

US Fish and Wildlife Service

Bringing Wildlife Back -- Then and Now

America the Beautiful is still the home of wondrous numbers and varieties of wild creatures. Yet, only a few decades ago, wildlife's survival was very much in doubt. The early settlers had encountered a spectacular abundance of wildlife. But, in their zeal to conquer an untamed continent, they squandered that legacy for centuries, wiping out some species and reducing others to a pitiful remnant of their original numbers.

Breakthrough: Pittman-Robertson Act

Then a remarkable thing happened. At the urging of organized sportsmen, State wildlife agencies, and the firearms and ammunition industries, Congress extended the life of an existing 10 percent tax on ammunition and firearms used for sport hunting, and earmarked the proceeds to be distributed to the States for wildlife restoration. The result was called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration act, better known as the Pittman-Robertson (or "P-R") Act after its principal sponsors, Senator Key Pittman of Nevada, and Representative A. Willis Robertson of Virginia. The measure was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 2, 1937.

Since then, numerous species have rebuilt their populations and extended their ranges far beyond what they were in the 1930's. Among them are the wild turkey, white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, wood duck, beaver, black bear, giant Canada goose, American elk, desert bighorn sheep, bobcat, mountain lion, and several species of predatory birds.

Shared Costs, Shared Benefits

Federal Funding from P-R pays for up to 75 percent of project costs, with the States putting up at least 25 percent. The assurance of a steady source of earmarked funds has enabled the program's administrators, both State and Federal, to plan projects that take years to complete, as short-term strategies seldom come up with lasting solutions where living creatures are involved.

In the more than 50 years since P-R began, over \$2 billion in Federal excise taxes has been matched by more than \$500 million in State funds (chiefly from hunting license fees) for wildlife restoration. Benefits to the economy have been equally impressive. National surveys show that hunters now spend some \$10 billion every year on equipment and trips. Non-hunting nature lovers spend even larger sums to enjoy wildlife, on travel and on items that range from bird food to binoculars, from special footwear to camera equipment. Areas famous for their wildlife have directly benefited

from this spending, but so have sporting goods and outdoor equipment manufacturers, distributors and dealers. Thousands of jobs have been created.

Managing Lands for Wildlife

Of the P-R funds available to the States, more than 62 percent is used to buy, develop, maintain, and operate wildlife management areas. Some 4 million acres have been purchased outright since the program began, and nearly 40 million acres are managed for wildlife under agreements with other landowners.

Various kinds of land have been acquired, including winter rangelands necessary for big game animals in the North and West, and wetlands, essential to ducks and geese for nesting, wintering, and stopover feeding and rest during migrations.

Along with land acquisition, better management methods have yielded remarkable results. Some examples include creating small waterholes in the southwest so that wildlife may drink; planting trees and shrubs in some Great Plains localities as woody cover to shelter pheasants, quail and other wildlife during winter storms; creating clearings in heavily wooded areas of the Northeast to provide more varied food and shelter for deer, woodcock, rabbits, and ruffed grouse; and controlled burning of brush and tall grass in parts of the South to stimulate growth of seed-producing plants for wild turkey and quail.

Research: Science Replaces Guesswork

P-R has aided greatly in a nationwide effort to enlist science in the cause of wildlife conservation. About 26 percent of P-R funding to the States is used for surveys and research.

Surveys, now employing computers and space-age technology, provide solid information on the location and activities of species, the make-up of their population by age and sex, and whether their numbers are rising or declining -- essential data in managing the species and its habitat.

Research has disclosed surprising answers to former riddles about wildlife's needs for food, cover, and breeding success. For example, it has shown that big game animals do not directly compete with livestock for food. Research findings have enabled managers to keep wild creatures in balance with their environments and to permit more people to enjoy wildlife without endangering the future of any species. State researchers using P-R funds have developed such tools as tranquilizing dartguns to capture animals, and miniature radio devices to track them.

Non-Hunters and Non-Game Benefit, Too

Although Pittman-Robertson is financed wholly by firearms users and archery enthusiasts, its benefits cover a much larger number of people who never hunt but do enjoy such wildlife pastimes as birdwatching, nature photography, painting and sketching, and a wide variety of other outdoor pursuits. Almost all the lands purchased with P-R money are managed both for wildlife production and for other public uses. Wildlife management areas acquired by the States for winter range also support substantial use by hikers and fishermen, campers and picnickers. Wetlands for summer waterfowl nesting are useful to nature lovers in other seasons. Recent estimates indicate about 70 percent of the people using these areas are not hunting, and in some localities the ratio may go as high as 95 percent.

Numerous non-game species enjoy P-R benefits, too. Ground cover for game birds is also used by all sorts of other birds and small animals. Bald eagles benefit significantly under careful management of forested areas where they typically nest. Fortunately, the Pittman-Robertson act does not restrict use of funds to game species, but instead allows their use for any species of wild bird or mammal.

Hunter Safety and Sportsmanship

Congress in the early 1970's expanded the P-R revenue base to include handguns and archery equipment, and authorized States to spend up to half those revenues on hunter education and target ranges.

