to continue to leverage technology to enhance efficiency.
- A new normal for the department are meetings via Microsoft Teams. It is a platform that is extremely helpful in having meetings, having discussions, working together on projects, and will be used to reduce costs within the territory.
- I have never seen such an amazing expansion of tech usage due to the current difficulties. The streamlining of training and digital work has been pretty cool. Definitely gives more options once this is over and the new normal hits town.
- We are quickly becoming adept at using online meeting platforms. Not only for communicating effectively over distance, but also for offering educational experiences to the public through webinars and other online programming. This new awareness will enable us to significantly broaden our reach going forward, especially in terms of offering online programs to schools. One person will be able to reach multiple schools at one time rather than visiting the schools one at a time.
- Conservation Education has spent time exploring the possibilities of Zoom, Skype, Teams and with the Education outlines we are putting together will be much more effective over the vast distances that we have to cover in rural areas. We will be able to help those outlying schools that it was hard to justify a three or four hour drive each way to give a one-hour presentation to.
- The Director's office has been able to develop a Continuity of Operations Plan with a pandemic annex to have in the future. This will hopefully prepare staff for an emergency like this, should it happen again in the future.
- We were also able to develop a telecommuting policy for the agency which staff could use at any time in the future, with proper approvals of course

Outdoor Recreation

Your constituents and customers have been heading outdoors, often to facilities that your agency owns or manages to escape the tedium of Zoom and computer images. What have you learned about messaging, people management, access management, and law enforcement considerations? What new tools or practices enable you to monitor or manage visitor use?

In the age of social distancing, the outdoors remain the last available venue for recreation. State parks, wildlife management areas, and game areas have seen increased visitation from traditional and non-traditional users alike. License sales for consumptive are higher than years past. Increased demands on agency resources often entail novel management problems with respect to intra- and inter-governmental coordination, law enforcement duties, and communication. Survey responses were categorized according to major theme. General comments observing increased resource are grouped in the "Public Use" section, within which responses mentioning licensing are included in a "Licensing" subsection. Responses pertaining to communication with the public, often about responsible recreation

and closures, are grouped in the “Public Relations” section. The responses focused on the challenges of coordinating across agency mission areas, with sister agencies, neighboring state agencies, or federal agencies are presented in the “Coordination” section. Finally, the “Law Enforcement” section is comprised of responses focusing on conservation officers’ and game wardens’ new mandate to enforce social distancing orders while also managing more user conflicts, educating the public, and enforcing existing laws.

Public Use

- Throughout the stay-at-home orders, all of our public access remained opened except two staffed public shooting ranges.
- It’s blatantly obvious that outdoor activities are lower priorities to most people than many others (soccer, movies, etc.) Changing those priorities will be challenging and will require unorthodox and unique thinking and actions.
- It has been good to be reminded just how valuable the great outdoors is to our citizens. In the absence of events creating hectic schedules for families, it was great to see time slow down and families returning to the simple activities outdoors. Even in times of crisis our country turned to what we manage to help them get through it.
- Increased participation in fishing has led to current declines in bait, tackle and boat availability. The demand has outpaced the current supply.
- Recognized that limiting access will be better perceived than full closure.
- Social distancing on and between vessels essentially limits the amount of access for recreational boaters.
- Outdoor recreation of any type is viewed by most as therapeutic. This illustration has played out across our state every day outdoor recreation has been available.
- With the opening of over 100 sites the public has been exemplary while recreating in their preferred activity of choice. Most people will exhibit good behavior if given clear guidance and a rationale.
- People were anxious to find outdoor recreational opportunities.
- State Park campers felt safer outdoors than indoors.
- COVID-19 unfortunately hit during our most busy time of year, which is trout season. Keeping staff, anglers, and the public safe were the top priority, and many long-standing practices had to be changed substantially or eliminated entirely for safety (e.g., use of volunteers to assist with stocking, announcements of stocking dates and locations, season opening dates).
- A cool and wet spring initially helped to limit crowding at our facilities. With the arrival of warmer weather and Memorial Day weekend, we are coming into the prime season for many of our facilities, with a lot of activity at boating access areas.
- The safe and effective installation of port-a-potties has been a big issue. Next week, we will be deploying them to over 110 sites with enhanced cleaning protocols and accompanying signage.
- We have seen a dramatic use by the public on our state game lands. Not only for hunting, but for hiking, biking, and “just hanging out.”
- Boating is one of if not the most critical outdoor activity in the state, always knew we were a boating state learn how much over this crisis.
- The public’s demand for outdoor recreational opportunities did not diminish during this episode, if anything, it has increased – often by first-time users. The public has more leisure

