

THE PRINCIPAL BENEFITS OF HOUSE BILL 1483

Sponsor: Representative David Maloney

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There is no provision that is more important to deer, grouse, and other forest-dwelling wildlife than HB 1483.

THE PROBLEM. For decades, Pennsylvania was one of the top two deer-hunting states in the nation. The Game Commission produced the maximum sustained yield of deer for over a million hunters, and provided a healthy forest ecosystem with abundant game and nongame wildlife. As a result, a \$5-billion outdoor recreation and tourism industry flourished, creating a vital economic foundation for rural communities. However, in 1998 the Commission switched its allegiance from serving the interests of sportsmen, the outdoor industry, and the general citizenry of the Commonwealth to, instead, serving the narrow interests of a handful of foresters and fringe environmentalists. On an agenda-driven whim at the urging of these special-interest groups, the Commission began a 5-year assault on our State Mammal, killing nearly 3 million deer from 2000-04. While sustainable and huntable deer populations normally range from 20-60 deer per square mile (dpsm) in healthy forest ecosystems, the Commission grossly overshot the herd, leaving only 1-2 dpsm in some regions. From 2005 to the present, PGC has maintained its assault on the herd with high and annually increasing numbers of antlerless hunting licenses and DMAP permits. The agency had mistakenly blamed deer for rapidly declining forest habitat and associated declining wildlife populations, and failed to recognize that the declines resulted from old and aging forests. Instead of harvesting timber to improve wildlife habitat, the Commission had mistakenly over-harvested deer. As a result, the deer herd has been virtually collapsed in many regions, habitat continues to decline, grouse populations and other forest-dwelling birds and mammals are rapidly declining because of mismanagement of the forest, an estimated 300,000 hunters have quit because of the lack of deer, family-business bankruptcies and closures are rampant throughout rural communities that are suffering over \$500 million of annual economic impacts totaling over \$7 billion in costs since 2001, and as of 2011 the state was losing a documented \$40 million per year in tax revenues that had escalated to \$93 million by 2016 -- \$58 million in annual state tax revenue losses, and \$35 million for local governments. The Commission is unwilling to resolve the crisis, and is, itself, losing \$8 million per year due to deer mismanagement.

THE SOLUTION. HB 1483 is designed to correct the greatest conservation mistake in the over-one-hundred-year history of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The bill will resolve six (6) major areas of concern.

(1) Deer Management / Sport Hunting. HB 1483 will increase deer populations throughout the Commonwealth by using three scientific wildlife management principles: creating broad-scale habitat enhancements, improving the biological structure of the deer population, and adjusting critical regulatory harvest measures. State-of-the-art habitat enhancements will result on 350,000 acres of State Game Lands and State Forests – creating 4,800 Forest Management Unit (FMU) sites throughout the roughly 6,000 square miles of public forests. This system of FMUs will be further developed on select private forests throughout the state. These measures will greatly increase forest carrying capacities to support more deer and sustain healthy deer while improving the health of the forest ecosystem.

In addition to increased deer densities, HB 1483 will use five other wildlife management and regulatory measures to return a targeted 300,000 sportsmen to the active ranks of hunting – 120,000 who by 2011 had quit hunting because of the lack of deer (see 2012 and 2017 Budget & Finance Committee reports), and over 150,000 others who continue to purchase licenses out of tradition but fail to go afield (see 2016 PGC news release). The five measures are intended to reduce hunting pressure on deer, to increase hunter satisfaction, and to improve scientific management practices:

- End the deer management assistance program (DMAP) on public lands.
- End concurrent buck and doe seasons.
- Return wildlife management units (WMUs) to a county-based system.
- Remove antler restrictions for senior hunters.
- Apply maximum-sustained-yield (MSY) principles to optimize deer harvests.

(2) Wildlife Habitat / Grouse and Other Species of Game and Nongame Wildlife. In addition to benefitting white-tailed deer, HB 1483's vast habitat enhancement system will create early successional forest stands on 4,800 square miles of public forestlands. The American Bird Conservancy identified "early successional forests" of the Northeast as one of the Top 10 threatened habitats in the United States. HB 1483 will especially benefit grouse populations, surpassing even those recommendations of the Ruffed Grouse Society. According to PGC's grouse biologist, Lisa Williams, "*Sightings this year were the fewest ever. If there's any good news, it's that grouse populations appear able to withstand illness if there's enough good habitat spread over a wide expanse.*" "*That is not how things have to be*", said Dan Dessecker, conservation policy director for the Ruffed Grouse Society. "*This is not rocket science. If you have young forests, you will have grouse. Pennsylvania doesn't,*" he said. PGC has failed for decades to cut mature timber as habitat for deer,

grouse, and other wildlife. Our forests are now 80-120 years old with closed tree-tops that are blocking sunlight from reaching the forest floor.

