

CAPITOL COMMENTS

A Different America



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WITH THE EXCEPTION OF the devastation in New York, no place in the United States has been more affected by the terrorist attacks than Washington, DC, even discounting the horror at the Pentagon. Just as the post-terrorist attack responses have changed our lives, the continuing harassment of anthrax scares and its reality have slowed the progress of your government. Reduced access to government buildings, to Capitol Hill, and to lawmakers have refocused the governmental life of America. Many of the changes are probably permanent, as are some losses of our personal freedoms. At this writing, Congressional buildings are closed and the outcome is uncertain.

Where do wildlife and natural resources fit in the national security agenda? In these first days of reaction to the September attacks and the onset of war in Afghanistan, the country's focus is on security and sorting out a dizzying array of real and perceived threats to people. The wheels of government are moving ahead to try to do normal business, to keep basic programs operating, and to ensure a focus on security issues. This offers both hazards and opportunities for our wildlife future.

Clearly, a leadership role for the Boone and Crockett Club in these momentous events should be to reinforce the truth that responsible use of both renewable and nonrenewable natural resources are as vital to our security as a nation as any other long-term plan of action for our future. In the heat of the moment, with emotions running high concerning new threats of bioterrorism, it may be hard to see that priority: especially if you are a legislator run out of your office by real threats that have affected your staff. But long-term productivity of the soil, effective and efficient use of energy, and preserving functioning natural systems such as forests, coastlines and watersheds are more impor-

tant to the future of America at this time, not less so.

We have already been concerned with good reason about the potential effect of chronic wasting disease (CWD) on our deer and elk populations. This concern immediately encompasses elk ranching and other economic uses of wildlife, which already are controversial in their own right. The potential for a hunter to encounter CWD or other diseases in wildlife has been a visible concern. But anthrax in the mail system, and the potential for dozens or even hundreds of other disease organisms or compounds to be used by terrorists puts a whole new cast on these threats. We watched with alarm the overreaction of agricultural disease control experts recently over the threat of hoof and mouth disease again entering the North American continent. Actual plans to eradicate deer, elk, and other wildlife in major areas, such as the northern Rockies, were discussed just within the past few months before the terrorist attacks. This was clearly overreaction.

All this means is that it is quite possible, under the tremendous pressures that have developed since September 11, that wildlife and natural resource issues will be swept aside in the name of national security. In fact, as this is written, there is a government task force considering setting aside protections for wildlife on winter ranges and other important areas where energy development is underway. I have written enough about this real threat to your big game herds over the past several years, that I won't go into any more detail. However, just as an example, none of the Wildlife Conservation Partners have been invited into this dialogue to protect the interests of wildlife while other difficult decisions are made. As usual, we are likely to play catch-up as the widely publicized "need to remove restrictions" is fueled by increased rhetoric about

the need for national energy independence.

Even the agricultural community has publicly begun to respond to the possibility of terrorism actively affecting our food supplies. What a different America this is just a few weeks after this disaster! Individual farms and communities and the agriculture industry are regrouping to protect food supplies against possible attacks as a measure of national security. This ought to reinforce the reality that soil, water, air, forests, watersheds, and wildlife are vital to the future of this country for its security and the well being of the populace. Those very arguments must be voiced as the country shuffles its priorities.

Budgets for natural resources, including wildlife, are likely to be at or above current levels in 2002. Why? Because the Administration and the Congress have agreed to expedite the appropriations processes, avoid partisan arguments, and get on with the business of keeping the country going for another year. They have more urgent problems to solve since September. This is an important development, and the implications for subsequent years are only now becoming evident. Mitch Daniels, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, stated that response to terrorist activities, rebuilding New York, and the war on terrorism would have to "be paid for." He used the word "offset," suggesting that the costs could not just be "extras" placed on top of the existing budget, but would somehow have to be accommodated within a restructured budget. The discussion proceeded to the possibility of major cuts in domestic programs, based on a national reevaluation of priorities. So, what we are seeing in this year is somewhat of a honeymoon, beyond which all bets may be off, and programs that support natural resource management will be prioritized against others. In past crisis situations, wildlife has not done well.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PARTNERS PROGRESS

