

Time for Action

THE PRICE FOR A GALLON OF GAS IN 1989 WAS \$1.02.

Now it's about \$2.20. The cost of a vehicle suitable for a Conservation Enforcement Officer in 1989 was \$12,016. Now it's \$20,724. The starting salary for that officer in 1989 was \$17,394. Now that starting salary is \$29,393. State Troopers start at \$33,223.

The cost of an Alabama resident hunting license was \$16 in 1989, the last year license fees were increased. The current cost of a resident hunting license is \$16. In 1989, the cost of an Alabama resident freshwater fishing license was \$9.50. The current cost of a resident freshwater fishing license is \$9.50.

By David Rainer

Funding Crisis

It doesn't take an economist to figure out with the increased costs of doing business since 1989, the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division is facing a funding crisis.

In fact, according to M.N. "Corky" Pugh, Director of the Alabama Department of Conservation's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, the Division's "toes are hanging over the cliff" when it comes to funding.

"The abundant hunting and fishing opportunities we enjoy now are a result of a partnership between the professional employees in the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division and the private landowners, hunters and anglers," Pugh said. "When you look at the opportunities we have compared to other states, people are just amazed at the abundant populations of deer and turkey and the abundant fishing opportunities we have in Alabama.

"Yet, when you look at our hunting and fishing license costs, compared to other states, we're way below the other Southeast states. When you take into account the added tags and permits that some of the other states have, our straight-forward \$16 hunting license is less than half of what most of them are."

For comparison, the average cost of a full hunting license in the surrounding states of Mississippi, Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana and Georgia is \$55.20. Some states, like Tennessee, force hunters to buy multiple licenses for privileges that are included in the Alabama license. The average freshwater fishing license in those states is \$13.80. Tennessee charges \$28, plus an \$18 trout sticker.

"We're way behind the average," Pugh said. "We all know how much more things cost now than they did in 1989. Only by being very frugal have we gotten by as long as we have."

Alabama's estimated deer population is currently 1.5 million. The estimated turkey population is 450,000. "When you look back at 1940, there were only about 16,000 deer and only 11,000 turkeys estimated in the whole state," Pugh said. "So that's a tremendous success story."

In terms of harvest in 2005-06, there were 441,000 deer taken by a little more than 204,000 deer hunters. The turkey harvest was 64,500 by approximately 56,400 hunters. "The success rate is incredible among our hunters," Pugh said. "In order to continue that, we must adequately fund the program that manages and protects the resource. Alabama has over 540,000 acres of public water reservoirs and lakes and approx-

imately 77,000 miles of freshwater streams. All the work that our fisheries section does to make sure the fish populations are healthy and abundant is funded through license sales and matching federal funds from Sport Fish Restoration. It's the same on the hunting side. The wildlife management areas, the hunter education program, shooting sports and archery programs and landowner assistance programs are all funded with hunting license revenue and federal funds through the Wildlife Restoration Program. As a matter of fact, both the Sport Fish Restoration and Wildlife Restoration programs return \$3 in federal money for every \$1 of state hunting license money to fund these activities."

The Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division gets zero dollars from the state General Fund, and the federal money received is restricted to specific fisheries and wildlife management activities.

Impact Is Felt

"One of the realities we face is that under the federal law dealing with those programs, we can't use federal matching dollars for law enforcement," Pugh said. "So our enforcement program is the first to suffer when we're in dire straits financially, like we are now. We currently have 19 Conservation Enforcement Officer vacancies. We are concerned about the impact this will have on our wildlife resources and we are equally concerned about the impacts to the landowners, hunters and anglers. From the landowner perspective, those conservation officer vacancies mean that we are unable to adequately respond when a landowner calls and somebody is illegally shooting

deer at night on their property or illegally shooting deer from a public road or trespassing. We're not going to have the people to respond. We don't have the people to adequately respond now.

