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Assemblywoman Bustamante Adams, Chairman
Sunset Subcommittee of the Legislative Commission
Nevada State Legislature
Carson City, Nevada

Position Paper: Do sportsmen really “pay” for wildlife?

Dear Madam Chairman

Due to time constraints, I was unable to address this topic in front of your subcommittee. Therefore, I have prepared this brief discussion in the hope that it may be of some assistance to you and your subcommittee in your work session regarding the Board of Wildlife Commissioners.

Who are the sportsmen who make that claim?

If one looks to see who stands up and asserts that sportsmen “pay for wildlife”, it turns out to be persons who buy a hunting or trapping license and tags, and who hunt or trap wildlife as a primary focus of his/her outdoor activities. These folks are not 16 year-old kids with a fishing license, or some guy who has a boat registered through the agency. These sportsmen are hunters or trappers and that is why, for purposes of this discussion, I have defined a sportsman who claims to “pay” for wildlife as someone who purchases a hunting or trapping license.

The most visible of these are a subset of sportsmen who appear at meetings of the Board of Wildlife Commissioners proclaiming (or sometimes complaining) that they “pay for wildlife”. They are likely to insist upon the killing of predators (coyotes and mountain lions) to enhance mule deer populations. They are offended that Nevada might, in the future, see a few gray wolves within its boundaries and demand that the animal not be allowed to live in this state.

These are persons who give the impression, when speaking, that they and their friends “own” wildlife in this state by virtue of paying license and tag fees, and that they are entitled to prevail

in any area of dispute with the general public regarding wildlife management.

While I do not claim that such individuals typify the demeanor and outlook of many or even most sportsmen in this state, they are, clearly, the “noisiest” and they are commonly supported in their views and comments by other sportsmen, county game management advisory boards, the agency, and by the wildlife commission.

How many of them are there?

According to the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), there were about 19,000 resident hunting licenses sold last year, and about 28,000 combined resident hunting/fishing licenses as well, totaling about 48,000 sportsmen who purchased a resident hunting license. If one adds trapping licenses to the mix...maybe 1000/year as a generous estimate...the number of resident sportsmen by my definition is about 50,000 statewide. (To view that number in perspective, recall that Nevada’s population is approaching 3 million inhabitants.)

It is important to note that over 80,000 fishing licenses are sold, annually. I do not include these 80,000 fishing license holders in my definition of a sportsman because they are not the ones making claims about paying for wildlife and displaying a sense of ownership and entitlement. However, NDOW does appear to claim them as supporters of all department and wildlife commission actions.

What do sportsmen contribute to NDOW’s budget?

According to NDOW’s website, the fees collected from the sale of all licenses and tags (hunting, fishing, trapping) contributes about one third (1/3) of NDOW’s annual operating budget. (Recall, though, that hunting and trapping licenses represent no more than 40% of all license sales. The remainder is fishing licenses.) So, resident sportsmen who buy hunting licenses and tags contribute only a portion of the 1/3 of NDOW’s budget which comes from license/tag sales.

What other money comes to NDOW from sportsmen?

Decades ago, the Pittman-Robertson federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment was created to raise money to distribute to individual states for wildlife management. These monies which sportsmen claim as their own comprise about 20-25% of NDOW’s budget.

But, are these dollars derived only from sportsmen? No. Consider the following: US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates annual hunting license sales in the U.S. at about 15 million. Estimates of gun ownership in the U.S. range from 60 million to well over 100 million. There are plenty of gun owners who collect weapons, shoot tin cans or clay pigeons, frequent shooting ranges, or do other activities that contribute to Pittman-Robertson monies but they are not sportsmen.

(By the way, NDOW counts all gun owners as sportsmen, even if no hunting licenses are purchased, and therefore defines all Pittman –Robertson monies as coming from sportsmen. I quarrel with that definition since I am a gun owner, shoot tin cans on occasion, contribute to the Pittman-Robertson federal excise tax, but I am, emphatically, not a sportsman and should not be called one.)

So, while the hunting public claims it is responsible for all Pittman-Robertson funding, in truth, its contribution is probably well south of 50% though precise breakouts of the sources of Pittman-Robertson monies are hard to find.

