

Challenges for Improving Natural Resource Management, Especially Fish and Wildlife

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It is a distinct privilege and pleasure to be with you for your 41st annual meeting.

Issues and challenges anticipated in managing natural resources in coming years are clear. The obvious problem, habitat degradation and destruction, will continue—at what rate will be determined largely by various activities of people. But all of us must recognize the basic problem is human population expansion and in some cases, such as acid deposition, hazardous chemicals and coastal wetland losses, modern technology. In such situations, actions are needed to restore and prevent degradation of the resource base.

Human population expansion and associated activities are threatening fish and wildlife habitats and populations. Yet, wildlife and fishery management professionals have given too little attention to the problem. Evidence of human population pressures on fish and wildlife habitats are nearly everywhere. But solutions involve sticky issues. Nevertheless, the issues must be faced squarely and the opportunity to do so exists—nationally, in each state, and by each individual.

Legislation (S. 1171 and H.R. 2212) has been introduced in the 100th Congress that calls for a national population policy and directs that it be implemented. It seeks to establish a federal policy that population stabilization is a national goal. It would require all federal agencies to review their activities and determine if they encourage population growth, and if they do, to change their way of doing business. That proposal deserves strong support.

Meanwhile, all levels of government and private individuals must seek and use a system of integrated management that incorporates and perpetuates wild living resources.

The framework for integrated resource management has been constructed with specific mandates for agricultural, forested, and other lands, as well as for water through the recent Clean Water Act and Water Development Act. These authorities

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and procedures for planning and developing water provide refreshing new opportunities to accommodate wild living resources. Fish, wildlife, and other resource managers must take advantage of these new opportunities.

Wetlands can be restored and improved through a number of new authorities offering pressing challenges and awaiting responses by federal/state agencies and citizens at large.

—The 1986 Emergency Wetland Resources Act broadened the Department of the Interior's responsibilities to encompass the full spectrum of wetland values. National wetland conservation plans pending completion should identify important wetlands to be maintained through joint private/state/federal actions. Strong state inputs are needed to ensure that key wetlands receive top priority attention and help meet objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

—The Water Resources Development Act of 1986 has expanded mitigation/enhancement authorities for the Corps' water development projects. Now the Corps has some authority to use its engineering design and construction capabilities to develop projects that benefit wetlands, fish and wildlife. Mitigation is specifically authorized for some water projects, including some in Arkansas (White River, 750 ha), Kentucky (Obion Creek, 2,400–3,600 ha), Louisiana (Atchafalaya Basin, 148,000 ha and Red River Waterway, 5,700 ha), and Mississippi (Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, 35,600 ha, and Yazoo Backwater, 16,200 ha). The Corps is authorized to mitigate on projects completed, under construction or to be constructed when the mitigation costs do not exceed \$7.5 million or 10 percent of a project's cost, whichever is greater.

—The 1985 Food Security Act (or Farm Act) authorizes the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) to grant easements for restoring wetlands on its inventory lands. The Tribble Tract in Mississippi awaits administrative approvals to complete the first such project in the Southeast.

Stronger interagency working relationships are required to capitalize on these habitat restoration and maintenance opportunities of the mid-1980s. New innovative approaches are needed in the Southeast to assist financially stressed farmers, as well as to realign water development designs to achieve social, economic and conservation benefits. Effective responses are needed by everyone at this meeting.

Fortunately, some new thinking already has been initiated to benefit wetlands through innovative actions, illustrated by 4 examples:

(1) A comprehensive freshwater diversion plan has been started (Caernarvon Project) by the Corps to reduce wetland losses in Louisiana. Objectives include creating more desirable salinity gradients, supplying sediments to offset subsidence, providing nutrients to nourish marsh vegetation, and increasing fish and wildlife populations and harvests.

(2) A 1985 cooperative agreement between the Department of the Army (Civil Works) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calls for a three-year pilot study to investigate the practicality of a national program for restoring and creating fisheries habitats.

