

Committee Reports:

5-1-07

The Senate Game and Fisheries Committee met to hear the Game Commission present their annual report.

Members in attendance included Chairman Charles McIlhinney (R-Bucks), Minority Chairman Wayne Fontana (D-Allegheny) and Senators Bob Regola (R-Westmoreland), John Eichelberger (R-Blair), Andrew Dinniman (D-Chester) and Robert Robbins (R-Mercer).

Carl G Roe, Executive Director of the PA Game Commission, testified that the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) continues to move forward in implementing their strategic plan where resources allow. To this end, he said the PGC has placed an increased emphasis on species management plans.

In terms of financial resources, Roe said that while their revenue exceeded expectations this year by more than \$7 million, he is concerned with mounting costs for the statewide business operating system and increased personnel costs. He also lamented that the PGC has only received two license fee increases in over 20 years.

Roe then testified that last year was a very successful hunting season especially with regards to bear, turkey and small game (where habitat is available). Acknowledging that deer hunting is more challenging, he stressed that while they are concerned about the views of hunters and their desire for more deer, PGC's primary concern remains with the conservation and responsible management of PA's wildlife resources. To this end, he said that they strive to meet goals of a healthy herd, healthy habitat and a reduction in deer human conflicts.

Roe closed by highlighting several projects currently being worked on by the PGC including numerous species based research projects, increasing the total acreage of State Game Lands, and wildlife propagation programs.

Senator Regola raised concern over reports of there not being a lot of deer in the Southwestern portion of the state and wondered if the PGC has given any thought to revisiting having a one to three day doe season in this portion of the state. Roe explained the PGC has specific measurements they use to determine the proper balance of the deer population and available food and habitat. He promised to get the Senator more information on these numbers for his wildlife management unit (WMU). Roe acknowledged that hunters want more deer, but it would not be prudent to increase their numbers if this results in the destruction of the habitat necessary to maintain a healthy herd.

Senator Regola next wondered how the PGC counts deer. Roe stated the Commission utilizes harvest data which consists of information gathered from meat processors and information from harvest report cards. He further stated that this information is used in a formula to ascertain total harvest rates. Additionally, the PGC looks at buck data from collared animals that were harvested, said Roe. He closed, stressing that the methods and formulas they use are common in the industry and widely peer reviewed.

Stating that he participates in a lot of youth mentored hunts, Senator Regola wondered how the state can encourage more adult hunters to participate in the sport. Roe agreed that this can be difficult given that this is mostly done by friends asking friends to join them in hunting. He said that the PGC has tried to make the transition easier for people that have never hunted before by offering a study course that can be completed at home and only requires the student to come in for the test. Roe closed by lamenting that a decreasing number of adult hunters is a nationwide trend.

Minority Chairman Fontana wondered who determines public policy for the PGC. Roe said the staff provides information and recommendations to the Board of Commissioners who ultimately decides the policy that the staff then carries out.

Asked how citizen advisory committees' factor into this process, Roe explained that the PGC receives input from a citizen advisory committee for deer human conflict issues.

Minority Chairman Fontana worried that there appears to be a lack of communication between the PGC and the hunting public. Roe stressed the PGC is putting together a communication program that they hope to have on the road by August or September of this year. Stating he does not yet know the details of how information will be delivered, Roe said that the Commission will likely setup a variety of stations that the public can interact with to learn more about the policies and work of the Commission. Asked about the financial impact of such a program on the PGC, Roe stated he views any expense as a cost of doing business.

Senator Dinniman expressed concern over the deer population in Chester County stating that his area has one of the highest rates of Lyme disease in the nation. Roe stated the PGC has increased the allocations for WMU 5C and has increased the number of available red tags. He also said they are considering revising the rules governing the harvesting of deer to lessen crop damage. Roe closed by stating that while the Deer Urban Management Plan has been completed, its full implementation is hampered by limited resources. Senator Dinniman wondered if the Department of Health should share in the management of the problem given the fact that doctors in the area are reporting multiple cases of Lyme disease a day. Roe explained that ticks carrying infections are also borne on animals such as chipmunks and mice. He argued that especially in the Southeast, the deer herd is somewhat compacted and therefore do not roam around a lot and spread the disease like they would in other areas. Roe pointed out that rodents are more responsible for carrying ticks when they are in the stage where they spread Lyme's disease. Deer carry them when they are in the reproduction stage.

Stating he is happy to hear the PGC acknowledge the concerns of the farming community, Senator Dinniman asked if the PGC would participate in a meeting of the various stakeholders on the deer issue so that it can be attacked on a multidisciplinary front. Roe said that he would and explained that he just met with produce growers on the issue of deer. He lamented that during these discussions he was informed that many of their neighbors attract deer by feeding them and that the farmers will not put up protective deer fencing around their crops because of aesthetic concerns. Roe stressed that everyone needs to play a part in finding a solution to the deer problem in these areas.

Senator Robbins expressed concerns over the PGC not having good timbering programs. He argued that totally mature forests do not have deer or food plots for wildlife. Roe explained that while they have tried to work with the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) on creating more food plots, DCNR has a different management philosophy than the PGC. In terms of PGC land, Roe stated that only 9% of timber on game lands is mature enough to harvest and this percentage should be around 20%.

Senator Robbins next asked how a recent court case involving a hunting accident where a hunter was on a private farm and mistakenly shot a person on land adjoining the farm could impact the use of other private lands. Roe worried that even though the hunter was cited for everything he did wrong, the subsequent court case where the farmer settled resulted in many private land owners dropping out of cooperative programs with the Commission. He stressed that there is a landowner protection bill for recreational uses that has been introduced and asked for the support of the Senators in passing this.

Chairman McIlhinney reiterated that there is a call for different strategies to be implemented in different parts of the state and encouraged the mutual support between the Committee and the PGC.