

The Last Cast

by John Arway, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) law enforcement staff recently provided critical assistance in several water-rescue events, including one on the Susquehanna River near Lancaster in which hundreds of individuals launched a variety of floatable devices during high water. Most of these individuals were not wearing life jackets and many had to be rescued after being unable to navigate the high waters.

Other incidents involved kayakers and individuals on a pontoon boat in Erie's Presque Isle Bay on a day when the National Weather Service issued a small-craft advisory warning boaters of waves between 3-5 feet.

Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, thanks in to the actions of PFBC waterways conservation officers (WCO) and first responders like fire departments and water-rescue teams.

These incidents and our agency response are reminders about the importance of the public service we provide to not just Pennsylvania anglers and boaters but to all Commonwealth citizens. The PFBC, for example, trains local fire departments and water-rescue groups to ensure that they can respond to emergencies like the one on the Susquehanna.

However, these and other critical services are in danger of being cut or reduced if the House of Representatives fails to pass Senate Bill 30, which would grant the PFBC the ability to initiate the first fishing license increase since 2005.

The Senate overwhelming passed the bill in March by a 47-2 vote. But the bill has yet to be voted out of the House Game and Fisheries Committee.

The PFBC is funded primarily by angler and boater revenues and receives no General Fund money. Our plan to keep spending below revenues has allowed us to provide the same level of goods and services the public expects without major programmatic cuts.

We have cut spending in large part by reducing staff from a high of 432 to 370. At the same time, the value of a fishing license adjusted for inflation has dropped to about \$16.25, while fish production costs have climbed dramatically. The true cost of today's fishing license adjusted for inflation would be \$37.18. At \$22.90, today's license value is a real bargain for PA anglers!

However, this fiscal year, annual operating and personnel costs are projected to exceed annual revenues.

Without a revenue increase, the PFBC must plan to significantly cut programs by fiscal year 2018-19 to meet balanced budget objectives and avoid insolvency.

The Bureau of Law Enforcement has 15 vacancies with 10 open field districts as we enter the heart of the fishing and boating season. With 23 officers eligible to retire - and

nearly as many more in the next three years - that number will continue to grow, and customer service, public safety, and resource protection will continue to diminish.

With a revenue increase, we will immediately request authorization from the Governor's Office to run a new school of officers.

Fish production accounts for the other largest portion of spending. We stock about 3.2 million adult trout each year and up to 40 million warmwater and coolwater fish, including Walleyes, Muskies, and Catfish.

Without a revenue increase, we must consider proposals to cut \$2 million, \$3 million and \$4 million from the budget.

A \$2 million reduction would close one trout hatchery and eliminate 200,000 adult stocked trout from 248 stream sections and eliminate the stocking of 28,000 trout in 18 lakes. Also, we would close one warmwater/coolwater hatchery, the American Shad hatchery and severely reduce services in the Cooperative Nursery Unit.

A \$3 million reduction would close a second trout hatchery and eliminate another 240,000 stocked trout.

A \$4 million reduction would eliminate a second warmwater/coolwater hatchery and thousands of warmwater stockings.

In total, we would cut stocked trout production in streams and lakes by 440,000 fish, or about 14%.

These are cuts we must make if we are to remain responsible stewards of our Commonwealth's aquatic resources and the funding provided by anglers and boaters – our customers.

This plan will be presented to the Board of Commissioners at the July 10-11 business meeting if it appears the agency will not be receiving a fee increase for the 2018 license year.

With a fee increase, we will continue producing and stocking fish at the rate that anglers, local communities and businesses have come to expect as part of Pennsylvania's \$1.2 billion fishing-related economy.

In our business, it is said that the time has come to fish or cut bait – to act or not act. In the General Assembly, it is said that the time has come to call the question.

In our last cast for support, we urge all Pennsylvanians who fish or boat to contact their representatives in the House and demand a vote on Senate Bill 30.

Click [HERE](#) to find your legislator