



WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST HELENETTE SILVER CIRCA 1958. FISH AND GAME FILE PHOTO.



© JIM BLOCK PHOTOS

Sustaining
New Hampshire's

Wildlife Legacy

This spring the
State Legislature
considers Fish and
Game's future.

Six wild turkeys strutted past my window the other day, and life stood still for a moment as I watched the hens and their almost-grown poults peck at late-season berries, then startle and scatter toward the safety of the forest. How much we'd be missing if there were no wild turkeys in New Hampshire, as was once the case! What if there were no longer places that a family could fish together, or see a moose, or hunt deer? What if no protections existed to make sure our kids and grandkids could admire the flight of a bald eagle over Great Bay, and no agency were on guard to protect our deer herd from devastating threats like Chronic Wasting Disease?

You don't have to go far to experience wildlife and outdoor adventure in New Hampshire. People here expect to find wildlife in our fields and forests and clean water in our lakes and streams. We're lucky — we can even still see the stars at night. Whatever you think of the "flatlanders," it's clear that those essential tourist dollars that keep the New Hampshire economy humming will only continue if we maintain the scenic beauty and wild places that draw them here.

Today, the future of wildlife and wild places in New Hampshire is at risk. The N.H. Fish and Game Department is in a serious funding situation, and unless a new revenue source is found, the agency will not exist as we know it beyond June of this year. This financial crisis comes at a critical time, when New Hampshire's landscape is rapidly changing. The state is

BY JANE VACHON

losing 18,000 acres of land to development each year, a loss of habitat and open land that puts both wildlife and related recreational opportunities in jeopardy.

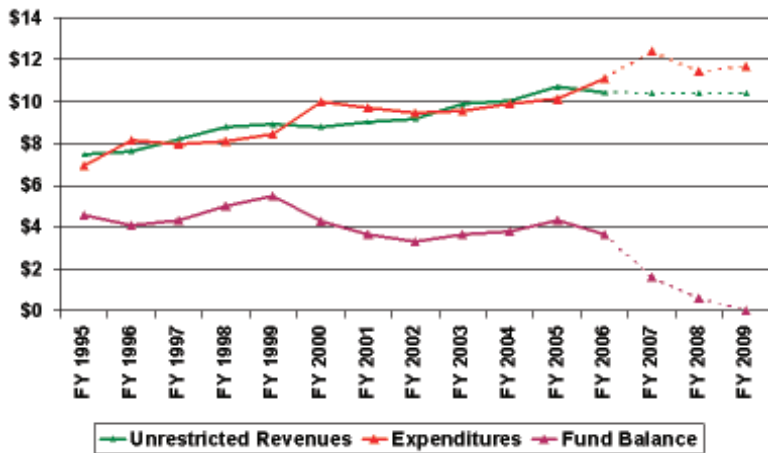
Fish and Game is actively exploring solutions and working with hunters, anglers, conservation groups, legislators and private citizens to emerge on solid financial footing, equipped to carry on its mission of conserving the state's marine, fish and wildlife resources and their habitats. Everyone who is invested in the future of Fish and Game and the state's wildlife and open spaces can help by expressing their support in coming months.

What's Going On?

Simply put, Fish and Game Department faces a financial shortfall because revenue is not keeping pace with the rising cost of doing business. Income from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses is flat. At the same time, costs like employee and retiree benefits, utilities, gas, fish food, etc., are going up. Fish and Game has traditionally been self-funded, except for a small amount of matching funds the state provides for the Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program. In recent years, the Department has been forced to dip into its long-term savings — the Fish and Game Fund; that reserve will soon be gone, leaving no choice but to cut programs and services to make ends meet unless additional revenue sources are found.

continued on next page

History of "Unrestricted" F&G Fund



This chart illustrates the growing gap between the unrestricted Fish and Game fund (the agency's "savings account") and its revenues. Although the agency has kept expenditures in check, the fund balance will soon be at zero.

continued from previous page

Part of the problem is that Fish and Game today is responsible for far more than it was when the New Hampshire Fisheries Commission was reformed as the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department back in 1935. At that time, the new department faced many wildlife challenges. Moose hunting had been banned since 1901, when only a dozen or so moose remained in the state. Deer were scarce; wild turkeys were gone; and fish, too, were on the wane. The newly formed Fish and Game Department focused on the emerging field of science-based fish and wildlife management. It enforced laws, ran hatcheries, conducted fish and

wildlife restoration and educated the public about conservation. Most people hunted and fished in those days, and federal funding emerged to support Fish and Wildlife restoration in the years that followed, so Fish and Game was able to support itself... for a time.

