

Attitudes Will Chart the Course: NRA's Perspective

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The Conservation, Wildlife and Natural Resources Division of the National Rifle Association (NRA), was created in response to the desires of our hunting membership to be stronger and more visible players in the public policy arena covering the myriad issues relating to conservation and how they may affect them. I will just add that this Division also addresses issues involving lead in the environment.

My topic this morning is entitled, "Hunters—a rightfully paranoid group." Now, it has been suggested by public officials in Washington that the alarm bell we are ringing (that our rights are being threatened), is tied to a superficial agenda—that agenda being "scare the wits out of our membership and they'll contribute money"; nothing more than an effort at scare tactics to raise funds. Not so. Discontent is growing at the grass roots level—not a discontent created out of the fertile imagination of organizations representing hunters.

Hunters see their traditional role in wildlife management under siege. Why? Not only are they affected by the direct assault on consumptive uses by animal rights activists (mentioned in Governor Fordyce's remarks) and evidenced by ballot initiatives at the state level, but indirectly by preservationist thinking creeping into policymaking at both the state and Federal levels. Our hunting membership is not only alarmed by what they see as changing attitudes toward their participation and contribution in wildlife management, but the trickle-down effect Federal decisions can have at the state level and conversely the influence of state wildlife management decisions on Federal policy.

I liken these hunters' concerns ("justified paranoia") or political reactions to a chemical reaction. The chemical reaction consists of 2 elements combined in the presence of 3 reagents with the whole reaction being accelerated by a catalyst. As stated, there are 2 elements to the "hunters' paranoia" and this is the basis for the chemical reaction: one is the personal fear that hunters have about a growing non-hunting public: "They don't understand why I like to hunt." The second, is the growing feeling that the Feds are trying to usurp state

control of wildlife management decisions. Now, these 2 elements independently are enough to cause the hunting constituency concern but, when combined in the presence of the 3 reagents, is creating an entirely new level of concern or anxiety—"justified paranoia." I will discuss what these 3 reagents are after I explain that the catalyst to this whole reaction, and its responsibility for the increased amount of "heat" that this reaction is producing, is the current Administration's actions and inactions toward the hunting community.

Many of you may have already had the opportunity to read Bob Marshall's article in *Southern Outdoors*—a 2-part series entitled "The changing face of wildlife agencies." Mr. Marshall identifies some critical components that have materialized to change what hunters' view as time-honored and maybe even sacred approaches to wildlife management. These components are the three reagents to this chemical/political reaction. They are:

- 1) The movement away from single-species management.
- 2) Men and especially women entering the ranks of wildlife management that do not have a background in the traditional uses of wildlife.
- 3) Competition for scarce resources that the hunting and fishing community cannot fulfill as state and Federal agencies implement programs for an expanding constituent base.

Again, I look at Mr. Marshall's components as the 3 reagents that combine the 2 elements of hunters' concerns into a heightened level of anxiety—"justified paranoia." Again, these elements being the personal fear of the hunter of no longer being understood in today's society (a relic, if you will) and the other being a Federal government that consciously or unconsciously wants greater control and management authority over historically state-managed species.

Component or reagent 1, multi-species management. The Federal mandate now is for an ecosystem approach to all wildlife management programs. The hunters' fear is where does the management of turkeys or deer or pheasants fit in? Are they going to hear, "Sorry, but it may not make the cut to survive the ecosystem approach to tomorrow's wildlife management programs"?

Component or reagent 2. The wildlife professionals of today and definitely tomorrow often do not participate in hunting, a time-honored tradition. At the Federal level and growing at the state level, the demographics are clear—greater numbers of people with no personal consumptive-use background are entering the wildlife management profession. And they do not and may not care to relate with these outdoor consumptive-use "relics." As Mr. Marshall noted, "these employees have no affinity for it." And on the personal fear side of the hunters' concerns is a growing feeling of not being appreciated or wanted either individually or collectively by these resource managers. "Oh sure, give us your money, but do you really have to participate in this activity to do 'good' things for wildlife, I mean kill things?" I will add here that the gap developing between hunters and law enforcement is especially prominent at the Federal level and increasing at the state level. It may be a result of the declining requirement for education or work-history in the natural resources field. So we end up with a

natural resources police force that is strong on law enforcement and becoming weaker on a holistic understanding of why there are wildlife laws. And to boot, they themselves may not hunt or fish. Again, hunters are increasingly coming in contact with governmental officials who don't understand why people hunt. In the Southern Outdoors article, Larry Marcum, chief of the Wildlife Management Division of the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency was quoted. He summarized the hunters' "justified paranoia" quite succinctly: "When the background of the people in management changes, and the backgrounds of the people providing the money for the agencies have changed, then its difficult to say that hunting and fishing won't be facing some serious challenges in the future."