(3) Completed restoration of a 19-km stretch of Florida's Kissimmee River, channelized into a straight canal by the Corps in the 1960s, now has enhanced water flows and restored marshes and produces more abundant fish and wildlife.

(4) Use of "Stream Obstruction Removal Guidelines" by the Corps on the L'Anguille River in eastern Arkansas, instead of destructive channelization, signals a ray of hope for more realistic management of river systems. Cost of the Arkansas project dropped from about \$60 million for channelization to \$13 million using the guidelines prepared by professional wildlife and fish managers. With this substantial saving identified and broad support from professional resource managers, farmers and conservationists, one wonders why the Corps persists in attempting to channelize the Obion and Forked Deer rivers in western Tennessee, as well as other rivers. Gross channelization is too costly, economically as well as environmentally, in many cases. All resource managers should be supporting the more sensitive, less costly, stream obstruction-removal procedures.

All of these new efforts feature improving interagency cooperative working relations, using the Corps' broad construction capability and experience in the best public interest, and benefiting wild living resources. Additional such efforts are needed immediately to maintain and restore key designated wetlands, as called for in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. New thinking and actions are required, as called for in the proposed Coastal Wetlands Recovery Act (S. 655). That proposal "would put the Corps of Engineers into the business of restoring our Nation's wetlands."

Despite these proposals and helpful provisions of the 1986 Emergency Wetland Protection Act, wetland losses will continue to be a consuming problem in the decade ahead. Various past efforts, such as duck stamp programs, Corps of Engineers' permits, Presidential executive orders, agency policies, etc., are insufficient. Wetlands continue to disappear at a rate approaching a half million acres each year. The 1986 Wetland Act, swampbuster provision of the 1985 Farm Act and other recent advances offer some hope for stemming the tide. However, they will not do everything needed. For example, only about 40% of the farms in the United States receive benefits from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Therefore, wetlands on 60% of the farms are not influenced by swampbuster.

This nation must have a strong, well-enforced policy demanding "no net loss of wetlands." We are at a point in time, with expressed strong public concern, to begin planning strategy for attaining such a policy nationally and in each state.

A much greater level of attention, as is being devoted in Canada, is required to rebuild North America's waterfowl populations, especially ducks and some Arctic nesting geese that have reached the lowest levels in more than 30 years.

Other challenges must be faced in American agriculture. Much of the agribusiness community has been backed into a corner by a mishmash of poor land management, misguided investments, and government intervention. The nation's agricultural complex, on its current course, cannot sustain itself. In too many areas, the land is being mined, not farmed on a sustainable basis. Accelerated soil erosion and devastating degradation of public waters are much too common. Food, cover,

and other conditions required by wildlife and fish are being adversely altered. Our capital resource—topsoil—is disappearing at unacceptable rates. In the United States, erosion removes an average of 30 m tons of topsoil per ha per year, with losses of hundreds of tons in some situations, including in the Midwest and Southeast. Soil scientists recommend that topsoil losses not exceed 13 m tons per ha per year on deep soils and 8 m tons per ha on shallow soils to maintain productivity. But accelerated erosion exceeds 13 m tons per ha annually on about 57 million ha, or 34%, of the nation's cropland.

Opportunities to help stop this disgrace and to benefit fish and wildlife immensely are available in the conservation provisions of the 1985 Farm Act. The conservation reserve, conservation compliance, sodbuster, and swampbuster programs will work only with strong interest and participation of state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, as well as effective administration by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies, Conservation Districts, county committees, and private landowners and operators. With recent USDA proposals to weaken criteria and standards for soil erosion prevention and control, serious questions have been raised on USDA's intentions and capabilities of doing what is right to place agriculture on a sustainable basis. Now is the time for the private sector, including farmers and ranchers, to speak out for doing what is right.

USDA's Cooperative Extension Service is preparing and distributing new information helpful in alerting landowners and operators to opportunities to realign their agricultural programs and incorporate conservation features made available through the Farm Act. Those efforts need strong support and expansion. Among many possible actions, you should energetically support reauthorization of the Renewable Resources Extension Act next year (1988) and request greater emphasis on fish and wildlife management.