An exciting "second summit" of the Wildlife Conservation Partners (WCP) was held August 21-22 in Cody, Wyoming. Organized by the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, and cohosted by Bob Model at Mooncrest Ranch, the meeting was inspiring. More than 30 organizations attended, discussed the partnership and how it might be managed, agreed upon a final draft of a charter which outlines need, purpose, principles, and operating rules and committees to keep the effort rolling. Attendees broke into working groups and discussed how to conduct work to resolve the issues outlined in "Wildlife For The Twenty-First Century." In brief, work groups laid out work plans, discussed outcomes and who may carryout the work, and are even now working to draft "white papers" that will describe specific needs and tasks, and lead to assignments to develop and explore action on these issues. The whole purpose of the meeting focused first on how WCP can operate functionally as a partnership, and then develop action plans to move our agenda.

A small contest was held to assure that we continue to view WCP as a partnership composed of participating organizations, not a new organization unto itself. Club President Earl Morgenroth just edged out professional member Paul Hansen in referring to WCP as an "organization." There was a \$10 penalty for each "mistake." While it was humorous, it also illustrated our zeal to keep this a "working partnership" that collectively assesses issues, the resolution of which is sought by individual organizations that decide to work together.

Since the summer meeting, of course, our lives have been interrupted by the new reality of terrorism. Events and progress on the issues identified by WCP are not as

clear as they might be, yet work is proceeding. Ducks Unlimited set up a meeting with the Council on Environment Quality (CEQ), to focus on the Farm Bill. This meeting enabled many WCP members to join other organizations in showcasing their interest in wildlife and natural resources issues to the new staff at CEQ. We were well received, in an atmosphere in which CEQ highlighted resource stewardship, performance objectives and partnerships, and dependence on sound science to deal with wildlife and resource management. Involving local interests in decisions, and ensuring compliance were other topics. WCP members have had other discussions with CEQ staff about energy development, about the need to focus on national wildlife refuges as well as parks, and about the need to pass the Conservation and Reinvestment Act to fund state wildlife agencies. Such meetings, whether developed for WCP or opportunistically enabling WCP to pursue its interests are the kind of "door openings" that we need at this time of turmoil in our new government.

The third summit of the WCP is being planned for September 15-16, 2002, at Big Sky, Montana. This will be followed by the annual meeting of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, also in Big Sky. A celebration day of September 17, between the meetings, is planned as a commemorative event for the 100th year of professional wildlife management in America. This offers an unusual opportunity to join with the state resource managers in this celebration and to cement relationships in working together on wildlife issues.

A meeting of the WCP in conjunction with the 67th North American Wildlife and Natural Resource Conference (April 3-7, 2002 in Dallas, Texas) is also being planned. A business agenda for WCP itself will be followed, then the meeting at which we have

agreed to encourage nonparticipating organizations to observe and find out what WCP is all about. This gathering will be the annual "open meeting" of WCP.

Many activities in government that have a major impact on wildlife seem to be on hold at this time. The CARA effort is alive and well, but unlikely to be finished in this legislative year. Budgets for federal natural resource agencies look positive for our interests. The Farm Bill is moving ahead strongly, with the House having passed its version, and the Senate starting to act during October. It is uncertain how far things will progress before the end of this Congressional Session. In either case, the bread and butter issues for wildlife—the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetland Reserve Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Forest Management provisions, and a New Grassland Easement Program appear to be integral parts of House or Senate dialogue about the Farm Bill. The details of the outcome are far from secure, but the outlook is good to continue a significant conservation segment in farm programs in the next Farm Bill.

It is uncertain how smoothly government will progress in all of its many areas during the coming months. The war is new, the threat of terrorism is with us daily, and the job of dealing with natural resources has not been made easier. Let's be sure the Boone and Crockett Club stands united as a strong messenger of the importance of our wildlife and resource base to national security. ▲▲▲

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