

Who Should Pay to Protect and Encourage Fish and Wildlife?

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Wisconsin leans heavily on hunters and anglers to fund DNR wildlife management programs, but the fee revenue has not kept pace with demand. A new report outlines options the legislature can consider during upcoming budget deliberations to help address the funding shortfall.

MADISON - Wisconsin is number one in hunting! Don't take it from me. The Department of Natural Resources has studies to back it up.

A new DNR report noted Wisconsin had the number one Boone and Crockett Trophy whitetail entries from 2005-2010 and the number one black bear harvest of all states.

Wisconsinites hunt deer at nearly three times the US rate and fish at twice the US rate. We lead the nation in world record musky caught and are the reigning world record holder of brown trout.

According to the DNR report, which included options to fund wildlife management, Wisconsin is number one in annual revenue from hunting - \$2,833 per hunter or \$2.5 billion.

Yet funds to manage Wisconsin's fish, wildlife and habitat have not kept up with needs. In fact, revenue dropped by nearly four million dollars in the past five years. Officials estimate the gap between authorized expenses and revenue is \$4 - \$6 million a year. Anticipating less revenue, the DNR looked for ways to spend less, which resulted in staff reductions and cuts to programs.

For example, with a 15% vacancy in fisheries management, there are fewer fish surveys and less accurate information for anglers. There was a significant reduction in the stocking of larger walleye.

With a 12% vacancy in wildlife management, there is less assistance provided to landowners for habitat development. The DNR reduced collaboration with conservation groups on habitat development and reduced trout improvement work. Pheasant restocking was cut in half. Two thousand acres of wetland impoundments were left unmanaged.

With 10% fewer conservation wardens, there are fewer patrols and less enforcement of hunting and fishing rules.

Our state leans on hunters and anglers to fund wildlife programs. Wisconsin ranks in the top ten states for tapping license fees to fund wildlife management.

The DNR reports, "Nearly ninety percent of revenue to manage the state's fish and wildlife resources comes from hunting, fishing and trapping license fees and the federal excise tax on the sale of hunting and fishing equipment including firearms and ammunition and a portion of the gas tax attributable to motor boats and small engines."

There is no similar fee to protect non-hunted species. The report quotes federal sources describing funds needed to protect the 12,000 or so species in State Wildlife Action Plans that are "in greatest conservation need".

The heavy reliance on license fees is concerning as the number of hunters and anglers decrease. For instance, gun deer hunting has dropped by 12% from its peak in 1999. Several efforts by lawmakers to increase the number of hunters and anglers failed and left bigger holes in the DNR budget.

For example, in 2011 lawmakers passed a bill that included a reduction in fees for first-time

hunting and fishing license purchases. Surveys later found reduced fees had little impact on increasing the number of licenses sold. Eighty percent of first-time-license-buyers did not even know about the discount until they paid for the license and most did not continue buying in successive years.

The DNR report stated the need to sell “four times as many resident first-time-buyer licenses and two times as many nonresident first-time-buyer licenses to break even”.

The report details several options for lawmakers in the upcoming budget debate. Ideas include raising fees, standardizing license discounts, eliminating the failed “first-time-buyer” program. In addition, the report suggests new ways to encourage and better serve hunters and anglers with automatic license renewal, gift cards, loyalty discounts and increased flexibility for combination license buyers.

Does rehabbing a trout stream benefit you if you don’t fish? You bet it does. The report reviews a great deal of economic data related to our natural resources. The upshot? Businesses locate and new businesses start where people want to live and people value a high level of scenic and natural amenities.

The report documented that people want to share in the protection of our natural resources. Maybe it’s time to spread the cost of protection over more than just the hunters and anglers, as Minnesota did with their legacy fund to benefit natural resources.

Thank you to the authors of this well-written report. I encourage you to read it and let me know what action you would like to see taken. You can find the report at docs.legis.wisconsin.gov

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