

Good morning Chairwoman Kulik, Chairman Maloney, and members of the House Game and Fisheries Committee. I am pleased to share with you what the Pennsylvania Game Commission has accomplished over the past year.

Our mission requires managing the Commonwealth's 480 wildlife species, across 46,000 square miles, and for more than 13 million people, both hunters and non-hunters. That's a huge challenge. But it's one that we embrace, as evident from the accomplishments by our employees, volunteers, and board members.

I would like to talk first about our efforts in protecting wildlife through the work done by our State Game Wardens. During fiscal year 2022-23, game wardens issued 5,567 warnings and initiated 6,911 prosecutions. The success rate for those prosecutions was 98.2% percent, demonstrating the professionalism, training, and judgment used by wardens when bringing charges.

Last month, 12 new wardens graduated from the Ross Leffler School of Conservation and were assigned to districts across the state, bringing our complement to 204 full-time wardens. Fourteen of those wardens are members of our Woodland Tracking Team and are specially trained in conducting search-and-rescue operations in remote locations and across difficult terrains. The Tracking Team was deployed 22 times last year and assisted the State Police in searching for the convicted murder who escaped from the Chester County Prison last summer.

For wildlife management, it seems appropriate to start with white-tailed deer, as no other species generates as much interest and passion. Given the significance of deer to our hunters, and the potential for deer to impact forests and agricultural industries, we take seriously the importance of maintaining a science-based program that uses the best available data.

That's why we invest so many resources in studying our deer harvest, which recently has averaged around 400,000 deer between the various seasons. Last year, 31 teams of Game Commission staff visited more than 400 processors and examined more than 23,000 harvested deer. This work allows us to monitor the age and sex of harvested deer to understand their population structure and inform our deer management decisions.

When it comes to bucks in particular, more than 60% of those taken are 2 ½ years old or older, thanks mainly to antler point restrictions, which a recent survey showed are supported by over seventy percent of our hunters.

There are many challenges that our deer population faces though, especially given the spread of chronic wasting disease (or "CWD"), which continues to show up in more harvested deer each year. Together with researchers from the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at Penn State, and the Wildlife Futures Program at Penn Vet, we're conducting research in Bedford and Fulton counties, to explore how CWD impacts deer movement, behavior, survival, and causes of mortality.

But deer are only one of the species that we manage.

Last year we wrapped up a three-year study of adult female bears in the Sproul State Forest looking at habitat use and survival rates. The results will be incorporated into future season recommendations. Launching this year is an even bigger research project that will take place over the next five years. It involves putting GPS collars on 200 male and female bears to learn more about their survival in relation to things like habitat and human presence.

Likewise, we're conducting research on wild turkey populations. Working again with Penn State and Penn Vet, we're putting GPS transmitters on turkeys in different landscape types and

following them to monitor their survival in the face of varying habitats, weather conditions, disease, predation, and more. Our counterparts in Maryland, Ohio and New Jersey recently joined the study as well, which will give us a regional perspective on turkey populations.

We are also continuing our efforts to combat white-nose syndrome in bat populations. Lately, we have documented some significant achievements and potential breakthroughs. We found that reducing the temperature a few degrees within hibernating sites can reduce the growth of the pathogen which causes the disease. Based on this finding, we piloted a treatment program at a site that resulted in a two-thirds reduction in disease prevalence. Last spring, we tracked female bats in migration and found over a dozen new colonies that led to over 1,000 reproductive adult females now being monitored and protected.

We're also studying the genetic diversity of grouse to learn more about how fragmented habitat impacts their survival rates.

And we're banding songbirds at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area as part of a continent-wide effort to identify threats to the survival of various species.

These are just a few of our ongoing projects studying the health and viability of Pennsylvania's wildlife.

We're also working hard to create and preserve the habitat that wildlife needs to survive.

