



MY FAVORITE TAX

For decades, we hunters, shooters, and archers have been paying a federal surcharge that helps conserve elk, bighorn sheep, geese, grouse, and other wildlife. If you didn't know that, you're not alone. **BY HAL HERRING**

As we gnash our teeth and rail at the assaults on our natural world—from calls to sell off federal lands to oil spills fouling our drinking and fishing waters—we conservation-minded Montanans need to take a few long moments to unclench our jaws and celebrate our successes. One in particular is largely unknown to the ranks of new hunters—the men and women who want to harvest naturally organic meat for their families. I enthusiastically welcome these newcomers. I want them, and the rest of us, to truly understand how we produced the wildlife populations they are just now beginning to enjoy and the rest of us have been appreciating most of our lives.

I want to tell them about the Pittman-Robertson Act (also known as P-R), and the cash that for decades has been flowing from it into our state's wildlife management coffers. As hunter license sales level off and non-hunting-related demands on Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks continue to increase—grizzly bear management alone costs the agency \$650,000 per year—P-R has never seemed so

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important, or so visionary.

I thought most people in the hunting world knew about P-R, but I was wrong. While researching this article, I called the gun counter at a major outdoor retailer to ask if the Pittman-Robertson taxes applied to cartridge reloading equipment (I later learned they don't). The friendly guy who answered the phone—otherwise knowledgeable about his merchandise—told me he had never heard of the Pittman-Robertson Act. I don't fault him for not knowing. We shooters and hunters have done a poor job of explaining, even to one another, just how irreplaceable P-R and hunters are to American wildlife and habitat conservation and management. So, for the good guy at the gun counter and everybody else, including me, here's the story of the most important single source of funding for wildlife the world has ever known.

Taxing ourselves

The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, called the Pittman-Robertson Act after its sponsors (Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Representative A. Willis Robertson of Virginia) came about at the lowest point for wildlife populations in our nation's history. The Depression and Dust Bowl had

taken a toll. State and federal agencies charged with restoring populations were broke. Worried about this dire situation, sportsmen across the country pressured Congress to continue an existing excise tax on firearms and ammunition. Congress agreed and set the tax at 11 percent. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the act into law.

The tax money collected from the manufacturers (who pass the extra cost on to

customers in the retail price) goes to the U.S. Department of the Interior. That revenue is then returned to each state according to a formula based on the number of hunting licenses sold each year and total landmass. (As the fourth-largest state in the nation, Montana makes out well in this regard. According to Adam Brooks, FWP's Federal Aid Program manager, Montana gets back \$1.24 for every \$1 in P-R excise tax that Mon-

tana sportsmen and sportswomen pay.)

Foreseeing that state legislatures might be tempted to use the money for other purposes, Congress required that P-R funds be used only to maintain wildlife populations, provide public access, and otherwise support programs that directly benefit hunters and shooting sports. To ensure that states continued to okay hunting license fee increases and not rely solely on the federal

funds, Congress had another great idea: Before a state could receive its share of P-R money, it had to pony up at least 25 percent in matching funds from hunting-license dollars. That helps sportsmen's groups push for regular license fee increases that at least keep pace with inflation. A state unable to match its allocated funds must return the P-R money back to the Department of the Interior to distribute to other states that can.



CONSERVATION TOOL A hunter checks out shotguns and rifles at Ray's Sports and Western Wear in Harlowton. If he buys a firearm, 11 percent of the sticker price will go to the U.S. Department of Interior, which will then allocate that money back to FWP to use for managing wildlife in Montana.

P-R is a classic case of “user pays, user benefits.” If hunters want to hunt, they have a responsibility to fund the management and conservation of wildlife.

The results of this visionary conservation legislation have been extraordinary, for both hunting and nonhunting fans of wildlife. In Montana alone, P-R has contributed more than \$275 million over the past 79 years for wildlife habitat and management, benefiting creatures from warblers to whitetails. Some of the money is targeted for hunting education programs, but most pays for the work of wildlife biologists, including the semiannual flyovers to count big game across Montana. It also goes to buy and manage Beckman, Mount Haggin, Dome Mountain, Blackfoot-Clearwater, and other state wildlife management areas and conservation easements.

Success of the Pittman-Robertson Act led to its expansion in 1970 to include a 10 percent tax on handguns and 11 percent tax on archery equipment.

