

Good morning Chairwoman Kulik, Chairman Maloney, and members of the House Game and Fisheries Committee.

It is my pleasure to appear before you today representing the Pennsylvania Game Commission, your state wildlife agency.

I am proud of the work done over the past year by our employees, volunteers, and board members. Collectively, we represent a team of individuals dedicated to fulfilling the agency's mission of managing and protecting wildlife and their habitats while promoting hunting and trapping for current and future generations.

The Game Commission is responsible for managing 480 species that can be found across the state – 414 species of wild birds and 66 species of wild mammals.

An essential component of managing these species is performing research to monitor population levels, conduct disease surveillance, and obtain the most up-to-date information on Pennsylvania's wildlife. This research then guides management decisions that are necessary to produce healthy wildlife populations.

As everyone on this Committee is well aware, the deer hunting traditions within our state are unmatched. Deer season in Pennsylvania is one of the most highly participated forms of outdoor recreation anywhere in the country. And monitoring the harvests from those seasons is a critical part of our deer management program. Last year, more than 75 trained employees visited over 400 deer processors, collecting data on more than 20,000 harvested deer. This research plays a key role in the management recommendations for this year's deer seasons.

In addition, last year represented the tenth year of a long-term research project, done in cooperation with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and Penn State University, studying the impact of deer and forest habitat. The slow growth of vegetation necessitates a long study period for a project such as this. But the questions it seeks to answer are of monumental importance for the future of Penn's Woods, as we continue to learn of the impact and the role that deer play in forest regeneration.

Last year marked the first year of a four-year research project on wild turkey populations. This is a cooperative effort with researchers from Penn State University and the Wildlife Futures Program at the University of Pennsylvania,

which will study hen turkey movement, survival, nesting, and disease prevalence. Last year, field crews in four Wildlife Management Units (2D, 3D, 4D and 5C) trapped 106 female turkeys (73 adult, 33 juveniles) during the winter of 2022 and attached transmitters on each. The transmitters record each hen's GPS location and activity multiple times per day. This new technology is allowing the agency to monitor not only the specific habitat a hen is using, but also what she is doing through the day. Each year of the study, an additional 100 transmitters will be deployed, making it the largest study of the wild turkey ever conducted in our state. In 2023, the state wildlife agencies of New Jersey, Maryland, and Ohio, will be joining this project as well, to provide a regional perspective.

Last year also marked the beginning of a new research project on our state bird, the ruffed grouse. We have started a research project to study grouse genetic diversity across the state. This project will be done using wings that were sent to us by hunters within the past decade, as well as recent tissue samples from different regions. Working with Penn State University, we'll analyze the results to determine if there are genetically distinct populations of grouse. This will help determine where grouse may be at the greatest risk of disappearing due to low genetic diversity or lack of connectivity to other grouse populations. We will then be able to identify where habitat creation and improvement is needed

the most to increase connectivity and genetic diversity to promote long-term population growth.

We have also joined a research project with 22 other states to study the recent population decline of eastern mallards. This project aims to learn more about habitat use, breeding success, and how behavior throughout the year can affect survival and breeding success. In the winter of 2021, 49 transmitters were deployed. In the first breeding season following deployment, Pennsylvania-captured mallards remained in the state or moved to New York, Ontario, Quebec, or Vermont.

The Game Commission has also been at the forefront of the fight to preserve bat populations following the unprecedented mortality caused by the presence of white nose syndrome in bats. The Game Commission developed a first-of-its-kind test to detect the presence of white nose syndrome. It's now being used across the world for disease surveillance. We have also discovered the role that temperature reduction within hibernation sites can play in stopping the spread of the disease, and in the summer of 2022, modified a fifth bat hibernation site to better draw in cold air while venting heat out of the site. This site engineering reduces internal temperatures below white nose syndrome's

preferred growth zone, thereby decreasing disease progression and increasing bat survival.

These are just some of the research projects the agency has been involved with during the past year. Others include two projects studying bear populations, a study into the population decline of snowshoe hares, and a study of nesting sites and survival rates for northern goshawks, which included the first known inoculation of free-ranging goshawk with a vaccine for the West Nile Virus.

