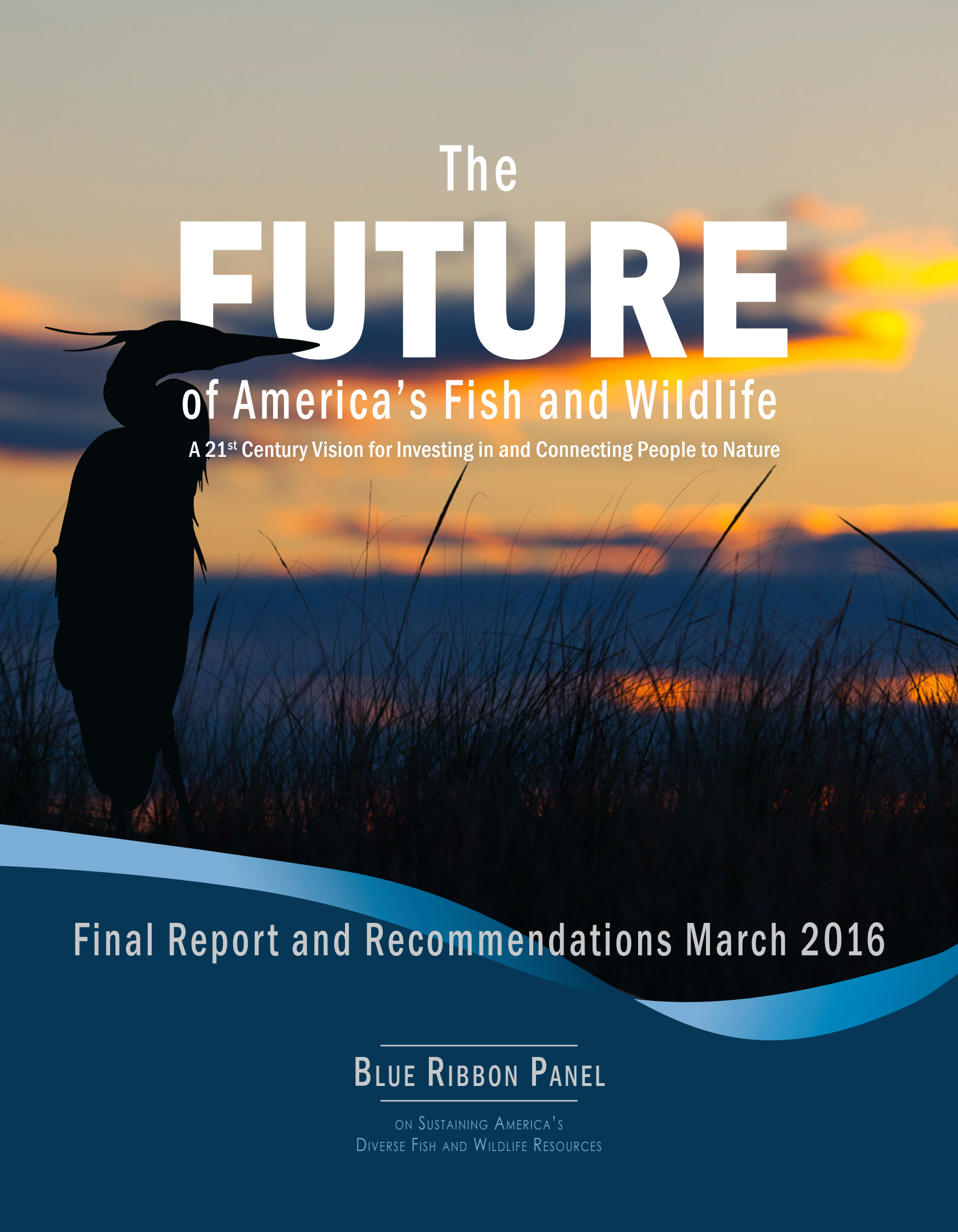


A silhouette of a bird, possibly a heron or egret, stands in a field of tall grass. The background is a vibrant sunset or sunrise sky with orange and yellow clouds. The bird is positioned on the left side of the frame, facing right.