P-R money, generated by everything from the youth-sized compound bow you bought your *Hunger Games*-inspired daugh-



TAX RETURNS The price sticker on ammo includes an 11 percent federal surcharge allocated to states for wildlife conservation.

We’d need all the support we could get to help us fight—and I know this sounds odd—to keep taxing ourselves for the good of wildlife conservation.

ter to the box of all-copper .270 cartridges purchased by your eco-minded brother-in-law, continues to be the backbone of FWP wildlife management.

Huge return on investment

These visionary excise taxes are based on basic principles of economic growth: Restore wildlife habitat to increase numbers of huntable game animals and boost the sale of licenses, which in turn fuels the sale of more guns, bows, and ammunition, which then provides more excise tax revenue for restoring wildlife. The cycle continues on in beautiful perpetual motion, teeming with happy outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen, healthy big game herds, and skies alive with pintails, tundra swans, and snow geese.

Of course hunters, shooters, and gun and ammo manufacturers don’t tax themselves out of the goodness of their heart. There’s huge self-interest in maintaining huntable wildlife populations and building markets for bows, rifles, and bullets.

But there’s also no denying the enormous societal benefits accrued by the P-R excise tax. Most everyone enjoys seeing the elk,

bighorn sheep, deer, black bears, and other big game restored and managed with the surcharge. P-R money protecting a marsh helps a watchable green heron just as much it does a huntable green-headed mallard—not to mention maintaining a wetland’s many ecological benefits: absorbing spring floods, filtering water, and storing carbon-laden soil and vegetation.

Then there’s the extraordinary return on investment. One nationwide study in 2011 found that the federal excise tax represented a 1,000 percent return on investment to manufacturers. Billions of dollars are spent not only by hunters and anglers but also by wildlife watchers, hikers, and other non-hunters who enjoy the clean water, abundant wildlife, and open spaces that P-R funds pay to conserve and protect.

It is unfortunate that so few people know this story. But it’s important that all of us who care about wildlife do. Too many people just assume we have open space and wildlife and clean water by divine right. It’s like how kids living at home with good parents believe there will always be a sound roof over their heads and plenty of food on the table,

never seeing the toil and risk it takes to earn those essentials. Abundant wildlife and healthy habitat don’t just happen. Certainly nonhunters contribute by donating to groups like The Nature Conservancy and paying federal taxes for managing national forests. But the lion’s share of wildlife habitat and management funding comes from hunting licenses and P-R funds. It’s up to those of us who fork over that money each year to explain those great benefits to one another and our fellow citizens.

Nearly a century ago, American leaders recognized the nation’s responsibility to restore and steward its greatest natural resources—and had the genius to figure out how to pay for it. It was hunters who made this happen, and we’re still doing it. But that’s not enough.

It’s essential that we also tell everyone who cares about wildlife about that ongoing accomplishment. Someday Congress might try to repeal the Pittman-Robertson Act, and we hunters would need all the support we could get to help us—and I know this sounds odd—keep taxing ourselves for the good of wildlife conservation. 🐾



Still no tax on bird seed

A near miss for P-R-style nongame funding

Nongame wildlife conservation almost had its own Pittman-Robertson-type dedicated funding source. In the early 1990s, the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies launched an initiative to expand hunting, fishing, and boating excise taxes to include a 1 to 5 percent surcharge on backpacks, sleeping bags, tents, canoes, bird seed, binoculars, and other camping, recreation, and birding gear. The idea was that all outdoors enthusiasts would benefit from the clean water, open space, and abundant nongame wildlife the new funding would conserve.

