

Wisconsin's Waterfowl Stamp – Is it time for a change?

Few among us would choose to increase the taxes we pay every day. Especially during this extended period of economic downturn, all of us are paying more attention to every dollar we earn. In its simplest form, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Stamp is a tax: a fee we pay to our government for the privilege to hunt migratory waterfowl. Yet the Waterfowl Stamp funds generated by these sales are used in a way that is perhaps more compelling for hunters to “buy in” to:

By statute, since 1978, the Department of Natural Resources has been authorized to collect the fees from the Waterfowl Stamp, and use them in two specific ways:

67% of the monies are to be used, “... for developing, managing, preserving, restoring, and maintaining wetland habitat and for producing waterfowl and ecologically related species of wildlife....”.

33% of the monies collected are used, “... for the development of waterfowl propagation areas with Canada, which will provide waterfowl for this state and the Mississippi flyway...”. These monies are administered in Canada by Ducks Unlimited, for the state of Wisconsin.

Since its inception, 32 years ago, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Stamp has raised more than \$13.2 million dollars for habitat works, both here in our state, and on the breeding & rearing grounds of Canada.

At our current rate of stamp sales, this program produces roughly \$380,000 per year, for use in Wisconsin. One estimate places the cost of maintenance and renovation of the 278 miles of dike, and 656 water control structures, (source: WDNR) currently under WDNR management would require \$1 million annually. Maintaining the infrastructure of wetland habitats resulting from the good works of the last 30 or 40 years isn't very glamorous, compared to creating new restorations, for certain. However, choosing to ignore these pressing needs is akin to refusing to re-roof your 30 year old home, in favor of adding a new sunroom. The new addition is nice, but your previous investment is going to heck!

First issued at \$3.25, increased to \$5.25 in 1991, and to \$7.00 in 1997, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Stamp has maintained its cost, the past 13 years. If it were indexed to inflation, it would need to be priced at more than \$10 now, just to provide the level of support it offered back then. Add this to the increasing public land base, and increased expenses in maintaining the infrastructure previously discussed means that the dollars being generated now are covering only a small portion of the actual need. At the Waterfowl Hunter's Conference in Steven's Point last winter, an informal survey of the attendees was made, regarding Waterfowl Stamp pricing. Of nearly 90 responses received, 93% favored an increase in the price of the Stamp. Of these, the overall majority favored increasing the price of the Stamp to \$15.00, *or more*.

With an increase in the price of the stamp to \$15, the revenue generated for use in Wisconsin, if sold at current rates, would more than double – to nearly \$815,000. On top of this would be nearly \$400,000 for use in the prairie pothole and boreal forest regions of Canada, where so many waterfowl species originate. An increase of funds like this would make a huge impact on what property managers of our public lands in Wisconsin could accomplish, as well as providing a continuing stream of funds for restoration, just like the ones that WWA has pursued for more than 25 years.

Just in the past few weeks, the WDNR, despite the state's predicted \$2.5 billion deficit, and already saddled with position vacancies, mandatory furloughs, and reduced budgets, managed to commit \$150,000 annually in new funds, from other sources, for wetland maintenance. As noted previously, it's not enough, but it does demonstrate their recognition of the need to do what they can, in spite of financial hardships, to maintain our valuable wetland resources.

Although most taxpayers would not choose to add to their own burden, it may be time for all of us as stewards of our natural resources, to consider increasing this fee upon ourselves. Much like the waterfowling ancestors who went before us, who elected to create the Federal Migratory Bird Stamp program (*itself responsible for millions of acres of waterfowl production lands*), we have an opportunity to direct our investment in our own future, towards the resources we've worked so hard to create, to restore, and to protect. In the near future, you may begin to hear this issue being discussed, amongst your hunting companions, and perhaps even with our Legislators. I encourage you to think about the impact we could make, if we band together to make a difference.