

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Opportunity For Wildlife - Time to Weigh In



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While the attention of Congress has not seemed to be on legislation, some members have shown leadership in advancing the biggest opportunity for wildlife and habitats since Theodore Roosevelt set aside the first national forest reserves. With extraordinary predictions of "trillion dollar surpluses" in the next decade, members of Congress are answering the call to preserve a lasting legacy of wildlife habitats, recreational areas, and new funding for basic wildlife management at the state level. In January and February a flurry of legislation, and an Administration proposal, show the greatest promise in our lifetime to move wildlife management to a higher level to enter the next millennium.

These proposals represent the next step in consideration of legislation first introduced in 1998, and reported in the winter issue of *Fair Chase*. In the Senate, Senators Mary Landrieu (LA), Frank Murkowski (AK) and a bipartisan array of other Senators introduced S.25. In the House of Representatives Congressman Don Young (AK) and John Dingell (MI) introduced HR 701, again with a bipartisan array of 35 cosponsors. While differences remain between these bills, most principle components are quite similar to each other, and to the bills introduced last year.

As before, both bills provide a dedicated percentage of Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas revenues to coastal states as impact aid, to the Land and Water Conservation Fund for both urban recreational needs and public lands for wildlife and wild places, and substantial funding to broaden wildlife programs of our state wildlife agencies. It is important to note that these are funds that have customarily gone into the general treasury to pay for deficit reduction in the past. They are being considered for reinvestment because of the good economic times and reduction in government deficits.

The Administration entered this dialogue in February with the President's Lands Legacy Initiative

that proposed, through current budget processes, some of the same expenditures for conservation. Things like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, open space, and other provisions are proposed with greater federal government control than in the legislative proposals. Most importantly, no funds were proposed to directly fund state wildlife agencies. Generally, even though there are considerable differences, the Congress and various organizations interested in the future of wildlife and habitat programs welcome the Administration's proposal because it enlarges the dialogue and raises the issues to a higher level of public discussion. It does not, however, fill the need.

The details of these proposals will be discussed and argued, and do not need to be repeated here. S.25 for example proposes appropriately 350 million dollars per year for state wildlife agencies, whereas HR 701 proposes 450 million dollars per year. Wildlife advocates are working on the Administration to add state agency funding, and attempting to get the Senate to adopt the House level. What is important is that the Congress and the Administration have all stepped forward with strong proposals to reinvest receipts from extraction of nonrenewable resources, into a lasting legacy for the future of renewable resources, both wildland and wildlife. This is a vitally important concept that is at the heart of this historic opportunity.

Broad recognition of all this as opportunity for wildlife and land, and its enjoyment by people, has been perhaps the most important development between 1998 and 1999. First, even while preoccupied with the seemingly endless impeachment process, leaders in Congress have focused on this opportunity and have been willing to listen, adjust the legislation a bit, build wider support, and come back quickly with strong proposals to start the dialogue in the 106th Congress. This occurred in an unprecedented atmosphere of cooperation by a wide ranging array of interest

groups. Hopefully, this latter development is building a flexible support base that can work to improve the legislation and find a way to pass a new law that seizes the moment, protects the interest of the land and wildlife, and meets the needs of people.

For months since the introduction of two similar bills late in 1998, various organizations have risen above their individual agendas to meet repeatedly. They have discussed the bills, expressed their needs to Congressional staff, all in the spirit designed to preserve this historical opportunity and keep a dialogue moving toward success. This has included representatives of environmental groups, wildlife conservation organizations, hunting and fishing interests, various governor's associations, the sporting goods manufacturers, major city mayors, the state wildlife agencies, and other organizations. This broader dialogue has risen above the individual agendas that all groups have, to pursue a common goal to keep this opportunity moving. This is a spirit in which great things can happen in conservation, and it is a testimony to the magnitude of opportunity presented by these proposals.