The **FUTURE** of America's Fish and Wildlife

A 21st Century Vision for Investing in and Connecting People to Nature

Final Report and Recommendations March 2016

BLUE RIBBON PANEL

ON SUSTAINING AMERICA'S
DIVERSE FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCES

THE FUTURE OF AMERICA'S FISH AND WILDLIFE

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FOREWORD

Fish and wildlife have been central to our work and our lives. Whether it's providing gear for the outdoor enthusiast, governing a state with a rich outdoor heritage or simply spending quality time in the outdoors, we can't imagine a world without fish and wildlife.

Our generation has been blessed with abundant elk, wild turkeys and a diversity of sport fish—but this has not always been the case. A century ago, most game species were imperiled and our nation was facing a fish and wildlife crisis. Fortunately hunters, anglers and the shooting sports and fishing industries rose to the occasion and secured funding so the states could do the important work of restoring and managing fish and wildlife. This remarkable partnership led to one of the greatest conservation success stories the world has known.

Yet what is hidden from most Americans is another impending fish and wildlife crisis. For every game species that is thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline. Unlike the conservation finance system that was created for game and sport fish, there is no comparable funding mechanism to manage the majority of fish and wildlife under state stewardship. As a result, thousands of species of birds, frogs, turtles and even the iconic monarch butterfly are slipping through the cracks and could become endangered in the future.

Equally alarming to us is the growing disconnection between people and nature. Today, children and adults spend far less time in nature which is affecting their physical and mental health and untying a bond with the outdoors that helps ensure there is a next generation of conservationists. If this trend continues, fewer Americans will understand the importance of or need for fish and wildlife conservation.

David Freudenthal

Former Governor,
State of Wyoming

John Morris

Founder of
Bass Pro Shops



We asked a distinguished group of business and conservation leaders to help solve a problem plaguing the conservation community for decades. In this report, the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources recommends a new funding approach that will help ensure all fish and wildlife are conserved for future generations.

A lot is at stake if we don't act soon. Every American benefits when we have healthy and accessible fish and wildlife. We need to start down a new path where we invest proactively in conservation rather than reactively. Doing so will help us avoid contentious endangered species battles that inhibit business, slow the economy and pass on the high cost of species recovery to the next generation. We invite you to join us in our quest to advance a 21st century vision for fish and wildlife conservation.



WE BELIEVE IN SUSTAINING FISH AND WILDLIFE

Our nation's fish and wildlife are one of its most valuable assets. Our quality of life, outdoor heritage and prosperity are tied to the health and sustainability of these treasures. Yet, we are facing an impending fish and wildlife crisis that could alter future Americans' opportunity to benefit from these resources.

For decades, thousands of species of native birds, mammals, fish, frogs, turtles and insects have been slipping through the cracks because we lack a financial safety net to ensure their long-term survival. Threats such as habitat loss, invasive species, extreme weather and disease are taking an increasing toll. Today, over 12,000 species of fish and wildlife have been designated as species in greatest conservation need.

Compounding this problem are societal changes that are altering the connection between people and nature. Over 80 percent of Americans now live in urban environments and we spend an average of 11 hours a day on electronics. These changes and others are affecting the quantity and quality of time spent in contact with nature. This growing separation and aversion to the natural world is affecting our citizens' health and their understanding and appreciation of the natural environment.

Healthy habitats benefit more than just fish and wildlife. An environment managed sustainably for fish and wildlife helps safeguard the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the scenery we view and the \$646 billion outdoor recreation economy. As our nation's population increases, so does the stress we put on our shared natural resources. When a species is pushed to the brink and becomes endangered, taxpayers are burdened with the cost of recovery, businesses face greater regulatory uncertainty and society risks losing a piece of the natural environment that we will never get back.

The states are entrusted with ensuring the health of our nation's fish and wildlife. Today, most are not able to meet this immense and important challenge because our conservation funding system is outdated and insufficient to conserve the majority of species under their care. Inadequate funding also limits efforts to inform and engage people to instill appreciation in fish and wildlife. If we don't modernize our system of conservation funding soon, thousands of additional species will become endangered and there may be far too few citizens in the future who will notice or care.