time, fewer competing scheduled commitments, and cheaper gasoline prices to support travel. The Governor's executive orders named various outdoor recreation activities, such as fishing, hunting, and visiting parks as "essential activities" when done responsibly. This bullet's narrative also applies to the next (Relevancy) category.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need and value for easily accessible angling opportunities near urban areas. In cooperation with local supporting entities, and through expanded use of a contracted commercial fish provider, regular stockings to locations participating in our urban fishing program were maintained. Stocking weeks were published on our agency's website but were not actively publicized or paired with organized fishing events to minimize public crowding.
- The outdoors usually provides an escape or an opportunity to disconnect from technology-focused daily lives. In the pandemic, however, more individuals have come to understand that technology can facilitate a connection to the outdoors through photos, virtual tours, and various outreach programs. When real-life interaction is not safe, digital services can bridge the gap as a method to interact with the outdoors. We must offer more digital mobile services to allow for more self-service opportunities to use for agency services.
- Fishers did not let COVID-19 severely affect their livelihoods or sport. Fishing was just as active during COVID-19 as before; we would like to capitalize on this in expanding recreational fishing opportunities.
- The main outdoor activities available are beaches, which were closed for two weeks. There were no wildlife/fisheries exhibits or trails at the beaches or other locations, which is something we intend to address.
- We saw a significant increase in outdoor activity in the state — on Conservation Areas, State and local parks, on our waterways, etc. Increases of outdoor engagement were over 150% in some time periods, according to Google analytics. We certainly saw a significant increase in permit buyers for Spring Turkey season and fishing licenses, suggesting renewed and new participants. We have also heard that retailers of outdoor gear/equipment have seen a significant spike in kayaks, canoes, fishing gear, etc.
- This ties to relevancy in that the awakening of droves of citizens who never ventured to public lands before has highlighted the importance of outdoor recreation to a healthy society. We have identified a need for greater use of real time technology for communication and monitoring of operations.

Licensing

- The public has gravitated to our lakes, streams and rivers, and participated heavily in boating and fishing. We experienced a 30% increase in fishing license sales for the months of April and May 2020 when compared to the same time in 2019.
- Levels of outdoor recreation have been at the highest levels we've seen and license sales and revenue appear to be climbing during the response period.
- Monthly, weekly, and daily license sales reporting and comparisons were provided to leadership to maintain a pulse on trends in sales and participation.
- Inquires to the licensing system suggest that new/different stakeholders were trying to find agency and licensing information during this time.

- Turkey hunting remained opened and likely saw an increase in participation and harvest but will need additional data to confirm
- Having an online and app-based license system was a huge benefit to the agency and our customers during this time of office closures and social distancing.
- As more and more residents seek refuge in outdoor recreation, ensure that your customers can purchase licenses, permits, and tags online, via telephone, or through USPS and not required to complete an in-person transaction. This is also true for boat registrations, tagging and reporting requirements, hunter education requirements and marine theft investigations.
- Preliminary data indicates resident spring turkey hunting participation was up slightly this year and nonresident spring turkey hunting participation was down.

Public Relations

- Public complaints have been virtually non-existent.
- Messaging (internal and external) may not be under agency control during crisis.
- Clear and concise messaging is crucial, especially during times of uncertainty. Public Affairs worked quickly to develop messaging and signage for distribution among our staff and constituents. Operational updates on our landing page, social media content, press releases, facility signage were created with careful attention due to the pandemic.
- “Responsible Recreation” was the best message used to describe what was needed for constituents to do. Encouraging staff on the importance of checking our areas for social distance compliance was critical.
- It is a balancing act between letting people know about all of the great outdoor resources that are available to them and not having everybody show up at the same place at the same time.
- With messaging, we have learned that everybody needs to be thinking ahead, having a plan and messaging that plan to the public. We developed a phased plan for re-opening our state parks, a plan for fishing and hunting dog-trial events, and others. We have also asked outside event coordinators who are wanting to use state-owned resource areas to develop plans for their events. Regardless of who created the plan, we’re asking people to sign off that they will agree to abide by it and message it to their participants.
- Broadband capabilities can enhance outdoor recreation experiences providing information and safety.
- The general public has been very satisfied and very appreciative towards staff when allowed to participate in an activity they have enjoyed perhaps their entire life.
- Social media has been instrumental in getting messages out to our consumers.
- Short videos that provided agency information have been very popular.
- Communications to the public about ever changing closures and re-openings is very important.
- Staff worked quickly and efficiently to develop a promotional campaign, “The Outdoors Are Always Open.” This provided our customers a safe and healthy alternative when the activities they typically spent their time on were closed or limited.
- Communications staff adapted very quickly and focused on developing and delivering content aimed at keeping anglers and boaters safe (e.g., social distancing practices). New messaging also covered letting the public know what policies were changing and why we were changing them.

