



In Support of the Wildlife Governance Section of S. 321

Walter M. Medwid February 27, 2020

Thank you Senator Bray and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify. The key message that I hope to convey this morning is that there is a chorus of voices calling for change in wildlife governance. I'll start with the voices at the 10,000 foot level.

### **1. The Wildlife Profession is calling for Change**

For over 25 years leaders within the wildlife profession have been assessing and writing about the need for agencies to change in response to citizen's expectations for how agencies function, who stands as their primary "customers" and how agencies address unprecedented environmental threats. The AFWA (the industry voice for FWA-VT DFW is a dues paying member) assembled a 52 page annotated bibliography on agency transformation that included 38 additional references of peer-reviewed papers on agency transformation including papers on agency resistance to change. It is worth noting some of the titles of key papers:

Transformation of SFWA: Ensuring the future of conservation in a rapidly changing world (2011)

Beyond Rhetoric: Facing the New Realities of FW Mgmt (1996)

From Clients to Stakeholders: A Philosophical Shift for FW Mgmt (1996)

Human Dimensions of Wildlife Mgmt: Knowledge for Agency Survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1996)

Why are Public Values toward Wildlife Changing? (2003)

Governance of State Wildlife Management: Reform and Revive or Resist and Retrench? (2008)

It's too late for Incrementalism: Let's Transform to a New Approach for FW Conservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2011)

Governance Principles for Wildlife Conservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2016)

Let me point out a leading voice for change and co-author on several seminal papers is Dr. Daniel Decker of Cornell. He is not on the fringes of the wildlife profession-quite the contrary-past President of The Wildlife Society, awarded its highest honor and last year, was awarded the highest award from the Wildlife Management Institute.

## **2. The Association representing the interests of FW Agencies is calling for Change**

In 2016, the AFWA released the Blue Ribbon Panel Report (16 pp). The panel, formed in response to an “...impending fish and wildlife crisis and the increasing disconnect of agencies with the citizenry, was chaired by the former Gov. of Wyoming and the founder of Bass Pro Shops. They released two recommendations one on using federal oil and gas revenues to fund wildlife conservation programs and the other on the need for agencies to transform to engage and serve broader constituencies. The report stated the following:

“Every citizen has a stake in and benefits from healthy fish and wildlife, but most have little contact with or understanding of the state agency responsible for their stewardship. To remain relevant, state fish and wildlife agencies will need to transform their structures, operations and cultures to meet the changing expectations of their customers. If state fish and wildlife agencies fail to adapt, their ability to manage fish and wildlife will be hindered and their public and political support compromised.” *Source: Page 9 BR Report*

## **3. DFW Staff is calling for Change** *Source: VT DFW*

A survey of DFW staff taken in 2018 showed the following:

- 62% of employees surveyed feel DFW should focus more on adapting to change.
- 85% of employees recognize that the views of the public are changing with regard to wildlife management.
- 50.8% of employees surveyed felt that “adaptable to change” was only “somewhat characteristic of my agency”
- 16.4% felt that “adapting to change” was “very characteristic of my agency”

Examples of Change facing the DFW

**Vermont Fishing, Hunting, Trapping License Sales Trends  
1985-2019** *Source VT DFW*

| <u>Fishing</u>  | <u>1985</u>  | <u>2019</u> | <u>% Change</u> |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Resident        | 54,747       | 41,442      | -25%            |
| Non-Res         | 19,053       | 14,556      | -24%            |
| <br>            |              |             |                 |
| <u>Hunting</u>  |              |             |                 |
| Resident        | 47,068       | 20,805      | -56%            |
| Non-Res         | 16,935       | 5,835       | -66%            |
| Combo Res       | 49,283       | 25,960      | -47%            |
| Combo Non       | 2,427        | 1,548       | -36%            |
| Youth Res       | 7,507 (1993) | 3,744       | -50%            |
| <u>Trapping</u> | 1,483        | 738         | -48%            |

