

An Update on the Feasibility of a Combined Fish and Wildlife Commission for Pennsylvania

Report Highlights

House Resolution 129 directed the LB&FC to examine the savings potential of merging the PA Game (PGC) and the Fish and Boat Commissions (PFBC). We also reviewed the feasibility of combining the PGC and PFBC law enforcement function into the Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

1. PA is the only state in which fish and wildlife resources are administered by separate agencies. In other states, fish and wildlife functions are carried out either within a stand-alone department or commission (in 20 states) or within an organizational unit of a larger state agency, such as a Department of Natural Resources (in 29 states). As such, a merger of the PFBC and PGC into a single agency is clearly feasible.

2. We estimate that a merger of the PGC and the PFBC could result in a net elimination of 52 staff positions, with associated salary and benefit cost savings of approximately \$5 million annually. The proposed structure retains all the responsibilities, programs, and assets of the two Commissions, including Commission ownership of State Game Lands.

3. Significant features of the proposal for a new PA Fish and Wildlife Commission include:

- eliminating several upper-level management positions at both the Headquarters and regions;
- creating of a new Bureau of Non-Game Species to address biodiversity and non-game species;
- reducing the number of law enforcement officers without reducing field coverage through reassignment of the officers' non-law enforcement responsibilities;
- continuing current staffing and operational levels in all key program areas, such as fisheries, wildlife propagation and management, and State Game Lands maintenance; and
- utilizing both existing headquarters buildings and consolidating regional offices.

The report also examines the potential impacts of a merger in other areas. These include vehicle fleet size, purchasing, training, information technology, publications, and equipment and supplies. Where feasible, we attempt to quantify potential costs or savings in these areas.

4. Several legal, regulatory, and administrative matters would need to be addressed in a merged agency. The report discusses Commission structure; Game, Fish and Boat Code changes; special funds structure; and collective bargaining issues. In particular, retaining three separate funds (Fish, Boat, and Game) reduces the opportunity to improve efficiency in a merged agency. Retaining separate funds also restricts the ability to use the revenues as needed to address the merged agency's priorities.

5. Game Fund revenues have increased markedly since 2009, while Fish and Boat Fund revenues have remained largely flat. While declining license sales have impacted both the PGC and PFBC, the PGC has benefited from oil/gas lease revenues, which have helped boost revenues from \$77.2M in FY 09-10 to \$91.7M in FY 12-13. Expenditures for both agencies have increased due primarily to increased personnel costs. All three funds had budget deficits in FY 11-12.

6. Many states supplement traditional funding of their fish and wildlife agencies with general tax revenues and other alternative funding sources. The report provides a comprehensive review of non-license revenue sources currently in use. In addition to general fund support (28 states), examples of other revenue sources include state income tax refund check-offs, vehicle license plate sales, user fees, lottery funds; and dedicated portions of state sales tax revenue for fish and wildlife agencies.

7. Merging law enforcement functions into DCNR may improve coverage, but costs would increase. A voluntary deputy law enforcement program may not be feasible in this scenario, so we assume additional officers would be needed. Union, retirement, and jurisdiction issues would also need to be addressed.