

Vermont Wildlife Coalition Testimony - H. 581

The VWC requests that you move H.581 to the General Assembly for a vote to create a working group to address the funding challenges facing wildlife management in Vermont.

A. First point - there is a funding crisis

Because I am submitting extended written remarks that include evidence of the funding crisis, I'm not going to present the full evidence here. I'll just say that the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), the National Wildlife Federation and even Vermont's DFW have all acknowledged that a crisis exists. I will quote AFWA:

For every game species that is thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline....Unlike the conservation finance system that was created for game and sport fish, there is no comparable funding mechanism to manage the majority of fish and wildlife under state stewardship."¹

B. What's the nature of this crisis?

There are three major sources of DFW funding, as well as miscellaneous income. About one third of the budget comes from hunter and angler license fees. The decline of hunting and angling license fees since 2006 has been well-documented.

Another roughly one quarter of the budget is from the state general fund. The DFW is increasingly drawing on the general fund dollars to replace lost license revenue.

Another third comes from federal grant money. One problem with this money is that the state must provide match from license sales. As license sales decrease, the amount of drawdown decreases. Another issue is that federal dollars were never inadequate to meet the goals of Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan. That's a conclusion stated in the Plan itself.

C. There is more than funding at stake

Point two and an even more compelling reason for a legislative working group to look at funding -- **the very future of Vermont's wildlife is at stake -- funding and the capacity to address the emerging threats to wild species are inexorably connected.** A major Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies report

states, “Yet what is hidden from most Americans is another impending fish and wildlife crisis. For every game species that is thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline...”² They go on, “In the coming years, thousands of species could be added to the list of federal threatened and endangered species.”³

A major report by the National Wildlife Federation, the American Fisheries Society and the Wildlife Society concludes that as many as one-third of America’s wildlife species are at increased risk of extinction. Vermont’s WAP reports that 976 Vermont species qualified as “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” (SGCN) as of 2015. If America’s wildlife is facing species loss on a large scale, there’s good reason to assume Vermont’s will also be susceptible.

D. Why is wildlife at risk?

Again, this is referenced in my extended written remarks, but the WAP discusses the challenges, including:

- Climate change
- Habitat loss and fragmentation
- Impacts of roads and transportation systems
- Pollution
- Invasive species
- Disease

There is not question that DFW takes these threats seriously. The 2015 WAP gives in-depth attention to climate change. And the agency for some time has been a leader in addressing the problem of habitat loss, which it describes as the biggest threat to wildlife. Scientists are only beginning to catch up on pollution and disease.

These are all complex issues and their unpredictability makes it hard to know where they will lead and at what pace, and the appropriate responses.

If DFW is struggling to sustain operational funding in the present, how will it fund the level of response required in the future to address wildlife protection needs?

E. Present funding solutions don’t provide the answer

Roughly one third of DFW’s budget comes from license fees and these have been decreasing since at least 2006. This is well documented. In response, DFW has been trying to restore licence revenues by recruiting more hunters. Their 2018 budget report concludes, “no matter how successful, these efforts will not replace lost license sales revenue.”⁴

The state general fund and federal grant money each provide roughly another one quarter and one third of the budget, respectively. Both are subject to political winds and therefore unstable. They are also insufficient and, in fact, federal grants are already declining. The WAP states that State Wildlife Grants face “additional cuts every year.” The report continues, “Annual SWG allocations have declined by 40% since 2002 and additional cuts are threatened every year.”

A key consideration is that it is primarily non-game species that are under threat. Non-game in VT includes some 21,000 species. That’s in contrast to 40-50 game species. Game constitute a minute fraction of all species. Traditional funding has disproportionately focused on protecting game. That needs to be adjusted for.

F. VWC is not going to suggest specific funding solutions.

We believe legislators must assume that task because they can access the expertise and records necessary to do the required assessment and to create whatever mechanism is decided upon. From that assessment, the group can then make recommendations about future budget needs and new sources of funding. So we will make these key points:

1. Funding Must Increase

Addressing the potential species loss will place new and heavy demands on DFW’s scientific capacity, beginning with the need for monitoring and research, and those activities, as the WAP notes, are expensive.

Another need is habitat protection. The department is already a leader in this area, but the number of acres it secures annually is not keeping up with the acreage lost. They need more resources.

Still another need is for funds to meet the increasing demand for services by the public, including the quickly growing catchall category of wildlife watchers.

2. Funding Must Be Stable

One could argue that there is no such thing as stable funding. That doesn’t deny that greater stability is possible and desirable. With stable funding, the department would have a fighting chance to protect Vermont’s priceless wildlife. The health of wildlife is critical to the health of all ecosystem participants in the ecosystem, including humans; it impacts our quality of life, our economy and our identity. One way to increase stability will be found in my next point.

3. Funding Must Be Diversified

The more diversity in the the sources, the more stable that funding. By “diversified,” we mean not only multiple sources, but also because the state holds wildlife in trust for all citizens, that all citizens should be participating in

financing the conservation of wildlife. The responsibility cannot fall to just a small subgroup. Involving all citizens would also help keep the public invested in the Department's efforts to protect wildlife.

Why can't hunters cover the costs? Hunters will be quick to point out their major role in funding conservation, and it's true. But two notes:

a) Historically, sports funding, while providing some benefit to non-game, was primarily directed towards game animals, hunters' main priority. That focus is part of the reason there is insufficient funding for non-game now.

b) hunter funding is decreasing at the same time the need for funding is rapidly expanding,

Can the public afford to contribute? The short answer is - absolutely. The US government estimates that wildlife watchers spend about \$3 on their avocation for every \$1 spent by hunters.⁵

But will the public want to contribute? We think so and polls by the DFW agree. One puts Vermont ranks one among states for public interest in wildlife. Another reported that 61% responded yes to an increase in the general sales tax for conservation.

4. Funding must be targeted to contemporary needs

Part of the job of the working group will be to assess what those needs are. This will require an examination of how the department allocates funding, what groups currently benefit from those allocations and in what proportions, and if the allocations actually make sense in today's world and in light of current priorities and challenges.

Gaining real public support probably will require DFW to put at least the level of resources into public programming and services that it now devotes to hunters and anglers.

Conclusion

Our purpose is to draw attention to why we can't ignore the funding challenge any longer. The department concludes, "**A long-lasing remedy to these issues (the decline in license sales and associated funding) will likely require other changes beyond those controlled by the department.**"⁶ We agree and ask the legislature to fulfill its role.

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¹Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), Blue Ribbon Report (2017), 2.

²AFWA, 2

³AFWA, 6

⁴*Fish & Wildlife Department Performance Based Budget - FY2018*, Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife (2018 Performance), 1

⁵2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 35,39. Hunters spent \$26.2 billion versus 75.9 billion by wildlife watchers.

⁶2018 Performance, 1