In the 1930s, the nation was mired in the Great Depression and the bounty of wildlife that greeted the first European settlers was rapidly dwindling. The need for restoration was urgent, but funding was scarce. Hunters and the shooting sports industry united with state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation groups, gardeners, women's clubs, birders and others to rally Congress to dedicate funding from an excise tax on guns and ammunition to restore game populations. In later years, the sport fishing and boating industries followed suit by establishing a similar tax on fishing gear and motorboat fuels to fund the restoration of our nation's sport fish. This historic collaboration is unparalleled and is the reason why we have thriving populations of white-tailed deer, wild turkey, largemouth bass and other game and sport fish species today.

This remarkable success story demonstrates that in times of need, private citizens, government and business can work together to find an innovative solution to solve a significant conservation challenge. A similar collaboration is needed today to address the crisis facing thousands of species that are not hunted and fished and to help reconnect people with nature. We believe a 21st century conservation funding system is needed now to safeguard our nation's fish and wildlife.

About the Blue Ribbon Panel

In September 2014, John Morris, Founder of Bass Pro Shops and David Freudenthal, former governor of Wyoming asked business and conservation leaders to join them on the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources. The Panel was charged with examining the current system of conservation funding and recommending a new mechanism that will conserve all fish and wildlife. After three meetings and consideration of nearly two dozen potential

funding options, the Panel agreed on two recommendations that will help set a new course for fish and wildlife conservation in this country.

Benefits of Connecting People (Especially Kids) with Nature

When we spend time in nature, we accrue physical and mental health benefits. Even a short amount of time in nature each day can improve concentration, reduce stress, lower blood pressure and improve mental health, all of which can help prevent disease. Some of the greatest health benefits are seen in children who are better able to complete tasks, follow directions, think critically and have improved physical fitness when they spend time outdoors.



If we've learned any lessons during the past few decades, perhaps the most important is that preservation of our environment is not a partisan challenge; it's common sense. Our physical health, our social happiness, and our economic well-being will be sustained only by all of us working in partnership as thoughtful, effective stewards of our natural resources.

- President Ronald Reagan

Benefits of Enhanced Ecosystem Services

Our natural environment provides benefits that help make life possible. These benefits include clean air and water, food, fiber, medicine, storm protection, soil retention, carbon storage, pollination, recreation and other attributes. These benefits often do not carry price tags, are not traded on the stock exchange and are hard to quantify. Yet, our use of and need for these life-supporting services is imperative. Worldwide, these ecosystem services are valued minimally at \$18 trillion per year.

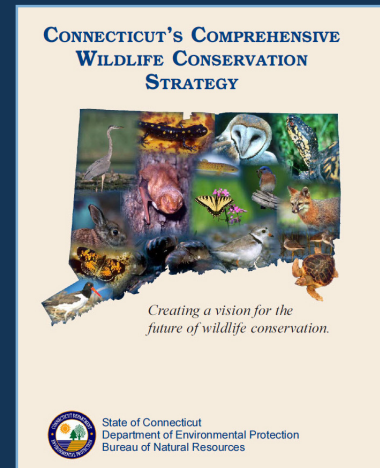
WE BELIEVE

THERE IS A FISH AND WILDLIFE CRISIS

The recovery of the nation's game and sport fish is one of our greatest conservation success stories. This achievement was possible because hunters, archers, recreational shooters, anglers, boaters and their industries banded together to support a tax on their products to finance fish and wildlife conservation. Today, this funding provides over a billion dollars to the states to monitor fish and wildlife, conduct research, protect and manage habitat and deliver quality access for hunting and fishing. This funding along with hunting and fishing license fees, serves as the primary source of revenue for most state fish and wildlife agencies.

There is no similar source of dedicated funding for thousands of species that are not hunted or fished. As a result, an increasing number of species are becoming rare and imperiled. In the coming years, thousands of species could be added to the list of federal threatened and endangered species. Nearly 1,600 species of animals and plants are already listed and the states have identified over 12,000 species in their State Wildlife Action Plans that are in greatest conservation need. The 20th century model of funding was never designed to meet the 21st century demands of fish and wildlife conservation.

Decades of inadequate funding have prevented the states from implementing the proven, cost effective strategies needed to keep fish and wildlife healthy. It costs taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars each year to restore threatened and endangered species, outlays that might be avoided or greatly reduced if proactive conservation measures were implemented first. The cost of complying with endangered species regulations and lost revenue from project delays also impacts business. A new vision for fish and wildlife funding is needed that will allow a greater number citizens to be investors in fish and wildlife conservation.



