

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Organized to Protect Conservation



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In August, more than 30 of the nation's premiere hunting conservation organizations met in beautiful southwest Oregon for two days of information sharing and strategizing. The overarching issue for the American Wildlife Conservation Partners

(AWCP) was the topic of future conservation funding. I have addressed this issue in a number of previous "Capitol Comments" columns. Our primary concerns focused on the upcoming Farm Bill, its conservation title and the federal funding for land management agencies at both the state and federal levels. In addition, AWCP participants expressed their concern about federal grant programs that leverage non-federal dollars at a ratio of three to four times the amount of federal funds. A large coalition of organizations, America's Voice for Conservation, Recreation and Preservation, has committed its energy to inform Congress about the national importance and economic generation associated with fish and wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation, and historic national landmarks. AWCP organizations have joined their voices with more than 600 organizations to demand that Congress recognize the contribution these activities provide to our nation's economy and tax revenue. In brief, we are asking for a fair shake when it comes to required budget cuts and smart funding decisions.

The AWCP meeting was not only a discussion of funding. Other discussion topics included: hunting and shooting opportunities on federal lands, wolf management, Endangered Species Act reform, wild horse and burro management, the Forest Service planning rule, National Wildlife Refuge System operation, the Equal Access to Justice Act,

wilderness and roadless area designation, and importation of foreign trophies. These meetings, held twice a year, provide an important forum for conservation organizations to gather information, discuss public policy, and decide their positions on a multitude of wildlife resource issues.

The issues we discussed are complicated. Agency regulations and policy, as well as federal legislation, require careful consideration. The "devil in the details" consumed much of our discussions. Unintended consequences of policy actions have become more of an issue than in the

management of natural resources. The Wildlife Management Institute's predecessor was formed in 1911. One hundred years later, these three organizations are still actively involved in the formulation, review, and amendment of public natural resources policy. These organizations have been joined by nearly 45 other national hunting conservation organizations. Each of the organizations brings its perspective, knowledge, and political power to resource policy debates.

Because the nation is facing an unresponsive economy and extremely difficult budgetary decisions, it is incumbent on all these hunting-conservationists organizations and their members to make their voices heard in Washington, D.C., and the state capitals across the nation. As we heard at the AWCP meeting, conservation funding will face staggering obstacles for the next 5 to 10 years. At the same time, major legislative and policy issues that will affect the future planning and operation of our national forests, national wildlife refuges, and Bureau of Reclamation lands are being developed and considered. These complex decisions will affect our wildlife resources and our ability to enjoy wildlife-associated recreation, including hunting. I am glad that the collective knowledge and leadership of AWCP organizations will be brought to bear on these issues. We have an opportunity to hold the status quo, enhance our legacy, or watch our legacy be torn apart by poor decision-making, decreased budgets, or both.

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past due to the litigious nature of society and the fine-tuning of existing public laws. Fish and wildlife resources are perhaps more threatened today by human population growth, energy development, climate change, land-use conversion, and water demand than any time in our nation's history.

Harnessing the collective social and political horsepower of these organizations (some of which have membership rolls that exceed 500,000 sportsmen and women) is crucial to drive positive public policy decisions with respect to fish and wildlife conservation and the hunting and shooting sports. Representatives of each organization had the opportunity to be exposed to experts on policy issues so that they can better inform their members of what is at stake for hunting conservationists and the resources for which we care so deeply. One hundred years ago most of the organizations that now comprise the AWCP did not exist. However, the Boone and Crockett Club and Camp Fire Club of America were both in existence then and were engaged in the public debate over the

I believe that all participants walked away from that meeting with the understanding that we really are facing the diminution of our conservation heritage. The question each of us has to answer is, "Will we let this happen on our watch?" ■