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Recovering America's Wildlife Act

Interview with Bill Heck, Regional Director, Mississippi Flyway North,
National Audubon Society

Introduction

Betsey Merkel: I'm so happy today to be speaking with Bill Heck and we're going to learn much more about the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. We're going to hear from Bill, whose storied experience in Audubon helping to conserve birds and habitat, and the tremendous effort that goes along with it. So, good afternoon Bill, how are you? And please introduce yourself.

Bill Heck: Good afternoon Betsey, and I am doing very nicely, thank you. Let me just tell you a little bit about myself. I think that most of the people that will hear this audio already know me or may have heard of me, one way or another, for good or ill.

I'm a long time Audubon member. I've been a member since the early 1980's. I've been involved in many ways in Audubon including President of two different chapters in Ohio, but my current role is that I'm serving on the National Audubon Board. I'm a Regional Director, which means I'm on the National Audubon Society Board of Directors and I represent an eight-state region in the upper Midwest, the Mississippi Flyway North.

That area includes Ohio and I'm delighted to have the opportunity to serve in that way and also to be in a position to represent Ohio's interests, and the interests of Ohio Audubon Chapters on the National Audubon Society Board.

It's been a lot of fun, I enjoy doing that, and I'm delighted to be able to talk to you a little bit today about the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. I am no expert by any means, but I have done some research. I've looked up the basics of the Act and have had a chance to talk to some people who are much more involved than I in the details and I'm happy to share what I can today. I think the fundamental message is going to be, this is something I hope all Audubon

chapters in Ohio and chapter members will be supporting, and we'll certainly talk about that in our conversation today.

Betsey Merkel: That's wonderful and I'm delighted as well. We're just eager and anxious to learn the basic information if we were an uninformed general public listener. What would you like us to know about this, and I know you're going to touch upon what people can do. If you could give us a basic outline of what this involves and any other message points that you think are important for all of us to know.

Background

[00:02:56]

Bill Heck: Let me back up and start with a little bit of background for you.

Many people don't know that in Ohio, general revenue tax dollars do not support wildlife conservation. In particular, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, which is the main Ohio government entity that is in charge of conservation efforts in Ohio, does not receive general revenue tax dollars.

They are funded by a combination of sources. Many of us know that the Division receives funding from hunting licenses and fishing licenses, also boat licenses, and there are some other ancillary things that hunters and anglers do contribute, as well as voluntary contributions. I should say for our hunting and fishing friends that they have been tremendously generous over decades in supporting wildlife conservation in Ohio.

There has been funding at the Federal level, which is passed on to the states since the 1930's, again for the hunting and fishing world, for game species.

What we need and what we don't have currently, is long-term stable funding for non-game species.

Now, interesting enough, I was talking with someone at the Division of Wildlife, and they tell me that probably 80% of their efforts in wildlife conservation are for non-game species. Obviously, they're spending a lot of the time helping the hunters and anglers of Ohio in terms of providing habitat for deer, rabbits, ducks - certainly as a hunted species - as well as fish species.

But, when they do that, a large portion of their effort actually is benefiting all other forms of wildlife, and including birds. And we're Audubon's so we ought to be talking about birds, right?

So, probably 80% of their effort is focused on non-game species and that ranges from everything many people in Ohio have heard of, programs, for instance, in mussels in our streams and rivers. That's the Division of Wildlife!

So, since there are no general revenue tax dollars going there, we need long-term stable

funding for wildlife conservation, and particularly for non-game species.

The Recovering America's Wildlife Act is a way to provide that. And the way this works, and I'm going to give you the quick overview, and again I don't have all the details at hand, but the way it works is a small portion of monies that are obtained from oil drilling and mineral extraction fees, and these go to the Federal government, a small portion of that would be diverted to the states for wildlife conservation purposes.

I want to be clear that this involves no new taxes, this is not a tax on the public nor is it a tax on businesses. We're talking about fees that are already being paid for mineral extraction and oil drilling, among other things, on Federal lands.

The question is, just diverting on a long-term basis, a portion of that money for conservation in all states across the country and in particular, in Ohio.

