

150 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

The Commission's Present and Future

by Spring Gearhart



Present

Spring: What is the agency's role today?

John: We continue to survive as an agency, because many people in today's society demand a healthy environment and enjoy outdoor recreation. We have 12.8 million people in Pennsylvania today, and almost 10 percent of our total population fishes. Based on the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 1.1 million people in Pennsylvania fish and that fits perfectly with our Resource First mission. Our message resonates with the public at large—protect, conserve and enhance our aquatic resources and provide recreation through fishing and boating opportunities.

S: What are some of the agency's most notable achievements?

J: First off, we have survived for 150 years. That is a strong testament to the strength of the agency and the fact that we deliver the services and goods that the public wants. Not many other state agencies, non-profit organizations or any other kind of organization has the history that we have at the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC). We're an independent agency and that helps us survive and be flexible during changing times. However, there are some who believe that we would be better as a merged agency. I don't believe that's the case. If we had been a merged agency early in our history, we would be a much different agency today. We stay focused on our mission and the species we have been entrusted to protect and manage. We continue to improve fishing opportunities with time by applying new science and engineering techniques with the resources we have available, which allows me to continue to say we have more waters to fish today than when I was a child. Hopefully, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to say the same thing. We've been successful in advocating protection for our waters and aquatic resources. And, we're well-respected in the positions we take today. They're positions based on sound science, and we can defend these positions well. Our batting average in both court and the legislature is high, and we take on only the battles that make a difference. We stand-up for the resources, and we make changes in recreational programs when we have to based on the resources that we have available. Our philosophy of Resource First has survived the test of recent time and will be one of the guiding principles for us in the future. I commonly say that we speak for the fish and the anglers, and that's our job. I have a

bumper sticker that says, "Fish don't vote." We need to stand up for the fish, and we need to communicate the risks and threats



photo-Spring Gearhart

Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission Executive Director John A. Arway

to the public at large, so they can help us speak out for the fish and aquatic resources in Pennsylvania. We provide a quality product and exceptional public service to our customers despite escalating costs over time. If you look at how our resources have come into the agency, you'll see that there are periodic times when we go poor, and we have to raise additional revenue. We have always been able to serve the public at large, so they support us when we need more revenue to fund our agency programs. Along with protecting our resources, we recognize the need to protect the public and keep them safe through programs like our Water Rescue Program, the Swiftwater Emergency Response Team and the PA-Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team. We partner with public safety agencies like the Pennsylvania National Guard and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency to develop programs to stay in touch with society's expectations. Much like adding body armor to the uniforms of our officers, we've now added water rescue safety training to their repertoire of expertise.



photo-PFBC archives

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission recognizes the need to protect the public and keep them safe through rescue and response programs.

S: How has present day technology advanced the agency's mission?

J: We need to use all the tools available to market our business. Pennsylvania anglers and boaters spend over \$1.2 billion every year to enjoy outdoor activities. That's a huge business that we're sustaining for Pennsylvania, and we have to use improvements in technology. When I was appointed director, a friend of mine called me and said, "I just saw that you have four Tweets." I had no clue what a Tweet was at that time, so I had to ask my kids and discovered that there was a social media network called Twitter that people communicated news over. Now, I'm a user of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, and even a tool called ResearchGate that allows scientific researchers around the country to share publications and questions about research topics. Today, we have better access to our customers than ever before in our history. It's our responsibility to learn as much as possible about our customers, so we can best deliver goods and services to changing ages and demographics, allowing us to provide better outreach, marketing, goods and services to meet their expectations. If we don't know what our customers want, it's difficult to design our programs for the future.

S: What opportunities does PFBC provide for anglers and boaters today?

J: You've heard me say this before, but we have more waters to fish today than when I was a child. We continue to annually stock 3.2 million trout and provide over 1 million fingerling trout to cooperative trout nurseries around Pennsylvania for stocking, that's 4.2 million trout. We raise and stock over 50 million cool and warm water fish. Given the fact that we have fewer anglers today, and we're producing as many if not more fish to help sustain the fisheries of Pennsylvania, the fishing opportunities we provide today are probably more than any other time in our history. Mother Nature grows a lot of fish on her own, but we supplement that with the fish we stock. We also assist by protecting, conserving and managing the fisheries in Pennsylvania. We have over 86,000 miles of streams and rivers, over 4,000 lakes and reservoirs, and 400,000 acres of wetlands in Pennsylvania. One of our primary goals is conservation, and our staff are committed to working with other regulatory agencies like the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, United States Army Corps. of Engineers, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to assist them with protecting the waters that we have in Pennsylvania. We also develop new programs like our Mentored Youth Trout Days Program and strive for success in our habitat management and fisheries management programs. We continue to expand our law enforcement programs, so anglers and boaters know that we're making the waters safer for them. Our engineers monitor the condition of our dams to insure that they stay safe to protect those who live downstream. According to the

Legislative, Budget and Finance Committee, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission uses the funds provided by angler and boater license sales more efficiently than any other fish and wildlife agency in the country. We take pride in that statement and will continue to provide the services that the anglers and boaters expect.



photo: Alan Schreffler

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission annually stocks 3.2 million trout.

S: How have partnership opportunities changed or grown?

J: We've traditionally had one major partner, the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs. At one time, they had tremendous lobbying power in the Legislature. When we peaked in license sales in the early 1990s, the Federation's voice was particularly powerful in terms of controlling what happened in prior Legislatures and Administrations. Over time, sportsmen's interests have fragmented into a variety of groups. The Federation still exists, but we now have the Unified Sportsmen, Trout Unlimited, B.A.S.S., Muskies, Inc. and a lot of other groups who all have a specific interest in their segment of the sport. Yet, we all share the common interest of clean water and good habitat. The Commission brings these special interests together and focuses on the issues that need advocated. We have to explain the issues to all of our sportsmen and conservation groups so that we can bring together the sportsmen's voice to focus on major issues of concern.

