

WCO Diary

by WCO Mark Sweppenhiser



Showtime!

One of the most popular questions posed to waterways conservation officers (WCOs) is, what do you do during the off-season? This is a logical question with a number of responses depending on a WCO's assignment in the state. In January and February, when boating is limited and fishing and hunting have slowed, many officers are involved in educational outreach programs. These programs many times involve large shows such as the Pennsylvania Farm Show or The Eastern Sports & Outdoor Show, held in Harrisburg.



WCO Rich Morder explains a regulation to a customer during a recent Eastern Sports & Outdoor Show.

The Harrisburg shows are fun. They are opportunities to meet people who value the natural resources we all love and enjoy. The second week in January marks the start of the annual Pennsylvania Farm Show. Thousands of people view the displays throughout the week, many of whom are landowners or farmers. These customers are vital contacts because the Commission stocks millions of fish along their lands each year.

Concerns we hear during the Farm Show are mostly about best land and water management practices, wetland areas, ponds, endangered species, trout stocking, and law and license questions. Visitors to the Commission's booth have the opportunity to secure pertinent literature, make contacts, and foster a working relationship with the Commission.

The Eastern Sports & Outdoor Show, billed as North America's largest outdoor sports show, draws people and vendors from all over North America. The show has a heavier bustle to it than the Farm Show. Customers often wait in lines for an opportunity to express concerns or clarify regulations with a WCO.



WCO Doug Deppen (far right), DWCO Carl Books (center) and DWCO Alan Bernardi help show-goers during a recent Pennsylvania Farm Show.

These shows are designed to provide an outlet for educational information as well as one-on-one interaction with Fish & Boat Commission employees. The WCO is an integral part of these shows. Many patrons want to address legal concerns with the agency with someone who enforces the Commonwealth's laws and regulations. The WCO, to many anglers, boaters and conservationists, is the most likely contact and in some respects is considered the "face" of the Commission.

There are also many attendees who are old friends who relish the opportunity to play "stump the chump" with the WCO at the booth. Still others want to argue a point of contention through the use of hypothetical situations. These scenarios usually begin with, "I had a friend who," or "How about this?"

These show-goers can be a lively group, and sometimes we have to agree to disagree on hot-button topics of the day.

There are always two things I can count on during these weeks of answering questions. The first is lock-jaw from smiling and laughing with our anglers and boaters. The other is a common cold seven days after the show, which I always seem to get. ☐

Note: The Fishing & Boating Events Calendar in this issue on page 63 includes a list of outdoor shows in which the Commission will participate.

Meet the Contributor

Mark Sweppenhiser grew up in Herndon, PA, on his family's dairy farm, where he developed a deep appreciation for conservation, fishing and hunting. He served four years in the United States Air Force with assignments all over the world. After serving, he worked as an education specialist for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (Florida) until he was hired by the Commission as part of the 15th WCO class. Mark's formal education includes earning a master's degree at Penn State. He is assigned to northern Dauphin County.