One thing that our listeners might be interested in knowing, is that if this Act passes in its current form, and I'm going to say a little bit more about the prospects of that, if the Act passes in its current form, Ohio's funding for wildlife diversity and wildlife conservation, would go up multiple times. We're not talking about a little bit of addition, we're talking about significantly more money for conservation in Ohio.

So that's the picture in general about the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. I hope that gives you a little background.

Betsey Merkel: That's excellent, thank you so much. That helps us by providing a framework for the context of the Act and the context of the situation that the Act is now arising in. What else is it that we can do specifically, and locally, and how can chapters and the public become much more engaged in National Audubon's efforts?

Action Steps

[00:07:42]

Bill Heck: There are several things. First, I do want to emphasize again that this is a bipartisan act, it has Republican and Democratic sponsors in Congress. One critical need is that the Audubon, and Audubon members, and the general public, make our congresspeople in Washington, D.C. aware of our desire, that, yes, we should be funding wildlife conservation in a serious way and we should be supporting Recovering America's Wildlife Act.

There are a number of co-sponsors of the legislation in the House of Representatives at this point, I certainly don't have the list at my fingertips, but it's a significant number of people. However, there are none from Ohio at the moment.

So one thing that I hope that Audubon chapters and their members will do is to contact their representatives and ask them to sponsor this legislation. The more sponsors the better, and again, we need to demonstrate that people in Ohio care about this issue.

Betsey Merkel: Very good. That's certainly a message that we can help to get out. I'm sure there are places on the web and at the National Audubon website, where people can go to read and learn more about this topic and also to take action. In our article, we'll be sure to research those links and include them for readers and listeners.

Bill Heck: I'll be happy to supply a few links. One thing I can tell people right away and for anyone listening to this, you don't need to look for the link, you can easily search for "America's Wildlife Recovery Act". If you search on that, you'll find there's a sponsoring alliance which includes people from industry, including people by the way from the oil extraction industry who are also in favor of this. It includes a number of organizations and if you just do that search on the web you can get to their site, it has a lot of good information about background, and on what's going on with the legislation, and I'm sure you'll find other sources too with a search like that.

Betsey Merkel: Yes, well, thank you for that. What would you like to talk about next, Bill? What is top-of-mind for you?

Strengthening Ohio

[00:10:34]

Bill Heck: There are a few stray facts that make this even more important. One is, when you look at Ohio, Ohio is number forty-seven per capita in land conservation in the United States. That's not exactly a sterling record and I'd certainly like to see us do better and I think all of us in Ohio would like to do better. Now in Ohio we have done some great work over the last few decades and I do want to give a shout out to the Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society that has done on-the-ground conservation work in Northeast Ohio and they've done a tremendous job. I think all the members of Western Cuyahoga should be proud and I hope they are proud.

But, again, we're forty-seventh in the nation and we can do better than that.

Let me give you some other examples: the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, since we're talking about northeastern Ohio, has been instrumental in saving lowlands in the Grand River Basin. There's an area where the funding that would arise from this bill, could be used to assist organizations such as the museum, in working with landowners or on public lands, to provide habitat and conserved habitat.

Certainly, some of the money could be used for land acquisition, but it is not necessarily that. We've got a good bit of public land in Ohio that could be better managed for conservation, and, a lot of private landowners want to not necessarily sell their land but want to put easements on their land because they believe in conservation. The funds arising from this bill could help to expedite that process, to help people with easements, which in many cases there are some costs associated with that.

Another thing I'd like to emphasize, going back to the hunting and fishing communities, some of the folks that I talked to at the Fishing and Wildlife often talk about the 'three-legged stool'.

We've got two-legs: we've got hunting, we've got fishing. And those people that engage in those activities are paying in the form of excise taxes and in many cases, voluntary contributions for conservation.

We need the third leg, we need the general wildlife diversity component as the third leg in our stool.

Another thing that's happening in Ohio and across the country, is that the hunting and fishing communities, as generous as they have been in their support of conservation, those communities are shrinking. The demographics are working such that there are fewer people hunting, and that's been true for decades and it's going down, and there are fewer people fishing.