We have also made it easier for the public to play a role in helping us monitor wildlife populations. Launched in June, the Wildlife Health Survey webpage enables the public to report observations of wildlife health issues in the state. We encourage the public to report any wild birds or mammals that appear abnormal, injured, sick, or are found dead. This tool has proved invaluable during the multiple wildlife health issues that emerged in the past year, including highly pathogenic avian influenza and rabbit hemorrhagic disease.

Managing for healthy wildlife populations also requires providing habitat that our wildlife needs to survive. And last year we continued our efforts of managing habitat on the almost 1.6 million acres within the state game lands system.

More than 30,000 acres of forested habitat were improved for wildlife last year through the agency's forestry program. This includes nearly 9,300 acres of timber harvested through timber sales, more than 15,000 acres of nontimber sale forest habitat improvements, and approximately 7,000 acres treated with selective herbicides to promote native vegetation valuable to wildlife. Our crews conducted prescribed fires in 359 units for a total of 11,852 acres treated.

And in the spring of 2022, we set aside over one million dollars to invest in protecting game lands in our northwest, northcentral, northeast, and southcentral regions from defoliation due to damage from spongy moths. Approximately 63,000 acres were treated using airplanes during a 16-day span in late May. This investment did immeasurable good, as last year's spongy moth outbreak was substantial, and caused severe damage in some areas left untreated.

We were also able to expand the size of the game lands system by almost 1,400 acres. This was done through 12 land purchase contracts and donations, including three indentures, and four donations of land.

In addition to managing wildlife populations and providing habitat for them to survive, the third vital role that the Game Commission plays is enforcing the

laws and regulations concerning wildlife. And, as always, we are proud of the efforts of our state game wardens – some of the most professional, highly trained conservation officers in the nation. During fiscal year 2021-22, game wardens issued 4,717 warnings and initiated 5,770 prosecutions in the Pennsylvania court system. The agency was successful in 97.2% of those prosecutions, demonstrating the judgment used by wardens when bringing charges.

I am happy to report that in February of 2022, 24 new game wardens were assigned to districts across the Commonwealth, following 45 weeks of intensive training at the Ross Leffler School of Conservation. And then this past February, another 18 new wardens also graduated and were assigned to districts, as well. This constituted the third consecutive year in which a class graduated and brought our compliment of full-time wardens to 204. Continuing with these efforts, we will be welcoming a new class in March of this year as we continue to provide a much-needed law enforcement presence across the state.

One thing that we try to never lose sight of at the Game Commission is that, while the central component of our mission is managing wildlife and their habitats, we also have an obligation to serve the citizens of our state – both those who buy a hunting or trapping license, and those who enjoy and appreciate nature.

The recognition of that part of our mission led to some important projects this past year, such as the construction of two new wildlife viewing platforms on popular game lands – State Game Lands 180 in Pike County and State Game Lands 290, on Haldeman island in Dauphin County – to provide more opportunities for members of the public to view wildlife at these unique locations.

We also added new shooting ranges for hunters and recreational shooters, including a rifle range on State Game Lands 44 in Elk County, and archery ranges on State Game Lands 46 in Lancaster County and State Game Lands 205 in Lehigh County. In addition, shotgun patterning ranges were built at State Game Lands 205, as well as State Game Lands 109 in Erie County. Due to their popularity, we have plans to continue the expansion of the number of shooting ranges on game lands for this year, and archery ranges are currently under construction at State Game Lands 203 in Allegheny County and State Game Lands 230 in Cumberland and Perry counties.

More than 40 miles of Game Commission access roads on 17 state game lands were created or maintained this past year, allowing for increased access into those game lands by the public.

The agency offered four wildlife livestream cameras this past year. Almost one million viewers tuned in to the popular cameras for an unfiltered look at



wildlife in their natural settings. They watched as two pairs of bald eagles constructed nests and tended eggs that hatched, with chicks growing into eaglets. They watched hundreds of thousands of snow geese and other waterfowl at our Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area. And they watched the antics of woodchucks, turkeys, deer, and elk on game lands in the heart of Pennsylvania's elk country during the elk rut in autumn. I should also add that we currently are offering a livestream of a female black bear that hibernated under a deck of a home in Pike County, and thousands of people a day tune in to watch the bear and the antics of her two cubs as they grow and get ready to emerge.

