

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## Celebrating Successes for Wildlife and Recognizing Opportunity



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More than 100 years of professional wildlife management was celebrated at the annual meeting of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies at Big Sky, Montana, in mid-September. It was an exciting

week with the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) meeting for their third annual summit, and hosting an opening reception for the participants in the centennial celebration of the International. After two days of AWCP meetings and a full day of the centennial celebration, the usual work sessions lasting the rest of the week convened committees on everything from public land management to the Endangered Species Act. More than 600 professionals participated in this important celebratory event.

This meeting highlighted the importance of the agency framework within which conservation programs are delivered in America. From the U.S. Forest Service, which is more than 100 years old, to the 50 states celebrating more than 100 years of their organized activities on behalf of professional management, America has a huge investment in their success. While it is easy to document success in restoration of key game species and tell the good

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news about the past, traditional wildlife management as we know it is under siege from change from many directions. A recurrent theme at this meeting was the broadening of the constituent base and the diversification of interests now seeking a seat at the table, wanting to have something to say about wildlife management. Coping with that diverse constituency, and the continuing human pressure on both private and public lands, tells us that despite our successes over the last hundred years, the job is not done.

While this is a popular time to belittle government and suggest that most wisdom lies at the local level, the future of our agencies, both state and federal, is central to the interests of wildlife conservationists, especially hunters. In 2001, we lost a critically important opportunity when the Conservation and Reinvestment Act failed. CARA would have assured substantial new, permanent funding for the state wildlife agencies to allow them to do the whole job of managing wildlife, cope with their diversifying constituency, keep state control over wildlife, and manage proactively to avoid having to invoke the Endangered Species Act. Appropriated funding from the Congress for state grants has kept this issue on the table, and under discussion. However, it isn't a substitute that we can accept. Funding for wildlife programs is still a high priority. Most states are facing strong budget deficits, cutbacks are occurring in the wildlife agencies, and the outlook is poor for federal help.

What should we do to prepare for the future? Perhaps it is time for sportsmen's groups to step out on their own, assess why CARA didn't pass, fix the things that concerned some, and take the lead in a new aggressive approach to meeting the financial needs of our state wildlife agencies. This would solidify the traditional role of hunters and anglers in supporting conservation. They have always supported more than just conservation for species that are hunted or fished, and have borne a significant part of the cost. There is great sentiment that a broader spectrum of people should bear the cost of broader management of wildlife.

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lution working within the changing society. We could take this issue to the President and the Congress and ask them directly to take this positive step toward the next phase of America's conservation legacy. We should get serious about leadership for the future of wildlife in America.

### Topics Covered at the AWCP Summit

There was a wide range of activities and subject matter covered at the AWCP summit. We heard reports on progress of work groups targeting issues like the need for active forest management and relief from estate taxes that can lead to loss of farms and ranches. We discussed new issues such as Chronic Wasting Disease, noting that a comprehensive symposium, legislative action, national plans, and many other things were happening as we move toward the hunting season this fall. Administratively, the AWCP solidified its membership criteria, and a day and a half was spent in discussion of these and an array of topics.

Highlighting the second day, Steve Williams, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Dale Bosworth, Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, each spent two hours with the entire assembled AWCP in a free-ranging discussion of priority topics relating to their agencies. Director Williams talked extensively about restoring the partnership between hunters and anglers and the Fish and Wildlife Service. He outlined his intent to hold a meeting after the first of next year to bring an array of stakeholders to the Fish and Wildlife Service Conservation Training Center at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, to talk about the future of national wildlife refuges, state/federal cooperation on wildlife programs, how to maintain the connection between hunting and conservation in the public eye, and other topics we may suggest.

Chief Bosworth, not unexpectedly, focused a good deal on recent proposals by the Administration to manage for improved forest health. The politics and dilemmas of responsible approaches to reducing fuel loads, managing fire danger around human habitations, and carefully approaching larger scale management on selected watersheds for water quality dominated the conversation. The Chief struck a chord with the audience when he indicated that stewardship projects, wherein private entities contract to do the work for the Service,

should not be linked to cutting large trees. He felt the focus should be on the desired outcome for the forest habitat, including wildlife. There was discussion with the audience about how fire management might be done to regain public trust in active management. All together, the interaction with the two agency heads was useful both to them and to the members of the AWCP.

A field trip took most of the AWCP participants to Ted Turner's ranch for a tour and barbeque. Mr. Turner greeted each person, and spoke with the group about the value of organizing to increase our strength, and his interest in working with hunters and anglers.

Several important actions for further work on central issues in "Wildlife for the 21st Century," the report to the President on natural resource needs for the future, were outlined for the AWCP at the end of our meetings, as follows:

- A letter to the secretaries of Agriculture and Interior presenting guidelines to be used in developing the various proposals for fuel reduction and fire management.
- A working group to propose specific actions to remove private land disincentives, such as dealing with estate taxation.
- To address concerns regarding gridlock in decision-making, a committee was assigned to work on the emerging Forest Health Issue.
- Because communications are vital to the success of our efforts at unifying hunter/conservation groups, a Communications Committee was formed to draft a plan for action for the AWCP.

A specific event in August highlighted the stake that hunter/conservationists have in achieving a higher profile for fish and wildlife considerations in orderly development of energy. The Bureau of Land Management offered several new lease sales near Pinedale, Wyoming, directly in a narrow migration corridor used by thousands of mule deer and pronghorn each spring and fall. A public outcry at the eleventh hour persuaded BLM to withdraw two critical leasing parcels after they were sold.

The importance of this migration area has been highly publicized in local newspapers, in the *Wyoming Game and Fish Magazine*, and in the results of scientific studies that previously were shared with

the BLM. Treating such vital habitats as "just another lease" under the pressure to expedite leasing reflects poorly on the programs the Administration and Department of Interior say are so important.

Since leasing gives away the opportunity to keep important mule deer and pronghorn habitats intact, this cries out for policy change in leasing programs. This is common sense that can keep the energy industry and the Administration on a responsible track with their public, and help safeguard resources important to us. It is the kind of specific request we must make to this Administration to protect our interests.

A new organization introduced itself at the AWCP. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) was incorporated in August as a nonprofit organization to provide increased advocacy for fish and wildlife management. The TRCP has incorporated the grassroots capabilities from the now disbanded Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance, and is in the process of adding legal and political strategy, media

outreach and policy analysis in order to focus on very specific resource issues. The TRCP will not respond to every issue that comes along, rather it will be highly focused on a select number of public and private land issues. The TRCP will work in cooperation with as many existing organizations as possible, and systematically employ a more coordinated effort on a few key issues than most of our community has been able to achieve in the past.

In this era where conservation has become so polarized and advocacy groups have been well financed and capable of strongly pursuing their agendas, hunter/conservationists need to focus on select issues one by one, keep science and common sense as our base, and learn to be more effective in the political and public opinion arenas. Through the AWCP, we are finding ways to work together, and express support on issues. The TRCP is just a new tool that our various organizations, including the Boone and Crockett Club, can work with to achieve real results on select issues. We will hear more about it as it develops. ■

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