



Photo by Zachary J. Pearson

Conservation Funding

For the Future of Texas

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An ecosystem diverse with native plants and animals is a healthy ecosystem thus efficiently providing for our needs. If we do not take the time, effort and measures necessary to conserve all aspects of the environment, future generations will have even more difficulties protecting our natural resources than we face now. It is our responsibility and duty as conservationists to take care of our ecosystems and make sure there are plentiful resources for the next generation.

Funding for wildlife conservation is not guaranteed and annually fluctuates. Historically, funds have been more stable for game species, but for nongame species, those not typically hunted or fished, funding can fluctuate or even disappear from year to year. There is a new initiative that aims to solve this funding problem for all species in Texas and the United States.

Game animals and fish were not always as abundant or plentiful enough to harvest as they are today. In North America, in the late 1800s, populations of game and fish

species were at all-time lows and continued to decline due to over-harvest and market-driven hunting (fur trade, feather industry, meat demand, etc.) without regulation. Our now overabundant white-tailed deer were scarce in numbers, waterfowl and sport fish populations were on the decline, wild turkey populations plummeted to near extinction levels in parts of the country, and salmon stocks were dwindling.

Action became necessary for the conservation and recovery of these and



other game species. Beginning in 1937, with the passing of the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, a large increase in funds became available for wildlife conservation and management. Additional funding for fisheries management and conservation occurred in 1950 with the passing of the Dingell-Johnson Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act.

The Pittman-Robertson Act established an 11 percent excise tax on firearms ammunition and archery equipment so hunters and shooting sports enthusiasts pay the bills. Today, Pittman Robertson or PR Funds are distributed to each state's wildlife management agency based on the size of the state and the number of hunters. Reimbursements are made up to 75 percent for approved conservation projects for certain species by these state agencies. Projects can include surveys, habitat management, research, land acquisition and hunter education. In 2016, Texas received \$32.1 million in PR Funds which are eligible to be used on approved conservation projects for any species of wild mammal or bird or their habitats, hunter education program and shooting projects and programs.

On the fisheries side of conservation, Dingell-Johnson Act or DJ Funds, allotted from a 10 percent excise tax on sport fishing equipment, boat sales and motorboat fuel, are distributed by the Secretary of the Interior to each state's fisheries management agency based on water area and the number of fishing license holders in the state. Projects for DJ Funds can include research, fish stockings, surveys, hatchery management, improving boater access and aquatic education. In 2016, Texas received \$18 million in DJ Funds.

These two programs have been wildly successful in increasing sport fish and some game species populations, to date; however, nongame species have significantly less funding available. The current funding mechanisms, each set up decade's prior, show the large discrepancy between game and nongame conservation that has evolved over the years. It has become clear the need for reliable, annually appropriated federal funding

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source for nongame wildlife and other species of concern.

Government agencies and private organizations alike understand the immediate need for action in the face of reduced budgets and the severe economic impacts associated with impaired natural resources. Upon recognition of a deficient national funding system for wildlife conservation, a new group known as the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources was assembled in

2015. The Blue Ribbon Panel convened under the leadership of co-chairs John L. Morris (founder of Bass Pro Shops) and former Wyoming Governor David Freudenthal and also included a panel of leaders in conservation agencies, outdoor recreation, sportsmen's groups and leaders from the energy private sector. This national-level panel tasked themselves with recommending alternative federal options to provide states with vital natural resources funding.

After discussing and evaluating various





alternatives, the panel made two final recommendations in December 2015. The first being that “Congress dedicate up to \$1.3 billion annually in existing revenue from the development of energy and mineral resources on federal lands and waters to the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program (16 U.S.C. 669b(a)).”

The second recommendation, with longer term action, would be to “Examine the impact of societal changes on the relevancy of fish and wildlife conservation and make recommendations on how programs and agencies can transform to engage and serve broader constituencies.”

The Panel will create a working group to study the every diversifying need of state fish and game agencies as the countries demographics shift and attitudes change about nature, which will consequently affect the relevancy of fish and wildlife conservation.

Under the first recommendation made from the panel these existing revenues would be used to improve our state’s wildlife populations. The Texas Wildlife Conservation Action Plan will serve as the “roadmap” for conservation in the state, address the management of game and nongame animals, as well as the states plants and critical habitats. The well-rounded conservation plan includes the Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) list that consists of 1,310 native Texas species labeled as imperiled, threatened or endangered.

With the gap in conservation funding in mind and addressing the recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Panel, new legislation was introduced to Congress on July 6, 2016, H.R. 5650, titled “Restoring America’s Wildlife Act.” This Act would not generate any new fees or taxes, but instead, assign fees from energy extraction leases on federal lands and allocate them for the distribution for work defined in each State Wildlife Action Plan. The bill, sponsored by Congressman Don Young (R-AK), ended the last congressional session with 18 bipartisan co-signers (12 democratic and six republican), and will be reintroduced in the spring of 2017. A companion bill in the US Senate is expected this summer. If passed, Texas could potentially receive a



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distribution of \$50-65 million annually. That funding would be used to conserve, protect and manage the most sensitive natural resources, habitats and populations in Texas. Looking at this figure in terms of the current federal conservation dollars allocated (PR Funds, DJ Funds and other federal funding) which totaled \$52.6 million in 2016, a bill like this would have a profound impact by potentially doubling conservation funding in Texas. Putting conservation to work in Texas with the proper funds needed to address our states issues could have long-lasting effects—species could be saved, habitats restored, new management implemented and perhaps most importantly, educate the public on positive aspects of natural resource stewardship.

Building on the history of our conservation heroes from the last 80 years, we have a historic opportunity to protect our nation’s and state’s natural resources with dedicated funding. However, while this additional funding would be utilized under the guiding document of the Texas Conservation Action Plan and would

follow the best conservation practices for all wildlife species (game and nongame) and their habitats, a cultural shift is also needed to address the shifting value that environmental conservation holds in our nation.

Here in Texas, our private landowners are the stewards of those resources, but it continues to be pertinent for all wildlife enthusiasts and the general public to be educated on the need, the importance and the value of our natural resources. Healthy and diverse ecosystems will not only help conserve our precious flora and fauna species, but it will also continue providing for our human population’s ever-growing demand on our natural resources. ♻️

CORRECTION

In the March 2017 issue of *Texas Wildlife*, the Conservation Legacy “Education by the Numbers” infographic incorrectly stated that Conservation Legacy was established in 1991. The Texas Wildlife Association Foundation was established in 1991 and Conservation Legacy was later established in 2001.