None of this is without controversy. There are those who think that oil and gas money is short term or somehow "dirty money". There are others who are concerned that further use of these funds will lead to environmental damage rather than restoration, and that further drilling and exploration will be stimulated along fragile coastlines. These concerns are not unique to environmental organizations but extend to governor's offices and associations as well. Oil and gas development is seldom a neutral issue in the arena of fish and wildlife and the environment. The important thing is that the past several months of dialogue have been listened to by the Congress, and the new legislation has incorporated important changes that help alleviate these concerns. However, there will be strong opposition from those who

don't believe in this approach to funding conservation.

Boone and Crockett Members and Associates should focus clearly on what this legislation will do for habitats and wildlife. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is used to buy land for refuges, forests, parks, and recreational areas that are important to the future of outdoor experiences for all Americans. Such purchases occur within the law, with appropriate government and congressional oversight, and are not a threat to the private landowner. Further, this funding would expand wildlife and fish programs through our state agencies to better meet the needs of people as well as wildlife and their habitats. It is designed to increase the capability of state agencies to do professional wildlife and fishery management to forestall species declines, and avoid listings under the endangered species act. It is of benefit to developers, ranchers, farmers, and hunters and fisherman of America. It will take the pressure off our limited traditional funding sources.

Your help is needed to continue the momentum to improve and pass this legislation. This will need your personal work locally with your governor and congressional delegation. These proposals are under strong attack from advocates of private property rights. Opposition from these groups blames all of these proposals on hunting and fishing groups, and suggests that there is no need for more federal ownership of land.

Data on the interests and needs of the American public, and personal experience with the popularity of public lands in the West for hunting, fishing, and other pursuits shows that to be a short-sighted view. There are too many people at the end of the roads that I go to hunt, even in wild areas requiring great effort to enter, to justify a conclusion that we have too much federal land. There is, in fact, less land in federal ownership than there was a hundred years ago, and many more people who wish to use it. The future of hunting and fishing and other outdoor pursuits

can be enhanced by careful acquisition where needed, solving inholding problems, reducing crowding, and otherwise providing for public needs. There are protections for private landowners build into the legislation. Look carefully at these proposals as they emerge.

Club Members and Associates can play an important role in countering these concerns raised by property rights advocates. Personal contacts to counter these unfounded criticisms can be very helpful—Club Members and Associates should stand up and be counted. Make sure your governor or delegation hear from you as an advocate of wild lands and wildlife. Many of the states the Club is most active in—such as the Northern Rockies—will need direct support to make this a success.

This is an issue that will not go away. The need is great, the opportunity tremendous and many interests are focusing on this like a dog on point. Other bills are likely to be introduced representing different approaches, more government control, probably more strings on how money would be spent. Others may address primarily the land base as the President's Land Legacy Initiative did, and not provide for active management. In the end, there is opportunity for a broad coalition of interests to embrace a wide ranging proposal that solves all of these needs. Just as in the 1997 negotiations that lead to the Refuge Improvement Act, there is opportunity that must be utilized to bring all of this together for wildlife. One possible scenario is to bring representative interests together, work out acceptable language, and pass a bill that provides something to everyone.

What should the Boone and Crockett Club do about this opportunity? What would Theodore Roosevelt have done? If we are the wildlife leaders we say we are, the Club needs to come out of the closet on this one, and pitch in and help. Many of our members and associates are connected to the oil and gas industry, or have personal relationships with key members of Congress.



Those contacts could tip the scales to get this done this year! Now is the time to use these contacts. This Club could be a powerful catalyst on this specific, historic opportunity- but it will take leadership and personal and organizational action.

Timing is everything in seizing opportunity. The Congress is emerging from a morass that may well produce an intense interest in getting things done that are positive, and visible to the public. Here is a ready-made issue that is bipartisan, fills demonstrated needs, is already well thought out. If the leadership and members of the Boone and Crockett Club are ready to fulfill the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt- here is the task!

I was recently asked an interesting question about the responses received to these articles in *Fair Chase*. "How much response do you get from the Club or its members in your calls for action?" I answered- so far, almost none, and nothing substantial on any issue. Will this one be different? I hope so! ▲▲▲

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