It is true, though, that sportsman, through their various social/advocacy organizations, do contribute substantial monies to NDOW and other similar agencies for use with various wildlife restoration/enhancement projects. Over a period of years, such organizations may contribute 100's of thousands of dollars or more for beneficial projects.

There is a corresponding fishing equipment federal excise tax, the Dingell-Johnson monies, which come to NDOW. However, I do not include these monies as derived from sportsmen since fishermen are not included in my definition of a sportsman for purposes of this discussion. These funds add about another 20% to NDOW's revenues.

Does the general public help “pay” for wildlife?

The answer is yes, indeed. Though I have not done a systematic review of non-sportsman-related funding for NDOW, I give you the following examples which I easily found with a short look:

The two “green” ballot initiatives passed in Nevada since 1990....Question 5 and Question 1...added about \$40 million to NDOW's coffers.

Four or five years ago, NDOW received \$17 million from revenues derived from federal off-shore oil and gas leasing income and congressional appropriations.

The Ruby pipeline which was completed through northern Nevada last year, contributed \$8 million for sage grouse mitigation projects.

So, here are three quick examples, worth about \$65 million, where sportsmen paid no more or no less than any member of the general public for NDOW to receive these funds. NDOW has access to federal grants, oil and gas leasing revenue, and other sources of non-sportsmen-derived monies which it receives every year. NDOW could provide more specifics upon request.

What does it mean when sportsmen say they “pay for wildlife”?

Actually, what sportsmen mean is that their license and tag fees and donations of various sorts help fund NDOW. This may well include building guzzlers, reintroducing bighorn sheep onto historic ranges, running fish hatcheries and the like. It also means paying for computers, paving parking lots, fixing leaky roofs, paying health care and retirement contributions, buying and maintaining vehicles and paying for game wardens.

Clearly, sportsmen DO NOT pay for the habitat and the environment on which wildlife lives in this state. In Nevada, wildlife lives mostly on public lands, though also on private, municipal and state-owned lands. Since the federal land management agencies...The Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Wildlife Refuge system and the like...are funded by congressional appropriations, sportsmen contribute not a penny more than the rest of us towards the vital land management activities by those agencies which provide wildlife a home in this state and across the West.

So who cares if sportsmen think they “pay for wildlife”?

Anybody who finds himself in a position where he thinks he is paying for something may, understandably, begin to think he owns that item and that he is free to do with it what he pleases. In wildlife management, this does lead to a sense of ownership and entitlement on the part of some sportsmen which blurs the notion that wildlife is a PUBLIC asset as defined in NRS 501.100.

This sense of ownership and entitlement spills over into conflict where, for example, a public desire for trapping reform, or the public’s concern about the fruitless practice of killing predators to “create” more game species generally results in the public’s wishes being trumped by the resistance by sportsmen to any change in current practices.

In defense of sportsmen, the idea to make NDOW (and other state fish and game agencies) a user-fee funded agency seemed sensible decades ago at a different time in our history. Sportsmen have lived with this system and know nothing else. Many have developed a sense of partnership with the agency whereas the general public experiences a sense of being the “outsider” in this system whenever it shows up to enter the debate. Sportsmen, the agency and the commission all point out that general fund support for NDOW is minimal, and by implication, the public doesn’t deserve a seat at the bargaining table until it antes up some money.

Regardless of the historical roots...an historical “accident” if you will...which made user-funding seem like a good idea at the time, it no longer makes much sense. Kids are more interested in electronics than in going hunting, or loading their own ammunition. Sportsmen are heading towards extinction, which one can easily see by reviewing declining hunting license sales numbers over the past few decades. This trend, which seems not reversible, worries NDOW and other state wildlife management agencies around the country since revenue shortfalls will

only worsen under a user-fee based funding system.

Ultimately, the general public should and will need to step forward and shoulder its proper responsibilities for the funding of wildlife management. As this occurs, it is my great hope that the values and practices of wildlife management will undergo review and modification to better fit the values of the general public which is, after all, the true owner and trustee of our great wildlife treasure.

Sincerely

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