



Wellspring of Wildlife Funding

HOW HUNTER AND ANGLER DOLLARS FUEL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

By Steve Williams, Ph.D.

As states struggle with dwindling budgets, questions about conservation funding dominate the discussion of fish and wildlife professionals across the country and in Washington, DC. Yet few people may be aware that the “granddaddy” of all wildlife conservation trust funds—created by the 73-year-old Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (**Pittman-Robertson Act**, or P-R)—realized a 38 percent increase in revenue just last year and provided more than half a billion dollars for wildlife conservation. The reason for the jump is controversial, and points to the nation’s critical need to find steady, broad-based funding sources for wildlife conservation.

Passed in 1937, the P-R Act levied a manufacturer’s excise tax on firearms and ammunition to provide funding for state fish and wildlife agencies. The increase of almost \$140 million in revenues in 2009 occurred because many citizens felt that the new administration might impose new gun restrictions, concern that sparked a buying spree. Whatever the reason, large jumps or dips in revenues make planning for wildlife conservation an unpredictable business. This is why groups such as Teaming with Wildlife—a coalition of some 6,000 organizations—are pressing Congress to provide long-term, reliable funding for all species of fish and wildlife. The time has come.

Building a Bank Roll

In the 1930s, recognizing that game populations in the United States were diminished and unsustainable, political leaders, hunters, firearm manufacturers, and others endorsed the P-R Act and its long-term financial commitment to the nation’s wildlife. In 1939, the first year of P-R funding, revenues apportioned to states reached \$890,000—a notable achievement in those difficult days of recession and world war. Revenue generated from hunting license sales and excise taxes is still the financial engine that drives conservation in most states. In 2009, more than \$1.1 billion in funding came from gross license sales of roughly \$764 million and P-R funds of about \$336 million. This user-pay, user-benefit system undergirds the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Not long after the passage of the P-R Act, anglers and the fishing industry worked with Congress to create the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (**Dingell-Johnson Act**, or D-J), passed in 1950. Like P-R, the D-J Act established manufacturers’ excise taxes on a variety of fishing equipment and gear and a tax on motorboat fuel and motors. In 1952, the first year of funding, D-J revenues totaled \$2.7 million. Last year the taxes contributed \$404 million to state agencies for sport fish conservation and management. Like the P-R program, the combination of D-J funds and fishing license sales contribute more than \$1 billion annually to state fish and wildlife agencies. To date, both the P-R and D-J programs have contributed more than \$10 billion to fish and wildlife conservation in the U.S.—a reflection of how hunters and anglers have ensured sustainable wildlife conservation.

Despite their significance, these funding programs are poorly understood by the public and even by most wildlife professionals. In essence, P-R funding today is derived from an 11 percent excise tax on firearms and ammunition, a 10 percent tax on handguns and revolvers, and an 11 percent tax on archery



Courtesy of Steve Williams

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Credit: Brent Stettler/Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

Mike Aull of Price, Utah, lands a glistening tiger trout at the Duck Fork Reservoir in the Wasatch Plateau. Substantial funds from the sale of fishing licenses and from excise taxes on a range of fishing gear help states conduct fisheries research, improve waterways, and provide recreational opportunities.



equipment and arrow components. D-J funding is derived from a 10 percent tax on fishing equipment, a 3 percent tax on electric trolling motors, a motorboat

fuel tax, a small engine fuel tax, and import duties on tackle, pleasure boats, and yachts. These taxes are collected by the Internal Revenue Service and deposited in Federal Treasury accounts—essentially trust funds for fish and wildlife conservation. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) administers the P-R and D-J programs and annually apportions tax dollars to each of the states and territories of the U.S. There is no other user-pay system of this magnitude for any other type of outdoor recreation.



Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The 2010 Federal Duck Stamp features a vivid portrait of long-tailed ducks, painted by award-winning wildlife artist Joshua Spies of Watertown, SD. Since the program began in 1934 it has generated more than \$700 million for wetland habitat in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

How Funds Are Apportioned

The formula for apportioning P-R and D-J funds is based on the number of certified hunting or fishing licenses sold in each state and the geographic size of each state. In order to be eligible for these funds, state and territorial governments must have passed “assent legislation” mandating that hunting and fishing license dollars can be used only for conservation purposes, as opposed to being diverted to fund general activities of the state. Canada does not have a similar federal source of funds, and most provinces submit hunting and fishing license dollars to the province for purposes other than conservation.

To insure that P-R and D-J funds are spent appropriately, FWS has established regulations that define eligible projects, which include research, restoration, conservation, management and enhancement of fish and wildlife and their habitats, and providing public benefit from these resources. In addition, approved grant funds are released on a reimbursement basis for up to 75 percent of eligible project costs. For example, if a state agency spends \$500,000 for eligible costs to restore a wetland complex, the P-R program would reimburse the agency for \$375,000.

In general, ineligible activities include public relations, revenue production, commercial purposes to benefit individuals or groups, enforcement of game and fish laws and regulations, publish-

ing and distributing regulations, constructing public facilities not directly related to conservation efforts, and most types of wildlife damage management activities. The P-R program does not allow expenditure of funds to support stocking game animals to provide recreation only. To insure program integrity, internal and external financial and administrative audits are conducted at least every five years to gauge compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

Wildlife Restoration Funding

Under the federal [Wildlife Restoration Program](#), excise tax revenue 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, and hunter education and shooting range programs receive \$8 million annually, with half of the taxes collected on handguns and archery equipment apportioned for hunter education. The FWS receives a small percentage of the total fund to administer the Act.

The Wildlife Restoration Act has been amended a number of times since 1937. These amendments have made the funds permanent and indefinite (1951); increased the excise tax from 10 percent to 11 percent on firearms and ammunition (1954); added 10 percent excise taxes from pistols and revolvers and allowed use of those funds for hunter education (1970); created an 11 percent excise tax on archery equipment and allowed the use of those 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 (producing 50 or fewer guns) from paying excise taxes on firearms (2005).

The P-R apportionments to states in the past five years have ranged from approximately \$233 million to \$472 million and support hundreds of P-R projects across the nation involving wildlife research, habitat management, program administration, hunter education, waterfowl impoundments, planning, shooting range development, land acquisition and easements, and private and public land management. In 2009 alone, for example, the program contributed:

- \$50.2 million for operations and maintenance



- across 18.6 million acres.
- \$32.1 million to fund 9,567 population research projects.
- \$18.2 million for habitat improvements on 1.2 million acres.
- \$11.5 million to acquire 1.3 million acres of land.
- \$10.7 million to provide hunter education to 372,000 students.

Sport Fish Restoration

With its varied revenue sources, the D-J Act supports a wide range of activities related to the [Sport Fish Restoration Program](#)—activities that also benefit myriad other aquatic species. The FWS retains a small percentage of funds for administration of the Act. In addition, each year \$800,000 is distributed to four regional Fisheries Commissions, \$3 million goes to the Multistate Conservation Grant Program, and \$400,000 to the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council. After that, 57 percent of the remaining funds support sport fish restoration programs, and 43 percent goes to coastal, recreational boating, clean vessel, and boating infrastructure grant programs, and to a national outreach and communication program.

The D-J Act has been amended six times since its inception in 1950. The Wallop-Breaux Amendment of 1984 expanded and captured additional funds from a broad base of fishing and boating items, included motorboat access projects, added marine as well as freshwater projects, and created the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund. A 1991 amendment added small engine gas taxes to the fund and apportioned a percentage for wetland and coastal wetland conservation. In 1992, an amendment added the Clean Vessel Program. Later amendments authorized funding for outreach and boating infrastructure and safety (1998), reduced or removed excise taxes on a narrow list of products (2004), and established a percentage-based allocation for grant programs (2005).