- Communicating what is available to active families and individuals that are seeking retreat in outdoor recreation during times of crisis for exercise, stress relief and a sense of normalcy.
- The public will depend on various platforms to seek information concerning the status of outdoor recreation. This includes websites, social media, the media, signage, as well as email and telephone. Clear, concise messaging must be developed and shared throughout all methods of communication in a timely manner. Where possible, communication concerning outdoor recreation should be coordinated and shared with partner agencies. This is vital for non-traditional users often do not have a clear understanding of what each partner agencies provides.
- The use of social media and website visitor alerts has been critical in keeping state parks visitors informed of changes to operations and park availability. The agency has leveraged the use of virtual state park tours and online education programs to connect people to the outdoors and park sites. Use of the full suite of traditional media communications should continue to ensure messages reach all segments of the population.
- Information flow to the public is key—as we have seen new audiences use our properties (a positive), they need to be informed concerning the available facilities and rules.
- Social media messaging has been relied upon by the public and highly useful.
- Relatedly, misinformation on social media is rife, as is confusion by the public in viewing information from multiple agencies/states as to outdoor opportunities. It is vital to ensure that the public knows where to find information relevant to the agency (i.e., agency website) and to keep that information up to date.
- We found that while communicating with the public about restrictions to outdoor recreation, i.e. no camping on beaches during the early stages of response, was an excellent opportunity to educate the public about local wildlife and conservation issues.

Coordination

- Lack of coordination and wide scale closures by some Federal agencies in conflict with Governor’s Executive Orders (EO) resulted in public frustration and significant crowding and related issues on all outdoor rec areas.
- Bordering states under different Governor EOs resulted in conflicts and public confusion for recreating on shared areas (lakes, parks, rec areas) - should try to develop process for better coordination between states that share recreation areas.
- Emergency orders for water-related activities should mirror other state orders.
- Consider the practicality, safety and optics of enforcement for any Emergency Orders.
- Coordination across agency boundaries must occur. While our agency remained open, other agencies closed access to recreation areas, concentrating outdoor recreationalists and creating compliance issues. Broader coordination on closures as well as agreement on closure messaging is required. Broader use of our AGOL Survey 123 tools were critical in managing facility assessments and provided real-time information to decision makers and response.
- All agencies and states having outdoor recreation areas and sites need to keep these locations open. For example, closing boat ramps in a neighboring state had a major impact in the number of users on some sites in our state. Similarly, closing access to federal properties concentrated more people on state managed land.

- Daily calls with communication directors at other state agencies and weekly Google hangout meetings with all Department employees ensured that we stayed connected to each other, acted quickly to dispel rumors and served our customers well.
- Be prepared for greater demand on your resources. This is particularly true if outdoor recreation opportunities are limited by other entities within your state.
- Closures to outdoor access opportunities should be well coordinated and communicated among jurisdictional authorities. When certain access sites are temporarily restricted (e.g., closure of parks or boat ramps), the demand will shift to other areas and may exacerbate crowding or exceed capacity. Further, the public often doesn't differentiate among the various jurisdictional authorities which may manage access, causing confusion among users and challenging the communication of resource managers. Where possible/practical, electronic registration or reservation systems for public access (e.g., day-use, camping, and public hunts) provides a great mechanism to communicate with customers and gives the agency more options for responsibly managing access, as opposed to full closure.
- Under the direction of our Governor, resident anglers have been afforded the privilege of fishing without a license for 60 days. This has certainly generated interest and participation in angling; however, it has also resulted in lost license revenue for the current calendar year. Time will tell, if this action results in long-term recruitment or reactivation of new anglers.

