

Hunters shouldn't be the only ones funding wildlife...

Recovering America's Wildlife Act could fund \$30 million for Michigan's At-Risk Species

Hunters and anglers pride ourselves on funding wildlife conservation in America, and as iconic game species go, we are justifiably proud. Through hunting and license fees and the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson Act federal excise taxes, we have funded the recovery of species like wild turkey, white-tailed deer and waterfowl, but about a third of wildlife species have been left behind.

In December 2017, a bipartisan pair of legislators introduced the Recovering America's Wildlife Act to help state agencies like the Michigan Department of Natural Resources recover our most at-risk species – without diverting hunter-angler dollars or raising taxes.

The Recovering America's Wildlife Act was introduced

in Congress on December

15, 2017 by Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-Nebraska) and Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-Michigan). It uses the same concept as Michigan's Natural Resources Trust Fund, in that it takes existing royalties from gas and oil development on federal public lands, as well as some from offshore, and redirects them into grant funding to state wildlife agencies to recover at-risk species. Each state has a Wildlife Action Plan identifying those species.

"The states have done a fantastic job with what little funding they have; the wildlife agencies have plans at the ready to help the species that need it most," said Naomi Edelson, senior director of conservation partnerships for the National Wildlife Federation.

Iconic species on Michigan's list include bald eagles, moose, common loons, eastern box turtles, monarch butterflies, Kirkland's warblers, peregrine falcons, sharp-tailed grouse, eastern massasauga snakes and the piping plover – a shorebird also on the federal endangered species list.

"The funding would be available for conservation efforts for fish and wildlife on the species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) list," said Amy DeRosier, Wildlife Action Plan coordinator for the DNR. "The funding also allows for outreach, law enforcement related to species of greatest conservation need, and

wildlife-related outdoor recreation."

That outdoor recreation is a significant economic driver in Michigan. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that Michigan's outdoor recreation economy generates \$26.6 billion annually and \$887 billion nationally.

The National Wildlife Federation estimates that nearly 8,000 species nationwide are at risk, though, meaning that they are either listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, or on a path to being listed as such. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act could help wildlife before

they get listed, like getting preventative medicine before requiring a more expensive emergency room visit.

"This proposal goes by the stitch-in-time-saves-nine principle. We can save money and save wildlife at risk by funding active conserva-

tion efforts today rather than waiting

until thousands of species are on the brink," said Edelson.

This much-needed funding could secure the future of our wildlife for future generations. The influx to the DNR for implementation of its Wildlife Action Plan would be a boon to wildlife habitat in the state. And for as often as hunters say that we shouldn't be the only ones funding wildlife, here's an opportunity for the general public to contribute without a tax increase – the royalties are coming from resources that all of us citizens own collectively.

So who currently funds nongame wildlife conservation? Michigan has a Nongame Wildlife Fund which receives \$25 of the \$35 Michigan Wildlife Habitat license plate. This year the plate celebrates the 100th anniversary of elk reintroduction but it usually features the common loon, one of Michigan's species of greatest conservation need. According to the DNR website, this fund has generated "\$23 million since 1983." That's \$23 million, total; nationally, the National Wildlife Federation estimates that current funding levels are less than 5% of what is necessary. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act would send approximately \$30 million per year to Michigan for these species and \$1.3 billion nationally.

This influx will help game animals, too. Michigan's wildlife



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management plan is broken down into management actions for habitat types, understanding that individual species are part of and dependent upon a habitat system.

"Many of the conservation efforts identified as priorities in Michigan's Wildlife Action Plan revolve around habitat management," DeRosier said. "And as you know, managing habitats provides benefit to lots of different species, game and nongame alike."

The Recovering America's Wildlife Act enjoys the support of hundreds of conservation organizations and businesses across the country, including the National Wildlife Federation, the Quality Deer Management Association, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Pheasants Forever, Trout Unlimited and Bass Pro Shops. It has truly bipartisan congressional sponsorship – three Republicans and five Democrats by the end of January – but it needs more. A previous version of the legislation introduced in the 2015-2016 term had 19 bipartisan co-sponsors but did not receive a hearing. In order to get enough momentum to move in Congress, the National Wildlife Federation is urging citizens to contact their members of Congress to request co-sponsorship of the legislation.

The idea behind the legislation was a recommendation of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources. The panel – organized

in 2015 – represented the outdoor recreation retail and manufacturing sector, the energy and automotive industries, private landowners, educational institutions, conservation organizations, sportsmen's groups and state fish and wildlife agencies.

The Blue Ribbon Panel was co-chaired by Bass Pro Shops owner Johnny Morris and former Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal, and its 24 members included Jeff Crane of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Becky Humphries of the National Wild Turkey Federation (and former Michigan DNR director), Jennifer Mull of the Outdoor Industry Association, Steve Sanetti of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, and National Wildlife Federation CEO Collin O'Mara.

"At a time when one-third of America's fish and wildlife species are at risk, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to save thousands of species and ensure that future generations inherit the full diversity of our nation's wildlife," said O'Mara.

"We cannot stand by and watch as so many of America's wildlife species continue to decline," said Edelson. "And if this bill becomes law, we won't have to."

To learn more about the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, visit www.nwf.org/recoveringamericas-wildlife.

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By Drew YoungeDyke