

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## Progress for Wildlife, and Things to Come



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**In late October, Congress** passed and the President signed a 37 pound omnibus appropriations bill, HR 4328. Most federal land management agencies had their funding level increased from FY 98, and there were some significant gains for wildlife, and a few losses. Until the eleventh hour of this fragmented legislative process, it was uncertain whether wildlife would gain or lose substantially. On balance, the outcome was better than expected in keeping agencies operating, but many major resource issues were again not acted upon. The next Congress, beginning in 1999, will confront an array of highly significant issues important to the future of our wildlife resource.

The USDA Forest Service appropriation was \$246 million larger than in FY 98 and \$196 million more than the President's request for the agency. Most of the increase was in land acquisition, with release of substantial funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) that had been in dispute. Important acquisitions of elk habitat in Montana and New Mexico will go forward, to the benefit of wildlife. The Challenge Cost Share Program received reported language attention suggesting that it should be policy to use at least 90% of challenge cost share funds for matching partners projects at the field level. This will be important to continued support by partner wildlife organizations. The Wildlife, Fishery and Rare Plants Program receives \$3.5 million more than in FY98. Most of this will go to wildlife habitat management and threatened and endangered species. The report also suggested that these program funds should be used to do ground work, and not to provide environmental clearances of other specific program projects. It has been a continuing problem that federal agencies with limited wildlife staff have had to divert that staff to cope with reviews, appeals, and litigation.

Initially, it looked like Knutson -Vandenberg (KV) could not be used to fund fish and wildlife work, and that fish and wildlife programs would lose \$4.9 million in FY99. Instead the final bill states that the agency will not be affected in FY 99 and it can use up to 20% of these funds for FY 2000. This allows the Forest Service to gradually adjust its budget and avoid an immediate loss from the wildlife program. KV funds result from timber receipts that have been declining, thus wildlife and fish programs have gone down with the changes in the timber program.

The Forest Service was pressured all year with legislative proposals, and repeated hearings on everything from roads to accounting practices. Over the next few months decisions will be announced on short and long term moratoria on road building on national forests, and further dialogue will continue on developing a national road management policy. Few areas of forest management offer so much potential for wildlife benefits as a carefully considered, national policy for comprehensive road management. To put this acrimonious debate behind us and focus on the needs of wildlife and fish resources in conjunction with road management, is a worthy goal for the future that the Boone and Crockett Club should pay close attention to.

An array of awkward rider provisions ranging from prescribed burning to fiscal process requirements were removed. These were hotly debated in the media, but the final bill largely removed them.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received increases totaling \$74 million for FY 99, with \$20 million actually being funds released from FY 98 LWCF appropriations. Funds to implement the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, which normally brings in 2 non-federal dollars for every federal dollar, was

raised to \$15 million which will boost migratory bird habitat work in Canada, Mexico and the United States. This is the funding that implements the North American Waterfowl Management Plan among other purposes. Endangered species funding went up over \$30 million, but most of that was earmarked for specific recovery programs.

The greatest gains were in managing the National Wildlife Refuges, which has been featured in this column in the past. Activities by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) resulted in 18 million new dollars for operation and maintenance of refuges. The attention generated to refuges by CARE also netted \$20 million per year increase through the transportation bill passed earlier, and another \$20 million was released of FY 98 LWCF appropriations, much of which will go for continuing to reduce the maintenance backlog on refuges. This continues the momentum of the past few years, with Congress taking very positive action and providing \$100 million new dollars for refuges in 1998 and 1999.

Appropriation language also limits the Service's activity on grizzly bear reintroduction to Idaho and Montana. The contentious issue of a proposed road through a wilderness area on Izembeck National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, was solved through funding alternate methods of transportation and upgrading medical facilities for local people.

The omnibus appropriations bill took a giant backwards step in interfering politically with the setting of duck hunting regulations. Through language added by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, the Secretary of Interior is directed to offer to reinstate a 20-year old memorandum between the Mississippi Department of Wildlife Conservation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that extends the

duck hunting season to January 31, 1999. It limits the length of the season, but also requires that the offer be extended to any one of five other states in the lower part of the Mississippi Flyway. This is the first time in many decades that political intervention has intruded on the rigorous public process for setting hunting regulations through organized Flyway Councils. It is a clear threat to the integrity of the regulations process, as it is an invitation to others to "go political" to get what they want if they can't achieve it through the public process. Wildlife managers will be closely watching the response of other states, and Mississippi, in working through this to regain a professional and publicly sanctioned process that keeps it out of politics, and preserves our hunting tradition. Otherwise we can expect renewed legal challenges to hunting and continued animosity between states.

