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Growing Greener Requires Raising Greenbacks

Last month in this space, I wrote about the Commission's commitment to reducing the amount of effluent discharged from our hatcheries. Our goal is to reduce by 25 percent the total waste load from all Commission fish culture stations by the year 2003. As I said in that piece, the Commission views this goal as an exciting challenge that will test our skills as fish culturists and natural resource managers.

Upgrading our hatchery system is just one of many infrastructure projects the Commission needs to undertake in the next few years. Addressing the infrastructure needs for the state's fish hatcheries, boat access areas, and our other Commission-operated facilities will pose a major fiscal challenge.

Governor Tom Ridge and his administration are taking important steps to pursue innovative funding mechanisms to address the Commonwealth's environmental needs. The Fish and Boat Commission supports the principles of the Growing Greener Initiative and the Public Lands Stewardship funding effort. The Growing Greener Initiative deserves support from all Pennsylvania anglers and boaters. We strongly believe that Growing Greener is a great first step, but it doesn't go far enough. Currently, the funding package does not include any funds to address the Commission's infrastructure needs. We hope that this will be changed as anglers and boaters and conservation groups tell their legislators that they support Growing Greener with a "Plus" component to include Commonwealth facilities that support fishing and boating.

The Commission's project needs have been recognized by the Governor's 21st Century Environment Commission. A Public Lands Stewardship component has been proposed under the Governor's Growing Greener Initiative, which is designed in part to carry out recommendations of the 21st Century Environment Commission Report.

A grassroots coalition of 21 environmental, conservation, and sportsmen organizations has been formed called the Heritage 21 Alliance. The Alliance, like the Commission, supports the Governor's proposal while advocating that the scope be expanded to include rehabilitation of fish and wildlife recreation facilities, natural diversity conservation, wildlife management, and other important programs. Some have called this expansion of the initial proposal "Growing Greener Plus."

Implementation of the ideas outlined by the Heritage 21 Alliance would indeed be a plus for the anglers and boaters of Pennsylvania. But it doesn't end there. Commission programs benefit *all* Commonwealth citizens. Our 62 publicly accessible lakes and nearly 250 boating access areas support 21 million fishing trips and 20 million boating trips annually. These trips generate an economic impact for the Commonwealth valued at more than \$2 billion annually. The impact of boating in the Commonwealth (including boat fishing) has been estimated at more than \$1.7 billion. Angling alone generates an economic impact of \$1.35 billion annually, supports more than 16,000 jobs, and generates nearly \$50 million in state sales and income taxes. Nearly half

of the \$1.35 billion in fishing economic impact is derived from trip-related expenditures.

The Commission controls through state ownership, lease, or easements approximately 33,500 acres of land in the Commonwealth. Under the Fish and Boat Code, properties under the ownership and control of the Commission are owned by the "Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, for use of the Commission." In addition to our fish culture facilities, the Commission's lands contain lakes, fishing and boating access areas, and support facilities.

More than \$65 million worth of infrastructure improvement projects have accumulated at the fish culture stations, public recreation areas, and support facilities that the Commission controls. In the past, the Commission has used funds from a variety of sources to address its infrastructure and acquisition needs. Conservation bond initiatives have provided funding for these purposes. In some instances, the Commission used funds from General State Authority Bonds and then paid these funds back over a period of 25 years.

As a general rule, however, the Commission has funded most capital improvement projects out of operating revenues. Funding capital projects from operating funds is not a workable solution to infrastructure project requirements. As one person observed, "If PennDOT had to fund the building of roads the way the Commission has to fund capital improvements, there would be no new roads in Pennsylvania." This method of funding has the effect of severely limiting the size and number of projects that the Commission can complete in any one year. Thus, the backlog of projects grows, and priority projects languish.

As these needs grow and time goes on, these projects become more plentiful and more expensive to address. Many of the capital repair and improvement projects are essential to meeting our green hatchery goals and for the continued operation of Commission facilities. For example, the hatchery physical plants are, in most cases, over 30 years old, and major dam repairs are needed on 15 of the Commission-owned lakes. The capital project needs are comprised of the following:

- Hatchery improvement and effluent treatment upgrade needs: \$20 million.
- Dam safety repairs and improvement needs: \$18.5 million.
- Access area deferred major maintenance and improvement needs: \$11 million.
- Support facility construction and renovation: \$12 million.
- Priority fish passage project needs: \$5 million.

The bottom line is clear: Now is the time for the Commonwealth to undertake an infrastructure improvement effort that includes Fish and Boat Commission facilities. The so-called "Growing Greener Plus" initiative deserves our support.

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