

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## Coping With the Pace



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As the last *Fair Chase* was written, war in Iraq seemed likely, as this is written the shooting war is virtually over. The hard and expensive work to rebuild political and community organization is just beginning. It is interesting to note that only now are some environmental costs

and losses of wildlife being recognized in Iraq. Not so much from the obvious destruction of the immediate war, but the cost of the past several decades of misguided leadership. The new attention to rebuilding the Iraq infrastructure reveals that along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the location of the earliest seat of civilization, unacceptable exploitation of resources and damage to the future of the land has harmed the interests of the people of that country. Vast wetlands that supported early civilization, traditional human communities, and an array of migratory and other wildlife are largely gone after an onslaught of development to use the water elsewhere and occupy the landscape. Gone are the large flocks of waterfowl, the diversity of life, and the productivity of this famous area.

Once again we see proof that a sound natural resource base managed with an eye for the future, as well as the present, is as

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essential for national security as armed forces capability. As the pace quickens in the United States to put the war behind us, to take on the next stage of the war on terrorism, to combat a sluggish economy, and to get ready for a major election year, will America and its leadership make the right decisions?

As the last article was written, an omnibus bill appeared likely—in fact, one did pass, covering the needs of government programs in one single huge document. As predicted, national wildlife refuges did better than was reasonable to hope, netting almost 50 million new dollars to operate and maintain the refuge system. The North American Wetlands Conservation Act and farm bill programs did well, while state wildlife grants (the poor substitute for stable new funding) were reduced. Not only were state wildlife grants reduced, congressional appropriators essentially have walked away from their commitment to gradually escalate new funding to the states. With no guarantee from appropriators to progressively fund state wildlife programs, supporters are again in open competition with the other fiscal needs of government, and in tough times. It is clearly important that states use this grant program to complete projects that can support the value of investing in stable funding to do the broader job of wildlife management. The action now includes an important planning process to construct state wildlife plans that project future needs to their public, as well as to Congress.

A major focus on the Farm Bill front is working to implement sound programs. It is a real fallacy to think that because the Farm Bill has passed and money is designated for programs, that those programs will automatically come out right. Connecting with the diverse array of farmers, ranchers and other landowners, threading through piles of government rules and regulations to implement programs, and coping with the economic pressures of the times all work against easy implementation. There is growing recognition that the opportunity for programs on the ground under the new legislation is so immense that wildlifers and agriculture must find new ways to bring work directly to the ground if the programs are to be effective. It is difficult, for example, for the more than 40 of the 50 states that have serious budget shortfalls to focus new attention and new staff on taking advantage of the funding and program opportunities.

The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the first national wildlife refuge at Pelican Island, Florida, was held on March 14, 2003. Boone and Crockett Club Regular and Professional Members were present, marking this important event. Under Director Steve Williams' leadership, it went smoothly, appropriately recognized the historic accomplishments of the refuge system, and set the stage for the next step. However, challenges remain in this 100th year. While there has been great bipartisan support from the Congress in increasing funding for refuges over the past decade, highlighted through the work of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, there is still only the drudgery of the annual work for appropriations. What is needed during the centennial year, to capitalize on the presence of a commission and all of the public visibility, is to seize the moment and find a way to provide for our national wildlife refuges on a more permanent basis. This is another challenge that the Boone and Crockett Club should consider taking on.

Director Steve Williams of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service called a "Conservation Forum" meeting at the National Training Center at Shepherdstown, West Virginia in February. Many partners from AWCP attended, the Club was well represented by President Bob Model and others, and a good exchange occurred. The purpose of the gathering was to discuss how to identify issues of mutual interest and form stronger partnerships to address those issues. A variety of working topics came out of that meeting, such as addressing the turnover in professional employees in state and federal wildlife agencies, recruitment and retention of hunters and anglers, and access to public lands for hunting and fishing. The success of the meeting is leading toward attempts to more formally network between all of the organizations and the Fish and Wildlife Service and even other public land agencies.

A sobering visit this week with congressional appropriations staff reveals that the emerging funding situation for natural resources may slow down the pace of what we can do. They are facing the high costs of the war, the high costs of a much larger military budget, both of which will be paid for before other funding for government. This situation raises real questions about the future of many programs. ■