Hunter education is designed to make each hunter aware of how his/her behavior affects others. Hunters learn safe and proper handling of hunting equipment, responsible hunting conduct afield, the identification of wildlife and understanding of its habits and habitats, and respect -- for the animals, and for other hunters, landowners, and the general public.

Wikipedia

The **Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937**, most often referred to as the **Pittman–Robertson Act** for its sponsors, Nevada Senator [Key Pittman](#) and Virginia Congressman [Absalom Willis Robertson](#), was signed by [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) on September 2, 1937 and became effective on July 1 of the following year. during the 1970s^[1] and the most recent taking place in 2000.

Prior to the creation of the Pittman–Robertson Act, many species of wildlife were driven to or near extinction by hunting pressure and/or [habitat degradation](#) from humans. The Act created an [excise tax](#) that provides funds to each state to manage such animals and their habitats. Notable species that have come back from the brink since the implementation of this act include [white-tailed deer](#), [wild turkey](#), and [wood ducks](#).

The Pittman–Robertson Act took over a pre-existing 11% excise tax on firearms and ammunition. Instead of going into the [U.S. Treasury](#) as it had done in the past, the money is kept separate and is given to the [Secretary of the Interior](#) to distribute to the States. The Secretary determines how much to give to each state based on a formula that takes into account both the area of the state and its number of licensed hunters.

These States must fulfill certain requirements to use the money apportioned to them. None of the money from their hunting license sales may be used by anyone other than the State's fish and game department. Plans for what to do with the money must be submitted to and approved by the Secretary of the Interior. Acceptable options include research, surveys, management of wildlife and/or habitat and acquisition or lease of land, among other things. Once a plan has been approved, the state must pay the full cost and is later reimbursed for up to 75% of that cost through P–R funds. The 25% of the cost that the State must pay generally comes from its hunting license sales. If, for whatever reason, any of the federal money does not get spent, after two years that money is then reallocated to the [Migratory Bird Conservation Act](#).

In the 1970s, amendments created a 10% tax on handguns and their ammunition and accessories as well as an 11% tax on archery equipment. It was also mandated that half of the money from each of those new taxes must be used to educate and train hunters through the creation and maintenance of hunter safety classes and shooting/target ranges.

Results

This piece of legislation has provided states with funding for research and projects that would have been unaffordable otherwise. According to a [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) webpage that was updated in January 2010, over two billion dollars of federal aid has been generated through this program, which in turn means that states have kept up their 25% contributions with over 500 million dollars. The habitat acquisition and improvement made possible by this money has allowed some species with large ranges such as [American black bears](#), [elk](#), [cougars](#), and others, to expand those ranges beyond where they were found prior to the implementation of the act. Important game populations such as white-tailed deer and several [Galliformes](#) have also had a chance to recover and expand their populations.

Economics

The idea behind this act is that by creating more and better hunting experiences for people through habitat management and hunter education, more taxable items will be purchased, which would then provide more funding for management and improvement. The habitat improvement may also stimulate the [eco-tourism](#) sector of the economy by creating jobs in areas where people tend to visit for hunting or aesthetic reasons.

One source shows hunters spending around ten billion dollars a year on everything they need for their hunting trips. A different source found that hunters spend between 2.8 and 5.2 billion dollars a year on taxable merchandise. This generates between 177 and 324 million dollars a year in P–R money.

Another source estimated that hunters contribute about three and a half million dollars a day to conservation by purchasing taxable items and hunting licenses.

One study showed an extremely high [Return on Investment](#) for firearm manufacturers; 823% to 1588% depending on the year.

Related Legislation

Similar Legislation

The Pittman–Robertson Act was so successful that in the 1950s, a similar act was written for fish. This one was titled the Federal Aid in Fish Restoration Act. As with its wildlife counterpart, the name of this act is generally shortened by reducing it to the names of those who sponsored it, and so it is generally referred to as the [Dingell–Johnson Act](#).

Legislative oversight

In 2000, when evidence surfaced that the Pittman-Robertson Act sportsman`s conservation trust funds were being mismanaged, NRA board member and sportsman, [U.S. Representative Don Young](#) (R-Alaska) introduced the [Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs Improvement Act](#). The passed the House 423-2 and became law on Nov. 1, 2000 and defines in what manner the monies can be spent.

Proposed Amendments

On November 21, 2013, [Rep. Robert E. Latta \(R, OH-5\)](#) introduced an [omnibus bill](#) called the [Sportsmen's Heritage And Recreational Enhancement Act of 2013 \(H.R. 3590; 113th Congress\)](#). Title II of that bill, the Target Practice and Marksmanship Training Support Act, would amend the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act to: (1) authorize a state to pay up to 90% of the costs of acquiring land for, expanding, or constructing a public [target range](#); (2) authorize a state to elect to allocate 10% of a specified amount apportioned to it from the federal aid to wildlife restoration fund for

such costs; (3) limit the federal share of such costs under such Act to 90%; and (4) require amounts provided for such costs under such Act to remain available for expenditure and obligation for five fiscal years. The bill passed the House of Representatives on February 5, 2014.