Prescribed fire was used on almost 9,000 acres last fiscal year. Timber harvests improved habitat on nearly 25,000 additional acres. Some of those timber harvests involved a contractor paying us for the lumber. But for others, we removed the trees removed solely for the purpose of improving the habitat for wildlife.

We added more than 3,500 acres to the State Game Lands system, and made infrastructure improvements on existing game lands, creating, and improving 55 miles of roadways, and constructing 28 bridges.

We expanded the number of public shooting ranges that are available. We built six new ranges in the last two fiscal years and added two archery ranges last year, with another coming online soon and five more in the works. Multiple existing shooting ranges are scheduled for upgrades as well.

We certified more than 29,000 new hunters through a combination of online and in-person hunter-trapper education classes; over 50 of the classes being held in public schools, thanks to the legislation authored by Chairman Maloney which mandates that school districts shall make their facilities available for hunter-education classes.

We didn't stop there either. It can take time and resources to create a hunter, so we offered "Learn to Hunt" programs on pheasant, squirrel, spring turkey, archery deer and firearms deer hunting to help recruit hunters. These programs initially consist of a live webinar, and the videos are then made available on our YouTube page where they have reached thousands of new and potential hunters.

We've also made a point of going into communities where hunting is not as prevalent as other parts of the state. The 12-county Southeast region, for example, is home to more than half of Pennsylvania's total population. But for those who live there, it's not always easy to find a place to hunt or a mentor to teach you how to be successful. In conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, we offered mentored hunts in Philadelphia at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge and

Benjamin Rush State Park, as part of our efforts to introduce hunting to new participants and new communities. In so doing, we are also demonstrating to public landowners that it is possible to use hunting as the mechanism for managing deer populations even in heavily populated areas.

We set records with Pennsylvania's National Archery in the Schools program, which saw over 300 schools and more than 100,000 students participating. In addition to serving as the training ground for the next generation of hunters and recreational shooters, this program helps students develop focus, discipline, and patience – skills needed to be successful at both the range and in the classroom.

And speaking of the National Archery in the Schools program, we will be holding this year's state tournament on Friday, March 22nd, in Lancaster County. There is a flyer in the packet you received today that has the details on this event. We would love for you to attend if your schedule permits. There will be over 1000 students from across the state competing for individual and team awards on that day.

But hunters and trappers are not our only constituency. We manage all wildlife for all Pennsylvanians and strive to provide them with ways to connect with wildlife and the work done by our employees.

We released podcasts and videos, and expanded our presence on Facebook, Instagram, and X. And we talked face-to-face with Pennsylvanians at events like the Farm Show and Great American Outdoor Show.

Nearly two million viewers enjoyed our livestreams showcasing a bear den, elk, snow geese, and bald eagles' nests.

Through our Junior Game Warden Camps, we introduced hundreds of young Pennsylvanians to what it takes to be a State Game Warden, while internship opportunities gave older students real-world experience in everything from wildlife and habitat management to biology and education.

We offered driving tours on multiple game lands, giving people the chance to see some of our properties and interact with staff.

Each month we distributed copies of *Pennsylvania Game News* to approximately 4,000 libraries and 70,000 individuals, including anyone who took a Hunter-Trapper Education class in the past year.

We participated in the statewide Envirothon and held a National Hunting and Fishing Day event in conjunction with Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area's 50th anniversary.

All told, there is a lot to be proud of when it comes to Pennsylvania's wildlife and hunting heritage. We remain second in the country for hunting licenses sold, behind only Texas. A recent study analyzing hunting license sales found that the nationwide trend is for sales to decrease by over three percent per-year. But Pennsylvania is an outlier, with sales remaining steady over the last five years. We consistently rank in the top five states nationally for a variety of deer hunting categories, including antlered buck and antlerless deer harvest. We are recognized as a top turkey hunting state, with more hunters and more birds than just about anywhere. We have abundant small game hunting opportunities, thanks in part to the over 225,000 pheasants we raise and stock across the state. We continue to produce some of the heaviest black bears and some of the biggest elk. And we monitor, research, manage, and create habitat for all species in between, from barn owls to woodrats.

