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**BCWF**

BC WILDLIFE FEDERATION

***Presentation to the British Columbia  
Legislative Select Standing Committee on  
Finance and Government Services***

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## **Investing in creating a legacy of fish and wildlife diversity and abundance**

**On behalf of its 43,000 plus members, The BC Wildlife Federation welcomes this opportunity to address the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services on the vital issues that relate to natural resource management sustainability in British Columbia.**

The BC Wildlife Federation (BCWF) is the leading conservation organization in British Columbia. The BCWF promotes the conservation and wise use of British Columbia's fish, wildlife and their habitats and is recognized as such by stakeholders' province-wide. Throughout its history and under various names, British Columbia's fish and wildlife management agency has been among the most understaffed and underfunded of any of the fish and wildlife agencies in North America.

From 1974 to 2010, B.C.'s population nearly doubled from 2.4 to 4.5 million people. While the provincial budget increased almost five times, the budget for natural resource management barely moved. When we bring this up with our elected officials, we are told that all the money goes to the big three; health, education and social services, yet when we remove the big three from the budget, we find out everything else tripled. From 1998-2011 the renewable resource ministry budgets declined by nearly 56 percent, and from 1984-2010 the number of full-time equivalent employees declined by 21 percent. It isn't that health care, education, and social services are taking up the entire budget; it is that everything other than natural resource management takes up the entire budget. While B.C. is the most biodiverse jurisdiction in North America when it comes to funding, our neighbours to the East and South do better than B.C. on every metric.

They spend orders of magnitude more per species, more per square kilometre and more per capita. While B.C. spent ~\$34.1 million on fish and wildlife management in 2017, Idaho State spent three times more, with a budget of \$106 Million. Idaho is nearly one fifth the size, has one-third of the people, and nearly half the hunted species B.C. does.

We see this lack of investment in many of our fish and wildlife populations.

Mountain caribou are endangered and in decline across most of the province; we recently moved the remaining south Selkirk caribou to Revelstoke because the population was no longer viable. Chilcotin and Thompson river steelhead, once iconic runs in British Columbia, have gone from 3,000-5,000 fish returning annually with a catch and kill fishery, to being under threat, to imminent extinction. In fact, this year, the provincial government estimates fewer than 50 steelhead in the Chilcotin system. Moose populations in the central interior have experienced 50-70 percent declines in the last decade.

Mule deer and elk populations are also declining in parts of the province.

British Columbia is failing to adequately protect its natural resources, which is being exacerbated by the mountain pine beetle epidemic, fire suppression and climate change effects on forest ecosystem structure and productivity.



Meanwhile, after years of decline, the number of people taking up hunting has increased from 86,000 in 2005 to 112,000 in 2015 – more than a 30 percent increase.

This year the province is seeing tremendous increases in both hunter and angler license sales. However, hunting and angling in British Columbia have changed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. For the former, it is becoming increasingly difficult to exercise constitutionally protected rights to harvest wildlife. For non-Indigenous communities, hunting continues to be a family activity, where people are increasingly looking for sustainably and organically grown wild game. Both communities have a unifying interest in the sustainability of wildlife and wildlife habitat, yet chronic under-funding and resulting declines have divided these communities.

While most jurisdictions in North America have dedicated funding models for Wildlife, B.C. does not. Currently, 100 percent of freshwater fishing licence fees are dedicated between the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation and the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C.; only \$2.6 of \$14.5 million of hunting licence fees are dedicated to Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation.

In 2017, the BC NDP committed to ensuring dedicating funding for wildlife and habitat conservation, giving wildlife and habitat a priority, putting all funds from hunting licenses and tags into a dedicated fund for wildlife and habitat conservation and that all who rely on our wildlife resources will contribute financially to conservation.

In 2017, the B.C. Greens committed to focusing on restoring wildlife habitat, increasing funding to historic levels, committing to objectives for wildlife populations.

In 2017, the B.C. Liberals committed to endow a new Wildlife Society with \$5 million to manage and grow habitat, with future hunting fee revenue going towards the society to support their efforts.

Three years later, none of this has happened. While every party in B.C.'s legislature has constantly and consistently used words such as sustainability, conservation and the importance of biodiversity, food security, fish and wildlife, none have followed their written or spoken word.

The BCWF was encouraged the government increased the commitment of improving wildlife management by \$1 Million in 2018, \$3 Million in 2019, and \$10 Million in 2020. However, these dollars have not translated into actionable outcomes; the money has not gone into restoring wildlife populations. These budgetary increases were offset on the back end through reductions in base budgets, the Land-Based Investment System, and a further 25 percent holdback due to COVID related restraint.





## Hunting and Angling's Contribution

In 2013, freshwater angling was worth nearly one billion dollars, and 2011-12 expenditures by resident hunters generated \$230 million per year.

And there are tens of thousands of anglers and hunters who have money in their pocket and want to spend it, but fish populations and wildlife populations have declined so much that the opportunities to go out are either extremely limited or non-existent.