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Pete Sussenbach, director of PGC's bureau of habitat management, said, "*Right now we are heavily skewed toward that 80- to 120-year-old age class. There's just not a heck of a lot of those early successional forests out there. A dot of it here and there isn't going to do much. The problem is only expected to get worse.*" "*Grouse aren't going to disappear completely in the meantime*", concluded PGC's Lisa Williams.

The future success of our State Bird depends on passage of HB 1483. Habitat will be greatly improved for myriad other species of game and nongame wildlife from snowshoe hares, bats, and songbirds to pollinators such as honeybees and Monarch butterflies. There will be no public costs incurred from habitat enhancement operations. **There is no provision that is more important to deer, grouse, and other forest-dwelling wildlife than HB 1483.**

(3) Rural Economies. By increasing deer, grouse, and other wildlife populations with the resulting return of hundreds-of-thousands of sportsmen who had quit hunting because of the lack of deer, as well as the resulting influx of outdoor-loving citizens to Penn's Woods, HB 1483 will reinvigorate rural communities, family businesses, tourism and recreation, and the multi-billion-dollar outdoor recreation industry that have been devastated by over \$7 billion of damages, bankruptcies, and closures over the past 16 years as a result of the Commission's failed policies. Jeff Mulhollem, editor of Pennsylvania Outdoor News, published, "*Pennsylvania small businesses that catered to hunters have disappeared with the reduction of the deer herds.*" According to the director of the Cameron County Chamber of Commerce, "*The Commission's deer-reduction program is economic suicide for the county.*"

HB 1483 is projected to generate \$500 million per year for rural family businesses and communities, and up to \$1.2 billion annually within 10 years; to refill family cabins and hunting camps that now stand empty because of the lack of deer and other wildlife; and to generate \$93 million of annual tax revenues for state and local governments.

(4) Game Commission Accountability. Believing that the General Assembly does not have the scientific capabilities to technically oversee their actions, over the past 16 years the Commission has abused their conservation responsibilities to legislators, sportsmen, and the general citizenry. Quoting PGC executive management in private conversation, "*I get what I want. I baffle them with b___s___.*"

HB 1483 will assist the Commission in achieving its Title 34 mission using a legislatively appointed Forest and Wildlife Advisory Council of sportsmen and conservationists who will select and oversee a newly created Forest and Wildlife Advisory Service of wildlife biologists and forest scientists. In addition to deploying scientific forest and wildlife management techniques and coordinating the system of habitat enhancements, the Service will provide scientific advisory services to the General Assembly regarding forest and wildlife management, hunting and outdoor recreation, hunting-license-fee issues, and other conservation and environmental concerns toward assuring the highest degree of legislative oversight of the agency and the wisest multiple uses of Pennsylvania's natural resources.

(5) Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). At the current time, this virulent disease is expanding throughout the Commonwealth's deer herd and is threatening the future of both the state's deer and elk herds. At risk is not only the loss of major portions of both populations, but their viability for sport hunting, for outdoor recreation and tourism, and as multi-billion-dollar economic generators for rural communities. Game Commission policies are now encouraging the frequency-of-infection and rate-of-transmission of CWD. HB 1483 is designed to initiate remedial management techniques that are recommended from 10 years of university studies toward halting and reversing the spread of CWD. At this time, the futures of Pennsylvania's State Mammal and magnificent elk herd are dependent upon passage of HB 1483.

(6) American Chestnut. In 1904, an introduced Asian fungus began the 40-year extermination of the American chestnut throughout Pennsylvania forests and its range from Maine to Missouri. The American chestnut was the most valuable tree to wildlife in history, producing up to 2,000 pounds of chestnuts per acre every year, as opposed to oaks which filled the niche that was created by chestnut elimination and whose acorns are much less desirable to wildlife, are less bountiful, and are only produced every 2-3 years and longer. Chestnuts stimulated their own industry in the 19th century, having preferred wood characteristics for building houses, barns, and furniture, with train box-cars of nuts sent to cities – to be roasted over open fires. For decades, the American Chestnut Foundation has worked with university research labs to develop a blight-resistant strain that is indistinguishable in appearance and biological characteristics from the original parent stock. Soon these new seedlings will be ready for reestablishment throughout Penn's Woods. HB 1483's habitat

enhancement program will provide a unique mechanism to rapidly distribute this most valuable of native trees throughout 6,000 square miles of the Commonwealth's public forestlands.

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