

Bill Would Tap Game Commission Fund to Help Farm Conservation

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The Pennsylvania Game Commission's coffers would be pared to support a program that helps farmers mitigate water pollution under a bill recently passed in the state Senate.

The fiscal code, which helps

implement the state budget, was approved by the Senate on Aug. 30, but a last-minute amendment calls for the transfer of \$150 million from the Game Commission's Game Fund to Pennsylvania's Clean Streams Fund.

The latter was created last year with \$220 million from the federal

American Rescue Plan Act. It funds conservation programs, including the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program, which supports on-farm water-quality projects.

Since the Senate version was approved with the amendment, the bill will go back to the House for concurrence.

If it's approved and signed into law by the governor, not only would \$150 million be transferred from the Game Fund, but the Game Commission would also have to pay taxes on its 1.5 million acres of game lands.

In addition, the transfer of money

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out of the Game Fund could result in the agency losing its eligibility for annual Pittman-Robertson funds, which totaled nearly \$42 million in 2023.

Pittman-Robertson funds are derived from a federal excise tax on hunting and shooting equipment. The funds are collected by the federal government and disbursed to the states as matching grant money to state wildlife agencies.

Pittman-Robertson funds are intended to be used for administration of a state fish and wildlife agency and management of wildlife-related resources.

The result would be a serious long-term threat to the Game Commission's finances.

"It's a lot of money," said agency spokesman Travis Lau. "It was clear to us right off the bat that Pittman-Robertson funding could be impacted."

Lau said the agency reached out to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after the bill passed the Senate, and was told the transfer out of the Game Fund is not an appropriate use of Pittman-Robertson

county conservation district in the state signed on with the State Conservation Commission, which administers ACAP, to participate in the program.

"The districts have dedicated all funding, and some have a waiting line for funding," Shambaugh said. "If there are any additional funds for ACAP, the demand will absolutely be there."

But if the additional funding were to come at the expense of the Game Commission's Game Fund, Shambaugh said things could change with the legislation.

"We always support dedicated funding for conservation. As far as where that funding comes from, I'm not going to take a position on that. There are too many variables," she said.

Chris Hoffman, the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau president, said he supports funding ACAP to help farmers improve water quality.

But if money from the Game Fund is going to be reallocated, Hoffman said it should be used for a different purpose than conserva-

tion.

"Before taking money out of the Game Commission to put in other programs, the Game Commission should be helping address the crop damage our members are experiencing, which is in the hundreds of millions of dollars," he said. "We are in favor of ACAP funding, but we've been asking for years for the Game Commission to cover crop damages."

Several hunting and conservation organizations believe the money should remain in the Game Fund, and say a move to take it out will cripple the agency.

The Pennsylvania chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers said the provision violates the trust of nearly 1 million hunters who have paid into the Game Fund through license purchases and excise taxes.

"The (Game Commission) functions entirely without General Fund or tax dollars. If future legislators follow suit and conduct further raids on the fund, it will result in immense damage to the

commission's ability to carry out its mission," the group said.

The Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen and Conservationists, and the United Bowhunters of Pennsylvania, have also voiced opposition to the fiscal code amendment.

In July, the bill passed in the House 191-12. After the amendment was added in the Senate, it passed by a margin of 29-18.

Rep. Dave Maloney, R-Berks, cast one of the few votes against the bill in the House. The top Republican on the Game and Fisheries Committee, Maloney said the transfer of \$150 million from the Game Fund is egregious and breaches the narrow list of things the fund can be used for.

"This transfer of funds would set a very dangerous precedent for future transfers and diversions, both here in PA and across the nation," Maloney said.

He plans to oppose the bill when it is brought up for a concurrence vote in the House.

Aid to Conservation

If the bill becomes law and the transfer remains in place, it could be a welcome influx of funds for the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program.

If the program doesn't receive additional funding after 2024, the program would go away, said Brenda Shambaugh, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts.

Last year's one-time infusion of federal aid was never seen as a long-term funding mechanism for the conservation program.

So far, demand from farmers for ACAP funds has been high. Every

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