

Conservation Heritage Strategic Plan

Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program



Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principle

Mission: Working through partnerships to conserve and manage fish and wildlife and their habitats for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations.

Vision: Healthy, diverse, and accessible fish and wildlife populations that offer recreation, economic activity, and other societal benefits, in addition to sustainable ecological functions.

Guiding principle: Society benefits from conservation-based management of fish and wildlife and their habitats and opportunities to use and enjoy them.



Program Overview

The Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program (Program) and the partnerships it has fostered are considered by many to be the most successful conservation effort in the United States' rich history of fish and wildlife management. The Program features a number of grant opportunities that are covered by this Strategic Plan. Formula-funded grant opportunities include: Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration, which includes Hunter Education; Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration, which includes Boating Access and Aquatic Resource Education; and State Wildlife Grants. Competitively funded grant opportunities include: Boating Infrastructure Grants, Clean Vessel Act Grants, and Multistate Conservation Grants. Not included in this Strategic Plan are the Endangered Species Grants, the National Coastal Wetland Conservation Grants, and Tribal Wildlife Grants because responsibility for these is shared with other sectors of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

The Program was initially established through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 (now the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act) to address wildlife restoration. The Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act of 1950 (now the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act; expanded in 1984 by the Wallop-Breaux Amendment) addressed sport fish restoration. These Acts established a user pay–user benefit, excise tax-driven mechanism whereby

every State fish and wildlife agency, including U.S. territory and Commonwealth agencies, receives formula-prescribed, dedicated funding, through a permanent appropriation to manage their fish and wildlife resources. Industry partners pay taxes on equipment and gear manufactured for purchase by hunters, anglers, boaters, archers, and recreational shooters. Boaters pay a tax on motorboat fuel. The Service then distributes those funds to State, territory, and Commonwealth fish and wildlife agencies (State agencies) based on a formula determined by various factors, e.g., land area, number of paid license holders, minimums and maximums, to fund fish and wildlife management activities through grants.

No other single conservation effort in the United States can claim a greater contribution to fish and wildlife conservation than the excise tax-funded portion of the Program. More than \$10 billion have been collected, distributed, and matched with funds from State agencies for fish and wildlife management, species restoration, habitat protection and restoration, scientific study, population monitoring, hunter and aquatic education, and access for hunting, fishing and boating. All these activities result from a balanced effort from State and Federal grant managers ensuring effective, efficient, and accountable delivery of Program funds.

In addition to excise-tax derived funding, the Program also receives, year-by-year, funds from Congress for the State Wildlife Grant Program. These funds are distributed on a formula-prescribed basis, determined primarily by State population and land area, to State agencies to stabilize, restore, enhance, and protect species that are of conservation concern and their associated habitat. State Wildlife Grants address needs identified in State Wildlife Action Plans, focusing on practical, proactive measures to conserve and restore important lands and waters, curb establishment of invasive species, and address other pressing conservation needs as determined by each State, all for the purpose of keeping common species common. State Wildlife Action Plans were prepared by each State, territory, and Commonwealth after Congress charged them to develop their own State's comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. The State Wildlife Action Plans assess the health of each State's wildlife and habitats, identify their potential problems, and outline the actions needed to conserve these animals and habitats. Initiated in 2002, State Wildlife Grants have provided over \$375 million for conservation that have been matched by State agencies.

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Core Values

The State/Federal partnership agrees that it must:

- **Manage Fish and Wildlife as Public Trust Resources.** Stewardship of these and other natural resources is in the long-term public interest.
- **Support Traditions.** The Program embraces the rich traditions of hunting, fishing, boating, trapping, recreational shooting, and enjoying the outdoors.
- **Recognize the Contributions of Sportsmen and Sportswomen.** State and Federal partners appreciate the important conservation contributions of purchasers of hunting and fishing licenses, hunting, fishing, and shooting equipment, and motor boat fuel.
- **Recognize the Contributions of Industry.** State and Federal partners appreciate the important conservation contributions of industry partners through excise tax payments.
- **Strive for Sustainable Resources.** Sustainable populations of fish and wildlife resources and habitats are key to conservation and essential to provide for public use and enjoyment.
- **Be Accountable.** State and Federal partners assure that Program funds are used only for purposes specified in applicable State and Federal legislation and that Program results are succinctly demonstrated.
- **Use Sound Science.** Sound science and the ability to improve management by adaptively improving scientific knowledge through biological planning, conservation design and delivery, research, and monitoring are the foundations of Program success.
- **Recognize the Value of Partnerships.** State and Federal partners encourage the cooperation and involvement of all entities and individuals in the management and conservation of fish and wildlife.
- **Connect People with Nature.** Grant activities provide people opportunities to establish a closer connection with hunting, fishing, and the outdoors.



