



PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Time is about to Expire

By Riley Boykin Smith, AWF President

In my four years as Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (1999-2003), I talked with a lot of people about a host of natural resource topics. Forward thinking conservationists in the hunting, angling, and outdoor community should have and do have natural and legitimate expectations and ideas for new and improved programs, projects, management thrusts, and policies. Some of these good ideas were implemented at little or no cost, but many of our discussions and planning for these type of items would ultimately boil down to the most critical topic—funding. As you well know, funding is the basic ingredient necessary to implement new or improved programs, whether it's more biologists, more conservation enforcement officers, expanded public hunting areas, or increased stocking of fish in our lakes and rivers. Unfortunately, expanding existing efforts was simply not doable in many situations because of limited funding. Four years later, a similar but drastically different discussion is taking place. One that is far more ominous.

It has been 17 years since the last resident hunting and fishing license increase in Alabama. Inflation and other increased cost factors are coming home to roost and the discussion has shifted from "How do we create or expand programs and services?" to the stark reality of "How will we maintain the programs and services we have in the face of diminishing fund capabilities?" Quite frankly, unless we take steps now to insure increased revenue for our wildlife and fisheries programs we could see a funding crash begin as early as next year. The results of that crash could be devastating to our game and fish populations and will be devastating to the hunting, angling, and

outdoor community. How do we address such a problem? First, you must understand how our wildlife and fisheries programs are funded.

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Funding

The Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF) of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is funded by two mechanisms: hunting and fishing license sales and federal matching funds through the Wildlife Restoration Program (Pittman-Robertson) and Sportfish Restoration Program (Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux). Of particular note is the fact that license fee revenue is matched three to one. For every dollar generated through hunting and fishing license sales, Alabama receives three additional dollars through federal matching funds. It is through this revenue that our game and fish programs, as well as many non-game wildlife programs, are funded. Most importantly, not one cent of State General Fund money goes to the Division—a fact that many people simply do not know.

Operating on an annual budget of approximately \$32 million, WFF provides for conservation enforcement officer services in every county of the state; pays, trains, and equips wildlife and fisheries biologists; and operates three fish hatcheries, 31 wildlife management areas, and 21 public fishing lakes. Of the 325 employees, approximately 85-86 percent are situated "in-the-field" to provide programs and services supporting our wildlife resources and assisting Alabama's citizens at the local level. Several years ago, the Division went through a self-imposed right-sizing initiative, that reduced the number of enforcement

districts from twelve to six and realigned fisheries and wildlife districts, resulting in significant cost-savings, improvements in coordination, and enhanced delivery of services to the public. This reduction was done with no lay-offs or forced relocations. Why all the effort to restructure? For two very important reasons: first, WFF and ADCNR recognize their inherent responsibility to ensure that their operations are as cost effective as possible. Second, in the 17 years since the last resident hunting and fishing license increases, basic operating costs have increased because of inflation and pay increases, 41.5 percent of which were legislatively mandated and unfunded. Employee longevity is a plus for any organization, but even without an increase in personnel numbers, personnel costs rise with time.

Addressing the Funding Issue

There are three obvious ways through which the WFF funding issue can be addressed: increase federal matching funds, increase license fees, and/or develop new funding mechanisms. Increasing federal matching funds would require an Act of Congress, literally, as these funding mechanisms are provided through federal law. Although that is an option, it does not sit well in a "no new taxes" environment on Capital Hill, nor can it be done expeditiously. Increasing license fees at the state level is much more direct, automatically yields a corresponding 3:1 match with federal funds and has specific merit in Alabama.

The Case for Increased License Fees

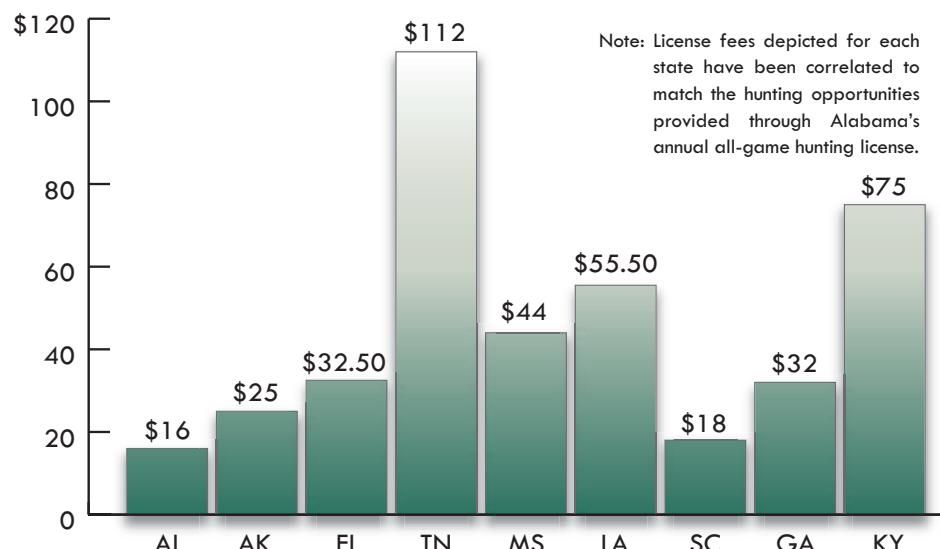
The last resident hunting and fishing license increase in Alabama was in 1989. Currently, our annual all-game hunting

license is \$16, the lowest license fee to hunt all-game in the southeastern United States (see Figure 1). This fact, combined with the liberal seasons and bag limits in Alabama compared to many southeastern states, makes a strong argument for the propriety of increasing our resident license fees.

Throughout the history of the conservation movement, hunters and anglers have repeatedly and religiously stepped up to the table and made the investments necessary to continually move wildlife conservation forward in this state and nation. It's time for us to up our investment in Alabama. What's the right fee for a resident hunting license: \$25, \$35, \$40? I won't proclaim that there is a single "right number," but I do know that change is in order and the time is upon us in Alabama to sit down and develop a plan for the future and enact it in the upcoming legislative session—waiting another year could prove too late. And while we're at it, we need to include a mechanism that allows for license fees to gradually increase with inflation so that we do not continue boom and bust cycles and the crisis management that comes around every time funding is about to crash.

There is no doubt in my mind that we possess the leadership within AWF and the conservation community in Alabama to find the right solution. I look forward to working with you to tackle this challenge and we will need your help to make it happen.

Figure #1 – Comparison of License Fees for Annual All-game Hunting in the Southeastern U.S.



Source: ADCNR, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

Potential Impacts of WFF Funding Crash

- Inability to provide adequate law enforcement response to illegal activities such as: landowners encountering armed, belligerent persons encroaching on their property; citizens encountering persons illegally hunting from roadways;
- Inability to maintain current system of roads and wildlife openings on Wildlife Management Areas and Physically Disabled Hunting Areas.
- Inability to maintain public shooting ranges at the current level.
- Inability to offer the number of hunter education courses necessary to meet demand and to purchase items needed for the mandatory hunter education program.
- Inability to provide landowner technical assistance and assistance through programs such as the Deer Management Assistance Program.
- Inability to provide assistance at Youth Dove Hunts at current levels and possible elimination of some hunts.
- Inability to adequately continue restoration programs such as the southern walleye program; redeye bass stocking enhancement program; Florida largemouth bass program in public waters.
- Inability to partner in community youth fishing events.

Source: ADCNR, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

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