But there are more and more people engaged in non-consumptive uses, like birding, for instance. And we all know there are a lot of birds around and it's (birding) becoming more and more popular.

We as birders, the birding community, and the general wildlife community, need to step up to the plate and support this kind of legislation.

Betsey Merkel: Very good. You've pointed out some key areas of opportunity for people to take action, to be present, and to lead. That's wonderful. What other information do you have for us that we need to pay attention to?

Summary Key Factors and Action Points

[00:14:23]

Bill Heck: Well, I think that the key factors that I suggest we keep in mind, and to summarize a couple of quick action points,

- I want to emphasize again that there are no new taxes involved. This is not a tax measure, it's simply using existing monies that mineral extraction and oil extraction industries already are paying for drilling and extracting on federal land and in federal waters, and using that money to support wildlife conservation.
- With that in mind, I think that the critical thing is to become informed on the issue. People don't have to learn all the details all the way through. We've often talked about legislation as a sausage making process, nobody needs to know all the details but simply to get the general idea, learn what's going on, and primarily again let your congresspeople know that you support the legislation and that you want to see co-sponsors from Ohio.
- Spread the word! We can spread the word through our friends and colleagues who might not be Audubon members, or who might not be listening to this audio, or who might not be looking at the website, let them know that this is a really important thing and this can make a huge difference for conservation in Ohio and across the country.

In our current political climate, and I don't think it comes as any surprise that it is highly polarized, this is a bipartisan effort and this is something I think the country can come together on and can be proud of. So, I hope people will take that seriously.

Betsey Merkel: That's excellent. You've given us lots to think about and I really appreciate the context of the topic and the basic information about it, and then the next step action points where people can become involved and begin to learn more about this. Thank you so much. Is there anything else you would like to add?

[00:14:23]

Bill Heck: Not really. I would ask people to contact your congresspeople and let them know you support the Recovering America's Wildlife Act.

Betsey Merkel: Thank you, Bill Heck, it's been wonderful to speak with you and thank you for taking the time in your day to help us understand more about how everyone can help in the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. Thank you so much.

Bill Heck: Thank you, Betsey, and thank you to the Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society.

William (Bill) Heck currently represents Audubon chapters in eight states (Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin) as Regional Director – Mississippi Flyway North on the board of the National Audubon Society. Previously, Bill was president of Columbus Audubon; treasurer of the Black Swamp Bird Observatory in northwestern Ohio; on the Audubon Ohio board; and a member of the nominating committee and the board of directors of the Ohio Ornithological Society. A former resident of southwestern Ohio, Bill has been president of Audubon Miami Valley; served as treasurer of the Three Valley Conservation Trust; and was treasurer of the Environmental Mobile Unit in Oxford.

He retired in 2007 after a career in information technology management in both the private and public sectors. He holds BA (Heidelberg University), MA (Kent State University), and MBA (Miami University) degrees.

When not working with conservation and birding organizations, Bill travels extensively, usually on birding trips. His destinations have included a number of countries in Central and South America as well as Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Madagascar, Thailand, and the Philippines. His wife, Mary, joins him on the less lunatic of these Adventures.

Bill's friends describe him as an obsessive birder but otherwise harmless. Bill is located at 201 Montrose Way, Columbus, OH 43214 and can be reached at email wheck@audubon.org or phone: (614) 859 BIRD (2473).

Betsey Merkel manages web and marketing for Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society.

Recommended:

- Recovering America's Wildlife Act legislation reintroduced
<http://wildlife.org/recovering-americas-wildlife-act-legislation-reintroduced/>
- The National Wildlife Federation
<https://www.nwf.org/Our-Work/Wildlife-Conservation/Policy/Recovering-Americas-Wildlife-Act>
- National Wildlife Federation, Fast Facts on the Wildlife Crisis
https://www.nwf.org/~media/Documents/PDFs/Wildlife-Conservation/Fast-Facts-Wildlife-Crisis_10192017.ashx