We see the bond is breaking between our young people and the natural world. Hunting and fishing are a fundamental part of Canadian society. A growing body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature—i.e. “nature deficit disorder” due to an increasing lack of connection to the land. There are ways to fix that.

I want to touch briefly on what we do and have done for habitat, fish and wildlife. The BC Wildlife Federation can trace its roots back to the late 1800s. In 1969, the B.C. Wildlife Federation founded the B.C. Conservation Foundation to implement projects in the field. From 1986 to 2016, the BCCF delivered over 5,000 conservation projects worth more than \$123 million in B.C.

In 1981, the BCWF helped start the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation. This organization began when hunters and anglers put their hands up and said they wanted to pay more for their licenses if that money was dedicated. The Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation has now funded over 3000 projects, awarding \$189M, including acquiring over 25,000 hectares of land for fish and wildlife conservation.

More recently, the BCWF started the Southern Interior Mule Deer Project. Mule deer have been a species of concern for over 60 years in parts of the interior, where hunter harvests have fallen by over 90 percent and no positive change in the mule deer population has been realized. Every government in history has turned a blind eye to the plight of these populations.

The project aims to identify the causes of the decline, with the hopes of reversing the trend. While similar projects have been funded wholly by Fish and Wildlife agencies in other jurisdictions, due to chronic under-funding in B.C., we had to be innovative.

### Southern Interior Muie Deer Project Success

The SIM Deer Project, started with a small \$5,000 grant, now has;

- two Ph.D. candidates at different post-secondary institutions;
- a partnership with Okanagan Nation Alliance;
- funding from over two dozen different organizations;
- over 100 volunteers contributed 3,000 hours of their time and 40,000 km of mileage on their vehicles.

We have taken \$5000 and turned it into a project worth well over \$1 million. The project has already identified areas of critical habitat and migratory routes for mule deer and will collect more actionable data as it enters its third year.





## Recommendations

### **Recommendation #1 – Establish Wildlife Governance and Funding Models**

The Premier mandated Minister of Forest Lands and Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD) to: “Improve wildlife management and habitat conservation and collaborate with stakeholders to develop long and short-term strategies to manage B.C.’s wildlife resources.”

We are now more than three years into the current government’s mandate. The province has not yet moved this mandate or its platform commitment from paper to the forest. The province of B.C. should immediately:

1. Dedicate all hunting license fees to wildlife management;
2. Dedicate a portion of all rent from those who make money off our natural resources (logging, mining, ecotourism, etc.) to fish and wildlife management;
3. Ensure that all funding is leveraged and that it results in on-the-ground management activities;
4. Set objectives for habitat, fish and wildlife in legislation;
5. Those who contribute funds should have a say in how they are allocated via an inclusive governance model;
6. First Nations must be included.

### **Recommendation #2 – Establish a Water Security Fund**

Establishing a \$200 Million Water Security Fund to support watershed stewardship groups, educational institutions, agricultural producers, industry, fisheries interests and others, alongside federal, provincial, First Nations and local governments with a focus on collaboratively protecting and maintaining the functioning of B.C.’s watersheds.

A Water Security Fund would be a permanent fund to invest in initiatives and efforts that deliver long-term water and watershed sustainability across B.C., including:

- collaborative partnerships at the watershed scale;
- modernized watershed-based land-use plans;
- community-driven restoration initiatives, and;
- innovation supporting province-wide advancements in watershed protection.

Healthy forests and wetland systems provide a host of watershed services, including water purification, groundwater and surface flow regulation, erosion control, and streambank stabilization, to the benefit of fisheries and wildlife.

- The importance of these watershed services will only increase as water quality becomes a critical issue and be more expensive to deal with in the face of climate change.





## Summary

British Columbia is fortunate to have a rich diversity of fish and wildlife resources, but it is disappearing. We are adding more people to British Columbia's population every day, putting more stress on our natural resources, and at the same time, cutting funding and capacity to steward those natural resources while dividing the communities which care so deeply about fish and wildlife conservation. Without proper funding and political leadership, this downward trend in our natural capital will accelerate. We have hit the wall.

The 43,000 and growing membership of the B.C. Wildlife Federation firmly believes it is our collective responsibility to restore these resources. We must recognize the challenges and opportunities that we face in maintaining B.C.'s diversity of species over the long-term, including investing in measures now that will prevent future costly species or habitat recoveries such as the mountain caribou recovery project or others. We also strongly believe in the benefits of building on existing fish and wildlife management and education programs as well as investing in new initiatives.

Your kids and their kids are counting on you to make the right decision, for your parties to be their word, to restore our mountains, lakes and streams to their former splendour. There was a time, only a decade ago, when a British Columbian could see a mountain caribou, catch a world-renowned Thompson steelhead, and this decade they are headed for museums. We can fix these problems; providing adequate and stable funding is the first key to success.