“Declining license sales threaten the department’s ability to conserve and manage the state’s fish and wildlife species.....” *Source: VT DFW*

**4. Public perspectives on wildlife governance call for Change**

Commissioner Porter indicated that a survey of public opinion about the DFW indicated strong support and implied that an assessment of DFW was simply not needed. I suspect that asking any citizen about the Dept. of Forest, Parks and Recreation, the Agency of Transportation or the state police would generate positive results.....but what does that really tells us? Scratching the surface is where substance is to be found. We know from recent surveys on trapping and wanton waste conducted by the survey arm at UVM, that there are clear disconnects with the public and DFW and Fish and Wildlife Board policies. The majority of Vermonters surveyed opposed the very policies that the department and the board fully support.

The FW Board is under ever-increasing scrutiny for the outsized role it plays in wildlife governance. Yes the board has a narrow focus-it regulates only games species however it has complete control over those species. And yes, the board makes regulations but it also makes public policy over public resources that must benefit all citizens as stated in statute. Board members are uncredentialed, unelected and unaccountable to the governor, the legislature or the citizens yet they hold extraordinary power to make

public policy on public resources without representatives of the public having a seat at the table. For example, the board establishes Vermont public policy that declares the wanton waste of certain species of wildlife is acceptable; that the river otter is a game species, that the crow is a game species, as is the red and gray fox and the bobcat. Do those positions truly reflect the values Vermonters hold toward these species? That authority is sweeping and asserts the priority of wildlife uses over wildlife values for those species. To be clear, this is not the fault of the board members but rather the situation in which they have been placed.

Does the AoT have a roads and bridges board that operates similarly? Do citizens equipped with a driver's license determine passing lanes and speed limits on our roads? Does the Dept. of Health have a citizen's board that determines vaccination schedules or Lyme disease treatment protocols? Why then is there a defacto 4<sup>th</sup> branch of government which is off limits to the typical fair hearing process? Doesn't the fate of public resources deserve a semblance of open government especially at a time when the DFW is very open in declaring that wildlife management decisions are becoming increasingly complex. The functioning of the board and its authority versus the authority of the biologists we hire, train and invest in within the DFW, needs to be examined by the working group.

## **5. A Time of Unprecedented Environmental Threats calls for Change**

- 6th Mass extinction-population of wild animals halved since 1970
- One third of American wildlife species are at increased risk of extinction
- Our Wildlife Action Plan reports that 976 Vermont species qualify as species of greatest conservation need
- Moose, Bats, Monarchs, Reptiles and Amphibians, bumblebees, honeybees-all in decline
- One third of wild birds in US and Canada have vanished since 1970
- Climate Change
- Habitat Loss and Fragmentation
- Invasive Species
- Disease
- Pollution

Conclusion: There is a revolution of thought underway right now regarding wildlife governance. It is time for the next generation of management that addresses the fate of hundreds of species at risk in Vermont. What worked well for wildlife agencies in the first half of the 20th century won't necessarily work well today. Conditions change. We have a duty to address the seismic shifts before us—shifts in our culture, in our demographics, and in funding. And there is urgency:

**“As many as one-third of America’s wildlife species are at increased risk of extinction.”**

Joint report by National Wildlife Federation, American Fisheries Society and Wildlife Society (2016)

I urge you the Committee to pass those sections of S.321 that deal with establishing a working group to examine the state’s wildlife governance in light of the weight of evidence calling Vermont to bring its governance into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Thank you.

### **Supporting Documents**

#### **Governance Principles for Wildlife Conservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

<https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/70168366>

#### **Blue Ribbon Panel Report from Assoc. of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**

[https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/8215/1382/2408/Blue\\_Ribbon\\_Panel\\_Report2.pdf](https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/8215/1382/2408/Blue_Ribbon_Panel_Report2.pdf)

#### **State Fish and Wildlife Transformation: An annotated Bibliography**

**52 pages**

<https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cornell.edu/dist/9/7447/files/2018/10/Transformation-literature-annotated-bibliography-July-2018-292rlph.pdf>