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Taxes with benefits: Federal funds help ensure fish, wildlife in state can thrive

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David Snodgrass

David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

Mohammad Hassan Yousefi feeds fish at the Cikana State Fish Hatchery in Martinsville. Money from federal taxes on fishing, boating and hunting items and licenses helps fund the hatchery and other improvements for habitat, wildlife and fish across Indiana. This year Indiana received a record \$17 million from the federal Pittman-Robertson and Dingle-Johnson acts.



Posted: Sunday, May 11, 2014 2:20 am

By A. Jay Wagner Special to the Hoosier Times | 1 comment

A modest gravel lot is carved out of the surrounding cornfields where Paragon Road meets the White River. A few crushed and faded beer cans are scattered near a cement slab that descends into the muddy waters.

Farm machinery and pickups cross the bridge heading toward the small town of Paragon or toward the traffic of Ind. 37. Throughout the morning and early afternoon, the ramp only saw occasional activity. A pickup truck backs in a trailer, dropping a fishing boat into the water, and a pair of Indiana University students unstrap a pair of kayaks from the roof of their Subaru.

It's Burnett Landing, and it isn't much. But it isn't supposed to be. Its unobtrusiveness is its purpose. The boat access acts as a nexus between urbanity and nature.

And it's one of the innumerable products of the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, commonly known for the lead signatories as the Dingell-Johnson Act. The 1950 federal law places an excise tax on boats, boating fuel, and fishing equipment and redistributes the money to states to be used for hatcheries, fishing surveys, and boat access sites including Burnett Landing.

Dingell-Johnson is the aquatic corollary to Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, or the Pittman-Robertson Act. Passed in 1937 and considered by many to be landmark legislation in the conservation movement,

Pittman-Robertson taxes guns, bows, and ammunition and dedicates the revenue to land acquisition and maintenance, shooting ranges and education programs.

Together they raised nearly \$1.1 billion nationally in 2013, and present the disparate interests receiving broad political support, gaining full approval from the National Rifle Association as well as environmental groups. The reciprocity of the programs is undeniable. Those taxed — boaters, hunters, anglers, hikers — see the money reinvested into supporting their hobbies.

"They're invaluable," said Jim Hodgson, the regional Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration chief. "Fish and Wildlife Services wouldn't be the same without Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson."

Glen Salmon, the current landscape conservation cooperative coordinator and former director of the Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife, said the effects of the acts have been seismic.

"I don't think America would be what it is today without Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson. They support all the hard work that goes into preserving the wildlife and the habitats that we've come to expect," Salmon said.

Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that Indiana would be receiving a record \$17 million in combined Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson allocation. The historic amount is attributed to a jump in firearms and ammunition sales and the inclusion of money put aside during the 2013 government sequestration.

Distribution of the funds is determined by a formula considering the state's excise tax revenue, the number of hunting and fishing licenses issued, along with population and land area. The federal government provides 75 percent of the funding for the programs, with the states often using revenue from licenses to help cover the remaining 25 percent.

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One recipient of Dingell-Johnson funds is the nearby Cikana State Fish Hatchery. Thirty-five ponds spread throughout 28 acres just outside of Martinsville, it is one of eight state-owned hatcheries that maintain Indiana's fishing stock. Cikana alone produces 23 million fish of more than 18 different species, including popular sport fish like walleye, bass, trout, muskie and catfish.

Dan Jessop, the longtime manager at Cikana, had a hard time imagining the hatchery without the support of Dingell-Johnson.

"It's huge," he said. "It allows us to scientifically manage the state's fish population. Without it I'm not sure we could accomplish very much."

An unlikely relationship between the state hatcheries and the Bureau of Prisons, and funded primarily by Dingell-Johnson, has resulted in the successful Go FishIN in the City program, bringing fishing opportunities to urban areas.

The hatcheries administer the program, but the real work is done by the inmates at Terre Haute's federal penitentiary, where they had previously raised and prepared fish for consumption. The first year of the program saw such success in stocking the waters near Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, Evansville and other cities that the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Fish and Wildlife is considering more complicated work for the penitentiary in the future.

"It's worked for us, and it's worked for them," said Jeff Malwitz, assistant property manager at Cikana. "They have the facilities and manpower, and they've been great to work with."

The Pittman-Robertson Act funds a wide range of hunting education programs and since 2007 it's supported the Indiana branch of the National Archery in Schools Program, which introduces archery back into the school curriculum. Worked into existing physical education, math, or physics coursework, the program has been unmitigated success and sparked an explosion of interest throughout the state.

Tim Beck, program coordinator, said you could fill a book with all the triumphs, citing a number of students overcoming developmental and behavioral issues when given an inclusive outlet.

"Not everyone has the ability to participate on a basketball court, but we can help just about anybody shoot a bow and arrow," Beck said.

The program began a state tournament in 2007, drawing 200 students. It's grown dramatically since, moving from Kokomo to a bigger venue in Muncie, where it had more than 1,000 participants. This year the tournament will be conducted on the Indiana State Fairgrounds with 1,600 challengers.

"We had to turn 400 students down this year, because we still didn't have enough space," Beck said. "The growth has been amazing. In the I-64 corridor, between New Albany and Evansville, you can find an archery tournament held in a high school gym just about every weekend."

Be it a boat ramp, an introduction to archery or the maintenance of the state's fishing stock, Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson provide the resources that allow for Indiana's natural habitat and fish and wildlife populations to thrive.

"It's not a glitzy, glamorous program. It's about taking care of the natural resources, and the acts provide the money for the fish food, the pickup truck, the college-educated scientist, and the microscope. It largely goes unnoticed, which I think says a lot about its expectations and successes" Salmon said.

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