The Bureau of Land Management, which manages 270 million acres of some of our best deer, elk, sage grouse and antelope habitat, received a \$25 million increase overall. Fisheries and wildlife received modest increases, but even those are significant in a vastly

underfunded agency. There is mounting interest in FY 2000 increases targeting habitat restoration work. The welfare and management of this agency deserves the future attention of the Club.

Landmark proposals for major new funding for conservation programs became a reality late in the session. The Conservation and Reinvestment Act HR4717 was introduced by Congressman Don Young and others in the house, and the Reinvestment and Environmental Restoration Act S2566 was introduced by Senators Mary Landrieu, Frank Murkowski, Trent Lott, and John Breaux. Both bills provide a dedicated percentage of Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas revenues to states for wildlife programs. There are some differences between the two bills, but both would provide new funds roughly equal to the annual level of funding from both Pittman-Robinson and Dingell-Johnson excise taxes. This would double the funding that currently supports fish and wildlife programs in the state agencies. Both bills also provide for funding for land acquisition through the LWCF, both for local "stateside" and national conservation of lands that will benefit

all Americans in the future. The beginning of the dialogue on such legislation is a landmark in conservation equaling in magnitude the new funding from Pittman-Robertson achieved in 1937.

It is important to note that these proposals are not the same as the original Teaming with Wildlife proposal for an excise tax. They do, however, offer a chance to achieve most of the same goals.

There still are many concerns about specific portions of the bills, including whether the fish and wildlife funds are adequately targeted to non-game species, and environmental provisions of other parts of the bills that provide money to states separate from the fish and wildlife considerations. Overall, however, these bills are a tremendous advance.

Also likely is yet a third proposal from the Administration, to employ alternative ways of using

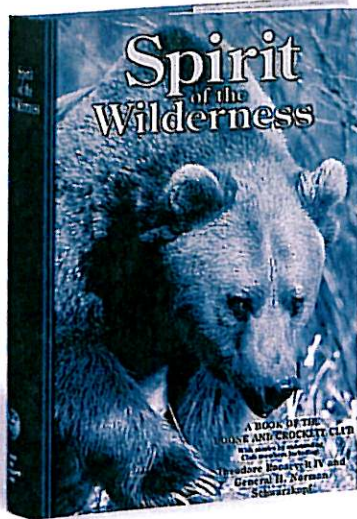
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In addition to stories by Schwarzkopf and Roosevelt IV, other noted Boone and Crockett Club members contributing stories of hunting, fishing, hiking, exploration and adventure include Richard Borden (wildlife film maker for Walt Disney Company and National Geographic), Richard P. Carlsberg (noted sheep hunter), Prentiss N. Gray (first editor of the B&C records book, *Records of North American Big Game*), John M. Kauffmann (National Park Service executive), Dr. William MacCarty (surgeon) and Paul D. Webster (B&C president). Idaho wildlife artist Hayden Lambson created the cougar sketch etched in silver leaf on the book's cover. A four-color photograph of a massive grizzly bear, by Denver Bryan, graces the dust jacket.

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OCS funds. The next session of Congress promises to be lively and focused on important new funding that will benefit wildlife and outdoor recreation uses including hunting for many decades to come!

Many issues remain on the table for the next round of legislation. Authorization of the Endangered Species Act did not occur, but will likely be a priority again in 1999. A new proposed bill to fund neo-tropical migratory bird programs also failed, yet there appears to be considerable support for doing something with this important issue in the next congress. A challenge will be to overlay the needs of migratory bird funding for song birds with those of waterfowl, wading birds and other components of the North American migratory bird resource, to widen the support base.

An emerging area of concern is the proliferation of listing packages for endangered species. Recently the National Wildlife Federation proposed listing the black-tailed prairie dog throughout its range. Prairie dogs occupy less than one percent of their former range. While they are still relatively common in many western states, they have been decimated by poisoning and habitat alteration. Recreational shooting programs have come under fire because of a need for managed approaches to harvest, rather than the haphazard approach of the past. The lesser prairie

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chicken has been proposed for listing, and a large working group of state, federal, and non-government organizations is attempting to work with habitat to improve the status of the lesser prairie chicken. Another hunted species being considered for listing is the sage grouse, because of the continuing deterioration of sage communities in the west. Sage grouse may now occupy half or less of their original range, and only four states have populations exceeding 20,000 birds. The key to this is management of Bureau of Land Management lands, such as those highlighted in past columns concerning oil and gas development in Wyoming.

The decline of hunted species – both the prairie chicken and sage grouse – is of deep concern to wildlife managers for the future. If the combination of habitat changes and inaction by management agencies and the hunting community is allowed to continue, we may face the loss of hunting privileges for species that have been part of the traditional hunting scene in America since the beginning. More focus on pro-active action at a landscape scale must occur if we are to forestall more instances of animals requiring protective action. The Boone and Crockett Club should take an active role in these kinds of efforts. Are we ready to provide such leadership? ▲▲▲