Law Enforcement

- Our staff were encountering higher use at our public hunting areas, boat ramps, and shooting ranges. Many were first timers. Therefore, our law enforcement officers wrote fewer citations and more warnings. Staff had many more opportunities to educate the public on the mission of our Division.
- We have had to monitor the use of specific areas and manage for user conflicts. Our hopes are to continue to market to our citizens to maintain this surge in outdoor use.
- Enacted special LE protocols to ensure safety but returned to normal procedures when data showed double digit decreases in delinquent behaviors.
- "Pop-up parties" surfaced at a few WMAs close to urban centers needed to be controlled (e.g., temporarily closed, restricted parking, restricted access to walk-ins or bicycles).
- Boating participation increased dramatically; resulted in need for additional LE presence (every day has been like a holiday weekend).
- Monitoring use and social distancing on state properties has been a monumental shift for our Department. Technology has not replaced manpower for this effort, and it has been significant.
- We have used law enforcement (Park rangers and Conservation Officers) for the purpose of letting people know that we have a presence and to remind them to practice social distancing. This has been an educational approach more than enforcement.
- Electronic check-in on mobile devices provides real-time data for monitoring public use and harvest data.
- Seeing increase of nontraditional users on state game lands and also an increase for drug and alcohol issue.
- Increase in illegal ATV use.
- Overall, increase workload for game wardens.

- A key element of Community Policing is providing public safety and conservation law enforcement within State Parks to develop user's knowledge of park resources, rules, and regulations. The pandemic has limited proactive, one-on-one and group, educational interactions with the public in areas such as stewardship and protection of resources. We expect an increase in those interactions and contact once social distancing restrictions are relaxed. Throughout the pandemic, officers educated park users on social distancing requirements, as well as modeled and encouraged the wearing of face coverings to prevent the spread of disease.
- Increased outdoor recreation brought with it higher than normal calls for law enforcement service and the added need for public education. This deviation from traditional seasonal fluctuation has required modifying historic patrol efforts as well as public outreach strategies. Game Wardens enjoy a robust following on its social media feeds, which has been guiding residents in ways to safely enjoy outdoor recreation. Law enforcement judiciously tailored its approach, focusing on traditional safety messaging and encouraging responsible recreation.
- Increased interest and demand for park visitation elevated the importance of managing visitor levels. The encouragement of day-visit reservations has allowed parks to manage visitor levels with minimal conflicts by allowing visitors to ensure they would be able to enter sites prior to travel to a park.
- Trout stocking staff have worked very closely with our law enforcement staff to effectively address potential concerns relating to safe, social distancing on lakes and streams stocked with trout.

Agency Relevancy

We often talk about the quality of life that nature, many of the resources that you manage, brings to the everyday life of people. Now more than ever that perhaps is true for urban and suburban citizens. What stories have you told about the importance of your mission and agency? What stories have you told about managing wildlife trade and disease? How will your public service today make you more relevant for tomorrow?

Fish and wildlife agencies throughout the nation saw spikes in public interest in outdoor recreation, both among traditional and non-traditional users. This surge in interest is evidenced by swelling license sales, crowded state lands, and increased political, media, and public attention. States communicated with users about the availability of recreational opportunities, about agencies' role in managing fish and wildlife resources, especially as it pertains wildlife disease and trade, and about the benefits of responsible recreation on physical and mental health. Responses that focus on upticks in use, on the importance of recruiting and retaining users, or on agency relevancy initiatives are grouped in the "Recruitment and Retention" section. These answers are further broken out where respondents specially mention relevancy to traditional or new, non-traditional constituencies. Answers focusing on specific messages, such as the role of state fish and wildlife agencies in zoonotic disease management, or on education, are grouped in the "Messages" section. Answers focusing on the means of communication, such as social media, traditional news media, or signage, are grouped into the "Methods of Communication" section.

Recruitment and Retention

- The fundamental value of outdoor recreation is relevant. The importance of boating access and wildlife management areas was evident without promoting the opportunities. Shelter in place

Executive Orders presented a unique situation making it inappropriate to encourage customers to leave their homes to hunt/fish/hike etc. But we did not need to actually promote our areas. In fact, we were concerned about promoting these opportunities given the number of people participating. Take away all urban/other recreational distractions and the fundamental value of outdoor recreation is relevant again. Nothing can overcome the inherent value of the land and water itself to draw people who are simply looking to get out of the house and do something that is not in a crowded space.

