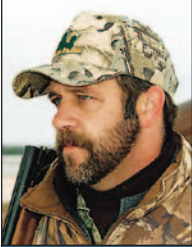


CAPITOL COMMENTS

The Budgets of Discontent



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Based on their words and actions, it is quite clear that some members of the U.S. House of Representatives do not share our concern about conservation. The proposed Fiscal Year 2011 Continuing Resolution (CR) would have eliminated or

reduced funding for some of the most effective conservation grant programs run by the federal government. For example, the proposal would have had severe repercussions on the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund, State and Tribal Wildlife Grants, Forest Legacy Program, National Wildlife Refuge System, and the National Fish Habitat Action Plan.

Many of these grant programs leverage non-federal dollars on the scale of three to four times more than the appropriated federal dollars. As it finally played out, Congress did not make the draconian cuts that some desired. That is the good news for conservation now. However, as Congress debates the Fiscal Year 2012 federal budget, it is certain that conservation programs will not fare as well.

Without a doubt, the nation is facing severe financial problems. The size of the federal budget, budget deficits, the debt ceiling, and debt payments must be addressed. However, the recent focus on making these cuts almost entirely from discretionary funding is shortsighted, disingenuous, and ineffective. The federal budget is approximately \$3.5 trillion. The budget deficit is estimated at \$1.4 trillion. Discretionary funding constitutes about 39 percent (or just over \$1.3 trillion) of the entire federal budget. We cannot erase the budget deficit until the nation solves the future of entitlement programs (\$2.1 trillion and growing). Within that 39 percent of discretionary funding, federal spending for land and water programs constitutes only about 0.5 percent of the entire federal budget. I am not advocating for a complete pardon from budget cuts to conservation programs, but let us recognize their size relative to the entire budget and the programs' importance to the nation.

It appeared that the budget cuts offered in the last CR were decided by a weird Chinese menu approach—reduce this from column A, and eliminate that from column B. There was no logic to the process; rather, it reflected staff work which must have been directed to grab a spreadsheet of federal conservation programs and don't stop cutting until they reached a magic and arbitrary dollar amount. We should expect more from a Congress that publicly declares its thoughtful and deliberative budget development process. The proposed reductions and elimination of federal conservation programs would have halted—and may still halt—years of hard work by Congress and American citizens to improve conservation in this nation. Further, they would have tarnished the nation's conservation legacy that the Boone and Crockett Club so proudly and rightfully proclaims. Remember, those budget cuts were offered when Congress was looking for \$100 billion in cuts for the FY 2011 budget. Current figures vary but I have seen demands

and anglers provided license revenues of \$1.3 billion and excise taxes of \$880 million for state fish and wildlife conservation programs. Retail sales of hunting and fishing equipment totaled \$70 billion. State and local sales taxes associated with hunting and fishing purchases provided \$11.5 billion to those entities. Federal taxes collected from these activities were \$14 billion. That amount exceeded the budget for the Department of Interior. Who would dare say that hunters and anglers do not pay their way and provide the lion's share of funding for conservation? Who would dare say that these citizens' interests were unimportant? Apparently some members of Congress are perfectly, if not deliberately, willing to target the interests of American hunters and anglers. If you are not insulted by their actions, you should be. And you should start thinking about what this nation will become without continued investments in our natural resources. You might also ponder the future for your children and grandchildren.

Conservation funding for programs that protect wetlands, acquire, and/or place easements on river bottoms that would restrict infrastructure development and allow rivers and streams to follow natural courses, now appear to be pretty cost effective when the country is besieged by flooding in the lower Mississippi and upper Missouri Rivers. Imagine the cost savings associated with conserving wetlands and floodplains rather than the expense of flood insurance payments to rebuild flooded structures for the second or third time. The agricultural and conservation lands downstream of the levees in Louisiana certainly have proven to be cost-effective because they absorbed

flood waters and protected the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Imagine the real value of these lands if the marketplace rewarded conservation efforts, rather than development, in the historical Mississippi River floodplain. The ill-fated efforts to tame the Mississippi and Missouri rivers should provide a valuable lesson that conservation pays, protects lifestyles, and protects the economy. If only Congress could see past their green and misaligned eyeshades. ■

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for cuts totaling \$381 billion for the FY 2012 budget. This is a desperate and critical time for conservation in the United States.

I hope, and we should demand, that Congress considers the economic impact associated with fish and wildlife conservation when making decisions that affect funding for the programs that make that economic impact possible. According to the 2006 *National Survey on Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation and Hunting in America/Fishing in America: An Economic Engine and Conservation Powerhouse* report, there were more than 34 million Americans who engaged in hunting and fishing. Hunters