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WINGTIPS

Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

Four Ways to Build the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund

From: the Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

This is a special edition of Wingtips, an issue devoted to the workings and potential of the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF). This Fund is where Stamp dollars are deposited. This issue of Wingtips, furthermore, is intended to start a discussion on growing the MBCF, a discussion that can be continued on our website, on Facebook, listservs, and elsewhere among our organizational and individual friends and colleagues.



The first Stamp: 1934-5

Sometimes you have the engine before you ever have the gas-tank or even the fuel!

Here is a case in point.

In February 1929, the Migratory Bird Conservation Act was passed by Congress and signed by the outgoing U.S. President, Calvin Coolidge. Among other things, this Act created the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission (MBCC), a body expected to review and approve "inviolable" federal refuges for migratory birds in the U.S.

The Commission would eventually become very important, but its role was decidedly weak at the outset, at least until some sort of reliable bird conservation funding mechanism could be found. The argument could be made that the Commission only became meaningful with the creation of the "Duck Stamp" in 1934. Funds from the sale of the Stamps are deposited in a special treasury account known as the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF) established by this "Duck Stamp" Act.

In this way, the Stamp dollars became the fuel in the gas-tank of the Fund to run the engine of the Commission. The results would drive some serious bird and habitat conservation through the next eight decades.

Indeed, in the 1930s, the MBCF started small - from 635,000 Stamps sold the first year at \$1 apiece. Still, that \$635,000 would be equal to \$10.7 million today. Over the decades, the MBCF has become extremely significant, with over \$850 million now having gone through the Fund. (This accounts for over 5.5 million acres of Refuge System habitat secured.)

There have been three major sources of funds deposited into the MBCF for habitat acquisition in

the National Wildlife Refuge System:

1. The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps, commonly known as Duck Stamps,
2. Import duties collected on arms and ammunition brought into this country, and
3. Congressional appropriations authorized by the Wetlands Loan Act of 1961.

While there are these three current sources for the MBCF, they correspond with four practical ways to grow the Fund:

1. Sell more Stamps
2. Raise the price of the Stamp
3. Increase the collection of revenue under import duties
4. Pass a new Wetlands Loan Act.

Our Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp is in favor of all four methods, although not all are equal nor are all four equally simple to implement. Let's look into each of the four ways to grow the Fund, as background for any further detailed discussion:

Selling more Stamps

This looks simple: when more Stamps are sold, more money comes into the MBCF to increase wetland and grassland acquisition. But it's more complicated than it might look at first glance.

First, you can sell more Stamps in a required way or in a voluntary way.

Required buyers are the past and current foundation for stamp sales. These are waterfowl hunters, a pool estimated at about 2 million people 16 years of age or older. Their numbers are nurtured through recruitment and retention. Such sustaining activities are a major focus of waterfowl organizations down to the local level as well as the state wildlife agencies.

A new compulsory approach could also mean requiring more Americans to buy the federal Stamp through types of hunting *not* involving waterfowl (for example, the hunting of other migratory waterbirds - cranes, snipe, etc.). It may also mean *creating* a new requirement where having a valid Stamp is necessary - not optional - to access Refuge System property (NWRs or WPAs) or required for refuge-sponsored activities (e.g., organized field trips, classes, or other refuge events).



Hunters are the Stamp mainstay

Currently, the Stamp serves as a "free pass" for any NWRs that charge for entry. That's wonderful, but nobody is actually *required* to have a Stamp on refuge system property unless that person is engaged in waterfowl hunting.

Voluntary buyers are those people who don't *need* to buy a Stamp. If active waterfowl hunters actually need the Stamp, everyone else is a potential voluntary buyer. And that's a lot of people!

As such, the voluntary buyer needs to be convinced that buying a Stamp is an appropriate, if not a virtuous, conservation-oriented thing to do for wildlife and habitat.

The voluntary buyer might be the waterfowl hunter who doesn't necessarily hunt every year, but who buys a stamp nonetheless, a good conservation habit, a matter of course. The voluntary

buyer may also be the active waterfowl hunter who voluntarily buys an additional Stamp or stamps. Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, and other waterfowl-oriented organizations have often called for this action among their constituencies.



From the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge Association

The voluntary buyer might include other hunters (e.g., upland bird hunters) who don't necessarily engage in waterfowl hunting. These are hunters with a tradition of paying, of giving, and the potential pool is significant. (For example, Pheasants Forever has already encouraged its members to voluntarily buy the stamp.)

The voluntary buyers could also be birders, wildlife photographers, hikers, canoeists, campers, and general conservationists. The potentially high numbers are there; a detailed market approach has yet to be fully developed. And the voluntary buyer with a different motivation is the stamp collector.

In any case, increasing the voluntary buying of the Stamp requires significant and ongoing promotional, educational, and marketing efforts.

Raising the Price of the Stamp

An increase in the price of the Stamp is the second way to build the MBCF. If the price of the Stamp goes up, more money comes in, assuming that close to the same number of stamps is sold. Moreover, the organized waterfowl-hunting community has been in favor of a price increase. It should be that simple!

Or is it?

The price of the individual Stamp was last raised in 1991 when it was bumped up from \$12.50 to \$15. Of course, an item bought in 1991 for \$15 would today cost \$24.96. And if the price of the stamp were to increase from \$15 to \$25, the cumulative amount collected would boost from about \$25 million to \$40 million per year.



The Current Stamp

One mistaken opposition argument against a price increase suggests that this is a tax increase, despite the fact that the Stamp is not a tax at all. Still, a price increase alone may not be seen as entirely "fair," essentially when it means "going back to the same well" for more money, asking the waterfowl hunters to carry the load, especially if it is perceived that they are doing this alone.