The formula that worked well for many years has now changed on several fronts. Over the past decade, the number of fishing licenses sold in New Hampshire has fallen 10% and hunting license

sales are down 25%. That's happening not just here, but across the country. Nationally, participation in hunting and fishing is declining, along with the critical license dollars that pay for most of the work wildlife agencies do. Across the U.S., fish and wildlife agencies can't sustain themselves under the traditional funding model. Since the 1970s, 31 states have changed the funding structures for their state wildlife agencies, so that they do not have to rely solely on hunting and fishing fees. Some get money from income, sales or other taxes or fees; others, including Vermont and Maine, from annual General Fund appropriations.

Meeting New Mandates

Traditional sources of revenue now must be stretched, because N.H. Fish and Game's responsibilities have broadened to meet modern needs, including habitat protection, OHRV registration and enforcement, protecting threatened species, providing access to public waters, controlling wildlife damage, dealing with nuisance wildlife and monitoring for diseases like avian flu. Fish and wildlife conservation in today's world calls for skilled professionals working in fish and wildlife management, mapping, information technology, communications, law enforcement, engineering, conservation education and business.

"We're not just a Fish and Game Department any more, but an agency responsible for an array of duties. New Hampshire is growing twice as fast as the rest of New England and, facing this phenomenal growth, we've identified many key policy issues affecting fish and wildlife," said Lee Perry, Executive Director of the Department. "We need funding to be able to put those policies into action while we still have time."

The state's new Wildlife Action Plan, for example, identifies species that are in danger of disappearing from the New Hampshire landscape. "Time is running out for New England cottontails, which now exist only in pockets of the state because 75% of their habitat is gone," said John Kanter, who coordinates Fish and Game's Non-game and Endangered Wildlife Program. "Blanding's turtles are dependent on our wetlands and take a full 15 years to reach maturity. Only careful transportation and development planning can balance their habitat needs with our own."

Sharing the Load

From its simple beginnings, Fish and Game has evolved into a modern wildlife agency responsible for conserving all of the state's fish, wildlife and marine resources—a complex organization with an ever-expanding set of duties and mandates that benefits *all* New Hampshire's citizens. Fish and Game's work protects open space, scenic beauty and wildlife resources that we all enjoy. It also

What You Can Do

At press time, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Commission had approved several potential legislative strategies for raising new funds for Fish and Game, including a conservation decal for non-motorized boats; a saltwater fishing license; and dedicating part of the state rooms and meals tax to Fish and Game. As the Legislative session gets underway in January, these or other proposals may be in the works to provide stable funding for Fish and Game.

Here's how you can help:

- **Stay informed.** Specifics of current proposals will be posted at www.wildlife.state.nh.us.
- **Write or call your legislators** to ask them to support the Fish and Game budget and legislative proposals to fund the Department so it can meet the fish and wildlife challenges of the future. Tell them how important it is for all New Hampshire's citizens and our quality of life.
- **Attend legislative hearings** and speak out for Fish and Game. "We need more representation," said Rep. Robert L'Heureux, who has served on the Fish and Game Committee for 16 years. "It makes a big difference if people come out and show their support."

brings economic benefits. Hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers bring \$579 million into the state's economy, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Wildlife-related recreation expenditures in New Hampshire support 12,791 jobs, plus more than \$280 million in salaries and wages, \$42 million in state and federal tax revenues annually, and account for 7.4% of the total N.H. rooms and meals tax.

Even though the Department works for 100% of the state's citizens, hunters and anglers in New Hampshire — about 20% of the state's population — have footed the bill for Fish and Game over the years through license fees and a Federal excise tax on sporting goods. They are happy to do their part, but agree that it's time to share the load.

