

General Session

Facing the New Millennium

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On September 11, 2001, the world got smaller for me. I dare say it got smaller for all Americans. Like many of you, I have done a lot of soul searching since September 11. There have been few events in my lifetime which have caused me to think as deeply. In light of the tremendous tragedy and sorrow, loss of life, and the after-shocks to our culture of freedom, our economy, and our government, what role can you and I play in the new millennium?

I was tempted to pay appropriate homage to the seriousness of the crime and then focus our attention on current issues like the Farm Bill and CARA. But I always came back to, "What is right?" What should I say to my Southeastern colleagues about the new millennium? I should say, "It is time for some plain talk."

We have been living in a make-believe comfort zone. Get your heads out of the sand and open your eyes. Look and see where we are. Look at the whirlwind changes occurring in our culture and society.

Population increases alone will create substantial changes in the wildlife business. During the first 10 years of this new millennium, America's population will increase by 25 million. By 2050, there will be an increase of over 120 million.

There is a critical role we can play in the future of America and our way of life. Is your place on this planet at risk? I don't ask this as an alarmist, but as a realist.

The conservation values we preach, sometimes to each other, have enormous value to American culture. The national resources of air, water, and land that we strive to conserve are the very tools we can use to help this country, although those resources are the ones the public takes most for granted.

We must become advocates for smart growth in our cities and reuse of developed lands. President Sandifer and Ron Crouch, who will follow me, will make you think about these issues. They will highlight and call to your attention significant issues and trends in the South. Yesterday and Saturday, a select group of individuals from SEAWFA states participated in the first SEAWFA leadership forum. Clearly we have good ideas; we have visionaries in our ranks. Much national conservation leadership at all professional levels comes from the South. We have lots of work ahead of us to compete for budget resources, customer time, attention, and money. We know now we must market. We must compete for our customer's discretionary dollars.

But let's not lose sight of the position of strength from which we start. We are an

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economic force in the South. The activities we regulate are an economic driver. We compete favorably with major industries in most states. A high percentage of our citizens participate in wildlife-related recreation.

Clearly we have challenges in the new millennium. America needs to remain connected to the outdoors and the fish and wildlife values we offer and regulate will be important to this country's future. America's youth needs our activities. Population growth, urban sprawl, and smart growth or dumb growth will shape wildlife's future. We have the leadership, technical, and professional staffs to do the jobs, but we must work smarter, more politically astutely, and aggressively.

This is an exciting time to be an American. We have a lot to offer America through the conservation values which are a part of our heritage. Just as we honored our veterans today, let us honor the Roosevelts, the Leopolds, and the Pinshots by our commitment to aggressively promote our conservation heritage into the next millennium.

We shall not fail.