Moreover, the decision to raise the price of the Stamp is not an administrative decision, but a legal decision to be made by the U.S. Congress.

Regardless of these arguments and difficulties, an increase in the price of a Stamp is fully justifiable and long overdue.

Increase the Collection of Revenue Under Import Duties

The tax from imported arms and ammunition goes into the MBCF. That amount can be considerable; it has been about \$30 million per year recently, but increased in the last year to \$40 million. (This should not be confused with the Pittman-Robertson taxes which go to the states for wildlife conservation. P-R excise taxes are collected quarterly from outdoor industry manufacturers for sales of arms and ammunition as well as other products at a rate of 10% - 11%.)

You could increase the amount of money from import duties by: a) raising the rate of the tax; or, b) taxing other associated products.

The current rate for imported arms and ammunition is about 2.5% - 4.7%, depending on the product. (This is under the harmonized tariff schedule of the U.S., chapter 93.) Raising a tax, especially these days, is always difficult, but it can't be dismissed offhand.

Including *other imported products* to go into the MBCF is another route. Frankly, much more outdoor equipment is being imported these days than manufactured in this country. Imported binoculars, backpacks, hiking boots, and camping gear might be considered. Even a very small tax rate could add millions to the MBCF. Again, the law would have to be changed, and these items and related tax rates would have to be incorporated in the proper tariff schedule for the MBCF. Of course, the very word "tax" is currently out of favor, and so is this particular revenue approach, at least for the moment.

Pass a New Wetlands Loan Act

The original Wetlands Loan Act, passed in 1961, allowed borrowing against projected future Stamp sales. There were \$200 million appropriated under this unique and exceptional authority. (Fortunately, in 1986, Congress forgave the wetland loan advances, a total of about \$197.5 million.)

In 2007, a new Wetlands Loan Act was proposed, and it had some bipartisan steam for a while. That proposed advance was for \$800 million over 10 years, with the intent of securing habitat while the prices were still low. The "buy it now cheaply and pay for it later" arguments have been attractive, but not strong enough. The effort for a new loan was noble, but the political coalition sufficient to get the act passed was not there.

There was even some talk last year of a 2013 Wetlands Loan Act that would be for 10 years at an optimistic \$1 billion per year, but this was not to be.

Some members of Congress see any new proposed "loan" as a way to finesse a clever gift to the Refuge System, given the way the original Wetlands Loan Act was ultimately forgiven. (A proposed loan presented in tandem with new and enhanced ways to grow the MBCF might address these suspicions.)

Still, a Wetlands Loan Act should be a top priority to build the MBCF, at least as soon as the political climate makes it viable.

Conclusions

Are there other options beyond the three major source of funding?

Perhaps.

Maybe tapping some creative drilling, carbon, or transportation funding sources might be considered. Or maybe large environmental penalties could be directed specifically to the MBCF in the future. In reality, a little-known and minor source of MBCF funding includes the receipts from permits for rights-of-way across refuge lands, so alternate funding sources are not inconceivable.

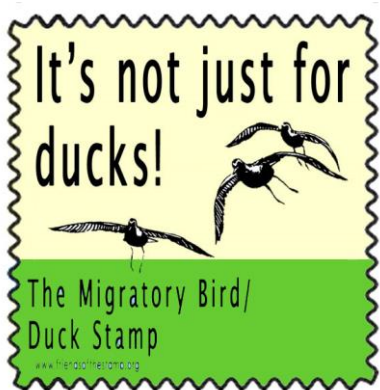
But we think that the aforementioned four primary options are currently the most basic to consider for the time being when thinking about growing the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund.

Admittedly, with the exception of increasing sales to voluntary buyers, most of the above proposals will be difficult to enact since *federal legislation would have to be altered or created*.

The Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp happens to be in favor of "all of the above," while admitting the current difficulties of the final three options - raising the price of the Stamp, increasing the collection of revenue under import duties, and passing a new Wetlands Loan Act.

Right now, we concentrate on educating constituencies likely to buy more Stamps, be they hunters (of all sorts), birders, wildlife photographers, refuge visitors, hikers, anglers, environmental educators, or other outdoor- and conservation-oriented Americans. But we are also firmly in favor of raising the price, increasing the way import revenue is collected, and even backing a new Wetlands Loan Act.

It will take time, but it can get done.



Conservationists ought to take heart from the words of the very first Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ira N. Gabrielson, who declared the following in his book, *Wildlife Conservation* (1941): "The conservation battle cannot be a short, sharp engagement, but must be grim, tenacious warfare - the sort that makes single gains and then consolidates these gains until renewed strength and a good opportunity makes another advance possible."

Gabrielson's approach is as true today as it was in 1941, and building the MBCF may require step-by-step and incremental advances rather than counting on systemic or colossal changes. Patience and perseverance can still create victories for the MBCF and for birds, wildlife, and habitat conservation.

TO FIND THESE FOUR WAYS ON OUR FRIENDS WEBSITE, [SEE HERE](#).

About the Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

The [Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp](#) is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion, preservation, sales, and better understanding of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (commonly called the Duck Stamp). The organization fosters an appreciation of how the funds collected through the Stamp build the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Part of our emphasis is that the purchase of a Stamp is not something that will just benefit ducks. Among scores of other bird species, numerous kinds of shorebirds, long-legged waders, and wetland and grassland songbirds are dependent on habitat derived from Stamp purchases.



Furthermore, it's not only birds that benefit from the Stamp. Reptiles, amphibians, fish, butterflies, all flourish through Stamp investments. Water quality is also strengthened!

[Become a Friend!](#)