



To: Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Re: **HB 581**

Position: **OPPOSE**

Date: **March 12, 2020**

Honorable Members:

My name is Brent Miller, and I am the Senior Director, Northeastern States for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. I am also a Vermont resident, and an avid hunter and angler who celebrates the current and historic role of sportsmen and women as Vermont's preeminent conservationists, as well as the role that the conservation funding our community generates for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department plays in providing benefits for all Vermonters – whether or not they are sportsmen and women themselves. To that end, I encourage the Committee to oppose HB 581 (An act relating to the funding of the Department of Fish and Wildlife) in its current form, and to consider amending the bill to include a specific charge for the to-be-formed committee to focus on ways to increase participation in hunting and angling in recognition of our community's long-standing history of benefiting all residents through our participation in these time-honored traditions.

America's sportsmen and women led the vanguard that resulted in the formation and organization of state-level fish and wildlife regulations and departments, including the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. During the 19th century, the United States experienced a period that saw an exploitation of various wildlife species to meet increasing commercial needs. Recognizing the undoubtedly perilous situation, our nation's sportsmen and women banded together to enact laws governing the harvest of wildlife. These early conservationists recognized that unregulated market hunting, coupled with an increasingly urban, non-agrarian society largely out of touch with wildlife in wild places, would ultimately result in negative consequences for much of the country's wildlife, and therefore implemented self-imposed regulations for the betterment of this nation's fish and wildlife. Building off of that, professional wildlife managers continued to work to ensure that healthy and sustainable populations of wildlife would continue in perpetuity. Conservationists like Aldo Leopold developed

game laws and worked to restore and conserve imperiled wildlife populations and their respective habitats. At the core of all of these efforts was an insistence that science serve as the guiding force in wildlife management decisions and regulations. Wildlife managers, employed by state and federal agencies, would be trained in fields such as biology, ecology, and law enforcement to fulfill this charge. To this day, Vermont sportsmen and women continue to work alongside the Fish and Wildlife Department towards furthering conservation efforts that benefit all wildlife species and all residents of the state.

For more than 80 years, sportsmen and women have held the role as the primary funders of state-level conservation efforts in the United States and are thus an important constituency that provides benefits for all Vermonters. This funding mechanism, the American System of Conservation Funding (ASCF), is a “user-pays, public-benefits” structure, in which those who consumptively use public resources pay for the privilege, and in some cases the right, to do so. There are three pillars to the ASCF: revenue from sporting licenses, and excise tax revenue from both the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act) and the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (Dingell-Johnson Act). The resulting funds collected through this program are the lifeblood of the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. These excise taxes and license dollars are used to fund a wide variety of activities including: fish and wildlife research, private and public habitat conservation, hunter education, shooting range development, land acquisition and easements, wetlands restoration, and angler access area construction. Since 1939, state fish and wildlife agencies across the nation have received over \$65 billion from sportsmen and women through this funding structure. In 2019 alone, Vermont’s sportsmen and women generated over \$15.3 million dollars for conservation through revenue derived from license sales and excise taxes on sporting-related goods through the ASCF. These contributions include more than: \$4 million through hunting licenses; \$2.5 million through fishing licenses; \$4 million through the Pittman-Robertson Act; and \$3.70 million through the Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux Acts. It is indisputable that sportsmen and women are currently the primary funders of the Fish and Wildlife Department, and we take pride in our role as the single largest drivers of state-level conservation funding here in the Green Mountain State.

While ensuring stable funding for the Department is a laudable goal, and one that we fully support, in its current form, HB 581 makes several omissions and assumptions which cannot be overlooked. Specifically, the bill’s findings section focuses on the decreases in license sales and uses that as a justification that alternative funding mechanisms must be considered. What is conveniently left out of the discussion is that although licenses sales decreased from 1985-present, the funding generated by the smaller constituency has more than tripled over that same time period (from \$4.96 million in 1985 to over \$15.3 million in 2019). Even when adjusted for inflation, the funding from sportsmen and women has still significantly increased over this period (adjusted 1985 figure in 2019 dollars assuming 2% inflation/year = \$9.7 million, versus actual contributions from sportsmen and women in 2019 of \$15.3 million).

Vermont hunters and anglers have long demonstrated a willingness to pay for state-level conservation that far exceeds any other constituency. We need not dig very deep to find several recent examples that drive that point home. Just last year, when the Salisbury Fish Hatchery was in danger of closing due to budget shortfalls, Vermont’s sportsmen and women came together and voluntarily agreed to an increase in our license fees to help close the gap and to ensure the hatchery remain operational. Further, the Habitat Stamp is another strong example. Although the Habitat Stamp is a voluntary giving program that all Vermonters are able to contribute to, the vast majority of funding for the program continues to come from hunters and anglers who, after already purchasing their licenses,

decide to contribute still more funds to support the Department. This existing program is well publicized by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and several state-based conservation organizations, yet the general public, by and large, does not take advantage of it.

With the above points in mind, I encourage the Committee to oppose HB 581 in its current form and to broaden the purview to not only focus on alternative funding mechanisms, but to also explore ways to reduce barriers to participation in hunting and fishing, which will generate additional conservation dollars from the one community that has repeatedly, and continually demonstrated a willingness to pay for the essential work that the Department undertakes to benefit all species and people of Vermont. Further, such work must be done in concert with the sporting community and the Fish and Wildlife Department, who has dedicated personnel who can provide subject matter expertise as the Committee undertakes this important work.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. Should you require any additional information on this matter, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,



Brent Miller

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Enclosed: Contributions to the American System of Conservation Funding by Vermont Sportsmen and Women



Vermont

Contributions to the American System of Conservation Funding

Through the American System of Conservation Funding (comprised of revenue from sporting licenses and Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux funds), sportsmen and women contribute billions of dollars to conservation. The System is a “user-pays, public-benefits” model, wherein sportsmen and women provide the vast majority of the funding for state fish and wildlife agencies – the primary stewards of our nation’s fish and wildlife resources. The revenue generated through this System helps to conserve fish and wildlife, provide clean water and healthy landscapes, and maintain access to these resources for the public at large, not just hunters and anglers.

	Hunting Licenses	Fishing Licenses	Pittman-Robertson	Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux	Total
2019 Funding	\$4.04 M	\$2.53 M	\$4.05 M	\$3.70M	\$15.32 M
2019 National Rankings	45	46	46	48	47
Historical Funding Total	\$146.71 M	\$104.71 M	\$62.06 M	\$88.40 M	\$401.88 M
Historical Funding US Rank	44	46	50	50	46

Vermont sportsmen and women’s contributions to the American System of Conservation Funding:

- Thanks to the ASCF the Fish & Wildlife Department currently owns and maintains 98 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) totaling more than 145,000 acres throughout the state. All WMAs are open to a variety of outdoor recreation that the public can enjoy including wildlife viewing, bird watching, hunting, and fishing
- From 2005-2013, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department acquired 41 separate parcels (excluding fishing access areas) totaling more than 4,141 acres to be added to WMAs or to create new WMAs.
- The state of Vermont has built 180 public boat ramps and access areas.
- Vermont’s Let’s Go Fishing Program encourages young Americans and their families to get out and go fishing, improving angler participation and informing residents of the importance of sportsmen’s role in conservation.
- The Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department manages three public shooting ranges throughout the state.

This report is made possible thanks to:

2019 Certified Paid License Holders
 Fishing: 118,837
 Hunting: 67,619

2019 Total Licenses/Permits/Tags
 Fishing: 125,587
 Hunting: 178,809

