



The American System of Conservation Funding

2017 marked the 80th Anniversary of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) program, and presented the hunting and angling conservation community with an ideal opportunity to refocus, redefine, and reclaim the notable story as America's original conservationists. The idea of conservation in America began with members of the sportsmen's community, who introduced game laws and programs to protect natural resources – leading to the creation of fish and wildlife agencies. Today, WSFR contributions are still aimed directly at conservation funding and largely affect resources used by Americans. Many are unaware of the multitude of benefits that affect all Americans – consumptive and non-consumptive users alike – that have resulted from the efforts of the sportsmen's community. In order to foster greater understanding of the positive impacts hunting, angling, and recreational shooting have for our society, **the WSFR program should be redefined as the American System of Conservation Funding – a “user pays-public benefits” program.**

Eighty-two years ago, the hunting community initiated this system with the passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act) which directed excise taxes on firearms and ammunition to a dedicated fund to be used specifically for conservation purposes. Further, revenue from sportsmen's licenses was permanently linked to conservation through the establishment of this program, laying the foundation for what is now the American System of Conservation Funding. Through time, this System has expanded and now includes the fishing and boating communities - with the passage of the Federal Aid in Sportfish Restoration Act (also known as the Dingell-Johnson Act, and the subsequent Wallop-Breaux Amendment) as well as the archery community. The funds collected through this program are the lifeblood of state fish and wildlife agencies – the primary managers of our nation's fish and wildlife resources. These critical conservation dollars fund a variety of efforts including: enhanced fish and wildlife habitat and populations, recreational access to public and private lands, shooting ranges and boat access facilities, wetlands protection and its associated water filtration and flood retention functions, and improved soil and water conservation - **all which benefit the American public.**

Hunting, angling, recreational shooting, trapping, and boating are all closely related to fish and wildlife conservation. The term 'conservation,' can be traced back to Gifford Pinchot of the U.S. Forest Service. Pinchot defined conservation as the “wise use of the Earth and its resources for the lasting good of men.” Along with the use of a resource comes the responsibility of careful resource management. America's sportsmen and women are the original conservationists, who exemplify the laudable definition of conservation advanced by Pinchot, and remain dedicated to the stewardship of our natural resources.

Celebrating 80 years of sportsmen-led conservation this year, we are now presented with the opportunity to more broadly portray sportsmen and women as providers of benefits to the greater public. Natural resource management agencies nation-wide should work alongside the hunting and angling conservation community to develop and implement strategies that promote understanding of the historic and current roles that this community holds in fish and wildlife conservation. A primary focus must be to enhance recognition that a subset of users – hunters, anglers, recreational shooters, and boaters – largely foot the bill for programs that help deliver abundant fish and wildlife, clean water, healthy landscapes, and access to these resources that are enjoyed by the public at-large.

In a time of changing social, economic, and environmental dynamics, it is crucial that the public understands the commitment that America's sportsmen and women have to conservation. Revamping the commonly used, descriptive terminology associated with the System to “user pays-public benefits” is critical to furthering the public's understanding of the American System of Conservation Funding as being vital to the future of outdoor recreation and natural resource management.