

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Teaming With Wildlife — An Idea Whose Time Has Come!



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This year more than \$300 million for wildlife and fisheries conservation will go to state agencies on a matching basis under the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) and Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux (D-J/W-B) programs that are the foundation of wildlife and fishery management in all 50 states. This continues a conservation legacy involving hunters and fishermen which has persisted for 60 years. The Pittman-Robertson program—Federal Aid In Restoration of Wildlife—began in 1937 and will celebrate its 60th anniversary in 1997. The more recent Dingell-Johnson Wallop-Breaux program for fisheries began in 1950.

Coincident with this celebration is unprecedented support for “Teaming With Wildlife,” a

proposal to forge similar support for non-hunted wildlife using the same, established federal aid model that has worked for hunters. Dan Poole introduced this topic in *Fair Chase* in this same column in 1995. Since then, more than 1,400 organizations nationwide, representing the largest coalition in conservation history, are getting serious about funding “the other half” of the

wildlife story in America.

Congress is currently talking much about user-pay approaches to funding programs—just like Pittman-Robertson. The Teaming With Wildlife proposal would use a surcharge on an array of outdoor equipment to broaden wildlife management programs through the existing state agen-

cies to cover all wildlife, and the needs of all the public. Both hunters and non-hunters would benefit from these programs. Here are a number of ways:

- Maintain the leadership role of the sporting community in fish and wildlife conservation.
- Take financial pressure off license fees and P-R and D-J/W-B excise tax money.
- Provide a way for the non-sporting community to pay its share of conservation costs.
- Add more habitat accessible to traditional uses like hunting and fishing.
- Strengthen existing state fish and wildlife agencies, and widely expand the public constituency that supports them.
- Build on the existing, proven administrative system of P-R and D-J/W-B.
- Allow state fish and wildlife agencies to satisfy their broader responsibilities to all wildlife.

In 1975, the Wildlife Management Institute conducted a national assessment of needs for non-game fish and wildlife programs in the United States. Based on that information, a coalition of groups successfully passed the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980. This Act outlined great intent to build nongame programs, but Congress has never funded it. Those legitimate needs for funding to manage nongame continue today.

Our state game and fish agencies are under tremendous pressure from declining funding. As an example, Wyoming recently had to make 30 percent reductions in staff and programs because of reduced license sales largely connected with the 1993 die-off of big game in that state. This will reduce services to hunters long beyond the inevitable recovery of big game herds. It is not to the benefit of the hunting community for such major fluctuations in programs to occur. Currently,

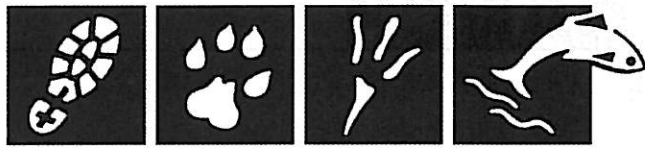
there are no buffers to excise tax or license sale decreases, and other fund-raising devices such as fees on site, specialty license plates and tax checkoffs have had limited success nationwide.

There is growing support to expand the user-pay concept beyond the hunting and fishing community, to provide a way for all citizens who use outdoor products and enjoy wildlife to contribute to management programs to maintain fish and wildlife and their habitats. Some in Congress agree that this kind of funding might be the most effective hedge against having to invoke the Endangered Species Act. By enhanced management of the 1,800 wildlife and fish and their habitats that currently receive little attention, new species are less likely to be listed for protection.

Some hunting advocates have expressed concern about whether land managed for non-game would be accessible to sportsmen and sportswomen. Missouri, since 1976, has implemented broader funding to conduct such wildlife programs. The Missouri Department of Conservation just purchased 80,000 acres of forested lands, initiated 30-year research projects on forest management, and established natural areas as needed, yet most of the 80,000 acres is newly available for public use, including hunting. From this example, we can see that responsible management for all wildlife need not be a threat to traditional uses.

Other concerns are that this legislation is somehow a disguised raid on current uses of Pittman-Robertson funds. The Pittman-Robertson Act is not restricted to game species and has legitimately helped other wildlife. Draft legislation, in fact, is tiered off the existing Pittman-Robertson law, and language in Pittman-Robertson prevents any such raid. Others fear seeing “our” wildlife agencies taken over by

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non-hunters. Let's face it, society has changed, and the overwhelming majority does not hunt—but have a legitimate interest in wildlife. These concerns have to be met as they always have, by direct involvement at the state level to provide balance in how agencies are run.

We in the wildlife management and hunting community are justly proud of the status of waterfowl, elk, wild turkey, whitetail deer, and many other species that have recovered under Pittman-Robertson over the past 60 years. Yet hunters cannot succeed in the future if they allow themselves to be marginalized only to programs using dollars from license fees and existing excise taxes. To maintain a responsible role in society—not a combative, defensive role—hunters must take the lead in providing effective management for all wildlife and their habitats. Within such a framework, society will not only continue to accept hunting, but embrace it as a part of conservation

TEAMING WITH WILDLIFE *a natural investment*

for the future as it has been to date. The traditional wildlife community must take the challenge and provide leadership or literally hand it off to others who will not share our views about its traditions and its uses.

The Teaming With Wildlife coalition includes businesses like Bass Pro Shops, Swarovski, and Browning who are leading the way in the outdoor products industry and have served notice they are serious about this landmark effort. The Boone & Crockett Club is listed among supporting organizations, continuing its leadership role from the past. Look at the organizations that have been willing to step up and support this movement—Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, the Ruffed Grouse Society,

the Archery Manufacturers Organization, The Izaak Walton League of America, and many others both national and local. Ten governors have signed letters supporting this concept. Can Boone & Crockett members deliver some others and move this effort ahead?

TEAMING WITH WILDLIFE

Teaming with Wildlife is a proposal to create a national trust fund for state level wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation and conservation education.

A coalition of over 1500 conservation and recreation organizations and agencies, and related businesses are proposing to place a user fee in the form of an excise tax on a range of outdoor recreation products. This proposal expands upon 50 years of successful earmarked excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment known as the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Funds.

Wildlife managers and hunters should look critically at this proposal. It must strengthen existing wildlife agencies and their funding and programs. It must protect Pittman-Robertson. It must serve a broader public, as well as the rest of our wildlife heritage. Look hard at objective concerns about this proposal—but don't accept every concern as gospel. Much rides on its success for a better future for wildlife and hunting.

