

TENNESSEE WILDLIFE FEDERATION • DUCKS UNLIMITED • WOLF RIVER CONSERVANCY • TURKEYS FOR TOMORROW • BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB • THE NATURE CONSERVANCY • NATIONAL DEER ASSOCIATION • TENNESSEE FIELD TRIAL ASSOCIATION • DELTA WATERFOWL • AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION • PHEASANTS FOREVER • QUAIL FOREVER • CONGRESSIONAL SPORTSMEN'S FOUNDATION • TENNESSEE BASS NATION • TENNESSEE BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS AND ANGLERS • HATCHIE RIVER CONSERVANCY • NASHVILLE SPORTSMAN CLUB • SAFARI CLUB INTERNATIONAL • TALL TIMBERS • CAMPBELL OUTDOOR RECREATION ASSOCIATION • TENNESSEE STRIPED BASS ASSOCIATION • GREENE COUNTY HUNTING AND FISHING CLUB • FAYETTE COUNTY ROD AND GUN CLUB • MUSIC CITY TROUT UNLIMITED • ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION; ROYAL BLUE, DUCK RIVER, COOKEVILLE CHAPTERS • HIGHLAND SPORTSMEN'S CLUB • DALLAS SAFARI CLUB, SAFARI ANYONE CHAPTER • BASS ANGLER SPORTSMEN SOCIETY

The Honorable Bill Lee
Office of the Governor
Tennessee State Capitol
Nashville, TN

Re: Ensuring Dedicated and Sustainable Funding for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency

Dear Governor Lee:

On behalf of the signatory organizations below, we write to underscore the urgent need for dedicated and sustainable funding for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA).

Since 1949, TWRA has been the workhorse in Tennessee's efforts to conserve our state's fish, wildlife, and outdoor heritage. The Agency's work ensures that Tennesseans have access to world-class hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing opportunities, while also supporting the state's growing outdoor recreation economy. In recent years, increased operational costs have created a financial reality that threatens the Agency's ability to manage Tennessee's fish, wildlife, and their habitats effectively. Yet, compared to many of its peers from other states, TWRA overwhelmingly relies upon license revenue for general operational funding. In creating a new and dedicated source of revenue for TWRA, Tennessee can take a meaningful step in better managing the wildlife and fisheries which we all enjoy. Recognizing that there will always be existing and new challenges for our state to tackle, we must give the agency every tool possible to serve the public and achieve its mission.

TWRA's mission is to manage all of Tennessee's wildlife for the benefit of its citizens. However, hunters and anglers have always needed supplemental resources to provide enough funding to meet the challenges facing our fish and wildlife. Now, in our time, these challenges are arguably greater than ever - whether working to prevent species from becoming listed as federally endangered (an expensive and conflict-ridden option at best) or working to manage invasive species that threaten our native fisheries - the issues faced by TWRA and its supporting network of users have only become more complex.

Investing in Tennessee's wildlife through providing a dedicated source of funding to TWRA is an investment in Tennessee that will show meaningful returns. The economic impact of outdoor recreation, a significant portion of which centers around fish and wildlife, was estimated to be \$12 billion in Tennessee in 2022. The economic contribution of hunting and fishing in Tennessee combined is estimated at \$2.4 billion. With adequate funding, we believe investing in fish and wildlife funding will significantly help rural Tennessee economies and the people who rely upon them. Our organizations believe that this investment will allow TWRA to conduct critical and transformational work, such as:

- Reducing the maintenance backlog on agency-managed lands and boat ramps, which benefits habitat, user experience, and ease of access
- Improving access to rivers primarily used in the wintertime access to rivers for hunting.
- Enhancing assistance to private landowners for fish and wildlife management - for example, deer management assistance.
- Increasing capacity for prescribed fire management on agency-managed lands, and where appropriate, private lands.
- Enhanced wetland management on agency-managed lands.
- Supporting wildlife law enforcement by filling vacant positions, and therefore improve enforcement of wildlife laws.
- Reducing user fees for a multitude of groups who use agency ranges and lands for club and community activities.

To be clear, our organizations do not advocate for a tax increase to achieve necessary funding, but propose some form of a diversion of existing tax dollars as a sustained, dedicated source of funding for TWRA. Many of our surrounding states have taken this approach, such as:

- Missouri - Allocates 1/8th of 1% of the sales tax to their state fish and wildlife agency and has generated more than \$2,000,000,000 since it was enacted.
- Arkansas - The Arkansas Conservation Fund is funded by 1/8th of 1% of sales tax, 45% of which is allocated to the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.
- Georgia - Enacted in 2018, the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act allocates up to 80% of the sales tax dollars collected on outdoor recreation equipment to the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund.
- Texas - In Texas, the Legislature passed a constitutional amendment instituting sustainable dedicated revenue streams generated from diverting a portion of the sales tax generated by sales of sporting goods (including outdoor gear, firearms, etc.) collected at the state level. This was dedicated to fund the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 2019.
- Virginia - In 1998, Virginia's General Assembly passed House Bill 38 to dedicate a portion of the existing state sales tax on hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching equipment to the state's wildlife agency. The law directs that two percent of the proceeds from the state sales and use tax on hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching equipment be paid into the Department of Wildlife Resources' Game Protection Fund.

Through implementing a version of dedicated funding that is appropriate for Tennessee, we believe that not only will TWRA be able to sustainably maintain its vital work for fish and wildlife, but also that Tennesseans will be better served by such a long-term solution. A wildlife agency fully funded through a stable and sustainable funding source would provide the long-term solution needed to stabilize or even lower license fees. Sportsmen, by and large, are willing to pay for the services we rely upon from the agency for the activities we enjoy.

In addition to seeking a dedicated funding mechanism like the options outlined above in the General Assembly, TWRA's biodiversity program should be fully funded as set forth in Tenn. Code Ann. § 70-8-110(a), and these operational costs should not solely be carried by license customers. Again, the goal of biodiversity efforts is to prevent listing of species, which is a benefit to business, industry, and Tennessee's economy.

We respectfully urge your Administration to work with the General Assembly to establish a secure, dedicated source of funding for TWRA. This investment is essential to safeguard our state's natural resources and ensure that future generations of Tennesseans inherit the same outdoor heritage we enjoy today.

Thank you for your leadership and for considering this important step to strengthen Tennessee's conservation future. We look forward to working with you to ensure TWRA has the resources it needs to continue its vital mission.

Respectfully,

Tennessee Wildlife Federation

Safari Club International

Ducks Unlimited

Tall Timbers

Wolf River Conservancy (Shelby County)

Campbell Outdoor Recreation Association
(Campbell County)

Turkeys for Tomorrow

Tennessee Striped Bass Association

Greene County Hunting and Fishing Club

Fayette County Rod and Gun Club

Boone and Crockett Club

Music City Trout Unlimited (Davidson County)

Terry Lewis, Acting President – Pine Mountain
Longbeard Chapter of NWTf (Campbell
County)

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Royal Blue
Chapter (Campbell County)

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Duck River
Chapter (Bedford County)

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Cookeville
Chapter

Highland Sportsmen Club (Hamilton County)

Dallas Safari Club, Safari Anyone Chapter
(Knox County)

Greene County Hunting and Fishing Club

Bass Angler Sportsmen Society

The Nature Conservancy

National Deer Association

Tennessee Field Trial Association

Delta Waterfowl

American Sportfishing Association

Pheasants Forever

Quail Forever

Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Tennessee BASS Nation

Tennessee Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Hatchie River Conservancy

Nashville Sportsman Club