

LBA Performance Audit Report Summary:

Fish and Game Department Performance Audit Report – January 2008

The purpose was to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (F&G) operations. The audit period covered State fiscal years (SFY) 2002-2007.

The duties of the F&G include management of the State's fish, wildlife, and habitat; off-highway recreational vehicle training and enforcement; conducting search and rescue; and administering the Statewide Public Boat Access Program. The Department is established under an 11-member Commission and headed by an Executive Director, who oversees six Divisions: Law Enforcement, Support Services, Public Affairs, Wildlife, Inland Fisheries, and Marine Fisheries. In SFY 2007, the Department expended approximately \$23.4 million. To focus our efforts, we identified declining revenue streams and associated programming. Consequently, programs funded by diminishing revenue streams received the most attention during our audit.

Historically, state fish and wildlife agencies depended on user fees, including hunting and fishing licenses, as a major source of revenue. However, nationwide decreases in hunting, fishing, and trapping participation combined with increased fish and wildlife agency responsibilities are straining this revenue source. A 2006 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) national survey of fishing, hunting, and wildlife-associated recreation found, while the number of sportspersons is declining, millions of Americans continue to enjoy wildlife recreation. While hunting and fishing remain popular activities in New Hampshire, the number of licenses sold peaked in the mid-1980s and began a general trend downward through 2006. Primarily as a result of license fee increases, license revenues have generally increased since 1980; however revenues have been flat since 2003. Over the audit period, F&G operating expenses including information technology, retiree health insurance, employee benefits, and utility costs increased significantly.

Results In Brief

Our audit presents 30 observations and recommendations targeted at improving management organization, controls, and efficiency, as well as several revenue enhancement measures. While the number of the Department's traditional constituents has been declining since the 1990s, non-traditional users benefit from the Department's efforts to conserve and protect wildlife species and habitats. The Department's name does not reflect its scope of responsibilities and despite the F&G's broadened statutory focus and expanded constituent groups, the perspectives of the expanded constituency are not well represented on the Fish and Game Commission or integrated into policy decisions. Additionally, the Fish and Game Commission's authority has diminished over time and its oversight authority is unclear and inconsistent.

The F&G would benefit from comprehensive planning, strengthened controls, and reorganizing certain Department functions. The strategic plan, adopted in 1998, does not identify Department priorities and the Public Affairs Division does not have a comprehensive written operating plan despite its heavy reliance on unrestricted Fish and Game funds. The F&G has not centralized

fleet management responsibilities or implemented adequate controls over vehicle repairs and maintenance. The F&G would also benefit from establishing motor vehicle, OHRV, and snowmobile pools at regional offices. Further efficiencies can be gained by discontinuing the practice of assigning vehicles, OHRVs, and snowmobiles on a full-time basis to part-time personnel. To more functionally align the Department's programming and reduce administration cost, the F&G should move OHRV and snowmobile training and education to the Public Affairs Division and assign a civilian administrator.

While most areas of overlap between the F&G and other State agencies are well coordinated through memoranda of agreement or memoranda of understanding, some agreements were not formalized or approved by the Governor and Council. Additionally, the F&G should explore closer coordination with the Department of Resources and Economic Development for marketing to out-of-state residents and the State Police for dispatching services.

Finally, our audit recommends the Legislature consider a recreational marine fishing license, a non-motorized watercraft decal, and a more equitable method for funding search and rescue operations. We also identified possible federal aid opportunities for the F&G to consider. Finally, to alleviate pressures on Fish and Game funds, some Public Affairs Division personnel expenses related to supporting dedicated account programs should be charged to those accounts.