

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Strengthening Our Voice For Conservation



Rollin D. Sparrowe

President
Wildlife Management Institute

Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club

THE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION Partners met on March 16, 2001, at the 66th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Washington, DC. Almost all of the 35 organizations were represented and an excellent meeting confirmed the Partnership, its operating procedures, and a strong agenda of broad conservation topics as previously reported. We left the meeting with the intent to pursue meetings with the President, the new Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture, and with Congress. The time is right for the Wildlife Conservation Partnership to step forward and enhance our collective engagement in resource and land management issues that affect natural resource conservation, wildlife and habitat, and our enjoyment of those resources.

A curious thing is happening. With a new conservative President and Administration, hunter/conservationists somehow are suddenly attractive to other organizations, the media, and even grantors, which think that somehow we will have a stronger voice for the next four years. Hunter/conservationists are seen as a force that can open doors and work with the new leadership. Let's hope this is true, because we have as much at stake as any other interest group! This is of course, the intent of our new national partnership, and we must pursue it with vigor regardless of what others think—or what reasons they may have to seek us out now when they did not previously.

Conservation and environmental issues have become an early area of conflict in the new Administration. The appointment process remains agonizingly slow, and it is possible that key agency heads will not be appointed until midsummer. Those in place seem hampered by lack of staff to deal with complex issues. "Think tanks" in Washington are rather loudly recommending that the Administration select people based on loyalty to the President's agenda and to ideologi-

cal strengths, rather than specific knowledge or expertise on topics or issues. Many who have been appointed seem to reflect political connections and industries rather than other skills. There is an "art" to managing in the bureaucracy that can't be ignored, and connection between new appointees and career professionals will be essential for orderly change to occur, or programs may be disrupted.

A bright spot, on April 12, was the nomination of Dale Bosworth as the 15th Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Dale is a career professional with broad experience, most recently as Regional Forester in the Forest Service Region covering the Northern Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. Dale is widely connected in conservation circles and is someone who will listen to the concerns of the Wildlife Conservation Partners. With Dale at the helm of the Forest Service, we have a new opportunity to recover ground lost concerning wildlife habitat in the National Forest System.

We were fortunate to have Interior Secretary Gale Norton speak to the professional community at the 66th North American, then share lunch with us and meet many conservation leaders. Club President Earl Morgenroth visited extensively with the Secretary at lunch and among other things, talked about the Wildlife Conservation Partners and the Club's desire to work with her. We have had less success with access to other new Cabinet appointees, most of whom still have few staff but a daunting meeting schedule.

The failure—or partial victory depending on how you look at it—of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA) last year has identified a fundamental dichotomy in the vision of what is needed to advance the cause of conservation in the United States. While much rhetoric about CARA—particularly from property rights activists—was that it was an acquisition program and a threat to private land, the

Club decided that the CARA legislation actually improved the oversight of federal land acquisition. Acquiring land but not providing management capability is not a full investment in the future. The track record of fish and wildlife resource recovery in the United States under stable funding to the states, and financially supporting a professional workforce to manage habitat and wildlife, is a model of unparalleled success. The real goal for CARA continues to be expansion of that stable funding beyond the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, to provide the capability for states to manage all fish and wildlife and their habitats. This will reduce the federalization of those resources through prevention of declines, and it can avoid the sort of crisis management that triggers federal intervention and regulation. This fundamental premise of stable funding for wildlife—not just acquisition—is a key goal of the new national partnership. This was lost on those who walked away from CARA last year.

Since then, HR 701 has been reintroduced in the House of Representatives and other approaches are being pursued in the Senate. There is some talk of separating the wildlife funding by itself. The climate is not the same in either the Congress or the new Administration, and wildlife funding advocates have their hands full raising this issue over discussions that focus on tax cuts, education reform, paying down the federal debt, and supply and demand of energy.

We predicted that those who opted to support annual appropriations with a focus on land acquisition rather than stable funding to the agencies through CARA would regret that decision. In the first rollout of President Bush's budget on April 9, that fear took real shape. The same environmentalists who helped scuttle CARA at the end of the last session, are desperately pushing continuation of the land acqui-

sition funding as a first priority. But the Bush budget throws curves to everyone. In a new approach to "block grant funding," the Interior Department has not requested the second year of modest new funding for state wildlife programs (see update on CARA, *Fair Chase* Spring 2001) but suggests that states (meaning governors) could elect to use funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This would change the focus of LWCF funding to paying operational costs of programs, and would put programs of funding to state wildlife agencies in direct competition with many other state programs—no guarantee of wildlife program funding at all. Worse yet, the National Park Service would manage the account to distribute money to state wildlife agencies! Wildlife funding has never done well when it is just one option among many. These changes miss the mark,

do not guarantee expenditure for wildlife, and need to be fixed.

