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State wildlife agencies seek new funds as license sales fall

NORTHWOOD, N.H. (AP) — Carl Wallman used to raise prize-winning Black Angus cattle on 211 acres of pastures, woods and swamp in this central New Hampshire town.

Now retired, Wallman has changed his focus to making Harmony Hill Farm hospitable for everything from bear to butterflies, moose to meadowlarks.

He says he'd be hard-pressed to do it all without advice and small grants from the state Fish and Game Department, like one that pays him to mow his fields when the hay is past its prime, so bobolinks and other grassland birds can nest and raise their chicks.

"Farming, you're just managing for one species, and here you're managing for thousands, so you really need their input," he said. "I don't think most people have any idea how much they do."

Whether that help will continue is an open question, however. Like other state fish and wildlife agencies around the country, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department has been hit hard by a national decline in fishing and hunting. That's because it depends on sales of hunting and fishing licenses _ and federal grants tied to that income _ to fund most of its work.

For the first time in its history, the New Hampshire agency is seeking significant funding from general state tax revenues, arguing it cannot remain self-supporting without drastic cuts in staff and services.

"The history of this department has always been, 'User pays,'" Lee Perry, the agency's executive director, said in a recent interview. "When we were primarily dealing with hunters and anglers, it made sense. But ... there are an awful lot of other people using the resource and benefiting from the resource who aren't paying."

"User pays" has fallen short for state wildlife agencies from Maine to California that were set up to regulate hunting and fishing.

Compounding the financial squeeze are new and expanded missions: protecting endangered species and habitat, leading search and rescue operations, enforcing off-road vehicle laws and helping track diseases that affect wildlife and humans.

Some of those tasks came with new user fees or federal dollars, but others did not. For a while, states bridged the gap by raising license fees, but hunters and anglers have balked

at providing the sole financial support for activities that also benefit birdwatchers, hikers, kayakers and wildlife tourists, all of whose numbers are on the rise.

Some states reached the breaking point more than a decade ago _ and persuaded voters or legislators to provide more funding. Arizona and Colorado dedicate some lottery and gambling revenues. Texas and Virginia tax sales of outdoor equipment. Minnesota has an income-tax checkoff, and other states sell special license plates, according to a University of Minnesota study.

The biggest funding gap is for conservation efforts involving species that aren't hunted or fished and aren't yet endangered _ about 80 percent of all wildlife, said Naomi Edelson, director of Teaming With Wildlife, a coalition of conservation groups and agencies.

Congress passed the State Wildlife Grants program in 2001 to help. But while the federal hunting and fishing grant programs provide \$3 for every dollar raised by states, the State Wildlife Grants require a one-to-one match _ and states have no obvious user fees they can tap for their share. That's put even more pressure on agencies to develop new funding.

Two states are clear leaders: Arkansas and Missouri. Both have dedicated, 1/8-cent conservation sales taxes, a mechanism that should keep pace with inflation.

Arkansas' tax, which has let the state build new nature education centers and conserve more land, will contribute about \$26 million to the Game and Fish Commission's \$63 million budget in fiscal 2007, said spokesman Keith Stephens. The tax also helps fund state parks and heritage programs and an anti-litter campaign.

Before it passed in 1996, "We were in a crisis: Our equipment was worn out, we didn't have enough people to man all the land we had, we didn't have enough funds to manage the state's wildlife and fisheries," Stephens said.

Those woes are familiar to Perry, who is seeking at least \$1.6 million in New Hampshire funds in his proposed \$27.4 million budget for next fiscal year. Without that money, he says, he will have to lay off up to a quarter of Fish and Game's staff and close several regional offices and fish hatcheries, with adverse consequences for every New Hampshire resident.

"We don't like asking anybody for money," Perry said, "but the unfortunate truth of the matter is clean air and clean water and wildlife and all the benefits we have here in the state ... come at a cost."

Perry's bid to earmark about \$4.6 million annually in state rooms and meals tax money for his agency died in the House in March, amid questions about the agency's management and how to replace those revenues.

Legislators also rejected a saltwater fishing license and a \$10 conservation decal for canoes, kayaks and other non-motorized boats. Still pending was a bill to give the agency a share of gas taxes from snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles.

Eric Orff, a Fish and Game wildlife biologist who advises Wallman on habitat management, says the rapid pace at which open space is being developed puts the state at a critical juncture.

The agency, with the University of New Hampshire, has developed maps that rank the habitat value of open space throughout the state, and Fish and Game is using them to advise towns and land trusts, private landowners and timber investors. But those conservation opportunities won't last unless they are acted upon soon, he said.

"We can identify land that 100 years from now, it'll make a difference to that town," he said. "We have the technology and the foresight right now. It's the will and the cash that's missing."

On the Net:

Teaming with Wildlife: http://www.teaming.com/state_funding_initiatives.htm

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grants: <http://www.fws.gov/grants/state.html>

New Hampshire Fish and Game Department updates on legislative proposals:
http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Inside_FandG/legislative_proposals.htm

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