- Maintaining services to traditional constituents while reaching out to new ones includes many facets to “agency relevancy.” In the area of outreach, our mission is to increase awareness of wildlife conservation needs and opportunities and help people understand the importance of land conservation, wildlife management, and outdoor recreation in maintaining quality of life. Our relevancy as a state agency depends in large part on our ability to actually provide those services. If our resources are diminished, our relevancy will suffer accordingly.
- The focus on the availability of public lands has never been greater than it is right now. Regardless of the topic of a press release, we are reminding people to get outside and enjoy the outdoors.
- Our sites were closed at the beginning of the pandemic and remained closed for 6-8 weeks. The public reaction to this clearly showed how much people value our sites and the recreational opportunities they provide, which highlighted our relevance as providers of outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation is of utmost importance in the quality of life of much of the population, and the opportunities we provide at our State Parks, State Fish and Wildlife Areas, State Forests, State Natural Areas and Historic Sites is a significant component of outdoor recreation in the state.
- The activities and programs that exist are very relevant to the well-being of our society.
- As people, particularly in urban and suburban locations, exhausted their indoor diversions, anecdotal information suggested they developed a heightened appreciation of nature in their backyards and communities, increasingly turned toward nature-based observations and interactions and confirming the importance of our fish and wildlife conservation mission to the general public. Nature exists everywhere and we could enhance our relevance with more urban-based education and outreach, capitalizing on people’s innate affinity with nature and the outdoors.
- We should continue to take the opportunity to inform the public (tell our story) on what we do as an Agency by using every tool available to us.
- Access to public lands and waters has proven to be extremely important to our public.
- The increase of public land use led to some government agencies closing access to the public. This created a noticeable outcry.
- We are seeing unprecedented use of these public facilities. In many cases, we are ‘the only game in town’ for those seeking an escape from home confinement.
- The need for more outdoor recreation was apparent to our staff and community.
- We have been lenient on minor violations utilizing warning and assisting persons in purchasing license and boat registrations by phone and online.
- COVID-19 is providing more time for people to hunt – time off from work, no organized sports.
- Learned that if given time most families and individuals will seek outdoor recreation and the need to be prepared to accommodate them when the opportunity arises.

- When residents feel that their ability to access your state’s natural resources have been denied, there will be outcry from all aspects of the public.

Nontraditional Users

- In our state, we should no longer have a major relevancy issue. Our public waters and lands remained open during the pandemic. Therefore, we received an increase in visitation from our traditional and especially non-traditional users. Our challenge now is to stay in front of this new user group and maintain our relevance once things go back to some sort of normal. Hopefully our staff made a great first impression on this group.
- Traditional as well as non-traditional users were reached. The fact that nearly all our facilities remained open and non-traditional users have been utilizing our properties may serve to enlighten people on opportunities we provide. The 38% uptick in license sales that fisheries experienced may indicate forgotten relevancy and we should capitalize on messaging those lapsed and new anglers.
- We have been able to educate new customers on rules and regulations of our agency.
- Although historically we have done little to reach out to broader constituencies, months before the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed, we were laying the groundwork to begin taking the relevancy issue seriously.
- We are seeing increased use of state game lands and likely new people are being exposed to our agency in this way.
- Now that more of the general public is aware of our programs and lands, we will look to leverage those new relationships to our benefit going forward.
- These and other efforts provide us an opportunity to bring in new customers/supporters who likely only got to know us while enduring the stay at home order.
- This pandemic has presented an opportunity for youth, individuals, and families to discover or reconnect with the outdoors.
- Emergency response broadened relevancy with certain constituents.
- Take advantage of and expand on the myriad of opportunities for broader user base activities provided through Public lands management programs.
- Public Trust Resources have been sought out because people have had more time with everything shut down. We are looking at more innovative ways to market to “new” customers. Families are spending more time in the outdoors.
- Opportunity to better partner with outdoor recreation industry re: promoting benefits of outdoor recreations programs and services by state agencies

Traditional Users

- Continuation of public service was close to normal re: responding to incidents, inquiries, day to day business (except public meetings).
- Some members of the public asked for a temporary suspension of the hunting and fishing license requirement during the COVID-19 situation.
- The agency owns and operates three shooting ranges across our state. Those ranges were closed as part of the COVID19 response. As a result, we received a great deal of requests from the public to reopen those ranges. Our ranges were the first facilities opened to the public.