Apportionments to the states in the past five years have ranged from approximately \$291 million to \$404 million, funding hundreds of projects involving fisheries research, river and stream improvement, program administration, aquatic education, hatchery construction and renovation, planning, fish passage improvements, boating infrastructure development, and reservoir management. Among the major expenditures for 2009:

- \$31.9 million to fund 1,092 research projects on fish populations.
- \$23 million for hatchery maintenance at 101 sites.
- \$20.8 million for operations and maintenance across

- 360,000 acres.
- \$20.1 million for renovations at 65 hatchery sites.
- \$10.3 million to provide aquatic education to 754,000 students.

Will the Well Run Dry?

American hunters and anglers have made massive contributions to conservation through their license fees and excise taxes as well as through contributions to nonprofit groups such as Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Trout Unlimited, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. These funds—along with millions of dollars from

Summer Lake Thrives on P-R Funds

For the Summer Lake Wildlife Area in Oregon (below), the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Act is a lifeline. Since the area's establishment in 1944, P-R funds have provided the majority of its budget, contributing about \$336,000 this year alone and helping to protect 19,000 acres of land.

A critical nesting and rest stop for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway, the Summer Lake area supports more than 250 species of birds and 40 species of mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians. P-R funds support wetland maintenance and restoration to ensure healthy habitat for resident and migratory birds such as sandhill cranes, American white pelicans, tundra swans, snowy egrets, great blue herons, many passerines, and trumpeter swans—a newly reintroduced species.

"It's quite a complicated regime of flooding and drying wetlands to get a mix of wildlife species," says Peter Moore, wildlife restoration coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. To prevent infilling with vegetation, managers burn, mow, dike, and re-flood the area to create more open water space.

Marty St. Louis, manager of Summer Lake Wildlife Area, says that between 2,500 to 3,000 acres of wetland habitat have been restored over just the past four years—all of it made possible through P-R funds. "They allow the states to manage these habitats, and that's beneficial not only to the hunted species but also to the endangered and other species throughout the flyways," says St. Louis.

By Madeleine Thomas, Editorial Intern



Credit: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife



nonprofits, Farm Bill programs, federal agencies, and legislated funding programs in some states—help support the protection, restoration, and management of not just game species, but of all fish and wildlife. These dollars have also enabled the acquisition and enhancement of millions of aquatic and wildlife habitat acres, and supported research in areas such as biological monitoring, life history, population modeling, and habitat management.

Yet as the nation continues to urbanize and as citizens lose their physical relationship with wildlife resources, the financial, social, and political support for sustainable use and conservation is at risk. The decline in the number of certified paid hunting license holders—down 14 percent over the last 30 years—does not bode well for the future funding of conservation. And though hunter and angler recruitment and retention programs across the country are attempting to sustain the numbers of sportsmen and women, these individuals alone should no longer be expected to shoulder the burden of conservation funding.

Of course all citizens contribute to conservation through federal taxes that support natural resource

agencies such as FWS and the U.S. Forest Service. However, these agencies do not have the authorization or responsibility to manage non-federal trust species—resident deer, bear, turkeys, and other fish and wildlife species that reside within the borders of state and territorial boundaries, and which make up the bulk of species in the nation.

Efforts are underway to expand the financial contributions of all Americans. Advocates for climate change adaptation funding and the Teaming with Wildlife coalition make powerful arguments for the inclusion of public funding in conservation, and Congress and the industries that rely on abundant fish and wildlife resources have taken steps to provide financial support for their long-term sustainability. The main challenge is to engage the multi-billion-dollar wildlife-associated recreation industry and its customers to put their collective shoulders to the wheel of conservation alongside the hunters and anglers of this nation. How we meet this challenge will decide the fate of fish and wildlife resources and of human generations. ■

This article has been reviewed by subject-matter experts.

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