"We are certainly all a lot better off having our fish and wildlife managed professionally," said Joe Norton, Executive Director of the N.H. Wildlife Federation, which represents 50 Fish and Game clubs with about 7,000 members around the state. "Hopefully, we can get to the bottom of the budget problem and keep moving forward."

Fish and Game expands the impact of its efforts by working in partnership with many different groups on conservation projects. From joint wildlife research with the University of New Hampshire to successful collaborations with N.H. Audubon — restoring osprey populations to the state and nurturing a colony of threatened terns on the Isles of Shoals, among others — to a survey of Eastern brook trout done in partnership with Trout Unlimited, Fish and Game's positive impact on conservation efforts in the state is significant.

At the Crossroads

What does Fish and Game need? The Department must find a new supplemental source of revenue, an estimated \$6 million annually, to catch up on lapsed responsibilities and keep staff and programs strong into the future. As an immediate stopgap measure, Director Perry has asked Governor Lynch to put \$1.6 million per year, or \$1.23 per N.H. resident, of General Fund revenue into the Fish and Game budget for the next two years, FY 2008 and 2009. (FY 08 begins July 1, 2007. Fish and Game's total annual budget is about \$27 million.) Without these funds as a temporary fix, Fish and Game will have to lay off as many as 28 full-time workers (more than one-fourth of its staff) and eliminate 36 part-time positions, as well as closing facilities. Such deep cuts would gravely affect the Department's ability to deliver the services it currently provides.

The time has passed when Fish and Game can function as a self-supporting agency. Currently, the Department receives just \$50,000 from the N.H. General Fund (matching funds for nongame wildlife and habitat conservation), or about 3.8

cents per resident. In contrast, the vast majority of New Hampshire's state agencies are supported almost entirely by the state's General Fund.


Past budget crunches at Fish and Game have been resolved by raising license fees or laying off personnel. That's not possible today, since New Hampshire hunting and fishing licenses are already the most expensive in New England, and a 2004 survey showed that for the first time, license price was a top barrier to participation. If Fish and Game raises license fees, the resulting decrease in hunters and anglers would result in a net loss of revenue.

Belt-tightening measures won't solve the problem either. "Further cuts aren't an option," says Perry. "We're already operating on a bare-bones budget. We've eliminated 14 positions, dug deep for efficiencies and put off equipment purchases."



© JIM BLOCK PHOTO

What's at stake? The future of the wildlife and open space that add to New Hampshire's quality of life is on the line, as are the jobs and economic benefits created as people enjoy wildlife resources. If the state can't fulfill its Wildlife Action Plan, the fate of entire species will be at risk, and hundreds of thousands of federal matching dollars forfeited. Stable funding is essential to maintain the array of services Fish and Game provides — fish and wildlife management, Search and Rescue, habitat conservation and much more.

"One hundred years from now, people will look back and see this as a defining moment for New Hampshire's fish and wildlife," said Perry. "Everyone benefits from Fish and Game's work. It's time to change the Department's funding structure so that we all contribute to its continued success." 

By the Numbers

- **\$579 million** — Amount people spend in one year to hunt, fish or watch wildlife in N.H.
- **3.8** — Cents per resident in General Funds New Hampshire provides to Fish and Game.
- **\$18** — Dollars per resident spent by Fish and Game for wildlife and habitat conservation and recreation.
- **31** — States that provide funds for their fish and wildlife agencies.
- **\$1.6 million** — Stopgap General Funds needed each year in FY 08 and 09.
- **\$1.23** — Amount per N.H. resident that the stopgap funds would cost.
- **\$6 million** — Amount needed per year to keep Fish and Game stable into the future.


"One hundred years from now, people will look back and see this as a defining moment for New Hampshire's fish and wildlife."
— Lee Perry

Jane Vachon is Associate Editor of Wildlife Journal. Jon Charpentier and Jason Philippy of Fish and Game Public Affairs contributed to this article.

New Hampshire Wildlife Journal is your best source for fishing, hunting, wildlife and conservation information in the state.

DID YOU ENJOY READING THIS ARTICLE?

Every issue of N.H. Wildlife Journal includes stunning wildlife photography, in-depth features and "how-to" articles – plus Naturalist's Notebook, Warden's Watch and no advertising.



So what are you
waiting for?
Subscribe today!

www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html