



CELEBRATING THE NATION'S GREATEST CONSERVATION PROGRAM

By Scott A. Warner

Each year, nearly 400,000 hunters take to West Virginia's woods to enjoy some of the best recreational opportunities this state has ever known. However, if it wasn't for the forward-thinking actions of a few politicians, at the urging of hunters and gun manufacturers generations ago, neither our state nor our nation would have the abundance of wildlife, wildlife habitat and wildlife management programs we enjoy today. This year, state wildlife agencies across the nation are celebrating the 75th anniversary of the most successful wildlife management partnerships ever implemented by federal and state agencies.

First discussed in the 1920s, a proposal to tax the manufacturers of firearms and ammunition to provide money to manage wildlife was revived in March 1937 by participants at the Second North American Wildlife

Conference. One of the prominent participants, Carl Shoemaker, was appointed to draft legislation. After securing support from the firearms manufacturers, he obtained support from Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Representative Willis Robertson of Virginia. Robertson is best known for adding the following 29 words to the bill: "...and which shall include a prohibition against the diversion of license fees paid by hunters for any other purpose than the administration of said State fish and game department..." Pittman

introduced the bill on June 20, 1937, with Robertson introducing an identical bill in the House several days later. Congress passed the bill with amazing speed and lack of political bickering on August 17. On Sept. 2, 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, commonly known as the Pittman-Robertson (PR) Act.



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From left: Releasing deer in 1950s; banding wild turkeys in 1960s; radio tracking turkeys in 1980s; family enjoying benefits of PR program; tracking muskies in 2000s; hunter buying bow, which helps fund wildlife projects.

DNR Photos



75 Years

IT'S YOUR NATURE

Under the Act, Congress placed a 10 percent excise tax on firearms and ammunitions used for hunting that was earmarked to reimburse state wildlife agencies for activities directly related to wildlife management. According to Shoemaker's plan, revenue collected from this tax would be apportioned among state wildlife agencies through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Federal Aid Program based on the number of hunting licenses sold in each state and the state's surface area. Over the years, Congress has amended the Wildlife Restoration Act to include additional items used for hunting such as archery and handguns. This has allowed wildlife agencies to keep up with the demands of hunters and shooting enthusiasts. Based on the success of the Wildlife Restoration Program, Congress passed The Sport Fish Restoration Act in 1950, which placed a tax on the manufacture of fishing equipment (later expanded to include motorboat and small engine fuels). These funds can only be used by the states for fisheries management, boating access and aquatic education.

To protect the integrity of this program, restrictions were placed on these federal apportionments. The law states that only state wildlife agencies are eligible to receive the funding and that the money citizens pay in excise taxes can only be used to reimburse wildlife agencies for programs directly related to wildlife management activities. In addition, the legislation went one step further by requiring states to create assent legislation ensuring that revenue collected from the sale of hunting licenses could only be used for wildlife management activities. These stringent federal mandates have been very successful in protecting license money from financing special interest groups or going into the state's general revenue fund.

In the early 1900s, state wildlife agencies were significantly challenged, with wildlife populations threatened by unregulated hunting, industrialization, and the sprawl of human expansion that impacted wildlife habitat. We must not forget that during this time most wildlife agencies were in their infancy and didn't have a secure source of funding. With passage



WV Dept. of Commerce/Ron Snow

In the 1940s, federal aid money was used to purchase land to create Panther Wildlife Management Area in McDowell County.

of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, state wildlife agencies finally had that source. Federal aid dollars allowed for the implementation of activities such as habitat management, land acquisition and research. Work previously thought impossible by early wildlife professionals could now be implemented, and has led to today's wildlife management success stories.

The concept of the Wildlife Restoration Act, though simple, is brilliant. It is based on a user pay/user benefit philosophy, generating support from hunters, state and federal wildlife agencies, and the hunting industry alike. When a hunter purchases a deer rifle outfitted with a nice scope along with ammunition to go hunting, 11 percent of the purchase (increased from the original 10 percent) will end up funding state wildlife programs directly benefiting the hunter through better deer management programs, land acquisitions, habitat protection and improvements, and hunter education programs.

In terms of its economic significance, state wildlife agencies receive \$350 million of federal aid money annually to support programs directly benefiting wildlife and hunters. In West Virginia, annual apportionments average around \$4 million. Since 1937, West Virginia has received nearly \$100 million to fund such successful programs as the purchase of acreage in McDowell County in the 1940s to create Panther Wildlife Management Area, implementation of the West Virginia hunter education program in the 1970s,

the wild turkey restoration program of the 1980s that reintroduced turkeys to all 55 counties, the grouse study of the 1990s, and most recently, the research efforts that have been monitoring the expansion of the state's black bear population. In addition, the money goes to fund management activities that take place every year on nearly 1.5 million acres of land in our wildlife management area program and technical assistance to private landowners.

The extended economic benefit of this program to the state and its businesses should not be forgotten. The management activities partially funded by federal aid dollars, and the resulting abundance of wildlife, bring millions of dollars into the state's economy through job creation, hunting equipment and clothing sales, and food and lodging costs for hunters. The federal aid program also provides local economic benefit through the purchase of equipment and material used for management activities on state wildlife management areas.

So whatever attracts you to nature, today's wildlife success stories are directly related to the forward-thinking actions of hunters and Congress 75 years ago by the creation of the Wildlife Restoration Act. Through this program, \$4 billion has been contributed by hunters, creating a partnership between the state wildlife agencies and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that is envied by most other federal programs. With the continued degradation of our natural resources, conservationists, whether they have an interest in hunting or not, must recognize the contributions made by hunters. The PR program truly has become a user pay, public benefits situation. It's through this understanding, and continued support to state wildlife agencies through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program, that we'll be able to enjoy our wildlife resources for generations to come.

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