It is not yet clear how this kind of funding shift is expected to work. It is quite clear that the Park Service has no business administering funds that go to operating programs of state wildlife agencies, especially when the Park Service budget proposes over \$440 million of Land and Water Conservation Funds for its own needs. This doesn't mean the Administration had intent to do any harm to the Pittman-Robertson program, but it goes without saying that changes in government can have unintended negative effects. Here is a specific situation where a new Administration could have benefited from direct input from the expertise of the Wildlife Conservation Partners. Now it falls to us to try to help unravel this puzzle, clarify what the needs are for wildlife conservation in the future, and work with the Administration to assure

that these funds get to state wildlife agencies.

CARA activities are proceeding strongly to rally the grassroots nationwide, to firm up coalitions working directly with the Congress, and prepare for another run at this important objective. Several problems face the CARA effort:

1. Other energy stakes are higher this year and the attention of some in Congress who were helpful before will be diverted elsewhere.
2. National parks seem to dominate the agenda with the White House as they did in the transition dialogue within Interior.
3. So far, stable funding for wildlife programs in the state agencies does not appear to be a priority for this Administration.

This latter point is one about which Club Members may be able to help directly. For CARA to move successfully and provide a future for traditional wildlife agencies to lead



...the funds could be redirected ... to build up a substantial trust, the annual proceeds of which would be available for monitoring impacts, and for habitat protection and enhancement of wildlife populations influenced by development.

Of much greater importance to the Boone and Crockett Club is assuring that the needs of game herds in winter and in other key times of the year receive direct consideration as energy development and operational phases proceed.

in the 21st century, stable funding to the states needs to become a personal priority for the President.

The country still awaits firm plans from the Administration for the proposed accelerated energy development. The announcement in the President's budget and in legislation in the Senate of intent to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) has met widespread public resistance. Well-orchestrated campaigns and statements by various public figures in opposition to this development have slowed the momentum. It will continue to be debated and has a large constituency, as it should.

Of much greater importance to the Boone and Crockett Club is assuring that the needs of game herds in winter and in other key times of the year receive direct consideration as energy development and operational phases proceed. Indeed, there are some areas that should not be devel-

oped because they are so important. Decisions on all of this should be made carefully based on specific considerations of geographically distinct areas and impacts on wildlife populations and their seasonal ranges. So far, wildlife interests are not on the table as discussions occur about plans and proposals to open important lands to more exploration. The Interior Department has a working group and the Vice President is chairing a major planning effort government-wide, yet these activities do not appear to be considering the wildlife resources we care about. Once again, this situation cries out for the Wildlife Conservation Partners to provide the

expertise to deal with this complex situation for wildlife.

We need to clarify that we are not opposing orderly development of energy resources to meet our country's needs. However, not all of the restrictions on energy development are products of last minute decisions of the departed Administration. In fact, many of them occurred over several years, with lots of input from wildlife organizations. A reasonable platform for the Club and other organizations goes something like this: development and production of energy on public lands should be conducted with as much care as such development on private lands; renewable resources such as mule deer and cutthroat trout require equal consideration under law; scarce sportsmen's dollars from excise taxes should not have to pay to monitor the effects of development nor fund remedial action; and development must be carefully authorized on a site-by-site basis with specific attention to the wildlife resources. Such a platform would avoid repeating the mistakes we have been upset about in recent sweeping designations of land uses. It would be the businesslike approach that is needed.

A concept of a "trust fund for energy development and wildlife" is emerging. Revenues from energy development are substantial, and those already collected from onshore oil and gas producers that go into the U.S. Treasury offer a logical source of funding for wildlife. This would not interfere with the revenues that go to the states or elsewhere; the funds could be redirected for a specified number of years to build up a substantial trust, the annual proceeds of which would be available for monitoring impacts, and for habitat protection and enhancement of wildlife populations influenced by development. All appropriate property rights and other concerns could be dealt with directly, and the funds—designated for wildlife and fish in proportion to the development activity—would go back to the states.

This is a project to which the Boone and Crockett Club can offer much expertise. Its basis must not be a case of placing blame on one industry for what is happening to wildlife, but instead an opportunity in which industry and hunter/conservationists can be visionary. Our mule deer, elk, and pronghorn have been affected by roads, fences, ranching and farming, towns, second home development, and long-term reduction in habitat quality. No single factor is likely the reason for reduction in herds or limitations on their productivity. This project should be a winning prospect—especially with respect to game herds—for the next century. Making this happen could be a milestone in the Club's conservation legacy.

Much more will be coming out about the Federal Budget and its natural resource implications in the future. Appointments will proceed and it will be clearer where agencies and programs are going. Some opportunities are already in the mix. The Department of Interior for example, has suggested in the Budget proposed for the Fish and Wildlife Service a "timeout" on citizen petitions for listings of endangered species. This would give an opportunity to reexamine how biological priorities might drive listings and protection, how priorities may be set among all of the needs for declining wildlife, and even lead to consideration of how better to deal with the landscape under management and use by people, and still conserve wildlife. This proposal has immediately provoked widespread opposition, but the concept offers an interesting potential to work constructively on a difficult problem. There are likely to be equally sensitive but equally promising opportunities as proposed changes in programs unfold in the coming months. The Boone and Crockett Club should remain open to involvement as we are needed, and definitely needs to drive forward with the Wildlife Conservation Partners to make our voice heard. ▲▲▲