

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

Report Highlights

Background: House Resolution 15 directed the LB&FC to reexamine the feasibility of merging the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC). The LB&FC's report is to assist the House Game and Fisheries Committee in its consideration of a broad range of options for structuring and funding Pennsylvania's fish and wildlife agencies.

1. Pennsylvania remains the only state in which fish and wildlife resources are administered by separate and organizationally independent agencies.

At the state level, fish and wildlife functions are carried out either within a stand-alone department or commission (in 22 states) or within an organizational unit of a larger state agency, such as a "Department of Natural Resources" (in 27 states).

2. A merger of the PFBC and the PGC and the combined management of Pennsylvania fish and wildlife resources is clearly feasible.

The federal government (in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and 49 other states manage fish and wildlife resources in a single agency structure. The report proposes an organizational structure for a merged "Fish and Wildlife Commission" in Pennsylvania structured around three major deputates: Resource Management, Administration, and Field Operations. The proposed structure retains all the responsibilities, programs, and assets of the two Commissions, including Commission ownership of State Game Lands.

3. We estimate that a merger of the PGC and the PFBC (as structured in the report) could result in a net elimination of 71 staff positions, with associated salary and benefit cost savings of approximately \$5 million annually. In addition to streamlining the Commission by eliminating redundant positions, a merger would also provide a better balance between the Commissions' law enforcement functions and wildlife/conservation functions, and would better position the combined Commission to request General Fund or other state funding to meet its infrastructure needs.

4. State fish and wildlife agencies have entered a new era of mounting financial demands, budgetary shortfalls, and increasing pressures to adopt a more holistic approach to fish and wildlife management. Significant features of the proposal for a new "PA Fish and Wildlife Commission" include:

- the elimination of several upper-level management positions at both the Headquarters and regions;

- the creation of a new Bureau of Non-Game Species to address the perceived lack of focus on biodiversity and non-game species;
- a phased reduction in the number of law enforcement officers without reducing field coverage through reassignment of the officers' non-law enforcement responsibilities;
- the continuation of current staffing and operational levels in all key program areas, such as fisheries, wildlife propagation and management, and State Game Lands maintenance; and
- the full utilization of both existing headquarters buildings and consolidation of 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.

5. Several legal, regulatory, and administrative matters would need to be addressed in establishing a merged agency. The report discusses Commission structure; Game, Fish and Boat Code changes; special funds structure; and collective bargaining issues.

6. Both nationally and in PA it is becoming increasingly clear that new revenue sources are needed to fund fish and wildlife programs. Declining license sales, combined with increased operating costs and infrastructure needs, have placed the PGC and PFBC in a position where they can no longer rely solely on their traditional revenue sources. Both are facing severe budget constraints and, whether or not a merger occurs, new revenue sources will be needed.

7. 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, and lottery funds; 4 states, led by Missouri in 1997, now dedicate a portion of their state sales tax revenue for fish and wildlife.