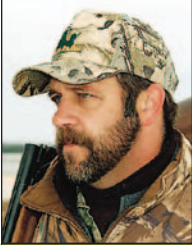


# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## Conservation Funding for the Future



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The 16-day government shutdown in October is history, and I, for one, hope we do not repeat history in January when Congress debates spending and deficits again. In my last column, I asked for reasonable compromise. Apparently reasonable compromise was

deemed unreasonable, but we should hope for a better resolution in January. Congress is back in session as I write and ready to grapple with the same issues it has punted time and time again—federal deficits and federal debt.

Who would have thought that sequestration, a deadfall trap intended to kill a budget impasse, would become the normative mechanism to managing our nation's spending? Sequestration has become a snare that is holding back important resource allocations that have to take place. Meanwhile, federal agencies have been forced to accept across-the-board cuts, and state fish and wildlife agencies are unable to use a portion of the federal excise taxes collected for and directed to state fish and wildlife conservation. To add insult to injury, these federal excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, archery, and fishing equipment are at record high levels. The funds languish in the federal treasury at a time when most state agencies are facing unprecedented conservation challenges and insufficient financial resources.

Funding conservation in the U.S. is accomplished in numerous ways. Federal tax dollars fuel the conservation engine for land management agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Bureau of Reclamation. Nonprofits and individual philanthropy play a large role in acquiring and/or conserving lands and species. Notable examples are The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Trust for Public Lands, and many others. Conservation organizations like Pheasants Forever and the National Wild Turkey Federation focus their conservation efforts on private landowners

and the use of Natural Resource Conservation Service federal grant funds. The aforementioned federal excise tax dollars apportioned through the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Acts provide states with roughly \$700 million annually for conservation. However, the most significant source of conservation funding for states is license and permit fees paid by hunters and anglers. In 2011, those fees amounted to approximately \$1.5 billion. In addition, hunters and anglers also pay their federal taxes, donate to organizations, and purchase firearms, ammunition, and fishing equipment.

Although we talk about the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation

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as though it includes a funding mechanism for conservation, that is untrue. The model does not address funding per se, perhaps because conservation funding in Canada is quite different than it is in the United States. Our reliance on the American system of conservation funding (the "user pays-public benefits" model) in the U.S. is unique but it is at risk in the future. Shane Mahoney (biologist, writer, and lecturer from Newfoundland, Canada) among others, has rightfully questioned the sustainability of the American system of conservation funding. Hunter and angler numbers have stagnated or declined in

some areas of the country. License and permit fees have increased to meet revenue demands, particularly across much of the western U.S. Shane and others have advocated for a wider and more inclusive funding source rather than relying on the hunting and fishing segment of our population.

Given the fickle nature of politics and budget allocations at the federal and state level, the vagaries of philanthropic giving, the unprecedented but unsustainable spike in excise taxes, and the financial aspects of hunting and fishing licenses sales, it is clear that future revenue sources for conservation must be explored. What is crystal clear is

that expenses for conservation will continue to rise. Resource agencies are contending with the impacts of oil and gas development, solar and wind energy development, climate change, agricultural land conversion, habitat destruction and fragmentation, and a myriad of other issues that affect all fish and wildlife species. These impacts accompany a growing population that currently numbers around 315 million in this country and 7 billion globally.

The Boone and Crockett Club, as it has on many occasions in the past, could and should lead the debate about how we address the future funding of conservation in the U.S. Sustainable funding is consistently one of, if not the top, priority of state fish and wildlife agencies in the last two decades. Let's put the collective knowledge and experience of regular and professional members together to address revenue sources for conservation. In future columns I hope to expand on this topic but it is essential that all of us start thinking now. ■