That concludes my prepared remarks. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work performed by the dedicated individuals who make up the Game Commission. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

That concludes my report on our activities over the past fiscal year. I would like to end my testimony by taking a few moments to talk about two of the biggest issues that we faced in 2023.

First is the amendment to House Bill 1300 that would have transferred \$150 million from the Game Fund to the Department of Agriculture to be used for the Clean Streams Fund.

In our conversations with the Senate, we understand that the intent behind that amendment was to ensure that our resources were going to fund conservation work across the Commonwealth. And I am pleased to announce that we have been able to develop a plan that will do just that through expanding our capacity to perform habitat projects on private lands. The primary focus of this program will be to improve habitat for wildlife, with the funding for this program coming from the Game Commission, thus, keeping with both state law and federal regulations governing the use of money from license fees and revenue derived from land purchased with license fees. And in some instances, the work performed under this program will have the additional benefit of counting toward the Commonwealth's contributions toward restoring the Chesapeake Bay, thus meeting the overall objectives of the Clean Streams Fund.

I want to recognize the members of this Committee, and in particular the chairs, Representative Kulick and Representative Maloney, for the role that you played as that amendment to HB 1300 was discussed. Your leadership was instrumental. And on behalf of the Game Commission, and the numerous conservation groups that reached out to you for support, thank you.

The second issue pertains to the sale of antlerless licenses. On June 26, 2023, the first day that licenses went on sale, the demand for antlerless licenses that morning overwhelmed the

system, causing significant wait times. You called for a hearing with us last September to discuss the challenges that we faced, and, most importantly, what can be done to ensure that it doesn't happen again this year.

At that hearing, Chairwoman Kulik, you correctly identified the biggest issue that we were facing when you said, "I think we have to understand that the hunters...cannot predict whether their unit is going to sell out, so to them there is an urgency." And while we have been in constant discussions with the vendor on making adjustments and improvements to the system, as long as that "urgency" exists for most hunters, we must expect that there will be a similar rush to buy licenses again this year, and with it, the potential to once again overwhelm the system.

Given that reality, the best way for us to reduce that initial demand, is to guarantee an antlerless license for our resident hunters in the first round of sales. And I am happy to announce that in most instances, we can do just that.

This summer, during the initial two-week round for resident hunters, we will assure the availability of an antlerless license for most units for that entire round. For WMUs that normally sell out early, we will continue first-come, first-served sales. For example, WMU 2G – that sold out in the first-round last year – will remain a first-come, first-served WMU. Other WMUs may join WMU 2G as staff complete antlerless allocations and look at hunter demand in each WMU. But with this new approach, we expect that most resident hunters in the first round will have two weeks to purchase a guaranteed antlerless license for the WMU of their choice.

This change is designed to spread out the volume of sales during that first round. For most units, regardless of when a hunter applies for an antlerless license in that round, be it at 8:00

a.m. on the first day; 11:30 p.m. on the last day; or anytime in between, we can guarantee that they will receive an antlerless license for the unit that they applied.

For the remaining rounds of antlerless license sales, we will use the same system that was in place last year, with each hunter able to purchase one license per round, until the number of licenses set forth in each individual unit has been exhausted.

I am excited to implement this change. We took seriously the direction from you to review the sales data from last year and develop a more convenient method of selling licenses and we believe this approach strikes the right balance. It meets the needs of our hunters through alleviating the demand and that rush on the first day of sales, and at the same time allowing us to manage deer populations through antlerless license allocations, which will remain in place during the rounds when units are most likely to sell out.

We would appreciate your help in spreading the word about this change, and reminding our hunters, that for the majority of them, they will be guaranteed an antlerless license in the first round and there is no need to buy a license as soon as they go on sale.