

The Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act

Bringing Wildlife Back -- Then and Now

America the Beautiful is still the home of wondrous numbers and varieties of wild creatures. Yet, only a few decades ago, wildlife's survival was very much in doubt. The early settlers had encountered a spectacular abundance of wildlife. But, in their zeal to conquer an untamed continent, they squandered that legacy for centuries, wiping out some species and reducing others to a pitiful remnant of their original numbers.

Breakthrough: Pittman-Robertson Act

Then a remarkable thing happened. At the urging of organized sportsmen, State wildlife agencies, and the firearms and ammunition industries, Congress extended the life of an existing 10 percent tax on ammunition and firearms used for sport hunting, and earmarked the proceeds to be distributed to the States for wildlife restoration. The result was called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson (or "P-R") Act after its principal sponsors, Senator Key Pittman of Nevada, and Representative A. Willis Robertson of Virginia. The measure was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 2, 1937. Since then, numerous species have rebuilt their populations and extended their ranges far beyond what they were in the 1930's. Among them are the wild turkey, white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, wood duck, beaver, black bear, giant Canada goose, American elk, desert bighorn sheep, bobcat, mountain lion, and several species of predatory birds.

Shared Costs, Shared Benefits

Federal Funding from P-R pays for up to 75 percent of project costs, with the States putting up at least 25 percent. The assurance of a steady source of earmarked funds has enabled the program's administrators, both State and Federal, to plan projects that take years to complete, as short-term strategies seldom come up with lasting solutions where living creatures are involved.

In the more than 50 years since P-R began, over \$2 billion in Federal excise taxes has been matched by more than \$500 million in State funds (chiefly from hunting license fees) for wildlife restoration. Benefits to the economy have been equally impressive. National surveys show that hunters now spend some \$10 billion every year on equipment and trips. Non-hunting nature lovers spend even larger sums to enjoy wildlife, on travel and on items that range from bird food to binoculars, from special footwear to camera equipment. Areas famous for their wildlife have directly benefited from this spending, but so have sporting goods and outdoor equipment manufacturers, distributors and dealers. Thousands of jobs have been created.

Managing Lands for Wildlife

Of the P-R funds available to the States, more than 62 percent is used to buy, develop, maintain, and operate wildlife management areas. Some 4 million acres have been purchased outright since the program began, and nearly 40 million acres are managed for wildlife under agreements with other landowners.

Various kinds of land have been acquired, including winter rangelands necessary for big game animals in the North and West, and wetlands, essential to ducks and geese for nesting, wintering, and stopover feeding and rest during migrations.

Along with land acquisition, better management methods have yielded remarkable results.

Some examples include creating small waterholes in the southwest so that wildlife may drink; planting trees and shrubs in some Great Plains localities as woody cover to shelter pheasants, quail and other wildlife during winter storms; creating clearings in heavily wooded areas of the Northeast to provide more varied food and shelter for deer, woodcock, rabbits, and ruffed grouse; and controlled burning of brush and tall grass in parts of the South to stimulate growth of seed-producing plants for wild turkey and quail.

Research: Science Replaces Guesswork

P-R has greatly aided in a nationwide effort to enlist science in the cause of wildlife conservation. About 26 percent of P-R funding to the States is used for surveys and research. Surveys, now employing computers and space-age technology, provide solid information on the location and activities of species, the make-up of their population by age and sex, and whether their numbers are rising or declining -- essential data in managing the species and its habitat. Research has disclosed surprising answers to former riddles about wildlife's needs for food, cover, and breeding success. For example, it has shown that big game animals do not directly compete with livestock for food. Research findings have enabled managers to keep wild creatures in balance with their environments and to permit more people to enjoy wildlife without endangering the future of any species. State researchers using P-R funds have developed such tools as tranquilizing dartguns to capture animals, and miniature radio devices to track them.

Non-Hunters and Non-Game Benefit, Too

Although Pittman-Robertson is financed wholly by firearms users and archery enthusiasts, its benefits cover a much larger number of people who never hunt but do enjoy such wildlife pastimes as birdwatching, nature photography, painting and sketching, and a wide variety of other outdoor pursuits. Almost all the lands purchased with P-R money are managed both for wildlife production and for other public uses. Wildlife management areas acquired by the States for winter range also support substantial use by hikers and fishermen, campers and picnickers. Wetlands for summer waterfowl nesting are useful to nature lovers in other seasons. Recent estimates indicate about 70 percent of the people using these areas are not hunting, and in some localities the ratio may go as high as 95 percent.

Numerous non-game species enjoy P-R benefits, too. Ground cover for game birds is also used by all sorts of other birds and small animals. Bald eagles benefit significantly under careful management of forested areas where they typically nest. Fortunately, the Pittman-Robertson act does not restrict use of funds to game species, but instead allows their use for any species of wild bird or mammal.

Hunter Safety and Sportsmanship

Congress in the early 1970's expanded the P-R revenue base to include handguns and archery equipment, and authorized States to spend up to half those revenues on hunter education and target ranges.

Hunter education is designed to make each hunter aware of how his/her behavior affects others. Hunters learn safe and proper handling of hunting equipment, responsible hunting conduct afield, the identification of wildlife and understanding of its habits and habitats, and respect -- for the animals, and for other hunters, landowners, and the general public.