Future

S: What environmental and natural resource challenges do you think future generations will face?

J: As a society, we've done a good job in dealing with past problems, which is why we've cleaned up so many of our waterways. And, that's to the credit of things like the Clean Water Act that was passed in 1972. The Clean Water Act set the challenge and the funding mechanism that states continue to use to make all our waters fishable and swimmable again. While we still haven't completely met the goals of the Clean Water Act, we continue to strive to reach those goals. We still have waters in Pennsylvania that aren't fishable and swimmable. We have thousands of miles of waters that need to be cleaned up, and we have a lot of challenges left ahead of us. These challenges are much different today than they were when I began my career as a Fisheries Biologist. I was able to walk up to a pipe, look at how many fish were above the pipe, how many fish were below the pipe and determine the damage of what was coming out of the pipe. Today, we have to look at a network of tributaries coming out of watersheds. Each tributary may carry low levels of different kinds of pollutants. A good example is the Susquehanna River where we've identified things like Endocrine Disrupting Compounds (EDCs). There are tens of thousands of chemicals that can cause hormonal changes in fish that cause them to



Endocrine Disrupting Compounds and herbicides are likely causing sores and lesions on bass in the Susquehanna River.

exhibit intersex conditions. This is a condition where male bass have a hormone called vitellogenin, a hormone that should only be present in the blood of female bass, in their blood streams and the precursors of eggs in their testes. You can't look above and below a pipe any longer and determine what's coming out of the pipe to fix the problem in our streams and rivers. You have to look at an entire landscape of a watershed and determine what chemicals are coming off the land, further determine the pathways of how the chemicals are reaching our waters, and then determine the risks of these chemicals to our fish and other aquatic life. I'm confident that we can find solutions, but it is going to take a lot of work. First, we need to admit that problems are occurring. We've come to a point with the Susquehanna River where we brought together all of the scientists working on river issues. After much deliberation and analyses, they concluded that substances like EDCs and herbicides were some of the likely causes of why our young Smallmouth Bass are getting sores and lesions. These infections were the direct result of bacterial infections and could be causing other symptoms like intersex conditions. These are all hormonal changes in the fish that are being expressed because of immune system changes. It is going to take a lot of work by some of our best scientists and engineers to come up with prescriptions to fix the problem, but we're headed on the right path. We need both funding and political commitment to fix the problem so that we can have a healthy Smallmouth Bass fishery in the Susquehanna River once again.

For more information, see the Sesquicentennial (150th) Anniversary 1866–2015 "Straight Talk" from the January/February 2016 Pennsylvania Angler & Boater magazine at www.fishandboat.com/straighttalk.htm.

S: What growth opportunities do you see for fishing and boating in Pennsylvania?

J: I believe that we can grow back to 1.1 million licensed anglers, like we sold in 1990, but we need to work at it through marketing and outreach initiatives. Our competition is other leisure activities that compete for people's time. We need to determine how to move fishing and boating up on life's priority list, so people can spend less time worrying about life's problems and more time enjoying the natural resources that Pennsylvania waters have to offer. Time is competition for all of us. When I was a child, I participated in sports—basketball,

football baseball, hunting and fishing as my prime sports. I played basketball, football and baseball during the week, and we had practices and games during the week. The weekends were reserved for family time, and my family had the time to go fishing and hunting together and enjoy outdoor recreation. Today, we have to set aside time to do things like fish and boat. We know that we have about 250,000 anglers and boaters who come and go from our sport, so we need to remind them to take advantage of the opportunities that Penn's waters offer.

S: What hopes do you have for PFBC, and how do you see the agency growing in the future?

J: You can be an optimist, pessimist or think outside the box. I always think of the adage, "How do you view the glass, half empty or half full?" I saw a quote that you view it neither way, you just need a smaller glass and that way it would be full all the time. That's the way our outlook has to be for the agency. We need to have high hopes even when we are not selling as many licenses as we used to sell. We can change the way people view fishing and boating in Pennsylvania by providing more opportunities, adding value to their experience, making them want to fish, getting kids involved by asking adults to take them fishing. We've developed our programs to manage and protect what we have to best serve the public. We continue to provide the goods and services that anglers and boaters and conservationists expect. We focus on our mission and manage our own funds, so the future is bright as long as we continue to do this in a responsible way. When I became director, I said that we weren't going to spend more than we earned. If we continued to spend more than we earn, we would be in serious trouble pretty quickly. We would be furloughing staff, growing less fish and closing hatcheries if we didn't have a sound reserve to carry us through tough times. If we stay responsible and run our agency like a business, I think we can survive indefinitely and continue to grow our customer base. We have to remind people that fishing is fun, inexpensive, easy to do and a great way to relax. I'm optimistic about the future and look forward to seeing PFBC evolve with society.

S: What advice would you give future leaders?

J: Do the right thing, and tell the truth. We may differ on what the right thing is, and that's ok. I've always contended that if you and I differ about something, it's your job to convince me about your position and my job is to convince you about my position. If we agree to disagree, one of us has to make the decision about what to do, and that's why we have a chain of command. I have seen people tell the truth in different ways. Some people may think I can stretch the truth, or I can tell half the truth. However, you can only get into trouble if you don't tell the whole truth. Tell

people what you believe and explain to them what you can do and what you can't do. That's always worked well for me. If you follow these general principles, you'll be a successful leader. Be passionate, and use all the tools that you have in your toolbox. Recognize the role of all staff in decisions and be guided by the mission of the agency—Resource First! ☐

Straight TALK:

www.fishandboat.com/straighttalk.htm