Beyond existing farm programs, there are needs for additional legislation to advance integrated conservation/agricultural commodity programs and expand potential benefits for fish and wildlife. Legislation (S. 1521) has been introduced to increase the conservation reserve limit from 18 million to 26 million ha. That is good, but the bill also proposes to open those lands to grazing and haying under certain conditions. That blanket ticket, without stipulations, would be bad. Ample evidence shows that if grazing and haying is permitted, they will be carried out. And wildlife habitat benefits of the program would be compromised.

New legislation also is needed to permit the FmHA to transfer inventory lands to other federal agencies for wildlife purposes. FmHA currently holds about 0.7 million ha that it received through defaulted loans. Some of this land is adjacent to existing public areas, such as national wildlife refuges and national forests, and has high wildlife values. Other areas would make ideal additions to holdings of state wildlife agencies and other state agencies. However, FmHA claims that it does not have the authority to transfer these lands to other agencies. That situation must be remedied immediately through pending corrective legislation (H.R. 3030).

A major advance was made when a memorandum of understanding was signed between FmHA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in May 1987. Now, a half-

year later, it is past time to complete pilot projects in many states. To date, only one project in Ohio has been completed. Others await action in a good number of states, including Mississippi, Minnesota, and Colorado. Prompt implementing actions are needed.

Additional progress can be made through legislation needed to extend conservation provisions of the Farm Act to the Farm Credit System (FCS). FCS is a quasigovernmental lending co-op that is threatened to go under without rescue assistance because too many farmers are not repaying their loans. Congress has been asked to rescue the system with more taxpayer funds. Conservationists are requesting that any bail-out of the system include requirements that future borrowers be subject to provisions in the swampbuster, sodbuster, and conservation compliance provisions of the 1985 Farm Act. Then, farm credit programs, as well as crop production programs would have a much-needed conservation dimension. Proposals are before the Congress to weave conservation provisions into the Farm Credit rescue bill. Assuming the procedures developed for screening FmHA inventory lands are extended to FCS inventory lands, another 0.9 million ha would be reviewed for existing and potential values for wildlife and fish.

In recent weeks, conservationists registered a request with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to convert at least a part of the 16 million to 22 million ha of set-aside acreage from an annual to a multi-year program. Response to that needed change is pending.

Here in the Southeast, release of the draft report on "The South's Fourth Forest," with its emphasis on timber rather than fully integrated multiple benefiting forest management, stimulated some strong reactions. Conservationists are looking forward to the final report. It is anticipated that it will elevate maintenance of productive wildlife and fish populations. The challenge is to achieve, to the best practicable extent, fully integrated resource management. That it can be achieved is demonstrated by decades of success in managing forests for timber, wildlife, fish, and other products and services at the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia. The pressing need is to make sure fish and wildlife values and habitat needs are incorporated into management plans developed for as much as possible of the Southeast's 98 million ha of forested lands, especially the 5.9 million ha of national forests.

Despite some remaining challenges, opportunities for enhancing fish and wildlife on national forests have never been better. Signals from the U.S. Forest Service continue to please those who believe that the agency is determined and capable of evolving into a multiple-use administrator more in tune with public needs and desires. Fish and wildlife stand to gain tremendously as the Service switches lanes to improve its programs and image. Likewise, the State of Washington's new approach for managing forests on an integrated, multiple-benefit basis holds much promise for resolving long-standing debates. Other states should examine that new initiative.

On private forested lands, net revenues from joint timber/wildlife management are reported by Alabama's Cooperative Extension Service to exceed profits from timber alone. Where demands for hunting exist, fees of \$8.50 to \$12.00 per ha per

year provide private landowners with an economic incentive to carry out multiple-benefiting forest management. The lease fee tips the scales in favor of wildlife and timber in forest management.

Collectively, resource managers must work more effectively with citizens to ensure integrated resource management that restores and perpetuates the resource base, including fish and wildlife habitats and populations. There are no alternatives to this fundamental approach now, nor will there likely be in the future.