

# THE PITTMAN-ROBERTSON ACT: A SYSTEM WE CAN DEPEND ON

## CONSERVATION POLICY COLUMN

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**As members and supporters of organizations like the Boone and Crockett Club, we know that wildlife conservation in this country is largely funded by hunters. However, based on recent efforts in the U.S. House of Representatives to dismantle these policies, it has become clear that some folks outside of our community aren't familiar with the importance of the Pittman-Robertson Act.**

Members of the Boone and Crockett Club across the country built a system of wildlife conservation funding for states that has stood, largely intact, for approximately 85 years. Driven by the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration program, this system works by levying a federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery tackle. Those funds are then matched with monies generated from the sale of hunting licenses at the state level. Together, these funds, and those derived from the Dingell-Johnson Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, make up most of the American system of conservation funding and are used to make

robust investments in wildlife habitat, research, and active restoration activities. These funds make up a significant amount of dedicated revenue for state fish and wildlife agencies every year—61% in FY 2019 alone.

However, it is worth revisiting why we needed these resources to restore wildlife populations in the first place. Not so long ago, many of our wildlife populations were close to extinction. Overzealous early settlers nearly wiped out some species and left only pitiful remnants of other species. It may be hard to believe, but in the 1930s it was a rare event to see even one whitetail deer on a hunting trip in much of the U.S. In Mississippi, for example, the population had dwindled to about 1,500 animals in the larger swamps; today, the population in the state is nearly two million. The loss of habitat and over-hunting without regulation caused severe declines in many species of game.

In the mid-1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt convened a blue-ribbon panel on wildlife conservation to address the massive

declines in some of our country's most charismatic wildlife species. Hunters, some of whom were members of the Boone and Crockett Club, were named members of this panel and were tasked with developing a solution to this problem. One recommendation of this group led to the writing and passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, commonly referred to as the Pittman-Robertson Act, which was named after its sponsors Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Congressman A. Willis Robertson of Virginia. It was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 2, 1937, and it intended to provide funding to states for the restoration, rehabilitation, and improvement of wildlife habitat, the distribution of educational information and wildlife management research.

The Pittman-Robertson Act levies an 11% federal excise tax on sporting arms, archery equipment, and ammunition and a 10% tax on handguns. Collected from the manufacturers by the Department of the Treasury, these funds are apportioned each

year to the states and territories by the Department of the Interior based on formulas set forth in the Act. Each state's apportionment is determined by considering the total area of the state and the number of licensed hunters in that state. Tribal wildlife agencies are not eligible for Pittman-Robertson grants.

To ensure that revenues from hunting licenses wouldn't be used for non-conservation purposes at the state level, the authors of the Pittman-Robertson Act smartly included a requirement that states must dedicate these funds to state wildlife agencies to be eligible for the federal grant program. To be eligible for federal funds, a state must also have in place laws governing the conservation of wildlife. All projects aided under the act must be agreed upon by the Secretary of the Interior and the fish and wildlife department of the state where the project is located.

**Pittman-Robertson has generated over \$15 billion alone to conserve wildlife, enhance public recreational shooting opportunities, acquire state wildlife management areas for hunting, fund hunter education programs, provide technical assistance to private landowners, and recruit America's next generation of hunter-conservationists.**

**Although funded wholly by firearm users and archery enthusiasts, the Pittman-Robertson Act also benefits those who never hunt but enjoy such recreational hobbies as bird-watching, painting, sketching, and nature photography as well as other outdoor pursuits.**

As a cost-reimbursement program, the state covers the full amount of an approved project and then applies for reimbursement from Federal Aid for up to 75% of its expenses. So, 25% of the cost must come from a non-federal source such as license fees paid by hunters and other such sources.

Of the funds available to the states, more than 60% is used to buy, develop, and maintain wildlife management areas. Over four million acres have been purchased outright since the program began, and nearly 40 million acres are managed for wildlife under agreements with other landowners. That is an area almost the size of Mississippi and Alabama combined.

Along with land acquisition, improved scientific wildlife management techniques have proved vital as well. Some examples include planting trees and shrubs in the Great Plains as cover to shelter quail, pheasants, and other wildlife during winter storms; creating watering holes in the Southwest; controlling burns and restoring waterfowl habitat in the South; and creating variable habitats in the Northeast for rabbits, deer, woodcock, and other wildlife.

Although funded wholly by firearm users and archery enthusiasts, the Pittman-Robertson Act also benefits those who never

hunt but enjoy such recreational hobbies as bird-watching, painting, sketching, and nature photography as well as other outdoor pursuits. Almost all lands purchased with money from this Act are managed for wildlife as well as other public uses such as hiking, fishing, and camping. Amendments have since been made to the program to fund the development and management of public target ranges as well as hunter education programs.

According to a 2019 Congressional Research Service report, from FY 2007 through FY 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported a total of \$6.2 billion (in 2018 dollars) of revenue from Pittman-Robertson sources. Ammunition accounted for \$2.1 billion (34%), firearms for \$1.9 billion (32%), pistols and revolvers for \$1.7 billion (27%), and archery equipment for \$0.5 billion (8%) of the total. Another report suggests that recreational shooters contribute more than 77.5% of revenues generated by this tax (excluding archery equipment).

Thanks to these efforts, the nationwide white-tail deer population is over 20 million strong and several other species' populations have recovered and extended their ranges well beyond what they were in the 1930s. Among them are the

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE REPORTED REVENUE FROM FY 2007 THROUGH FY 2016 FROM PITTMAN-ROBERTSON SOURCES\***

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**PISTOLS AND REVOLVERS — \$1.7 billion (27%)**  
**ARCHERY EQUIPMENT — \$0.5 billion (8%)**  
**TOTAL — \$6.2 BILLION**

\*According to a 2019 Congressional Research Service report.

wild turkey, wood duck, pronghorn antelope, black bear, bobcat, mountain lion, and several others.

The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act is a pivotal part of paying for wildlife management in this country. As a hunter, many of your equipment purchases help fund wildlife conservation, providing countless opportunities for outdoor recreation and promoting the health of our nation's diverse wildlife habitat.

However, as conservation leaders, we must remain vigilant to attacks on this system. Earlier this year, the Boone and Crockett Club worked with the American Wildlife Conservation Partners to crush a misguided proposal that would eliminate the Pittman-Robertson program. H.R. 8167, the so-called RETURN Act of 2022 would essentially "gut" funding for state wildlife departments. It would change the funding mechanism to an already unpopular tax on oil and gas leases from public lands and waters, even for non-coastal states. Furthermore, game conservation programs, such as those for deer and turkey, would no longer be funded; funding would be shifted exclusively

to non-game programs.

Pittman-Robertson has generated over \$15 billion alone to conserve wildlife, enhance public recreational shooting opportunities, acquire state wildlife management areas for hunting, fund hunter education programs, provide technical assistance to private landowners, and recruit America's next generation of hunter-conservationists. In 2021 alone, over \$1.1 billion was raised and distributed for on-the-ground funding for state wildlife agencies.

Without the funding, advocacy, and input from sportsmen, wild places and wild things would not exist in the health and abundance they do today. This bill has re-committed serious conservation organizations like the Boone and Crockett Club, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and others to explain and remind elected officials of this fact and what makes wildlife and habitat conservation work throughout our great nation.

Advancing the legacy of the Boone and Crockett Club means that we must protect our uniquely American system of conservation funding, while always seeking to improve the ways in which we pay for wildlife conservation in this country. ■

**READ A PITTMAN-ROBERTSON ACT SUCCESS STORY ON PAGE 60.**