Conservation Heritage

In the formative years of the United States, the status of fish and wildlife resources was not a cause for concern or perceived as a problem. Uncontrolled harvest was prevalent. As settlement moved westward, exploitation of natural resources continued. As a result of unregulated hunting, commercialization of wildlife, and habitat fragmentation, many of North America's wildlife populations began to decline.

Beginning in the late 1800s, hunters and anglers realized that the nation needed to protect rapidly disappearing wildlife and provide protected areas. As President Theodore Roosevelt said, "There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country." He and other early conservationists advocated for hunting and fishing regulations. They also established conservation groups. State fish and wildlife agencies were formed in the late 1800s and early 1900s in recognition of needed protection of fish and game. Also, several wildlife protection laws were enacted, including the Lacey Act (1900), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918), and the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act (1934). Despite these efforts, fish and wildlife resources continued to decline and reached an all-time low by the 1930s.

The 1930 "American Game Policy," authored by Aldo Leopold, A. Willis Robertson, and other conservation leaders, called for a program of restoration supported by stable, equitable funding, and trained wildlife practitioners. The policy, coupled with growing concern related to the Dust Bowl and other forces of the "Dirty Thirties," provided the momentum to create the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 (now the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act) and the subsequent laws that embody the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program.

In North America, the historic importance of fish and wildlife has been sustained by laws rooted in two premises: first, fish and wildlife are public resources held in trust by government for the benefit of all citizens; and second, fish and wildlife are to be managed in such a way that their populations may be sustained forever.

These premises are the foundation of what has become known as the "North American Model of Wildlife Conservation." In the United States, individual States have the constitutional authority and responsibility to manage fish and

wildlife species and set State program-funding priorities. Federal authorities are rooted in specific laws, international treaties, commerce across borders, and protection of threatened and endangered species on Federal lands.

Pressure on fish and wildlife resources has increased with the growth and sprawl of human population, reduction of habitats capable of supporting fish and wildlife, and increased demand for goods and services in the last several decades. It is government's responsibility to ensure that the American public has access to fish and wildlife, their habitats, and opportunities to use and enjoy them now and into the future. In addition to sustaining healthy fish and wildlife populations, the Program enables people to access areas where they can hunt, fish, boat, trap, watch wildlife, and enjoy the outdoors. Without the Program and the contributions of its partners, fish and wildlife resources in the United States would not be as sustainable and accessible to the public as they are today.

In some States, financial support for fish and wildlife conservation is almost exclusively based on contributions of hunters and anglers, shooting sports enthusiasts, and recreational boaters through their hunting and fishing license fees as well as industry's excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment and fuels. It is important to note that all other forms of wildlife-dependent recreation benefit directly from these contributions.

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Intended Outcomes

Fish and Wildlife Conservation

- **Utilization of fish, wildlife, and their habitats.** The Program partners will maintain and support the rich heritage associated with fish and wildlife uses, such as hunting, fishing, boating, trapping, shooting, wildlife observation and photography, and conservation education.
- **Management of fish, wildlife, and their habitats.** The Program partners will maintain and enhance sustainable, healthy populations of fish and wildlife and the habitats to support them.

Program Administration

- **Efficient and consistent administration.** The Program partners will ensure sound administration and oversight of funds and activities in accordance with core values and applicable laws, policies, and regulations.
- **Effective communication.** The Program partners will communicate effectively with State, Federal, and industry partners, as well as stakeholders, elected officials, other policy makers, and the public.



New Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the enormous success of the Program, wildlife resources will continue to confront new challenges. Agencies must address the impacts caused by limited financial resources, global climate change, urban sprawl and encroachment, and an urbanized society that is increasingly disconnected from the natural environment.

- **Connecting People with Nature.** The Program must take positive steps to encourage and nurture interest in the natural world. Connecting people with hunting and fishing traditions is important, considering the downward trends of participation in hunting, fishing, and boating, and the fact that those who participate in these activities are the primary financial contributors of conservation in the United States.
- **Climate Change.** Climate change has the potential to alter native and managed habitats significantly, to increase the likelihood of species extinctions, to stress native and nonnative populations, and to affect how people use fish and wildlife resources. Anticipating and responding to the limitations and opportunities resulting from projected climate change will be a unique challenge for fish and wildlife agencies.
- **Strengthening and Expanding Partnerships.** The success of the Program is due in large part to the effective partnerships between the State agencies, Service, industry, and Congress. Continuing this success and



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achieving the intended outcomes described in this plan will require that these important partnerships be maintained and strengthened. In addition, trends in climate change and the public's connection to nature pose challenges, but they also present opportunities to build increased support for conservation through existing and potential new partners.

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