

Straight TALK

by *John A. Arway*

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Thank You—Again

My previous “Straight Talk” column could have been my final one. I wrote that column to shine light on the matters that prompted the introduction of Senate Bill 935. The story that I told in my “A Bill of Attainder” article prompted many of you to reach out to me by e-mail, phone and personal visit. Comments ranged from “I didn’t know this was happening,” “Holy Cow!” to “What can I do to help?,” “This isn’t fair” and many more. My advice was: contact your local state legislators, provide them your opinion about the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission’s (PFBC’s) fiscal state of affairs and urge them to act on a revenue increase. After-all, it doesn’t matter if I retire voluntarily or involuntarily, the financial challenges facing PFBC will remain the same.

I understood the challenges facing the agency when I was offered and accepted the position of Executive Director in March 2010. Brian Barner, Deputy Director of Administration, briefed me about the fiscal condition of the agency and told me that we would need a revenue increase in 2012, because the red and black lines of spending and earning were sure to cross. If we continued on the same track of spending and earning, we would begin drawing down the reserve fund to pay the extra expenses caused by the increased costs of pensions, health care and general inflation. I was convinced that we could delay the inevitable by implementing a plan where we wouldn’t spend more than we earned until we received additional revenue to pay for escalating expenses. Unfortunately, PFBC’s destiny is controlled by others since the legislature must approve and the Governor must sign bills associated with license fee increases. Those are the current rules of law, and they are the rules that we must follow.

I began work on my first day by alerting my executive staff that, under my leadership, we would not spend more than we earn, and we would live within our means. I met



photo-Steve Krulik

Pictured are (left to right) S.O.N.S. (Save Our Native Species) of Lake Erie Vice President Ed Kissell, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission Executive Director John A. Arway and S.O.N.S. President Jerry Skrypzak.

with the staff at headquarters where I introduced myself, discussed my background and revealed my vision and priorities for the future. Then, I conveyed that message to all agency employees. I went to work educating legislators about our challenges and opportunities through personal meetings at the Capitol. My plan, at the time, was to make the case for innovative funding ideas instead of arguing for a traditional license increase. I knew that every time we increased fishing license fees from 1990 through 2005, it caused an 8- to 10-percent reduction in sales. These sales decreases have been partially responsible for the overall decline in fishing participation in Pennsylvania, and I wanted to change that trend. Over the course of the next 8 years, I talked to anyone who would listen about our financial problems (“Straight Talk” Mar/Apr 2013) and proposed practical solutions for our unavoidable fiscal cliff. We all stood by and watched the federal government’s response to the fiscal cliff dilemma several years ago. Their solution was to cut all programs by 7.5 percent to save enough money to pay their bills. I did not want that to happen to PFBC. Former State Representative Gary Haluska and I had many debates about the traditional and non-traditional approaches of revenue generation, and I was determined to prove Haluska wrong. In retrospect, it appears that he was correct. No matter how good a business case I could make for alternative revenues to help support PFBC programs to get more people fishing, most legislators believed, like Haluska did, that the traditional funding model of raising customer fees should apply.

We tried a fishing license decrease (“Straight Talk” Jul/Aug 2010), negotiating fees from oil and gas development on PFBC-managed properties (“Straight Talk” May/June 2011), proposing a consumptive use water fee (“Straight Talk” Jan/Feb 2011), doing less for less (“Straight Talk” May/June 2012), encouraging anglers and boaters to speak out about the

need for revenue (“Straight Talk” Mar/Apr 2012), explaining the opportunities that would result if revenues were received (“Straight Talk” May/June 2013), and expressing optimism for a New Year (“Straight Talk” Jan/Feb 2013). We hosted annual legislative luncheons throughout the Commonwealth from 2011 through 2016, where our Commissioners and I personally explained our problem. Our former Policy Director, Dr. Tim Schaeffer, was responsible for this idea and it resulted in forging important relationships with members on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers. Indeed, these discussions did result in some positive benefits. The PFBC was included in Act 13 and continues to receive \$1 million a year from impact fees paid by the natural gas industry. These funds pay for staff costs associated with the environmental reviews associated with deep gas well permit applications. The PFBC was also included in Act 89 (the Transportation Bill) and receives additional funds as reimbursement of the tax boaters spend on gasoline to assist with the repair or rebuild of unsafe, high hazard dams across Pennsylvania.

We also explained the economic importance of our government business. Anglers and boaters spend billions of dollars every year on fishing and boating in Pennsylvania, but none of the state sales tax on those purchases is reinvested in fishing and boating (“Straight Talk” May/June 2013). Finally, staff and I worked together on constructing and implementing a Spending Reallocation Plan (SRP), which has caused us to reduce our staff complement from 432 to 363 filled positions. This was done through the gradual attrition of positions (not filling jobs as people leave), which saved sufficient funds to pay the mounting expenses.

Absent sufficient movement on alternative funding ideas, we returned to the age-old model of increasing fishing license fees. It was painfully obvious that there was little appetite for anything but a traditional fee increase bill that would raise fees high enough the first year to carry the agency forward for a decade or more. An outcome of a legislative discussion at a sponsored breakfast in Bedford was to delegate the

authority of setting fees to PFBC. This model has been successfully used for other independent Commissions of state government. Much like private business, self-funded agencies understand their business models better than anyone and are in the best position to determine price resiliency in their markets given the competing demands for their revenues. Delegation of fee authority bills (currently Senate Bill 30) were introduced and overwhelmingly passed the Senate in two different sessions but have failed to be considered in the House.

I thanked you once for purchasing a fishing license (“Straight Talk” Jul/Aug 2012), so I would like to personally thank all of you again for taking a stand on Senate Bill 935 and Senate Bill 30. The sportsmen’s voice is critically important to the future of both conservation and recreation in Pennsylvania. However, we must remind ourselves and others in our ranks that, just like the proverbial falling tree in the forest, the sportsmen’s voice is not relevant unless it is both spoken and heard. I am proud to say that I am an avid Pennsylvania angler, boater, sportsmen and conservationist. I am fortunate to have been chosen to lead the charge to protect, conserve and enhance our Commonwealth’s aquatic resources and provide fishing and boating opportunities. I promise you that I will continue to do my duty so that not only our generation but also future generations will have the ability to enjoy Penn’s waters and woods just like the generations that came before us.

Hope to see you on the water!

Your Director,
>>(John{°>



Do Your Duty and Fear No One—R. W. Abele



The mission of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission is to protect, conserve and enhance the Commonwealth’s aquatic resources, and provide fishing and boating opportunities.

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