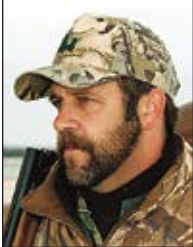


CAPITOL COMMENTS

Our Industry Partners



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The Wildlife Management Institute was founded by Club members in 1911 and quickly supported by firearms and ammunition industry leaders concerned about the plight of wildlife in this country.

Years of subsistence and market hunting with little regulation and no regard for sustainability led to a nation with vast expanses of land devoid of wildlife. Recognizing this condition was detrimental to their future business, and with genuine and personal concern about the state of wildlife, these leaders formed an organization that would ultimately help shape wildlife conservation for years to come.

Later, these industry leaders agreed to redirect an existing manufacturers' excise tax on firearms and ammunition to support wildlife conservation. With the conceptual ground work and legislative channels provided by the Club, along with this industry support, the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, passed Congress in 1937. These funds would become an essential component of state fish and wildlife agencies' funding. The combination of license fees and excise tax apportionments annually provided more than \$1.3 billion worth of wildlife conservation efforts during the last few years. Although I have written about this "economic engine for conservation" numerous times, I have wondered how industry views its return on this investment.

In 2011, Andrew Loftus Consulting and Southwick and Associates, Inc., published a report titled, "Financial Returns to Industry from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program." It garnered some interest and press releases then, but it is probably more germane today than ever. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies commissioned the report, which was supported by the Fish and Wildlife Service and industry advisors. Part of the reason for the

report was to respond to industry concern about the eventual fate of excise tax payments. After all, industry manufacturers wrote checks totaling almost \$500 million each year, a substantial sum of money for companies to carry on their balance sheets.

Recently, we have realized that a substantial portion of those excise taxes originated from products associated with shooting, not hunting. This realization has refocused many within our profession to emphasize shooting programs not just as a

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source of revenue but also as an introductory step into hunting. I agree with increasing that emphasis; however, I am concerned with what appears to be a resultant de-emphasis on the role of hunting's contribution to conservation funding and to industry's bottom line.

Loftus and Southwick's report chronicled the expanding hunting opportunities in the nation due to excise tax-funded research and management programs. In 1937, no states had dedicated bow or muzzleloader hunting seasons. The number of hunters increased nearly 250 percent between 1937 and 1982. Even with a slight decline in hunter numbers, more than twice as many hunters, and therefore customers, exist today as compared to 1937. Without question, industry's contributions helped create the scientific underpinning for successful wildlife

management programs that led to increased opportunities and access.

But what of the financial return on industry's investments (ROI)? The report stated that the ROI ranged from 823 percent in 1976 to a high of 1,588 percent in 1997. The ROI was due in part to matching funds required by state agencies and the long-term benefits of land acquisitions, easements, and public access. Another indirect ROI is the Wildlife Restoration Act's mandate that hunting license dollars must be spent on wildlife conservation projects, not to be diverted to other state uses. Industry has a guarantee from Congress that their investment will actually benefit conservation causes and ultimately their bottom line.

I am not a businessman, nor do I shoulder the responsibility to shareholders who rightfully expect a return on their investment. However, I am a hunter-conservationist who has worked closely with industry for many years. I know that diminished industry support for the excise tax program would have serious short- and long-term consequences for industry and our nation. That is why numerous colleagues and I work closely with industry leaders to explain the benefits of this program. We have identified the consequences of a lack of support: decreased wildlife abundance, decreased habitat quality, decreased social and political support for hunting and gun ownership, decreased customer base, decreased revenue, and decreased funding for conservation.

Through the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, state agencies, industry, and hunter-conservationist organizations work side by side to enhance the excise tax program. Today, industry support for the program is strong. However, increased pressure to improve bottom lines, changes in industry leadership, and changes in priorities may alter that support in the future. When you get a chance to thank an industry leader for their long-term support of conservation, do so with enthusiasm. Also respectfully remind them that, as hunters, we are their customer base, we buy their products, and we expect their commitment for years to come. ■