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MONEY & WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Are hunters being nudged to the backseat? It's a question Idaho residents are asking after Idaho Fish and Game (IFG) held public meetings throughout the state in August. Called the Wildlife Summit, the meetings were designed to address declining revenue, the future of the agency, and its role in managing fish and wildlife. Instead, they opened festering wounds and generated suspicion about the influence of environmentalists on the agency's mission.

IFG Spokesman Michael Keckler says the meetings were simply designed to "create an enthusiasm for wildlife and wildlife conservation from all citizens of Idaho and open up a dialogue about the future of wildlife conservation.

"Whether or not they buy licenses, all of our residents get a say in our wildlife," he adds. "Idaho's population has increased threefold in the last 20 years while the number of hunters has remained flat.

We spend a lot on non-game and threatened and endangered species, like sage grouse and salmon. We need to include everyone."

In other words, says Idaho for Wildlife cofounder Steve Alder, sportsmen are being thrown under the bus for the sake of agency funding and non-game wildlife.

"The first groups Game and Fish went to were environmentalists when they decided to hold these meetings," Alder said. "Hunters and fishermen pay for wildlife conservation. We were disappointed."

Alder's concerns dig at the very heart of the issue: As traditional revenue sources decline, how will state wildlife agencies continue to find their core missions? The outlook is murky in Idaho, where IFG saw a \$3.5 million decline in revenue last year, about 4 percent of its total budget. Sales of nonresident deer tags dropped 22 percent from 2010; elk licenses fell 23 percent. The number of big-game tags sold dropped by nearly the same amount

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this year. Alder and others in Idaho place the blame on a combination of factors: wolves and IFG itself, which, they say, tried to fool hunters about the impact of predators.

"At the peak of wolf predation, biologists claimed it was a habitat issue and not related to wolves," he says. "It was a massive cover-up. Some of these biologists worship some sort of utopian ecosystem where predators and prey live in some perfect balance at the expense of hunters."

Keckler rejects any notion of a cover-up. He points to the agency's mission statement, which includes "hunting, fishing, and trapping," as well as the aggressive wolf season and IFG's long-standing support of the state's hunting culture.

"Hundreds of hunters showed up to the Wildlife Summit meetings and were very supportive of our efforts to promote the state's wildlife to everyone," he says. "We have been and will always be focused on providing ample hunting and fishing opportunities."

Alder still isn't buying it. He's convinced more and more IFG employees would like to see wolves manage elk instead of hunters, ultimately leading to a drastic change in the future role of hunting.

"To them, the more predators the better, which is exactly what they are getting," he says. "This is playing right into the hands of anti-hunting groups."

He's not alone. Forums and blogs lit up with criticism of IFG after the summit. One blog headline read, "Idaho wildlife summit deeply rooted in environmentalism." A forum thread discussed members who were "in bed with environmentalists and anti-hunters."

Alder points to IFG biologist Michele Beucler. In 2008, she presented a paper titled "Mirror, Mirror, On The Wall: Reflections From a Non-Hunter" during the North American Wildlife Resources Conference. In it, she wrote, "Is it even appropriate for a government agency to advertise, market, or recruit—particularly when it focuses on such a narrow segment of the citizenry?" Beucler also questioned the foundation of wildlife management. Agencies should "expand recruitment and retention beyond hunting and into broader outdoor experiences," she wrote.

That's exactly the wrong approach agree Alder and Wyoming Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife Executive Director Bob Wharff. Instead of attempting to balance predators and big game, thereby allowing more hunting opportunities and license revenue, Wharff says Idaho and Wyoming are considering using a dedicated state sales tax to increase funding. It's an idea that concerns Wharff.

"As soon as we allow outside interests to have a stake in wildlife management, we will see an even greater shift in the mission of our state agencies," says Wharff. "If game and fish doesn't need our money anymore, where is the incentive to fix our game problems?"

It's an unfounded fear, says Conservation Federation of Missouri Executive Director Dave Murphy. Missouri voters approved a tax in 1976, which added 1/8 of 1 percent to the state's sales tax. The money goes directly to the Missouri Department of Conservation, generating nearly \$99 million last year alone, 59 percent of its operating budget. It's been a huge boost to the agency, but it didn't reshape the mission, says Murphy.

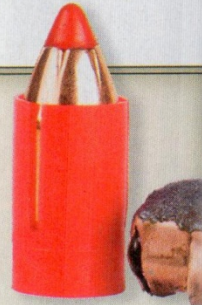
"There were the same concerns from hunters in Missouri when the tax was proposed, but none of those concerns came true," he says. "Instead, we have eliminated challenges from anti-hunting groups because the money has allowed us to shore up our game programs as well as our non-game programs. We have the highest hunter recruitment rates in the country and the conservation fund is in many ways responsible for that."

Missouri doesn't have wolves or face a significant drop in big-game populations. But the core issues are similar: In the face of a growing population and stagnant hunter and angler numbers, how will states pay for wildlife conservation? Murphy agrees with Keckler that everyone should have a say in management decisions.

"If we don't change something when everything else is changing," says Murphy, "the current way of doing things isn't going to continue to work for very much longer."

—David Hart

Hornady
SST-ML



Bullet Board

BULLET BASICS

Capitalizing on technology first introduced in the LEVERevolution line, the Hornady SST-ML has proven itself at providing excellent downrange accuracy and terminal performance in modern inline muzzleloaders. The traditional cup-and-core, hollowpoint design was augmented with a Flex Tip that improved ballistic coefficients and increased the envelope for reliable expansion in game animals.

TESTING GROUND

Because it has proven accurate in so many different rifles, I have used the SST-ML on two-dozen muzzleloader hunts.

FIELD PERFORMANCE

I have taken 13 game animals with the SST-ML (all 250-grain, .50 caliber), and only one required a follow-up shot, and that was due to a poorly placed first shot. On game animals weighing less than 120 pounds and shots under 150 yards, expect a pass-through. Otherwise, the bullet can usually be found just under the hide on the offside.

STATS

The SST-ML is offered in .45 and .50 calibers. The .45-caliber sabot/bullet combo uses a .40-caliber, 200-grain bullet while both 250- and 300-grain .45-caliber bullets are available in the .50-caliber sabot/bullet combo. Five recovered 250-grain bullets had an average retained weight of 199.4 grains and a final expanded diameter of .627 inch.

NOTES/OBSERVATIONS

The bullet is great for hunting big game from small southern whitetails to elk at moderate ranges, providing a good balance of expansion and penetration. The SST-ML has proven accurate in a wide variety of inline muzzleloaders in my battery with 100-yard, 3-shot averages often running under an inch. —J. Guthrie