

House Game & Fisheries Committee Hearing

Charleroi, PA

February 20, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Gillespie, Chairman Kortz, and members of the House Game & Fisheries Committee. My name is Dennis Fredericks, and I am the Commissioner for District 2 which encompasses Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Washington, and Westmoreland Counties. On behalf of the entire Board of Commissioners and the agency, I want to thank you for the opportunity to come before you to talk about last year's decision to move the opening day of rifle season to Saturday.

It is important to remember that the PA Game Commission exists to protect 480 species of wild birds and wild mammals and their habitats for current and future generations. The last part is especially important, and one aspect that I believe gets overlooked quite often. As your state wildlife conservation agency, we are tasked with managing for the present, AND, the future. Additionally, it is important to note that by law, we are required to manage all of those species for everyone, hunters and non-hunters alike.

As you know, the Pennsylvania Game Commission receives no General Fund tax dollars. We rely on three major sources of funding: natural resource management – oil, gas, coal, timber; the Pittman Robertson federal excise tax revenue; and hunting and trapping license sales. The Pittman-Robertson funds are intricately tied to license sales. Essentially, the more licenses we sell, the more federal funds we are able to draw down and put towards any number of initiatives that benefit wildlife here in Pennsylvania.

The license year begins July 1st and run through June 30th. While I cannot tell you what the final license sales numbers will be on June 30th, I can tell you what they look like through January 31st. Our year-to-date sales of licenses have increased over last year. This is significant. As of January 31st, general license sales have increased by 3,618 over last year to date.

On the surface, 3,618 additional hunters may not seem significant, but we can look at some other states for comparison. Through December 31st, New York was down 2%, Michigan was down 3%, and Ohio was down 8%. So not only did we see an increase, we did so at a time when other big hunting states are losing license buyers.

Nationally, hunting license sales have been on a decline for decades. In Pennsylvania, hunting license sales peaked in the very early 1980s and have generally been declining since; there have been a few small increases along the way, but for the most part, they are declining. Countless surveys and research projects have been done, not only in Pennsylvania but nationally, to determine the cause of

this decline. Through all this work, overwhelmingly, the number one reason that people do not purchase a license is lack of time. The logical remedy for this would be to create additional opportunities for hunters and trappers.

However, it is important to balance needs of the resource with hunting opportunities. With that in mind, finding additional opportunities for hunters to take afield is difficult, and limited. We have to be strategic about those additional opportunities. Just randomly throwing extra days on the end of the season, or adding some obscure extra season are not likely to work.

We have to take advantage of what we know regarding hunter tendencies, buying behaviors, and make the best decision we can with that information. For example, we know that the average age of a deer hunter in Pennsylvania is 54 years old. That's troubling. In just a few years, those hunters are going to age out of the yearly license buyer and into the lifetime license class. We have to find a way to get and keep the younger generation involved.

We know that we lose a considerable number of license buyers from the age of 18-30. It makes sense. Kids hunt with parents consistently through the time they graduate from high school. At that point, they are off to college, trade schools, military, workforce, you name it. They are starting their lives as adults, first jobs, starting families, buying houses. Their time is exceptionally limited.

They are dealing with being lowest on the seniority list for time off, if they even have vacation days to take. They are dealing with getting back to school for classes and finals. They don't want to have to make that difficult decision, but in a lot of cases, it's made for them. Randomly throwing another week of rifle deer season isn't going to help them.

We know that we are losing hunters to other states, and it's not because they have better hunting. Make no mistake, Pennsylvania has world class hunting, whether you are pursuing deer, bear, turkey, elk, or a myriad of other obsessions. We know we are losing them because of opportunities to hunt based on time available. We have heard from PA residents that are going to New York and Ohio because they are able to hunt the whole weekend. Likewise, we hear from hunters in other states that would love to come hunt in Pennsylvania if they were able to hunt the entire weekend.

We also know that we have a very limited number of huntable days that will help fill this void.

We have heard the point made regarding the survey that was done a couple of years ago which showed that hunters *preferred* the opening day to be on Monday. The issue with the survey was in the questioning. It was like asking whether you preferred steak or lobster. I may prefer lobster, but I also like steak.

I can tell you that the response that we have seen in regard to the Saturday opener has been overwhelmingly positive. We have heard countless stories of how college students were able to hunt

with their families for the first time in years, reliving those traditions of years past. How former Pennsylvania residents were able to come back and hunt in the same area they did years ago. We have heard about the parents with young families that had the opportunity to not only hunt with their children but have precious additional time with them.

Yes, we have heard of some traditions being impacted. But we have also heard the incredible stories of the new traditions that have begun.

I'm sure that at some point you have heard someone say that the Game Commission just wants to get rid of hunters all together. Or the other conspiracy theory you may hear is that we just want to eradicate deer. I'm telling you that cannot be further from the truth. The Pennsylvania Game Commission is filled with passionate, lifelong hunters, who continue to work in the best interests of all citizens of this great Commonwealth.

The truth of the matter is that the future of conservation in Pennsylvania relies on hunters and trappers continuing to participate. We have to be open to ideas that will buck the trend of declining license sales. Time will tell if this was the right move, but in a vacuum, it appears that moving to a Saturday opener has moved the needle in a positive direction with respect to hunter participation, and that is a godsend for conservation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to come here today. I would be happy to take any questions you may have.