



PROTECT CONSERVE ENHANCE

Revenue Sources



by Douglas J. Austen, Ph.D.
Executive Director
PA Fish & Boat Commission



What do sales tax money, real estate transfer fees, lottery dollars, and General Fund money all have in common? They're all used to fund multiple projects and programs throughout the Commonwealth. When it comes to finding a source of dollars to pay for all the work that the Fish & Boat Commission does on



Photo-Andy Shirels

Timber rattlesnake, candidate species

reptiles, amphibians, water rescue and other activities, we are concerned that a source of money is created to address these important resources and activities. You should be concerned as well.

Fish & Boat Commission activities help meet the recreational needs of the nearly 2 million people who fish and boat in Pennsylvania each year. In 2007, the Fish & Boat Commission sold more than 843,357 fishing licenses and 593,547 trout/salmon and Lake Erie fishing permits. Consequently, fishing has a tremendous positive affect

on Pennsylvania's economy, generating an overall estimated annual economic benefit of over \$1.65 billion.

Pennsylvania's diverse water resources include Lake Erie, small impoundments, large reservoirs, rivers, and streams. These waters provide many recreational opportunities for the more than 2.5 million people who boat in Pennsylvania each year. During 2007, 341,547 boats were registered in Pennsylvania, and the Fish & Boat Commission estimates that this boating activity has a total impact of \$1.7 billion per year for the Commonwealth's economy.

However, none of the additional money created by these recreational activities comes back to the Fish & Boat or Game commissions. A bill currently before the state House of Representatives would help to offset this inequity.

Earlier this spring, Representative David Levdansky (D-Allegheny) introduced House Bill 1676, which would allocate a very small percentage of the Pennsylvania Sales and Use Tax to the Fish & Boat Commission and the Game Commission. This would result in about \$5 million and \$10 million in annual revenue, respectively, for each commission.

House Bill 1676 was discussed in a hearing recently of the House Finance Committee, of which Representative Levdansky is majority chairman. Those testifying included spokespersons of



Photo-Andy Shirels

Bog turtle, endangered species

both commissions and the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, and others.

Reviewing how the Fish & Boat Commission is funded can help in understanding the need for House Bill 1676. The Fish & Boat Commission is a user-funded agency. This means that it receives no PA General Fund tax revenue to support its programs. The Commission operates out of two special funds: The Fish Fund and the Boat Fund. The main Fish Fund revenue sources are fishing licenses and fees (about 66 percent) and federal funds (about 22 percent) obtained from taxes on fishing-related items. The Boat Fund's main rev-

enue sources include boat registration and titling fees, refunds of liquid fuels taxes on gas used by motorboats, and federal aid.

Clearly, Representative Levdansky's much needed bill was a direct response to the reality that both commissions provide substantial services to the Commonwealth that are far above and beyond what anglers, hunters, and boaters should be paying through their licenses and registrations. It's also well known that fishing, hunting, and boating bring immense sales tax revenue into the bank accounts of the state and local taxing entities. But none of that money ever comes back to the commissions. Despite this, we continue to perform important work on threatened and endangered species, nongame species, public safety, emergency response and many other duties.

Unfortunately, all good ideas seem to run into opposition. In this case, some of that resistance comes from other groups competing for the same resources while, surprisingly, pockets of criticism emanate from within the conservation community.

In the political arena, money is power and is the measure of success. When one group asks for more money, it is assumed that someone else will draw the short straw.



Riffleshell, endangered species

In this case, however, all that we ask for is a fair share of the pie, not anything that shouldn't already be related to fishing and hunting activities. In Pennsylvania, although estimates vary somewhat, wildlife recreation has been tagged at supporting over 56,000 jobs and results in consumer spending of more than \$3 billion annually. This expenditure brings in state tax dollars and local tax revenue, so the claim on these funds is legitimate.



Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission ice rescue training



Water rescue students in training created and conducted by the Fish & Boat Commission. Visit the Commission's water rescue pages: www.fish.state.pa.us/boatcrs/waterrescue/000index.htm.

The criticism from among the conservation groups is a little more troubling. Some are concerned that legislators would increase legislative influence and control over the agencies if this funding mechanism were approved. This is the tainted-money scenario and would, supposedly, put us in collusion with the politicians.

Furthermore, anglers, boaters, and hunters fear that revenue tied to the General Fund would open the door to animal-rights, anti-hunting and anti-fishing activists seeking representation on both the Fish & Boat and Game commissions. However, it was noted during the hearing that most other states still do fund fishing and hunting from general fund revenue.

In 1921, the "Resident Fishing License Law" was enacted, and since then, the Commission has been funded through these fees. We have been receiving boating funds from the licensing of motorboats since 1931. For a long time, these funds were mostly adequate.

Now, however, the Fish & Boat Commission's broadened responsibilities for reptiles, amphibians, water rescue and other activities have revealed the need for a more stable, appropriate long-term funding source.

The Fish & Boat Commission supports Rep. Levdansky's bill and we urge you to support it by contacting your local state representative and senator.

Douglas J. Austen, Ph.D.
Executive Director