

# CONSERVATION FUNDING

**Any discussion of money should begin with a clear understanding of why it is needed or wanted. From this responsible start, it is easier to raise money in disciplined and successful ways. Prudent plans, such as increasing production and profit from bigger or better equipment, call for borrowing money in exchange for a return on capital. Riskier situations may arise from immediate needs, burning desires, or desperate straits, for which riskier financing is needed, and must be governed by a clear sense of need and purpose to avoid the spiral into credit cards, payday loans, and Tony Soprano.**

In conservation, the cold core need for financing is to sell conservation and deliver it to conservationists and the

public. We must recruit and keep people involved and organized as a strong customer base so there is always strong demand for lands and waters as habitat for fish and wildlife. We have reached a point where delivering the goods requires taking better care of public lands, enhancing conservation on private lands, and arranging more access. Wildlife populations need constant management and some need restoration or control.

For funding this enterprise, we have raised money largely through general taxes for federal agencies, charitable contributions for private groups such as the Boone and Crockett Club, and license fees and excise taxes on hunting and fishing gear that ultimately fund state wildlife agencies.

Our bottom line is taking hits from failures to deliver our goods. For example, Oregon has documented a decline in participation in the blacktail deer hunt as that population has declined. This means less revenue from licenses and excise taxes, and also less economic value to the communities where hunters travel, eat, and sleep. The decline in forest health—which is partly responsible for the blacktails' problems—is itself another example of how poor conservation results beget still worse efforts. As described more below, the routinely large and damaging fires that burn every year are costly to fight and are cannibalizing the budgets for restoring forests and wildlife habitat.

As we have reached a point of need, we must do

something about our financing. We are largely dependent on government, which operates by wavering around in the middle of the range between discipline and foolishness. To keep governmental conservation on track while also keeping private funding in line, the Club's approach must account for this reality. Our mission of guardianship and provident management depends on it. Therefore, what follows is a listing of principles for sobriety and feasibility that translate into actions that Club members themselves can take.

Many people believe, or assume by their actions, that the answer is simple: More federal money. This is no principle for action. But neither is any anti-government disregard for federal funding. We need it but it is no replacement



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for people making personal commitments. We need it, but we also know that conservation is strongest in countries with more vibrant economies, not bigger government.

There is always a risk of inefficiency and waste in government, but there are deeper pits that are more menacing hazards to avoid. One of these risk is immaturity. Ronald Reagan described government's infantile tendencies as "an unlimited appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other." In this bog, we lose the connection between what we want or need and how we pay for it.

The other trap is immobility. Aldo Leopold described government's inherent limit on size as being like the mastodon, "handicapped by its own dimensions"—an elephant in the room that is so big it cannot maneuver to do the multitude of small things that can be done only by, and rightly by, individuals.

And we must overcome a very practical problem, which is that the federal deficit is causing cuts in federal conservation spending. Our programs are not funded by any mandate in law, but other programs are. In fact these mandatory programs expend nearly everything the U.S. raises in taxes. With nothing left, the U.S. borrows to spend on conservation and other discretionary accounts. That means discretionary accounts are constantly under the knife of budget cutting to reduce the deficit. Instead of wringing out more spending from the federal budget, the best thing we can do is to help control the deficit in that budget.

To direct more money

to conservation while controlling the deficit, there are principles that lead to action. First, every sector of society should contribute to wildlife management and general conservation according to how each sector uses or affects land, water, and wildlife. We sportsmen committed to this principle nearly 80 years ago through a self-imposed excise tax on arms, ammunition, and boat fuel called the Sportfish and Wildlife Restoration Trust Fund, or PR-DJ for short (the initials of the lead congressional sponsors of these acts over time: Key Pittman, A. Willis Robertson, John Dingell, and Edwin Johnson).

Sustaining resources this way always returns general benefits beyond the direct effects and benefits. This is what we sportsmen-conservationists call a users-pay/public-benefits approach. There are other examples, though less direct, of sectors of society paying back, and these could be refined and expanded upon. If we act on these, we will have a comprehensive action agenda for the Club on conservation funding.

Energy development pays back through a share of royalties from outer-continental-shelf drilling operations called the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Farming is less of a users-pay system, at least a far less direct one, in that it expends general tax revenues through the programs of the Farm Bill to share costs with farmers for conservation work related to producing the food that we all eat.

The largest opportunity we have in dollar terms to redirect, refocus, and refine

an existing users-pay/public-benefits system is LWCF. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is a variant of the idea behind the Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Trust Fund and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The common feature is that payments from users of a resource are collected by the government and apportioned for conservation.

