



by Peter A. Colangelo, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission

Fifteen years ago, in 1987, the Fish & Boat Commission approved “Resource First” as the Commission’s motto. The adoption of the “Resource First” motto culminated more than a decade in which the Commonwealth’s fisheries management programs focused on the resource to guide policies in areas such as trout allocation and stocking and wild trout management.

Members of the Fish & Boat Commission and the Commission staff are very proud of the agency’s commitment to “Resource First.” Like many mottos or slogans that try to summarize a complex subject in just a couple of words, “Resource First” has been subject to various interpretations. If you ask three people what “Resource First” means, you’re liable to get three answers that differ in emphasis and wording. Some will argue that approval of policies and programs they advocate is required to put the resource first, while others may try to find some inconsistency between putting the resource first and providing recreational opportunities. Even so, there is no doubt that there is common understanding of, and overwhelming support for, the bedrock principles that underlay “Resource First.”

Executive Director Ralph W. Abele has been rightly recognized as one of Pennsylvania’s giants of conservation. His leadership imbued the Pennsylvania Fish Commission, as we were then called, with “resource first” principles long before “Resource First” became an agency motto. In the mid-1970s, our fisheries managers began to refocus their efforts to address resource-based fisheries management. A resource-based system required data, and the Commission began to inventory trout streams by looking at physical, chemical, thermal, biological and social parameters to generate a trout stream classification system.

An interdisciplinary Operation FUTURE Taskforce was formed to help translate resource information into



agency policies and regulations. “FUTURE,” an acronym that means “Fisheries Utilization Through User Resource Evaluation,” became a much-admired model to help policy-makers and managers make sound fisheries management decisions. The FUTURE approach worked because it included an interdisciplinary process involving Commission staff from many diverse functional areas as well as bringing in user group and angler input. The FUTURE process was not without controversy and disagreement. Some of the same issues raised today between fly-fishers and traditional anglers were discussed nearly 20 years ago. However, through it all, the process focused on resource-based fisheries management, and the process developed new policies and approaches that gained widespread recognition and support.

In January 1981, the members of the Commission unanimously adopted a policy for the Conservation and Management of Fisheries Resources. The policy stated that “it will be the policy of the Commission to protect, conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of the Commonwealth’s fisheries resources (including reptiles and amphibians) and to provide continued and varied angling opportunities through scientific inventory, classification and management of that resource.”

“Protect, Conserve, Enhance.” Those three words, taken from the 1981 statement of policy, appear on the “Resource First” logo and are an integral part of the “Resource First” approach.

When “Resource First” was adopted as an agency motto 15 years ago, it meant that a concept developed to guide

fisheries management programs would now inform and guide all Commission efforts. This expansion of the “Resource First” concept to enforcement, engineering, propagation, boating and education programs reinforced the longstanding principles espoused by our agency and its leaders. Putting the “resource first” did not mean putting water-based recreation second. Putting the “resource first” recognizes that without good quality water in sufficient quantities, there would be fewer recreational fishing and boating opportunities.

The Fish & Boat Commission’s policy is to protect, conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of our state’s precious fishery resources. There are many ways in which we do this: The waterways conservation officer acting on a pollution case, the area fisheries manager surveying a stream and recommending fisheries management actions, the aquatic resources program specialist working with teachers to make sure a new generation understands the importance of conservation of aquatic resources and the fisheries biologist reviewing a permit application are all, in their own ways, putting the “Resource First” and helping to protect, conserve and enhance aquatic resources. But even these examples are too narrow since, in a very real sense, everything we do as an agency has some relationship, direct or indirect, to protecting, conserving and enhancing our aquatic resources.

In 1991, the Fish & Boat Commission adopted a new mission statement:

The mission of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission is to provide fishing and boating opportunities through the protection and management of aquatic resources.

Although the mission statement seems simple, its development involved a great deal of input from staff and the angling and boating public. One of the

questions that some asked was whether the mission statement and the four agency-wide goals adopted at the same time somehow supplanted “Resource First” principles. The answer was emphatic: The Fish & Boat Commission mission is entirely consistent with the goal of putting the “resource first.” As the Commission said at the time of approval of the mission statement, our efforts to protect, conserve and enhance Pennsylvania’s aquatic resources are an ideal that may never be reached, but it is one that is worth our best efforts.

What about today? The basic “resource first” principles, which have guided the Commission for many years, are more important now than ever before. Our agency confronts major challenges as expectations change, and the Fish & Boat Commission, like fish and wildlife agencies across America, seeks the financial resources to do our jobs, address angler and boater expectations, and carry out our mission. As we learned from the recently completed FishPro report on Pennsylvania’s state hatchery system, it won’t be easy or inexpensive to upgrade our state fish hatcheries to meet evolving standards and meet angler expectations. The “Trout Summit,” planned for late September, is an example of how we continue to use a future-focused process of seeking input from a variety of sources as we move to update and improve our resource-based trout management efforts.

And so today, we celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the approval of the “Resource First” motto and honor those whose hard work and dedicated efforts laid a strong and lasting foundation for this approach.

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