

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Mixed Bag For Wildlife In An Election Year



Rollin D. Sparrowe

President
Wildlife Management Institute

Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club

It is that time again in Washington, an election is a few months away. There are relatively few working days left for the Congress, many issues have been languishing without action, a few positive steps have been taken, but the outcome of a lot of things important for wildlife is uncertain. The big concept presented in this column last quarter, increasing the top level allocation to natural resources for budgeting, has fallen on deaf ears as the administration and the Congress stalemate each other on what to spend money on. The rationale for shifting more of what this country already plans to spend to national forests, wildlife refuges, national parks, and important land and wildlife management programs is strong, but doesn't seem likely to change priorities. The Public Lands Funding Initiative, introduced April 14, 1998, with the help of Boone and Crockett Club member Theodore Roosevelt IV has been widely explained to key staff and members in the Congress, and in the Administration. Everyone says it makes sense, it is logical, and it is something that "should be addressed" as our government looks at its priorities.

Yet at a time when congressional leaders are proclaiming they have balanced the budget, and those same leaders are literally arguing over how large the surplus will be in future years, appropriations will likely fall short of expectations. President Clinton proposed huge increases in resource management programs, and the Congress has widely rejected those as budget busters.

Whether we agree on whether the budget is balanced, or how large a surplus might be, most wildlife needs will not take a huge advance in this session.

Bright spots include inclusion of \$20 million per year of funding for critical road maintenance on national wildlife refuges as part of the huge Transportation Bill. But the Forest Service, with a much larger need, was left out. In the same Transportation Bill, the Wal-

lop/Breaux reauthorization for funding for fisheries and boating matching grants to the states, analogous to Pittman-Robertson (P-R) that funds wildlife programs, received substantial increases and an expansion in authority to use the funds for public education.

Elsewhere, as far as budgets for basic wildlife programs go, the jury is out while the annual process slides toward election time. Will national wildlife refuge operation and maintenance funding be raised or cut back? The House appropriators added some, but the Senate reduced it. Forest Service fish and wildlife funds, down considerably from previous levels, may be increased but will be much less than needed. Sportsmen's organizations are faced with yet another year in which they will have much more hard cash to spend on habitat work for wildlife than the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management can accept. What a loss for wildlife and hunters! Will many riders be attached—some destined to fail by any measure—and provoke a Presidential veto? All of this and more will play out before this article gets into print. Wildlife are not likely to come out better for it.

Perhaps all this is a product of the continuing malaise of a negative relationship between many congressional leaders and the public land management agencies. The Forest Service continues to be beaten up in hearings, lately over road management, and accounting processes.

For wildlife interests, a comprehensive approach to actually managing roads on national forests would be very positive, and has been too long in coming. Perhaps after November we can address that need more objectively. Likewise, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) languishes for lack of ability to bring a bill through established processes for open debate. S1180 embraces many of the reforms that the Interior Department has already put in place for working cooperatively with private landowners. It

has been roundly attacked by environmentalists, and it doesn't suit those in the development arena. A wide array of organizations seem to agree that the interest of their constituents might best be served by the agencies having enough money to work out solutions under the law, but haven't been able to put these efforts together. Wildlife and people suffer because of it.

An exciting new development has been proposed for discussion, called The Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1998. A bipartisan group of Congressmen, led by Representatives Don Young, John Dingell, Billy Tauzin, Richard Baker, and Chris John propose to reinvest revenue from the outer continental shelf leases into environmental, wildlife conservation, and outdoor recreational measures. Based on providing "impact aid" to 35 states connected to America's coastlines, this discussion draft also proposes amendments to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Act, and Pittman-Robertson Act by providing substantial additional funds.

Most importantly to those who support increased funding for state wildlife and fish agencies, the discussion draft would authorize 10% of certain revenues from off shore oil leases to go into a new subaccount under P-R to deal with broader wildlife conservation, restoration, recreation, and education programs. This initial proposal calls for federal cost sharing of 75% to match 25% from the state, similar to existing matching formulas, and as a new feature includes some funding for law enforcement and public relations.

Many features of this proposal would further the causes laid out in the original proposal for Teaming With Wildlife (TWW). TWW is to be based on an excise tax designed to expand the user-pay concept to outdoor recreationists who neither hunt nor fish. While the new OCS Proposal doesn't do that, provisions of the bill address many of the same points of need for broader agency pro-

grams. As legislation is developed, the 3,000-member TWW Coalition will undoubtedly want stronger attention to the fundamentals of the original proposal. TWW through an excise tax remains a viable mechanism for the Coalition. The bottom line is that this new approach would almost double the funding for wildlife agencies at a time when they desperately need it. Program reductions and limitations on wildlife agency capabilities are growing by the day, and it is truly impressive that leaders in the Congress are stepping forward to address this.

There are many complex issues in The Conservation and Reinvestment Act and discussion of details is just starting. As reported earlier, new support movements have been formed to seek full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This includes funding federal land acquisition and "state side" funding for parks and recreation at the state level, independent of wildlife agencies. State wildlife agencies and hunting and fishing organizations have an equal stake in the future of federal funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and it is not addressed in this legislation. As an added issue many organizations, including sportsmen's groups, are concerned about the impact of such proposals on stimulating further damage to coastal ecosystems. Until the legislation matures and is actually introduced, there will be many questions about it. There is a similar proposal being developed in the Senate that may introduce new issues. The important message is that traditional wildlife management groups will not be alone in working toward the future of this legislation. With the competition for these dollars, we need to unite behind funding for the states and for both federal and state public lands. The Boone and Crockett Club should play a leadership role in this.

Related concepts are also receiving consideration. Onshore oil and gas leasing affects inland states, including all of those in the Rocky

Mountains, Great Basin, and even some on the coast. While 50% of royalties and other revenues are shared with states under the Mineral Leasing Act of 1987, none of those funds are guaranteed for wildlife and few if any of these dollars have been used for wildlife. The development impacts described in this column in the fall of 1997 are preceding at a rapid rate. Important sage grouse, mule deer, elk, pronghorn, and grizzly bear habitats are being affected. This may be the time to redirect funds to help ensure a future for big game herds on developed lands in the northern Rockies. Redirection of onshore funds that go into the general treasury, into a wildlife habitat and population restoration fund, could be drawn upon by state wildlife agencies to conduct studies and manage habitats to maintain or recover affected wildlife. This would be a real plus for the mountain states, and a win for everyone. It would not intrude on money that currently goes to the states for domestic uses, but would bring additional funds to those states to help keep our game herds. States like Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and others would benefit from this and it deserves full consideration. Members of the Boone and Crockett Club who know the oil and gas business should lead in getting this done.

Finally, preliminary action by the Congress on budgets for fish and wildlife matters is mixed. Generally, it looks like programs will remain about as they have been, and in a few cases they will advance or retreat. Additional work will have to be done to make the case to the leadership in our country that natural resources deserves a greater investment. One would think that the advent of a balanced budget, the forecast of large surpluses, and the growing demand from the American public for more attention to recreational uses of public lands and management of wildlife will have an impact. Maybe it will sink in after November, when our lawmakers return their attention to these issues. We should be there speaking out to help direct them. ▲▲▲

Important sage grouse, mule deer, elk, pronghorn, and grizzly bear habitats are being affected. This may be the time to redirect funds to help ensure a future for big game herds on developed lands in the northern Rockies.

