

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## President Bush, Healthy Forests, Wetlands, and an Open Door for Wildlife



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Several years of work came to fruition for the Boone and Crockett Club and its many conservation partners on December 12, 2003, with an extraordinary face-to-face meeting with President George W. Bush.

The meeting had been a goal of the Club and the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) since the start of the Bush Administration. The objective has been to: 1) make the President and other Administration officials aware of the strength and diversity of organized wildlife conservation groups; and 2) cement a working relationship between the Club and its partners and a President and his cabinet who can positively affect wildlife and habitat—especially with our help.

The Healthy Forest Bill, that returns focused active management to National Forests, was a common objective for the Club, many wildlife groups, and President Bush. It included a framework for manag-

ing forests to reduce fire danger on public and private forest land and it opened Administration and White House doors to the Club and the many AWCP partner groups. These groups wrote supportive letters and spoke up for responsible management of forests in an atmosphere of controversy and wild claims of intent to destroy forests—the same arguments that have held forest management in gridlock.

In November, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (the new partnership supported by both wildlife and fishery conservation groups) helped organize an important meeting with Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton, an impressive array of her top staff and agency directors, and nine diverse fish and wildlife groups. The meeting focused on how fish and wildlife conservation organizations could constructively work with the Secretary and President to strengthen the Administration's performance on key resource issues. Club President Bob Model spoke for the Club and urged the Secretary to take our issues to the President.

We highlighted to the Secretary needs for: 1) wetlands protection for ducks, fish and other wildlife; 2) energy policy that

assures the needs of wildlife and fish; 3) access to public and private lands for hunting and fishing; and 4) an array of issues from healthy forests to Farm Bill programs to marine fishery policy. We received a positive response and we urged the Secretary to communicate these opportunities, and our willingness to help, to President Bush.

While successful interaction on various issues often occurred through the AWCP network of 38 wildlife groups (with fishery groups joining in), President Bob Model kept his focus on a long-standing invitation to President Bush to join the Club at its annual black tie dinner in Washington, D.C. in the rotunda of the Smithsonian Institution's U.S. Museum of Natural History. This would be the place to connect with this President.

Many partners worked hard for this special meeting with the President and in the last minute frenzy that characterizes Washington events (especially involving a President), Mr. Bush reportedly said "Well, if they are all here in Washington, bring them down," and the historic meeting took shape at the White House.

Twenty fish and wildlife organizations met in the Roosevelt Room of the White House with Secretary of Agriculture Anne Veneman, Secretary Norton, Council of Environmental Quality Chair James Connaughton, and several key White House staff. After an exchange on mutual areas of interest, President Bush arrived and personally greeted each of us.

The President sat at a table with the group, thanked us for our support of the Healthy Forest legislation and Farm Bill, and stated his belief in active land management and practical approaches to conservation that recognize the needs of people. He identified his Administration as the most outdoor-oriented ever. He explained his focus on the war on terrorism and his commitment to win that war. The President stressed that he wanted us to know why he held this priority and that he knew it affected our whole country.

Mr. Bush said he was personally committed to conservation of wetlands due to their importance to wildlife and the American public. He said he would decide soon about his Administration's support for wetlands—and he did. The President

President Bush addresses the AWCP Partners, including the Club's President (far right) on December 12, 2003.



reaffirmed his commitment to a national policy of "no net loss of wetlands," first established by his father (while President) more than a decade ago.

In the most extraordinary part of this meeting, after saying several times that he had to meet his father for lunch, the President asked us all into the Oval Office. He captivated us for more than 30 minutes by explaining his philosophies of government and the presidency ("This job is bigger than any man"), the importance and dignity of the Oval Office itself, the tough decisions about the war, and, again, his commitment to practical land stewardship. He spoke about his personal interests in hunting and fishing.

Afterwards, the President again shook hands with each of us and thanked us for being there. We left with high emotion after this very personal glimpse into the thoughts of a sitting President dealing with enormous issues. For any American, this was an experience of a lifetime.

This meeting was a huge "door-opening" accomplishment for the Club, its many partners, and other wildlife and fishery groups who could not be there. The next steps are important. Implementation of his wetlands decisions throughout government will take work and the President stated his interest in working with us on this and other issues. One of the important issues to the Club

and its partners is the affect of energy development on wildlife. The President committed to ensuring that aggressive energy development is done in an environmentally sensitive way. The Club and its partners are working hard to step through this open door to help the Administration fulfill the President's desire.

Politics are involved in every interaction with an Administration. But in this election year, the focus of the Club and its many partners is not electoral politics, but to work within that political system for important, responsible outcomes for wildlife. This recent series of events was an important step—and our advice and our needs were listened to. ■

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