

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our state game lands system, a network of properties that is one of Pennsylvania's greatest conservation achievements. It covers more than 1.5 million acres, spread across about 300 tracts, with every tract dedicated to creating wildlife habitat and hunting and trapping opportunities.

This system, and the Game Commission itself, was created in a time of crisis. By the late 1800s, both the Commonwealth's wildlife and forested habitat were in steep decline, largely due to unregulated market hunting and widespread industrial-lead deforestation.

Against that backdrop, in 1895 the General Assembly created the Game Commission with the mission to restore and manage the Commonwealth's wildlife. A critical step toward fulfilling that mandate came in 1913 when the Legislature passed the hunting license law. For the first time hunters were required to buy licenses, the revenue from which funded wildlife management, law enforcement, and land acquisition.

With that mission at the forefront of our efforts, the game lands system was established. Parcels were added through purchase, donation, exchange and transfer. Many were vacant or degraded, such as former timber tracts or abandoned mine or farmland, properties which had little value for development but potential as a refuge for wildlife.

Over the decades, and through the concerted efforts of Game Commission staff and our partners, those lands were restored. Forests were managed for diverse age classes, wetlands were reestablished, and invasive species were controlled. The result is the mixture of wildlife habitats that define our game lands today. These properties are essential to sustaining wildlife populations and to supporting the hunting traditions that are critically important to so many Pennsylvanians.

But what makes the game lands system truly unique is the scope of their mission and impact. At their core, game lands exist to conserve wildlife and habitat. They provide hunters and trappers with opportunities to engage in their favorite pastimes. But they are also open - and free - to all members of the public. Residents of all walks of life visit the game lands to fish, hike, watch wildlife, ride horseback, bike, and just to connect with nature. A significant portion of Pennsylvania's tourism and recreation economy can be traced back to activities that take place on these properties.

Nowhere is this more evident than here in the elk range, on nearby State Game Lands 311. For decades, the economies of towns like St. Mary's and Benezette have been shaped by visitors who have come to view elk on that game lands. Every meal purchased, every souvenir bought, every hotel room booked reflects the economic impact of the land conservation and wildlife restoration undertaken by the Commission.

The same story plays out across the Commonwealth. Game lands are destinations. And every visit, whether to hunt, to trap, to use a rifle or archery range, or simply to enjoy the outdoors, generates economic activity.

And the benefits extend further still. Game lands also support natural resource development, providing critical revenue for both the Game Commission and the Commonwealth. Today, there are approximately 3,600 active natural gas and oil wells on game lands and over 1,000 miles of pipelines transporting those resources across all of Pennsylvania.

We also work with private contractors to help manage the game lands. Over the past 5 years we have awarded over \$70 million in bids to local contractors to help with projects such as deer fence installations, herbicide, timber stand improvements, insect suppression, and road construction.

These operations support jobs, strengthen local economies, and contribute to our energy independence.

Beyond their use for hunting, conservation, recreation, and resource development, game lands hold an intrinsic value that cannot be easily measured but is deeply felt by those of us who rely upon them. They remind us of the importance of wildlife, and the need to stay connected to the outdoors. For many Pennsylvanians, hunters and non-hunters alike, they are sanctuaries, not just for wildlife, but for anyone seeking a reprieve from the modern world.

While we take pride in the history of our game lands and the benefit they have provided to wildlife and the residents of the Commonwealth, I recognize the need to evaluate what the future should look like as we move into the next chapter of conservation in our state.

And I believe that our acquisitions must be more strategic than ever. That's why I've asked our staff to focus on three main priorities when evaluating properties for potential additions to the game lands system.

First, look to improve public access. When a property opens new opportunities for hunters and the public to enjoy and experience a game lands, that acquisition becomes a priority for the Commission. These tracts may be small in size, but their impact can be significant. A recent example is Game Lands 211 in Dauphin County, where the purchase of a parcel unlocked access to hundreds of acres that had previously been landlocked and unavailable to the public.

Second, we have put an emphasis on eliminating inholdings and indentures. These features make a game lands harder to manage and less safe for hunters and the public,

particularly when there is a residence or structure that is largely surrounded by a game lands.

And third, prioritize properties with exceptional wildlife or habitat value. These may be places critical to species of special concern, or landscapes with unique habitat features where the preservation of such lands has been central to our mission since the agency was created.

I believe that evaluating parcels based on these criteria will help focus our efforts and provide the most value for each acquisition while also helping to ensure that game lands remain the backbone of conservation, hunting, and outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania.

Game lands demonstrate what can be accomplished through vision and commitment. They are a promise that wild places and wild things will endure, not only for us, but for generations yet to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this vision. I am happy to answer any questions.