

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present highlights from the Game Commission's 2023-24 Annual Report. This past year has brought both significant change and significant progress, as we have worked toward fulfilling our mission of protecting wildlife and their habitats, while promoting hunting and trapping for current and future generations.

Our wildlife research and management efforts continue to advance, ensuring the sustainability of critical species.

Our elk monitoring efforts have improved with additional yearling collars and aerial thermal imaging, providing critical data on survival rates and habitat use. The bear population remains strong, and research is ongoing to help refine our management plan and strategies. Our extensive turkey study is offering valuable insights into survival, reproduction, and habitat use to guide decisions regarding future hunting seasons. The ruffed grouse populations, which was decimated from an outbreak of the West Nile virus, is now showing signs of recovery, with flush rates reaching their highest levels in over a decade thanks to targeted habitat restoration.

For deer management, our multi-year study on Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Bedford and Fulton counties remains a priority, as nearly half of the

hunter-harvested adult deer tested positive in 2024. Through GPS tracking and extensive testing, we are gaining critical insights into impact of CWD, and the urgency of our efforts to protect Pennsylvania's deer population.

Monitoring and restoring wildlife are only part of the equation—ensuring they have diverse, sustainable habitats is equally essential.

Prescribed fire remains a vital tool, creating young forests and open spaces that benefit species like grouse, turkey, and deer while also stimulating native plant growth. Last year alone, over 11,000 acres were treated with prescribed fire, bringing the five-year total to nearly 60,000 acres. Timber harvests further improved habitat on 25,000 acres by transforming mature forests into dense, regenerating environments rich in food and cover.

To enhance public access and enjoyment of our game lands, we continued with the unprecedented infrastructure improvements across the state, improving a total of 79 miles of roads and constructing 21 bridges.

In the last fiscal year, the Game Commission paid approximately \$1.8 million dollars to local governments as Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) for state game lands within their areas. And with the passage of Act 54 of 2024 as part of last year's budget, our share of PILT has increased to approximately \$4.6 million this

year, with the total amount going to counties, municipalities, and school districts, increasing to \$13.8 million. We recognized the need for increased payments and supported the legislation, the first increase in PILT for the Game Commission in decades, to ensure that those local communities receive the support they need.

To help prepare the next generation of hunters, in 2024, our Hunter-Trapper Education program certified over 20,000 students through in-person and online courses. The year also marked the lowest number of hunting-related shooting incidents since 1915, reflecting the dedication of our staff, volunteer instructors, and Pennsylvania's hunters in maintaining high safety standards.

Our pheasant propagation program stocked over 224,000 pheasants, while we also created over 60 managed dove fields. Additionally, we expanded opportunities for hunters to practice their skills by completing five new archery ranges and three shotgun ranges, bringing the total to 66 public shooting ranges across 40 state game lands.

For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024, the game fund's balance stood at approximately \$525 million, largely due to the surge in the price of natural gas that occurred from the fall of 2021 through the spring of 2023, and the resulting increase in revenue from natural gas leases on game lands.

Now that natural gas prices have returned to historic averages, we recognize that our long-term financial stability relies on the careful, strategic management of the temporary revenue surge we experienced. Our plan is to gradually draw down the Game Fund balance, using this opportunity to make critical investments and sustain operations without requiring an increase in hunting and trapping license fees. This measured approach will ensure that we continue providing exceptional service to Pennsylvania's wildlife and citizens while keeping hunting and trapping licenses among the most affordable in the nation.

We recognize that our success in achieving our mission also depends on a strong partnership with the General Assembly, especially the members of this Committee. Your insights and participation are important to us as we work to serve our shared constituencies.

And we invite you to experience the impact of our work firsthand: tour a game land to see timber stand improvements or a forest floor revitalized by prescribed fire; help stock pheasants; participate in a research project; or join us in celebrating key milestones like awarding a grant, dedicating new game lands, or opening a shooting range.

Together, we can create a future where wildlife thrives, hunting and trapping endures, and game lands remain abundant and accessible.