

CAPITOL CONSERVATION

Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act

FOR FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 1994, WILDLIFE AGENCIES IN STATES AND TERRITORIES RECEIVED \$182-PLUS MILLION UNDER THE FEDERAL AID IN WILDLIFE RESTORATION ACT OF 1937. UNDER THAT IMPORTANT LAW, RECIPIENT AGENCIES CAN USE \$144.6 MILLION FOR WILDLIFE RESEARCH AND THE ACQUISITION, DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF WILDLIFE PROPERTIES. THE REMAINDER, \$37.3 MILLION, IS AVAILABLE FOR HUNTER SAFETY EDUCATION AND THE ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC SHOOTING RANGES. BUT A STATE MAY USE MOST OF IT FOR WILDLIFE WORK SHOULD IT CHOOSE. IN ACTUAL PRACTICE, MOST OF THIS LATTER FUNDING IS USED FOR WILDLIFE WORK.

Allocated to agencies on a formula basis that takes into account a state or territory's area, number of resident hunting licenses sold, and, in the case of the shooting range assistance, the relative population density compared with other states, the money originates from a manufacturers' excise tax on sporting rifles, shotguns, handguns and ammunition. The money is made available on the basis of \$3 federal for every \$1 state committed to approved projects.

Two important provisions of the program, in place since the beginning and contributory to great progress in the restoration of native wildlife, are the requirements that states employ individuals possessing appropriate education and experience and that state agency licenses etc. fee receipts be used only for work of that agency. In the good old days, it was not unusual in some states for politicians to dip into hunting license receipts to help pay for roads, bridges or other vote-seeking purposes. And payrolls were padded with relatives and buddies, many of whom evidently believed that wildlife was a long night at a crossroads tavern. The threat of losing federal aid, now an important part of state wildlife agency budgets, now discourages such fund abuses.

One weakness in the current law, while not debilitating, likely should be changed, but it would be

risky to attempt to do so in the current tight federal budget environment. The amendment to the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act to credit long-existing manufacturers' excise taxes on handguns to the fund and to authorize states to voluntarily use receipts for hunter safety education and for the acquisition and development of shooting ranges, was accomplished during the time of the King and second Kennedy assassinations.

Members of Congress were leery of openly associating themselves with firearms. Most are even more so today. Then, a few questioned the wisdom of providing the public with opportunities to improve their knowledge and handling of firearms, inasmuch as politicians and other leading figures too frequently seemed to be the targets of choice of firearms abusers. So the allocation of receipts from the handgun excise taxes was based on population density in deference to the fact that most firearms abuses were associated with high populations. The thought was to get handgun users shooting on ranges rather than on city streets.

The formula has resulted in some striking inequities. For example, Texas with 1,081,582 paid licensed hunters in fiscal year 1993 received (the maximum) \$1,121,652 under the hunter education/shooting range provision. Massachusetts also received the maximum with only 100,762 paid hunting license holders. What's more, Maryland and New Jersey also received the maximum or close to it, and in the three states the amount of money allocated to them under the hunter education/shooting range provisions of the law was greater in each case than the amount each received under the wildlife restoration provisions. A classic example of the tail wagging the dog.

The allocation formula has proven to be inequitable for two reasons: States with a larger land area but lower human population have infinitely more wildlife work they could

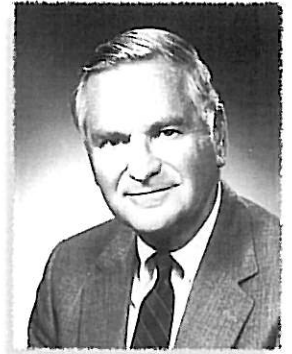
or should be doing than smaller more densely populated states, and, in some cases, the latter are investing very little of their hunter education allocations in ranges. They use some small part of the money for hunter education work, with a major part, as permitted by law, for wildlife purposes. But simply because the law permits such diversion does not make it right, particularly in those highly settled states where great need exists for areas where firearms owners may safely use their sporting firearms for familiarization and recreational purposes.

MOVING AHEAD IN OREGON

In Oregon, sportsmen and landowners have succeeded in winning legislative approval of a \$2 surcharge on hunting licenses, with the proceeds dedicated for use on projects to improve wildlife habitat and public access on private land. Project funding will be recommended to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission by a seven member board consisting of three landowners (two ranchers and one timber owner), three representatives from the hunting community and one person (designated as chairman) from the public at large.

The Oregon wildlife agency says, "It is difficult to anticipate how effective or far reaching actions of the Access and Habitat Board may be. Landowners and hunters do not always agree on some issues and as often as not the agency is in the middle. But all three share a genuine concern for the welfare of Oregon's wildlife. The Board may provide a vehicle which can channel that concern, along with a lot of dollars, to projects which will not only benefit Oregon's wildlife, but help deeply committed groups of people work together for a common cause."

This project will be watched closely by other states, for the problems facing the Beaver State differ little from those encountered elsewhere. A few already have hooked a land-acquisition fee to the regular license cost.



Daniel A. Poole
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
Boone & Crockett Club

The thought
was to get
handgun
users
shooting on
ranges
rather than
on city
streets.