Component or reagent 3. The Federal government is requiring a reprogramming of limited dollars to endangered and threatened species management. Added to this is pressure from a growing public wanting to participate in natural resources management and enjoyment at the expense of the hunters. This participation in wildlife management is being advocated at the Federal level by a growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose memberships pay dues with nothing going to actual resource management as hunters' dollars do, although it is still apparent to state agencies that hunter dollars do pay the freight at the state level. However, at the Federal level, entry into the decision-making process does not depend upon an NGO's membership's monetary commitment, or lack thereof, to actual resource management.

Now, enter this Administration as the catalyst to accelerate this reaction. In addition to producing the hunters' "justified paranoia," this accelerated reaction naturally produces an increasing amount of heat. But in this case, it is called "hunters' heat"—and that's what officials in Washington have been feeling of late. This political reaction has been accelerated without, I believe, direct intentions of malice. Its essence is captured in a quote from a recent article about the current non-hunting director of USFWS, Mollie Beattie, "The Fish and Wildlife Service is supportive of hunting, and particularly supports the conservation efforts of the hunting community, which go back a long way." Cynically read, it is as if she and others are saying, "thanks for the past contributions, we really appreciate the end result of your activity but let's not talk too much about the 'activity', you know, hunting." In essence, this Administration may not be anti-hunting but they're sure not pro-hunting. Best described, they are hunting neutral.

For example, within the Service they have a fishing initiative—why not have a hunting initiative?

I'd like to enumerate the actual actions that have positioned this Administration as the catalyst that has accelerated this (political) reaction to produce this intense heat—"hunters' heat."

1) First came an out of court settlement on secondary uses of refuges settled between Interior and Audubon. Alarm has spread through the hunting

community over the future of hunting on refuges—largely created because the new team in Interior did not recognize the need to communicate with affected constituencies before the suit was settled.

2) Driven by budgetary concerns, Director Beattie issued a memorandum to the field implying that funds may be reallocated away from wildlife-dependent recreation activities and toward other priorities and set up a gauntlet for refuge managers to run through should they decide to continue these activities. There is no question that the hunters see diabolic motives—Why? Because the leadership never bothered to consult them. Thank goodness we have friends like Senator Cochran who short-stopped that approach with language in the Interior Appropriations bill.

3) Third, they saw this Administration oppose an amendment that would have allowed hunting to continue—not be established, but continued—in the 1.3 million-acre East Mohave area of the California Desert.

4) Fourth, legislation backed by this Administration that would require secondary uses—and of concern to hunters—wildlife-dependent recreation—to go through a convoluted review process. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure that these activities would go by the wayside because of the lack of manpower and resources to conduct these drawn-out and needless compatibility reviews.

5) Fifth, they see the Feds trying to influence the states on how their PR excise tax dollars are to be spent. Earlier this year the Service proposed to regionalize or nationalize the wildlife priorities of the PR program. I don't think a pheasant stocking program would pass their litmus test of a regional or national priority. Sadly, they don't realize that even these types of short-term management programs have long-term financial and conservation importance by keeping hunters hunting.

Well, an attitude of paranoia, even though justifiable, will not chart any kind of course into the future. Hunters want to be a part of the changing landscape. Change is a natural process—but, human nature often fights change. The reality is though, that we have to be part of the flow or we are going to be left on the stream bank. As evidenced by the fear and to a degree, animosity, felt by hunters toward the Federal Administration—it's critical that hunters continue to be considered a vital component of wildlife management decisions; that they are seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem in addressing management challenges.

Hunters for a long time have been a part of an intimate circle. Now, new players are being introduced. Rather than government tossing the old players out to make room for the new and thereby keeping the circumference of the circle the same, the circumference should be expanded so that traditional players keep their place and new players can join in. No loss, and hopefully a net gain for the resource.

If anything, hunters' contributions need to be validated in order for them

to face change on a secure footing. It's not productive for us as hunters to have a "them or us" attitude. But that wedge is being driven in because of a lack of communication.

So what do we do now? Will this political reaction continue to generate ever increasing amounts of heat? We hope not.

1) First, we are meeting on a regular basis with Interior officials to help them help themselves from becoming a further catalyst to this reaction.

2) Secondly, these same officials must be sensitive to the 3 reagents of this reaction and institute programs such as a "hunting initiative" and reassure hunters that species-specific management for game has a role in tomorrow's ecosystem management approach.

3) Thirdly, it may be time for resource agencies and universities to initiate courses such as "consumptive user 101, understanding and managing for the consumptive user."

With our new division, NRA's voice for the hunter will be strengthened—but we don't want our role to be only adversarial in changing times—on the other hand, we will work hard to ensure that the hunters' role in wildlife management is not relegated to the past, but rather, the hunter has a rightful seat at the table participating in strategic planning for the present and future management of our country's wildlife resources.