There are ideas in play for the 114th Congress that would tighten and focus the incentives in LWCF that could raise more money from other user-groups. On the revenue side, LWCF could collect funds through excise taxes on goods used in recreating on public lands and water, for example; hiking, biking, camping, and birdwatching gear. A public land stamp akin to the Federal Duck Stamp is also conceivable. On the spending and benefits side, the use of funds could be expanded to cover operations and maintenance of public lands and waters, including active habitat management.

To act on this principle, the Club needs more of its members to play a personal role with the Club's policy team. We have professionals

under contract who can advise or guide any interested member in leading or supporting a task in the advancing of the users-pay/public-benefits principle. Opportunities for this include the conservation programs of the Highway Bill, the Energy Bill, the National Defense Authorization Act, and the Water Resources Development Act.

The Highway Bill has at times funded bridges and tunnels for migrating wildlife and repairs for fish passage routes interrupted by culverts or other water developments. Disrupted fisheries can be mitigated with support for hatcheries and habitat conservation—this came up in the Senate floor debate on the Sportsmen's Act in 2014; it still needs work.

The Energy Bill—and this example applies under state laws also—is an opportunity to return a share of the value of energy, which is developed at some risk to wildlife and habitat, back to achieving goals for wildlife and habitat through aggressive mitigation strategies, and to fund conservation projects. The debate on this idea should be about how, not whether to use some of the value coming

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up from the ground to pay for the values on the surface. There have recently been failed attempts to arrange this that have soured the necessary working relationships between conservationists and energy developers. There is work to do here.

The activities required to engage in this work include some reading and attendance on calls or in meetings, independent strategic thinking, and developing personal relationships with members of Congress, their senior staff, and other government officials.

The second principle for conservation funding is the need for money to sustain active routine conservation while restoring lost conservation values. This is like continuing to save money while paying down debt; neglecting routines while repairing problems compounds the likelihood of new problems.

Forest management is a prime example in which the Club is already engaged and could use the help of more Club members. Decades of well-intentioned, but misguided forest practices have saddled the U.S. with many acres of old, overgrown, dense forests. Many of these burn every year in bigger and hotter

conflagrations than would occur if forests were more diversely composed of young and old age classes, open and closed canopies, and richer mixes of tree and plant species. In these more diverse forests, there is more food and better cover for big game and other wildlife.

The Club is pursuing a straightforward fix that will help restore forest conditions while grappling with huge wildfires every year. The big fires are literally a burden of debt. They are so costly to contain every year that the Forest Service must divert money and effort from each year's program of forest management. Our fix—which the administration and bipartisan members of congress support—would move the cost of the biggest fires into accounts for addressing disasters, leaving the operations budget to fund the routine forestry that reduce the risk of wildfire.

The President's Budget for FY 2016 released in February once again proposed this change. To support it and any Congressional proposals that arise will take the same sort of active member involvement described above: working with the policy team and meeting with members of Congress and agency officials.

The final principle relies on sportsmen and other conservationists continuing to pay their own way above and beyond the governmental programs. These are personal actions and private contributions of time and money that sustain conservation organizations. The most eloquent statement of this principle is Leopold's essay, *The Land Ethic*. But there are specific actions at hand by which we can promote it.

The Club must finish the work on its 10-year project to allow higher deductibility of the value of donated conservation easements, and we should protect the deductibility of all charitable contributions. We should also develop similar ideas as part of broader tax reform. Where private individuals take the initiative to pay for conservation directly, the efforts are more direct and effective than government spending, and this should be reflected in lower tax bills.

Senators Dean Heller (R-NV) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) recently introduced the bill (S. 330) that would accomplish this goal. It makes permanent a rule giving landowners more years to carry forward deductions (and at larger amounts) on donated

conservation easements. Senators Heller and Stabenow need help moving the bill, which any Club member could provide whether their home state is Nevada or Michigan or any other. When we enact the permanent policy, donating conservation easements will be more valuable to more landowners, especially "land rich/cash poor" landowners.

In conclusion, there is an intentional reason that this review has not quoted a single dollar amount. Dollar figures are relevant to the workings of budgets, but budgets are only useful when derived from purposes and strategy—the focus of this review. Until the Club fixes on a vision of principled conservation funding, the numbers stand for a disorganized litany of small decisions. True to our position as conservation leaders, we must take the actions described in this review to start the community in steps toward a new century of sustainable conservation funding. ■

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