



# **Pennsylvania Game Commission**

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Testimony by  
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House Game and Fisheries Committee  
Increased Revenues for Wildlife Management

Thank you Chairman Smith, Chairman Staback and members of the Committee.

For more than 110 years, the Pennsylvania Game Commission has managed, protected and conserved our Commonwealth's wild birds and mammals for all residents, promoted our state's rich hunting and trapping heritage and protected more than 1.4 million acres of State Game Lands to serve as wildlife habitat and public hunting and trapping areas.

From the early days in which many wildlife species were brought back into the state – including deer, elk and beaver – to more recent wildlife success stories – such as bald eagles, peregrine falcons and fishers – the Pennsylvania Game Commission has worked tirelessly to fulfill our legislated mandate.

Indeed, today, Pennsylvania hunters and trappers, as well as those who simply enjoy seeing wildlife, have a greater opportunity to harvest or photograph much more abundant species than in decades past.

However, the one challenge the Game Commission has always faced is financing.

Working to keep our expenditures in line with revenues, we have been forced to cut millions of dollars from our operating budgets. We have cut back on purchasing new equipment, reduced program and project budgets, allowed vacant positions to go unfilled and, in some cases, eliminated services altogether. For example, simple conveniences, such as toll-free numbers for those seeking to contact our region offices and free subscriptions to our Game News magazine to landowners enrolled in our public access programs and to schools and libraries have been suspended.

However, there are some line items in our budget that we do not control. For example, with the new fiscal year comes an increase in personnel costs provided for under the state employee contract. This will amount to a \$2.8 million increase, which we can only control by not filling

vacancies, which means fewer people to provide the services that the public has come to expect from the agency. Additionally, we just received a bill for the Integrated Enterprise System, better known as SAP, which is the automated business operating system for the state. This was previously paid for by the administration. That cost now is being passed to the agencies. Our portion of the cost is a little more than \$500,000.

Also, the House of Representatives has before it Senate Bill 868, which, if enacted, would triple the agency's current payment in lieu of taxes on State Game Lands. We currently pay \$1.7 million annually to counties, school districts and municipalities. If Senate Bill 868 becomes law, we would be forced to pay \$5.1 million, an additional \$3.4 million that currently is not budgeted. This basically means that hunters are paying twice. They pay the total share for the Game Commission and their tax dollars go to assist in paying other agencies share. They foot the entire bill for the Game commission and yet the entire public has access to State Game Lands.

And, just like every Pennsylvania family, we are forced to pay higher costs for everyday items, such as utilities and gasoline. Gasoline alone has caused a more than \$1,000,000 jump in our annual expenditures from the last license fee increase in 1999, when gas cost about \$1 per gallon. To maintain a flat level in this item, we would have to drastically cut patrols and call outs by our conservation officers and wildlife biologists, as well as the habitat improvement work of our food and cover crews.

Our current estimated Game Fund balance, as of June 30, 2006, is expected to be approximately \$24 million. However, as our license year begins concurrent with our fiscal year on July 1, we must maintain approximately \$14.2 million in that fund in order to cover expenses to run the agency for two months, which is when we anticipate receiving monies from issuing agents.

Also, depending on the Legislature's action regarding Senate Bill 868, we must have between \$1.7 million and \$5.1 million available to make our payment in lieu of taxes, which must be paid annually prior to September 1. This would move the necessary funds from \$14.2 million to \$17.6 that would need to be available on July 1.

As noted in recent testimony by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, their reports issued in 2003 and 2006, stated that the Game Commission's ability to implement important programs and projects outlined in our Strategic Plan are stymied by a lack of sufficient revenue.

Without any annual stream of revenue from the state's taxpayers to support our operating budget, the inflationary affect on the revenues generated by the current license fee structure has impacted our ability to maintain the status quo, let alone move forward.

Yet, in the midst of concerns about our financial situation, we continue to provide positive news. Bear, turkey, squirrel, coyotes, waterfowl and migratory bird hunting continue to offer hunters outstanding opportunities. Beaver, fox, raccoon and other furbearers provide trappers with plenty of challenges. The bald eagle is a major recovery success. From four nests in 1983, to around 110 nests that we are monitoring this year, the bald eagle was downgraded from an endangered species to a threatened species last year.

And, while deer remain a matter of debate, we have made progress on implementing a comprehensive, integrated plan that focuses on three goals: improving the health of the deer herd; improving the habitat that deer and all other wildlife depend; and reducing deer-human

conflicts. On our web site you can view our models for each WMU and the harvest estimate model.

As part of the overall deer management plan, we also have finalized an urban/suburban deer management plan that seeks to more effectively manage deer in developed areas of the state, including proposing baiting regulations to be used in those areas.

The Mentored Youth Hunting Program, which was approved by the Board on Tuesday, will provide those under the age of 12 a chance to experience hunting under the close supervision of an adult mentor. This program has the possibility of being one of the best recruitment tools yet provided by the Legislature.

We also are experiencing increased support from our partners, such as the sportsmen's clubs here today supporting the need for a fee increase, for various programs that they have identified as important for wildlife and important to them. These partners have been working to provide assistance in habitat improvement, securing grants for wildlife research and acquiring other important parcels of interior holdings to add to the State Game Lands system. We certainly do not agree on all the policy issues, but one thing we do agree on is the need for a license increase.

As you no doubt are wondering, the chart behind me demonstrates what Pennsylvania resident adults pay for their basic hunting license and state migratory game bird license in comparison to what resident adults in various states pay for the same hunting privileges in their home state. While many of these other states provide general funds for their wildlife agencies, here in Pennsylvania, state taxpayers do not contribute to that Constitutional obligation, only our hunters and trappers.

As you have heard from those groups assembled here today, an increase in hunting license fees – regardless of which bill you choose to support – still will provide an enormous bargain for our state's hunters.

Wildlife needs your support and we, at the Pennsylvania Game Commission, remain committed to seeing that those funds entrusted to us by our license buyers are used on behalf of all Pennsylvanians, in responsible stewardship of managing all 465 species of wild birds and mammals.

Thank you.

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