- Some members of the public asked for relaxation of hunting and fishing season dates and bag limits to obtain sources of protein due to temporary meat shortages at grocery stores. The importance of fish and wildlife as a food supply has gained more attention recently.
- Participation and license sales are up across the board, and one major interpretation is that a lack of time really is a huge barrier to many people spending more time outdoors.
- Due to perceived meat shortages due to COVID-19, we are anecdotally seeing interest in hunting to provide a food source
- In times of quarantine or otherwise limited access to natural resources or outdoor recreation will thrust your agency to the forefront of public attention. This is evident in the inclusion of natural resource-based discussion in governmental actions, engagement of social media, drastic increase in media inquiries and increased contacts between the public and enforcement officers.
- Spring was a fortuitous time for herp monitoring with the recently developed app intended to engage public monitoring. Participation exceeded all expectations.

Messages

Wildlife Disease and Trade

- Management of wildlife disease issues may be more clear today than precovid. As our public has been inundated with information on how to manage covid-19. Many of these same issues can be applied to wildlife diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), which at times can be misunderstood and controversial. We believe people will be more receptive to this message going forward.
- State wildlife agencies could enhance efforts to inform the public of the implications of zoonotic disease transmission and the potential threats to human populations associated with the illegal trade of wildlife or the exposure to wildlife. Even fewer people are aware of the threats to wildlife populations as a result of infected humans exposing naïve wildlife populations.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also served to focus the public's attention on fish and wildlife health issues. Using guidance provided by AFWA, we have been able to implement a temporary moratorium on the handling of bats to avoid potential risks associated with reverse zoonosis and the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- Formed a team to address wildlife trade in the state, Legislative Budget Request for additional funding to leverage increased awareness, potentially leading to new research, management and rules.
- More people are aware of globalization and impacts on wildlife.
- Increased awareness of illegal wild animal trade.
- Increased awareness of captive wildlife (due to timing of Tiger King TV show).
- Managing wildlife trade is another area the agency has not prioritized in the past due to staffing limitations, but discussions have taken place within the past month to begin building a program to address the issue.
- As a state with an international border, our Game Wardens have a healthy working relationship with federal partners among many others. The Law Enforcement Division regularly uses multiple media resources to inform the public of the risk of illicit wildlife trade and the risk to natural resources and the public. In recent months, Game Wardens have investigated the illegal importations of aquatic products to include oysters, shrimp, crab, shark fins, among other items.

Education and Entertainment

- Pandemic provided an opportunity to reach new customers; with school closures, the Department's environmental education program developed wildlife focused homeschool curriculum including FB live sessions that was highly attended and appreciated.
- Wildlife viewing cams experienced very high viewership.
- Teaming with our state lottery dept, conducted a 12-hour FB live feed focusing on the state's wildlife and how lottery funds support it.
- Opportunity to develop and provide more conservation "edutainment" content on-line
- We have also seen increasing interest in online educational materials and online wildlife viewing opportunities (wildlife cams, etc.) as individuals have been at home. These should continue to be of value even post-COVID, as they are available for people to view quickly from their offices, etc.
- A new approach to outdoors education may need to be broached to ensure we are relevant for the future, continuing our work with fishers and the general public to create a community that connects ecosystems and biodiversity to public health.
- Through social media, we shared wildlife conservation success stories and promoted the diverse conservation work, as well as educational opportunities available through our agency.
- We utilize traditional news releases and social media posts to garner significant numbers of impressions. In recent years, some of these cases have also been featured on a dedicated TV series, which is viewed on Animal Planet by over 120 million people. Further, Law Enforcement personnel educate elected officials about conservation law enforcement, which was recently reflected in congressional testimony.
- Recognition that we need more data to demonstrate state and local economic value of conservation (contributing to rebuilding the state & national economies).
- Connecting people to wildlife through our newly developed educational webinar programs will reach a much broader scale of Nevada citizens. Instead of a program's limitation of space, location, or personnel capacity, we now can have the ability to bring our agency's programs to citizens homes.

