



PROTECT CONSERVE ENHANCE

Program Directions for the Future



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On February 7, I provided the annual report of the Fish & Boat Commission’s activities to the House Game & Fisheries Committee. This is the main legislative body that provides oversight of the Commission and is generally where legislation affecting our agency is first reviewed before going in front of the full House of Representatives. In addition to highlighting the agency’s work during 2006—such as the continuing development of an automated licensing system, exciting new changes to trout fishing, and funding for infrastructure—I also used my time with the committee to discuss program directions for the future. A great deal of my remarks centered around connecting anglers and boaters to the water and families to outdoor activities and how these critical challenges must be successfully addressed.

Even with its wealth of public lands, Pennsylvania is not immune to the trend toward privatizing access to our waterways and expanded posting of private property. As I explained in the last issue of *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater*, the implications for fishing are clear: Private lands border 83 percent of our stocked trout waters, about 70 percent of our wild trout waters, and some 59 percent of our class A wild trout waters. The Commission and other partners have already secured access through purchases and fishing easements to 2.1 miles of Lake Erie tributaries through the Lake Erie stamp special fund. However, I explained to the legislators that there is currently no viable funding mechanism for expanding such efforts to the rest of the Commonwealth. Our commissioners and staff will be working on a variety of programs throughout this year to help keep land open to all anglers.

Beyond the need to provide access for sportsmen and women, I also cautioned that more work needs to be done

to attract new generations of anglers and boaters. Traditional outdoor activities are simply not engaging youth in the right ways. We don’t have enough organized activities in the schools, our teaching methods are often antiquated, we don’t have enough family activities that offer well-structured programs for parents and kids, and we’re not nearly as visible in the cities as we should be.

To address these concerns, we need new thinking and new revenue for youth education. I renewed the call for funding in the form of an inexpensive fishing license for 12- to 15-year-olds with the money, and



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the federal dollars that come with it, dedicated to expanding youth programs. The funds would go directly into youth programs—no diversion to pay for general agency operations, and no misdirection of funds to pay for some other unrelated program. All the money for kids, all the time.

The message is clear: We simply cannot continue doing the same things and expect different results. We can't stop the trend of losing kids to video games and other activities if we don't establish the programs that they will find attractive. If we want to offer new programs, we need new funding for clubs, instruction, information, family events—in short, everything that will make Pennsylvania a leader in youth fishing and the development of young people who understand the resource.

Because this proposal bucks the tradition of not charging 12- to 15-year-olds, there is some resistance. Most people agree that it is not the \$5 fee. The legislators were quick to point out that you can barely buy a meal at a fast-food place for that amount. The challenge is putting together the programs that will address the problems, and our staff, the Governor's Youth Council for Hunting, Fishing and Conservation, and many supporting partners and groups have developed a great plan. You can find out more from our web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. Be sure to take a special look at the video narrated by one of the youth who helped develop the expanded youth program concept. Our staff is also willing to talk to any group that would like more information on the program.

In closing my remarks, I requested that lawmakers examine two other funding-related concerns: Important programs supported by fishing license dollars and watercraft registration fees that aren't directly related to recreational angling or boating, and the current process for establishing license and registration fees. The Commission takes much pride in its efforts to manage reptiles, amphibians, and non-game fish species, and to train emergency responders in water rescue, but general Commonwealth funds may be more appropriate for these programs than using sportsmen's dollars. The Growing Greener funds that we have been receiving for our hatchery upgrades and some dam repairs have been a very welcome source of assistance, and we are thankful for that support. But that will end soon and leave much still to be accomplished. Programs such as water rescue and non-game manage-



photos-Art Michaels

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ment really do need the Commonwealth to step up and financially support their efforts.

As most of you might also know, after our much-needed license fee increase in 2005, the number of license-buyers dropped by over 9 percent. We recovered a little last year, but the 29 percent cost increase in the resident license as well as increases in other categories that came in 2005 took their toll. It was clear that the historically lengthy time between license and registration fee updates, nine years in the last cycle, leads to inevitably sizable cost increases and sales declines. What other product that we purchase keeps the exact same price for nine years? We need to find a better way to set the license prices so that we don't relive the downside of major fee changes in the future.

I look forward to working with the members of the administration, the legislature, and you, the sportsmen and women of the Commonwealth in tackling these matters. If you're interested in learning more about my report, the full text of the speech is available on the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. Also available on the Commission's web site is a comprehensive annual report detailing strategic initiatives advanced in 2006, financial information, and program-specific statistics. I encourage you to spend some time with the annual report because it catalogs how your money is spent and what is returned to you in programs and services.

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