

A Summary of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program

By Mary Goodyear, NH Fish and Game

Long ago in North America, there was an amazing abundance of natural resources. There were endless forests, rolling prairies and wild rivers, with a great diversity and wealth of fish and wildlife nearly unimaginable in its scope to early explorers and colonists. They recognized the vast wealth the wildlife, especially furbearers, represented in their homelands. Beaver hats and furs were the fashion rage in Europe. The lure of great profit from the sale of furs caused many species to be trapped to endangerment to meet that European demand for furs.

It resulted in a double whammy for wildlife. At the same time as the unregulated harvest, habitat was lost, cleared for agriculture and building materials. We all know of the demise of bison and passenger pigeons, but did you know there were no beavers in New Hampshire and most of the Northeast for 150 years, from the 1750s to 1900?

About 1900 biologists and sportsmen started to recognize that without our help wildlife was doomed. Harvest limits and seasons were imposed. Beavers and other furbearers were trapped and re-located to encourage re-population. It wasn't enough.

In 1937, strongly supported by sportsmen and gun manufacturers, federal legislation passed that turned the tide for wildlife. The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act was passed by Congress to help dwindling wildlife populations. It is often called the Pittman Robertson Act or PR after its two congressional sponsors. It is an extremely successful program and is responsible for the great wildlife populations we now have in North America.

What does the act do? It imposes an 11 percent federal excise tax on the purchase of firearms used for sport hunting, handguns, ammunition and archery equipment. The proceeds are distributed to states' wildlife agencies for the restoration of wild bird and mammal populations; and for hunter education. A major benefit of the program is that it provides a steady source of income enabling projects that take years to complete. Science, in the form of long-term research projects, replaces guesswork and contributes to the success of projects and management. The Wildlife Restoration Program was so successful that in 1950 the Sport Fish Restoration Act was created and passed to restore and better manage America's declining fishery resources. Also referred to as Dingall Johnson or DJ after its congressional sponsors, it imposes a similar excise tax on fishing equipment and motor boat fuel.

Collectively, the two programs are called the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department receives nearly \$7.5 million annually from the joint programs to support research, the development and management of wildlife management areas, boat access and both terrestrial and aquatic habitat restoration. Since 1939 the two federal programs have provided nearly \$115 million dollars to New Hampshire for fish and wildlife conservation. Most other states are larger and receive significantly more annually.

Now, you know why it can be said that hunters and anglers are responsible for the great diversity and populations of fish and wildlife we now have in this country.