State Wildlife Action Plans - Blue Prints for Conserving Fish and Wildlife

Each State, territory and the District of Columbia have created comprehensive State Wildlife Action Plans. These science-based plans, developed in collaboration with conservation partners, lay out the key threats to fish and wildlife and the actions needed to conserve over 12,000 species in greatest conservation need and their habitats. Development of the plans in 2005 was a historic accomplishment but implementation has been curtailed because of a lack of funding.

WE BELIEVE A SOLUTION IS IN SIGHT

RECOMMENDATION 1

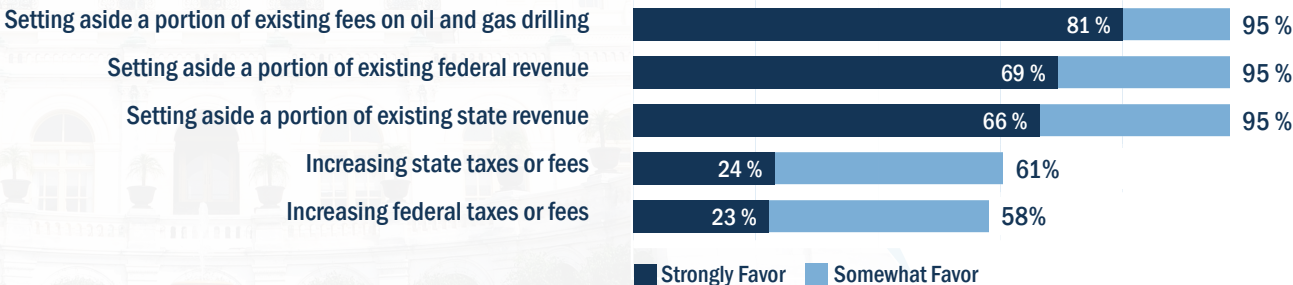
Congress dedicate up to \$1.3 billion annually in existing revenue from the development of energy and mineral resources on federal lands and waters to the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program (16 U.S.C. 669b(a)).

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources recommends that Congress dedicate up to \$1.3 billion annually in existing revenue from the development of energy and mineral resources on federal lands and waters to the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program. These funds would provide states with the resources needed to implement State Wildlife Action Plans which are designed to conserve 12,000 species in greatest conservation need. Effective implementation of these plans would require an estimated \$1.3 billion in new funding. Without funding, the states will be unable to implement voluntary, non-regulatory measures that have been proven to prevent threatened and endangered species listings.

In 2013, businesses that extracted energy and mineral resources on federal lands and waters paid \$12.3 billion in royalties, fees, and bonus bids to conduct their work. These companies provide vital services to the country by supplying the raw materials needed to fuel our economy and meet consumer demand. The oil, gas and minerals found on federal lands and waters are held in trust and belong to every American. Investing a portion of these proceeds into fish and wildlife conservation is supported by the public and will help ensure that current and future generations share in this wealth.

When advocates are given a range of options to fund State Wildlife Action Plans, they are much more supportive of using existing revenues than tax or fee increases.

Source Public Opinion Strategies - 2006



This mechanism will not require businesses or taxpayers to pay more, but instead allow all Americans to become investors in fish and wildlife conservation.

The funds should be dedicated to the existing, but unfunded, Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program, without displacing or diminishing funding directed to the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program was created by Congress in 2000 to “*extend financial and technical assistance to the States under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act for the benefit of a diverse array of wildlife and associated habitats, including species that are not hunted or fished, to fulfill unmet needs of wildlife within the States in recognition of the primary role of the States to conserve all wildlife*”. The program allocates funds using a formula, requires nonfederal match and provides states with the flexibility to also implement programs that help people learn about and access fish and wildlife for wildlife viewing, photography and other passive forms of recreation.

In order to build support for increased funding, the role of the states in conserving fish and wildlife needs to be conveyed to the public. The states led the way a century ago when most of the nation’s game species were

imperiled and they can keep species from becoming endangered when they have sufficient resources. This story of state-based fish and wildlife conservation is not understood by most Americans. A communication and marketing strategy should be launched to inform the public of the states’ role as guardian of our nation’s fish and wildlife.

