



STATE FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES

Commissions and Boards

PURPOSE OF STATE FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSIONS/BOARDS

State wildlife agencies are responsible for conserving all fish and wildlife for all people. Many agencies have a commission or board that plays a governing and oversight role over the agency. The specific structure can vary according to the structure and organization of the fish and wildlife agency; sometimes they might also oversee state parks or other natural resources. Their authority and roles can vary widely and can include setting policy, working with stakeholders, and monitoring agency performance. Commissions generally are responsible for approving rules and regulations, especially related to hunting and fishing seasons and limits. Some commissions are also responsible for hiring or appointing state agency directors. In 20 states, the commission/board directly appoints the fish and wildlife director or the person who selects the fish and wildlife director. In six states, the commission identifies a list of finalists from which the Governor selects a director. Commissions might also help set the agency's strategic plan, direct legislative policy or approve the agency budget.

The following examples highlight some of the responsibilities held by state wildlife commissions:

Duties and Responsibilities of Missouri Department of Conservation Commission:

- Appointing the Department Director.
- Serving as the Department's policy makers.
- Approving wildlife regulations.
- Strategic planning.
- Budget development and major expenditure decisions.

Duties and Responsibilities of the New York Conservation Fund Advisory Board :

- Review the allocations and expenditures of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for fish and wildlife purposes.
- Release information or reports to sportsmen/women and the general public regarding the conservation fund and fish and wildlife programs.

STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS OF COMMISSIONS/BOARDS

The average number of commission members is nine, with each commissioner having an average term of six years. Most commissioners are appointed by the governor. Some states also require confirmation by the state legislature. The requirements for individual commissioners vary by state. Many states require commissioners to represent a specific geographic area of the state. About 20 states call for interest, knowledge, or experience in wildlife and conservation. Six states require interest, knowledge, or experience in fish and fisheries. One state (Hawaii) calls for a formal degree related to conservation and natural resources; two states require water resource conservation background and expertise. Ten states call for commissioners with an interest or experience in hunting or fishing. Two states (Alaska and California) specifically ask for diversity of expertise. Some states also specify a background in a non-wildlife field such as agriculture.

Below are two examples of requirements of commissioners:

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commissioners (Colorado Revised Statutes 33-9-101)

- 11 members of the public, appointed by the governor with consent of the state senate
- Three members must be hunters/anglers; three members must be agricultural producers; two members must be outdoor recreationists (one of whom must be an advocate for non-hunting wildlife recreation); two at-large members
- Members represent the entire state, but should be balanced between the east and west.
- Members serve four year terms with a two term limit

Mississippi Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission (Mississippi Code Annotated 49-4-4)

- Five members, appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the state senate
- One member from each of the state's congressional districts
- All members must have a demonstrated history of involvement in at least one of the areas under the agency's jurisdiction
- Members must be "an active outdoorsman" and have held a hunting/fishing license in at least five of the ten preceding years
- Members serve five year terms

Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (Revised Code of Washington 77.04)

- Nine members, appointed by the governor with advice and consent of the state senate
- Three members must be from west of the Cascade Mountains, Three from the east, and three at-large; No two may reside in the same county
- Members should have a "general knowledge of the habits and distribution of fish and wildlife"
- The governor should appoint members who balance "all aspects of fish and wildlife, including representation recommended by organized groups representing sportfishers, commercial fishers, hunters, private landowners, and environmentalists"
- Members serve six year terms

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSIONS AND THE CITIZENS OF THE STATE

Commissions typically hold regular meetings that are open to the public. They are a forum for citizens of the state to voice their opinions on the activities of the agency. Commission meetings often have specific issues on the agenda and provide opportunities for feedback on issues outside of the agenda typically through an open comment period.

THE NEED FOR MORE INCLUSIVE FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSIONS

Fish and wildlife commissions have historically focused on representing hunters and anglers and their associated programs. Although core constituencies such as hunters and anglers will continue to be key allies, there is a need to broaden stakeholder representation on commissions to ensure fish and wildlife conservation remains relevant and supported by people from many walks of life. Healthy fish and wildlife benefit all Americans, but most have little contact with, or understanding of, the state agency responsible for their stewardship. Commission meetings create a venue for citizens to have their voices heard, and stakeholders should be encouraged to use this opportunity. If state fish and wildlife agencies and the commissions that guide them fail to adapt, their ability to manage fish and wildlife will be hindered and their public and political support compromised.

For more information see statewildlifetoolkit.nwf.org/