To make it more efficient for members of the public to contact the Game Commission, we created a Centralized Dispatch Operations Division at our Harrisburg headquarters. Dispatchers at the center are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to provide great operational coverage and support to game wardens and field staff across the state, while providing great customer service to Pennsylvania hunters, trappers, and wildlife enthusiasts. To date, centralized dispatchers have received and processed more than 159,000 calls from the public about everything from sick or injured wildlife, to game law violations, and general wildlife and agency inquiries. Along with centralizing the location of the dispatch center came many important equipment upgrades, including transitioning to the

use of the P-25 radio system. Due to new technology available to law enforcement, including updated mapping software, in-vehicle Internet capabilities and computer-aided dispatch, centralized dispatchers can monitor wardens across the state and be in constant contact.

I'd like to wrap up my remarks today by talking about what we have been able to do for hunters in recent years, as it is a source of great pride for myself, our board of commissioners, and our agency staff, on how we have been able to create so many more opportunities for the sportsmen and women in this state.

I'll start by mentioning small game, as there are few things that are more effective at creating a lifelong interest in hunting. We are now offering more small game hunting opportunities than ever before.

In recent years, the Board of Commissioners has set the start of the fall squirrel season in early September, more than a month earlier than it traditionally began. This gives all hunters, but our younger ones in particular, a chance to get an early jump on the season and experience a type of hunting that is deeply engrained in our culture from the days of Daniel Boone and the first settlers in Penn's Woods.

We have also expanded our pheasant hunting program. Our two game farms produced over 220,000 pheasants last fall. These birds were released across

more than 230 properties in 62 counties. We also improved the late pheasant season by holding two after-Christmas stockings, giving our hunters a good chance to find birds throughout the winter months.

We continue to see positive responses to our pheasant program, as demonstrated by the fact that the number of pheasant hunting permits continues to rise, for both junior and adult hunters.

We have also made an investment in dove hunting through our managed dove fields. Last fall, we expanded the number of fields in the state to over 60, spread out across all six regions and covering over 850 acres. The amount of interest in this sport is continuing to expand, and hunters who have never tried doves before are quickly learning how exciting and challenging they are to hunt.

Switching to big game, the increased opportunities are almost too numerous to list.

For bear hunters we offer chances to take a bear throughout the fall in the archery, muzzleloader, and special firearms seasons. And then again in the traditional firearms season, which is followed by extended seasons across much of the state during the firearms deer season. This was necessary to reduce the population from recent high levels that was causing conflicts with landowners,

particularly farmers. We were more than happy to use our hunters to get the population under control and, in so doing, create some incredible bear hunting experiences.

The resurgence of our elk population is truly a conservation success story. The Commonwealth is home to approximately 1,400 elk today. Almost 200 hunters each year get a chance to pursue some extraordinary animals that, for decades, were absent from our state.

Turkey hunters continue to experience excellent opportunities in both the spring and fall seasons. We are particularly excited about what we have seen with poult survival over the past two years, due to favorable weather conditions in the spring and an abundance of food throughout the summer and fall. All indications are that, in just a few short weeks, turkey hunters will have great opportunities to pursue gobblers all across the state.

And when it comes to deer hunting, Pennsylvania hunters are compiling some impressive numbers, year after year.

Just recently the National Deer Association issued its “Deer Report 2023,” which provides an overview of the deer harvests within individual states and compares those numbers nationally. In this report, Pennsylvania ranked fourth

nationwide in antlered deer harvest, and third in the antlered harvest per-square mile. For antlerless deer, Pennsylvania ranked second in total deer harvest, and first in antlerless harvest per-square mile.

And just as encouraging is that more and more of those deer being harvested are larger – in body and antler size – than most of us have ever experienced in our lifetime, indicating a truly robust and healthy deer herd, and the product of years of scientific-backed management decisions.

That concludes my prepared remarks. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here and discuss the ways in which we are working to create health wildlife populations across the state. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.