Additionally, strong and diverse grassroots support will be needed to make the case for new funding. The national Teaming With Wildlife coalition was organized two decades ago to support dedicated and sustained funding for fish and wildlife conservation. The coalition includes over 6,400 organizations representing millions of birders, hikers, hunters, anglers, natural resource professionals and others, making it one of the largest and most diverse coalitions ever assembled for a conservation cause. The coalition should be activated and expanded to support the recommendations of this Panel.

Benefits of the outdoors to the economy

Healthy fish and wildlife is good business and contributes to a strong economy. The nation’s 90 million hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers spend \$145 billion annually and generate tens of billions of dollars in federal, state and local taxes. Overall, consumers spend \$646 billion on outdoor recreation and provide 6.1 million direct jobs each year.



RECOMMENDATION 2

The Blue Ribbon Panel will examine the impact of societal changes on the relevancy of fish and wildlife conservation and make recommendations on how programs and agencies can transform to engage and serve broader constituencies.

The Blue Ribbon Panel will convene a working group to examine how shifting demographics and changing attitudes about nature are affecting the relevancy of fish and wildlife conservation. As the nation becomes more urban, ethnically and culturally diverse and disconnected from nature, the public's perceptions and values associated with fish and wildlife are changing. Although core constituencies like hunters and anglers will continue to be key allies, there is a need to broaden stakeholder representation to ensure fish and wildlife conservation remains relevant and supported by people from all walks of life.

Every citizen has a stake in and benefits from healthy fish and wildlife, but most have little contact with or understanding of the state agency responsible for their stewardship. To remain relevant, state fish and wildlife agencies will need to transform their structures, operations and cultures to meet the changing expectations of their customers. If state fish and wildlife agencies fail to adapt, their ability to manage fish and wildlife will be hindered and their public and political support compromised.

The working group will solicit input from a team of interdisciplinary experts to better understand the challenges facing fish and wildlife agencies and make recommendations on how to help them transition and transform so they can more effectively serve the needs of all citizens and all fish and wildlife.



SUCCESS STORY - BALD EAGLE

A half century ago, our nation's symbol was severely imperiled. The continental population of bald eagles declined from over one hundred thousand nesting eagles to less than 600 pairs. Following nearly four decades of intensive conservation and management, the bald eagle has recovered with nesting pairs now exceeding 10,000.

SUCCESS STORY - ARCTIC GRAYLING

In 1994, Montana's arctic grayling was designated a candidate for federal endangered species listing. State and federal agencies and private partners worked together to complete 450 habitat projects impacting 165,000 acres which helped double the arctic grayling population. In 2014 the US Fish and Wildlife Service determined that these efforts precluded the need to federally list the species, providing regulatory certainty for ranchers.

SUCCESS STORY - NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL

The New England cottontail, the inspiration for Peter Cottontail, was almost lost due to habitat degradation and competition from the eastern cottontail. In 2006, this species was designated as a candidate for federal Endangered Species Act protection. State and federal agencies, private organizations and private citizens worked together to start a captive breeding program and restore young forest habitats in New England. In 2015, the US Fish and Wildlife Service removed the species from the candidate list.

WE BELIEVE

EVERYONE BENEFITS FROM HEALTHY FISH AND WILDLIFE

A fundamental shift in how we finance fish and wildlife conservation is needed. We invest far too little in conservation until a species is in trouble and "emergency room" care is required. This flawed approach drives up costs, puts fish and wildlife at great risk and creates an environment of regulatory uncertainty for business.

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources has a solution. Dedicating a portion of federal royalties and fees from mineral and energy development in proactive fish and wildlife conservation would stem the flow of endangered species listings and make every American an investor in this important work. New funding would also provide resources to states to help reconnect people with nature and improve access to the outdoors to improve health and cultivate the next generation of conservationists.

The fish and wildlife resources that are part of our rich natural heritage are here because of the vision, passion and commitment of the conservationists who preceded us. Our generation will be judged by the state in which we leave these resources to the next. We must pick one of two paths. Do we proactively invest in conservation to ensure fish and wildlife are sustained or saddle the next generation with the high cost of recovering the species whose care we neglected. We believe that the right path is to begin investing NOW in a 21st century vision for fish and wildlife.

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TO LEARN MORE

About the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources contact:



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