

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## 75 Years of Wildlife Conservation



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In 1937 Congress passed the Wildlife Restoration or Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Act. This act and the Sport Fish Restoration Act passed in 1950 are conservation trust funds, an extremely rare occurrence in the federal budget. Neither requires annual appropriations, a fact that has provided stability in funding and the ability to plan for the future. Both acts required state legislators to assent to using hunting and fishing license dollars for conservation and conservation alone. We celebrate the 75th anniversary this year for the \$7 billion in excise taxes provided to state agencies for wildlife conservation during the past 75 years. There are two other things that we should celebrate. One is the assurance that license dollars are used for conservation. The other is the “user pays, user benefits” description of the P-R Act is really a unique “user pays, public benefits” model. This modest change of words is important because it better defines the outcome of conservation funding, and it sends a clear message to the public about the role of hunters and the results of P-R funding.

The real results of P-R funding are not just the restoration of deer and turkey populations; the results also include enhanced habitat for all wildlife species, improved water quality, improved flood control through stream and wetland restoration, improved forest habitat management, improved agricultural conservation programs, and a myriad of other actions that have enhanced private and public resources for the public's benefit.

Few of us know how the Wildlife Restoration Act actually functions. Excise tax revenue, assessed at the manufacturers'

level and deposited in the federal treasury, is used for a variety of purposes. The great majority is passed on to the states for wildlife conservation activities. Interest earned on the trust fund is transferred to the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund to assist in the management of waterfowl and wetlands. The Multistate Conservation Grant Program receives an annual amount of \$3 million. Hunter education and shooting range programs receive \$8 million annually. Half of the taxes collected on handguns and archery equipment is apportioned for hunter education programs. The FWS receives a small percentage of the total fund to administer the act.

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The Wildlife Restoration Act has been amended a number of times since 1937. The five amendments have included making the funds permanent and indefinite (1951), increased the excise tax from 10 percent to 11 percent on firearms and ammunition (1954), included the 10 percent excise taxes from pistols and revolvers and allowed use of these funds for hunter education (1970), created an 11 percent excise tax on archery equipment and allowed the use of these funds for hunter education (1972), changed the tax formula on arrows and arrow components (1997), set aside \$8 million for hunter education and shooting range development (2000), and exempted certain small manufacturers from paying excise taxes on firearms (2005).

As hunters and conservationists, we rightfully celebrate our role in financing wildlife research and management. However,

we need to share our story with the rest of the public. Instead of trumpeting the success of wildlife restoration alone, I believe that we need to expand our explanation to include the broad public benefits associated with the Wildlife Restoration Act. Increasing our relevancy to the public is essential, especially in these times of declining federal and state funds available for conservation.

The relevancy of conservation may best be achieved by identifying the “ecosystem services” associated with conservation efforts. The habitats we manage provide services such as: carbon sequestration, water filtration, sediment control, flood retention, pollinators, aesthetic values, and on and on. Remember, “user pays, public benefits.” Some progress in the development of ecosystem service markets, incentives, and regulatory action has occurred. However, until the economy captures the real cost of goods and services, including the impacts to the environment and the services that the environment provides, public policy decisions will continue to be made with inadequate information, and our profession will not be able to compete successfully in the market for federal and state funding or with the various alternative demands for natural resources.

Boone and Crockett Club members were instrumental in establishing the Wildlife Restoration Act 75 years ago. Today our challenge is to expand the public's understanding of the many public benefits provided by the act's activities. We must also expand the understanding of the relevancy of conservation to all citizens, not just those who hunt the fields and forests of our nation. We can increase the relevancy of conservation if we define an accounting of the services provided by wildlife populations, their habitats, and the ecological functions they provide the public. ■