Health

- We worked closely with our state health department to remind citizens that maintaining your mental health is critical in times like these, and spending time in nature is an excellent way to practice good mental health.
- While agency staff and park supporters have long referred to state parks as a critical function of government, during recent months that has been echoed by many elected officials as well. The references to parks and park personnel as "essential" by state leadership have been numerous, and the calls to reopen closed parks have been loud. State leaders have also often referred to the role parks play in maintaining the physical and mental health of citizens during this time. As noted above, anecdotal evidence points to new users for parks as citizens seek out nearby recreational venues and look for diversions from computer screens and indoor activities.
- The value of nature in improving public health and the issues associated with urbanization, invasive species, habitat loss, and zoonoses are ever more apparent to our staff.

- Strong and consistent messaging on the health benefits of outdoor recreation, especially fishing, hiking and biking has been a drum beat from government, health professionals and environmental groups.
- We noted the relevance of and took advantage of furthering the One Health discussion.

Methods of Communication

- Promoted a variety of outdoor recreation activities from the perspective of how to do them within CDC guidelines.
- Communication, internal and external, is difficult during a crisis, highly controlled; We were not able to leverage the national messaging about “getting outside” until ~ mid-May.
- Opportunity to develop incident command type system to manage and communicate opening/closures of public lands, waters and recreation areas (e.g., WMAs; national, state, county, city parks; beaches; national and state forests) to provide “one-stop shopping” info
- More people than ever are looking for info about places to recreate before they leave home, so agency website and apps need to be accurate and up to date.
- Ensure that the “get outside” messaging is aligned with state and local emergency orders that may limit accessibility to the outside.
- Opportunity to increase awareness of how safe, outdoor recreation reduces stress.
- The outdoors is always open and our agency utilized social influencers to tell a personal story of how the outdoors, hunting, and fishing are always open and available to the public. These activities have served as an outlet during a difficult time. We conveyed that outdoor activities are not only therapeutic for the mind, but also an effective way to socially distance. The video promoted our priority initiative of R3 in a way that reminded anglers why they love to fish and encouraged new customers to get outside and try something different, both for conservation and peace of mind.
- We must and will continue to be flexible with use of collaborative tools that can be used for outreach to constituents, partners, and customers, such as Zoom, WebEx, GoToMeeting, and Microsoft Teams. Using MS Teams Live and the AT&T conference service provided the virtual platform for our first-ever virtual Commission Meeting to include live public testimony.
- We have leveraged social media, our blog, and media outlets to get the word out regarding our agency’s offerings and outdoor opportunities.
- We have added phone lines, ramped up our marketing efforts, highlighted close to home fish stockings, built educational driving trails, produced a TV show over Google hangouts and more to make sure that we are more relevant than ever to the constituents who we serve.
- Users of the natural resources will seek official information from your agency’s Facebook pages. The use of Instagram, email, webinars, and other social media outlets are better for distribution of educational materials.
- We will soon be approving an agency strategic plan that includes “Relevance” as an agency guiding principle.
- We have enhanced our use of social media platforms, such as the NextDoor App, in ways that will benefit us moving forward. The Wildlife Briefs project, for example, has been a very successful endeavor that has given us the chance to make friends with people we have not communicated with directly in the past. And it is giving us the chance to position our agency and its people as the wildlife experts in the state.

- We have also changed our use of Facebook and YouTube. On Facebook, we have put more emphasis on educational wildlife content, and the content has reached new and broader audiences. During this time, we have also been posting more videos to YouTube, mainly educational webinars. This is improving our presence on the platform and increasing our subscriber.
- The situation has forced us to look outside of the box when it comes to our messaging. This challenge will make us stronger communicators/educators moving into the future.
- Staff has found new, more convenient ways to work with reporters to promote our message. For example, staff has been interviewed by reporters on FaceTime or over the phone multiple times. Before, staff would have to coordinate with reporters to choose a time and location to be interviewed. This involved phone calls back and forth with reporters. Staff would also often have to drive to news stations to be interviewed on set. The entire process could take hours out of the day. Now it takes minutes, and staff is still effectively getting our message across. We expect the media to continue using these methods for interviews moving forward.
- Our staff now have more time to re-design and re-develop our website. This project is important for the agency, because a new, mobile friendly site will make it easier for the public to better access information about hunting, fishing, boating, and the state's wildlife. This aids in our mission. While the project has always been a priority, working from home has given staff more time to put into working with the selected vendor to create the best site possible for the agency and public. This time home allows other divisions some extra time to work on their website needs. With all staff at home, all staff can more easily be engaged in the development and editing process. This time will give us a great opportunity to create a unique, mobile, and user-friendly website.