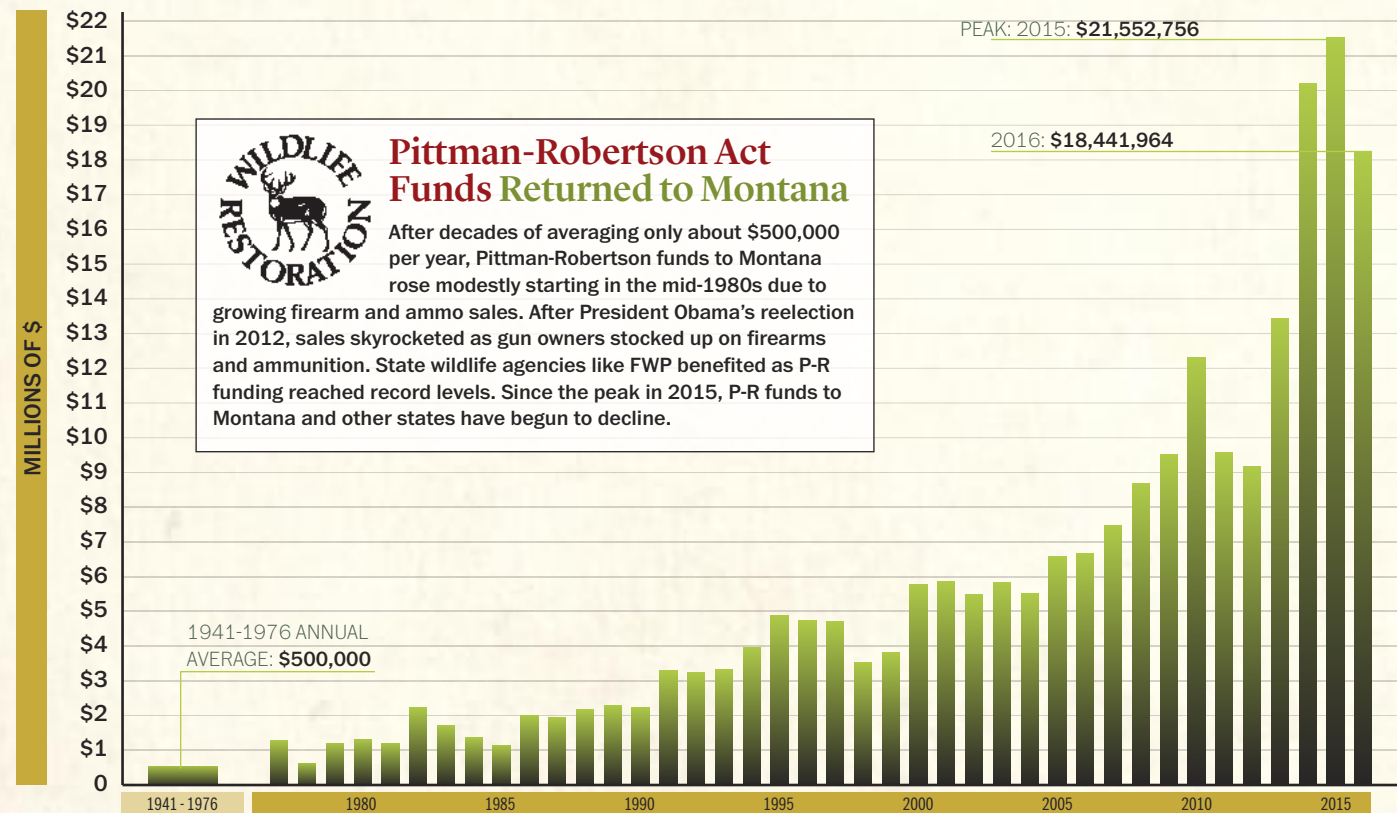
Supporting the proposal were the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, key members of Congress, and many manufacturers and retailers.

Unfortunately, a trade group representing several large outdoors recreation companies opposed the idea, as did members of Congress who had pledged to add no new federal taxes. By the late 1990s, the new surcharge idea was shelved.

In its place came proposals over the next two decades to fund broad-based fish and wildlife conservation using royalties from oil and gas development on federal lands and waters. Though more than 6,000 organizations representing millions of birders, hikers, hunters, anglers, and other outdoors enthusiasts now support dedicated federal funding for fish and wildlife conservation, Congress has made only halting progress.

A current proposal by the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America’s Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources has found bipartisan support in both houses. It holds the greatest promise ever for providing a permanent funding source for this much-needed conservation work.

—Tom Dickson



Anglers, boaters also tax themselves



Inspired by the success of the Pittman-Robertson Act, Congress in 1950 passed the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (known as the Dingell-Johnson Act, or D-J), creating a 10 percent tax on boats, boating fuel, and fishing tackle. This has become another of the planet’s great conservation success stories. In 2016, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks received \$8.7 million from D-J and used it for everything from maintaining fishing access sites to running hatcheries to monitoring fish populations.

Side note: Representative John Dingell of Michigan, who co-sponsored the bill, was the longest serving member of Congress in history when he retired in 2014. Dingell consistently received an “A” rating from both the National Rifle Association and a 100 percent rating from the League of Conservation Voters. I find that combination a powerful antidote to cynicism.

—Hal Herring



LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE DURAN; RAPALA; SHUTTERSTOCK