

Wildlife funding: Then and now

- By John Bradley for Dakota Edge Outdoors
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As I close out my hunting season, the 2019 calendar year, and I suppose the decade, I find myself looking back at the history of conservation in the United States along with how far we have come and where we need to head.

It's easy to take for granted the bounty of deer, turkey, walleye, and waterfowl in our state and it's hard to imagine a time when game species weren't so abundant.

But in the 1930s, ill-advised farming practices encouraged by the federal government had led to the Dust Bowl. At a time when millions of Americans stood in soup lines and politicians focused on reviving economically depressed communities, the idea of restoring depleted populations of ducks and other wild animals seemed far-fetched.

But that's exactly what happened. Hunters and anglers came together to pass legislation to restore wildlife and secure their outdoor heritage. The Pittman-Robertson Act and the Dingell-Johnson Act a decade later, put an excise tax on sales of firearms, ammunition, archery equipment, fishing equipment, boats, and marine fuel. This revenue is distributed to state governments for wildlife and fisheries projects, habitat management, game and fish surveys, species reintroduction, and hunter education.

The "user-play, user-pay" approach to conservation was revolutionary at the time and the dedicated funding from the acts helped to whitetail deer, antelope, turkeys, and many more species recover and become abundant in North Dakota today.

Unfortunately, non-game species have never received that same amount of attention or funding. The Dakotas has seen declines in numerous grassland and prairie species. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDG&F) has 12 species listed as threatened or endangered on the Endangered Species List and 115 species of concern, including its state bird, the western meadowlark. NDG&F does an incredible job of managing non-game species with the limited budget that they have. This isn't a knock on them. The message here is that conservation funding matters. Ducks, deer, turkey, and other game animals have benefited from decades of on-the-ground habitat efforts funded by hunters. We now need that dedicated funding for non-game species too.

Luckily, there is legislation moving through Congress right now that would address this issue. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act would provide the kind of consistent, dedicated funding that would help non-game species and other wildlife that is in decline. The bill would provide North Dakota with an estimated \$13.2 million annually for proactive, voluntary efforts that would reverse the decline of non-game species like the meadowlark. Keeping the many other species that are in decline off the Endangered Species List is good for wildlife, good for hunters, and good for farmers, ranchers, and energy producers.

Whenever I go out on our wild lands and waters, close to home or across the state, it's hard for me not to feel optimistic that we can rise to the challenges facing wildlife today. Just think about the generations of people who worked so hard to restore our nation's wildlife and fish. They sacrificed their time, energy, and money for us — and we need to do the same for future generations. It's our duty to keep pushing forward and thinking proactively.

Securing more dedicated funding for non-game species is one way we can do just that. Nearly 150 representatives from both sides of the aisle have already signed onto this common sense, cost-effective bill which shows that even in these divided times, Congress can still work together on something that will help to secure North Dakota's wildlife and strengthen its outdoor heritage.

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