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## SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE NEXT CENTURY OF CONSERVATION

*By: Jodi Stemler*

During September, anyone who hunts has probably already started to soothe their annual itch to spend time in the great outdoors. Hunting seasons are getting underway, or you've spent time cleaning up the duck blind or scouting big game. Anticipating the hours by the campfire or in the blind has kept you going through the summer, and now your opportunity to reconnect not just with your friends and families but also with the fundamental need to spend time in the wild has finally come.

But this fall, those of us who hunt or care about wildlife and habitat conservation have to look beyond our hunting season. This fall, the current generation of hunting and conservation leaders will be meeting with government decision-makers to chart the course for the future of our passions. We all need to sit up and take notice because from this meeting will come a long-term plan that will directly impact all of us.

Meetings happen all the time, you might think, what should make us think that this one might be different?

What's different is it's the first time since Theodore Roosevelt that a President has determined that wildlife conservation and our hunting heritage are important enough to bring together those that have a stake in these issues to craft a strategy that will take us through at least the next decade. What's different is a meeting that had its genesis in a presidential executive order, that will take direction and focus from the hunting and conservation community, and will actively engage elected officials from across political backgrounds to ensure its success in future years no matter who is in the White House or controlling Congress.



The *White House Conference on North American Wildlife Policy* will take the values and lessons learned from a century of conservation efforts; efforts that largely took shape after years of exploitation of our perceived inexhaustible resources left wildlife populations and hunting as a whole in jeopardy. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt convened a broad group of leaders to address the issue of natural resource conservation. The meeting launched conservation to national attention and set the stage for the next generation of hunter conservationists.

From Roosevelt's legacy came the likes of Aldo Leopold who led the charge to craft the American Game Policy in 1930 to solidify the importance of wildlife management and to strengthen the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. The Game Policy was updated only once in 1973 when a new North American Wildlife Policy adapted wildlife conservation goals to fit the new challenges that were facing wildlife management.

But while challenges continue to mount, a national direction and strategy for hunting and conservation has not been developed in more than thirty years. With urging from the Sporting Conservation Council, a federal committee created to advise federal agencies on conservation issues of interest to the hunting community, President Bush signed an Executive Order in August 2007 to pave the way for a necessary update.

"The vision of our forefathers helped protect this country's precious natural resources, but we have work that we need to continue in order to ensure we have healthy wildlife populations and continued opportunities for hunting," stated Sporting Conservation Council Chairman and Boone and Crockett Club Chairman, Bob Model. "Hunters have long led the charge on protecting wildlife and their habitat, and it is with this perspective that we will lay the foundation for the future of wildlife conservation and our hunting traditions."

The *Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation* Executive Order called for the federal agencies to facilitate the expansion and enhancement of hunting opportunities and the management of game species and their habitat. Specifically, the Departments of Interior and Agriculture were tasked to evaluate the effects of their actions on trends in hunting participation, consider the economic and recreational values of hunting, manage wildlife and wildlife habitats to expand and enhance hunting opportunities, and work collaboratively with state and tribal wildlife managers to foster healthy and productive wildlife populations.

Beyond the tangible agency actions that have come from the executive order, it also calls for the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality and the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior, working with the Sporting Conservation Council, to convene a wildlife policy conference that would be the foundation for a ten-year Recreational Hunting and Wildlife Resource Conservation Plan.

The overarching theme will be the perpetuation and the strengthening of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. Within this framework, topics will include the management of wildlife at the state, tribal and federal levels; conserving and managing habitat including addressing issues including energy development and climate change; ensuring dependable funding for wildlife conservation; and perpetuating hunter traditions. Working groups made up of a broad group of interests have expanded these concepts and developed real, attainable policy objectives to be included in the final ten-year plan.

So yes, fall means finally getting out into the field to hunt and reconnect with the outdoors, but this year it will also mean the start of the next century of conservation.

*This article is the first in a series about the White House Conference on North American Wildlife Policy. Following articles will provide more in-depth perspectives on the historical context of hunting and conservation.*

*Jodi Stemler has spent more than a decade working on sportsmen's and wildlife conservation issues. She is assisting the American Wildlife Conservation Partners raise awareness about the historical opportunity this conference will present hunters.*

*For more information, go to [www.wildlifepartners.org](http://www.wildlifepartners.org)*