"When you consider what will happen on the wildlife management areas, we're not going to have the money to do much of the required work such as planting the food plots or maintaining roads for public access. We're not going to be able to maintain our public shooting ranges as we should and it will prohibit the construction of new shooting ranges. We're already stretched to provide needed hunter education classes. On the fisheries side, the hatcheries will have to reduce their operations, which will impact the stocking of gamefish in public waters. We pump a lot of money and manpower into the community kids' fishing events, and we won't be able to maintain those at the current level."

Without a license increase, the current shortage of 19 conservation enforcement officers could increase to as many as 50 in two years because of retirements. "We cannot fill any vacancies until we solve our funding problem," Pugh said.

The one who feels the impact most is Allan Andress, Chief of the Enforcement Section. "There is a great demand for our services, not just from the hunting and fishing public, but the general public, as well," Andress said. "We help them with a variety of problems. For example, when a big alligator or a sick raccoon crawls up in your yard, who are you going to call? When rural residents hear shots at 2 o'clock in the morning or confront an armed poacher on their land, who are they going to call? It's going to be the conservation officer. When

a hurricane rips through the state, who has the boats, four-wheel drives and ATVs to get into these places and help people? It's the Conservation Department. We're the ones who handle those things."

Andress said, "Last year, 12,309 calls for assistance were logged through the district offices. That doesn't count the numerous requests for service that officers receive directly through their daily contact with the public.


"This fall, there has been a 27-percent increase in night-hunting complaints over the same period last year. After declining for many years, nighttime deer poaching seems to be making a comeback.

"We had 1,228 nuisance animal complaints – everything from squirrels to alligators," he said. "Most of those calls are just from ordinary citizens who don't have any idea what to do or where our funds come from."

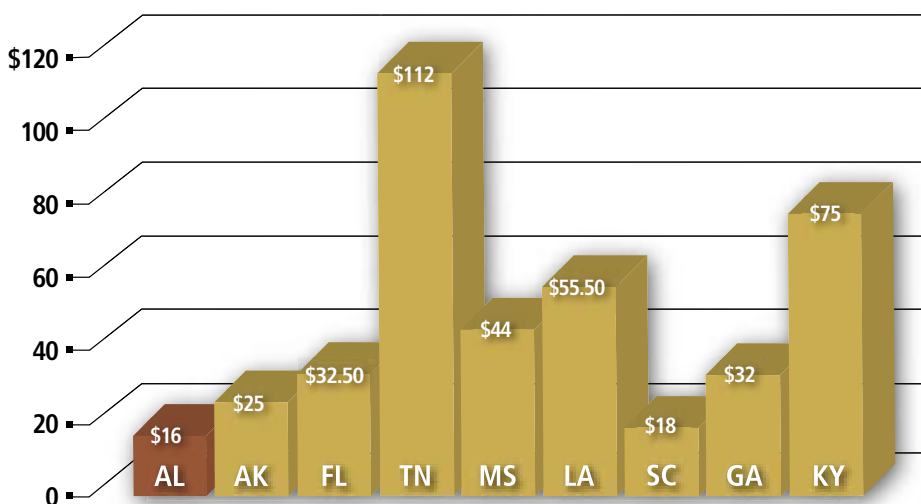
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Andress said efficiency has kept the division afloat as the funds diminished. "We also do a better job of coordinating our officers' work time with the public demand. We track our calls so that we can determine when and where we are needed.

"We have reached the peak with the current force. With fewer people to dispatch, our ability to perform those services will start to decline, leaving many areas and some entire counties without a resident conservation officer."

Now is the time to take a major step forward in protecting and managing Outdoor Alabama. Through increased efficiency, the Division has been able to manage without a license increase for 18 years. However, the current financial situation is increasingly critical. Legislation to increase the prices of hunting and fishing licenses will be introduced this spring. The Conservation Department asks for your support to keep Alabama's wildlife and fish resources healthy and abundant. It is the right thing to do and the right time to do it. 

Comparison of License Fees for Annual Resident All-game Hunting in the Southeastern U.S.



License fees depicted for each state have been correlated to match the hunting opportunities provided through Alabama's annual all-game hunting license.