

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Working for Wildlife in an Election Year



Rollin D. Sparrowe
PRESIDENT
Wildlife Management
Institute
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

The reality of an election year in which strong forces are attempting to either hold or change the balance of power in the Congress offers interesting opportunities. Further, what plays out this fall for wildlife, and perhaps for politics, could have an impact on a presidential election two years hence.

The key question? Are we asking for enough for wildlife through the Boone and Crockett Club and through the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) in our interactions with the Administration and the Congress? After all, that's the name of the game isn't it? Support for issues affects political support, and the reality is it can be traded like any other commodity. Wildlife interests have just not been good at making their needs known, turning them into a clear "ask" and holding their leaders accountable. It would seem to be time for the wildlife community to exercise this strategy, get specific, and play the game as everyone else is playing it. Are we ready for that?

Access to the Administration continues after the strong victory for conservation forces in the 2002 Farm Bill. As forecast in the last issue of *Fair Chase*, a giant Farm Bill with excellent wildlife habitat provisions passed the Congress. For the next six years, and possibly longer, these

programs will continue the bonanza of prairie game birds, ducks and other waterfowl, a variety of songbirds, deer, and other resources to put wildlife benefits right up there with soil and water conservation as the objectives of the American people in supporting farm programs.

The Administration needs help in implementation of this Farm Bill, like at no other time. Long-term downsizing of USDA staffing and the huge size of the new programs has resulted in estimates of a shortage of more than 3,000 technically trained people to deliver programs to the landowner. This means that the credibility of this Administration in delivering the programs, the Congress in having funded it, and the wildlife community in having pushed successfully for our strong provisions will all be on the line. Success of the Farm Bill will be judged by how well these programs work.

The same wildlife and agriculture interests that worked together to pass the Farm Bill have now turned their energies to implementation and provision of that technical assistance. It should happen through sources external to government like state wildlife agencies and contractors.

The 2002 Farm Bill scorecard is impressive:

- Conservation Reserve Program reauthorized through 2007 with an increased enrollment from 36.4 to 39.2 million acres and a pilot program for a million acres of wetlands.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program raises funding from \$200 million/year in the past to a whopping \$1.3 billion for FY 07.

- Wetlands Reserve Program supports wetlands restoration through easements and wetland restoration agreements on 250,000 acres per year up to a cap of 2.275 million acres.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program supports wildlife habitat projects starting at \$15 million going up to \$85 million by FY 05.
- Farmland Protection Program reauthorized at \$50 million for FY 02, going up to \$97 million for FY 07.
- Grassland Reserve Program, a new program to keep the last native grassland intact is authorized at 2 million acres with \$254 million.
- Conservation Security Program, a new program to pay farmers and ranchers for conservation practices. Authorized up to \$2 billion over time, it appears that pilot projects will be done first.

This Farm Bill exemplifies the power of partnerships and the power of learning to work with others to channel the use of large sums of money to meet wildlife's needs on the ground. The payoff for wildlife, hunting, and fishing dwarfs most of the endeavors that our community has been involved with.

Already there is talk of changing programs through appropriation. Commodity-related programs seem bulletproof, but conservation programs may not. While we legitimately work toward better implementation, we had better be ready to do battle to keep programs funded. We must be ready to make demands to keep the focus on conservation that helped pass the Farm Bill.

On another front, the proposed Homeland Security Agency would consolidate a wide range of government programs. Included is a proposal to transfer the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to Homeland Security. APHIS controls nuisance wildlife, conducts research on important diseases and control methods, and has been an important wildlife program. If APHIS were to be moved into a defense mode, how high a priority will remain for developing new methods for controlling nuisance wildlife, such as Canada geese, whitetail deer, and other species? Predator management, always controversial, needs attention. Recent actions of APHIS in

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planning for potential mad cow disease or brucellosis outbreaks did not convey great confidence to the wildlife community. Plans were initially drawn up for control of free-ranging wildlife without our input. If such an agency ends up in a defense mode, will its deliberations be more closed? Consider the possible magnitude of the Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) threat to hunting and associated industries in America. Without APHIS, can we effectively deal with CWD in cooperation with wildlife authorities at the state and federal level? Perhaps we should ask a friendly Administration to reconsider this, or provide assurances our needs will be met.

A landmark dialogue was convened in June, once again with the generous backing of Club leader Bob Model and his Mooncrest Ranch in Wyoming. An Energy Development Stakeholders Summit, sponsored by Sportsmen and Ranchers For Land Stewardship, with support from the Department of Interior (DOI) started a long overdue dialogue. Forty individuals representing wildlife and fish, ranching, and energy development met on June 14-15 at the Mooncrest Ranch to begin exploring reasonable solutions to potential conflicts between fish and wildlife, ranching, and energy development. Key DOI officials were present as observers. Facilitation for the Summit was provided by Meridian Institute, and a list of participants and summary of what was discussed is now available.

This was a "get acquainted" meeting, to achieve a common understanding of the challenges faced by each of the participating groups, and to discuss ways to improve operational approaches to provide for energy development and proper stewardship of other public land resources. Funding needs for the Bureau of Land Management and other sources for fish and wildlife were considered, and the dialogue is continuing. No commitments were made but the meeting seemed to have achieved its basic objectives.

Much of the discussion by industry was on the need for energy for the public. There is a conviction that much of energy development is misunderstood and misrepresented, but that there may indeed be ways to work more closely together. The ranching community

expressed concern about private property rights, adverse impacts to their operations, and water issues among others. Wildlife and fisheries representatives focused on public lands where pronghorn, mule deer, sage grouse and cutthroat trout are under pressure. They want to see fish and wildlife managed proactively through the development period, and they feel sportsmen should not have to pay the cost of a second restoration of important species. Facilitated discussion groups addressed funding needs, mitigation and enhancement potential, relationships/communication/outreach needs, and potential for adaptive management in resource planning.

Participants unanimously agreed that further steps in the dialogue seem useful, and there was considerable resolve to continue talking. Work is underway on common issues like how to fund and staff the Bureau of Land Management to do a job that will adequately protect

resources and yet facilitate development moving ahead, while considering new funding sources. Stakeholders have new communication that is hopeful for the future of our wildlife resources.

In Washington, an array of members of the AWCP including our Club and fisheries groups have together contacted Congressional Conferees developing a new National Energy Policy with a request to directly include fish and wildlife in that policy planning and provide funding. This is a prime example of the kind of "ask" that our community must put forward with any Administration and Congress, friendly or not. It is the sort of thing that Theodore Roosevelt understood very well when he founded the Club and took action for the public lands at the turn of the century. We will not make progress on this or other issues unless we ask for specific things we think are needed to assure a future for wildlife. Then we need to hold our friends accountable. ■

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