

The agencies, groups and volunteers on the front line

Fish & Boat Commission

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Most people, even anglers and boaters, know the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission as the agency that checks for licenses and registrations in the field. Commission workers are also the people who stock trout.

But the agency is responsible for much more that often goes unrecognized, and even misunderstood. The commission is responsible for the overseeing and managing of the aquatic resources of the state. This includes cold water game fish such as trout, but also includes all the many warm water species and non-game fish as well. In addition, the agency is also responsible for the protection and management of reptiles and amphibians that include dozens of little known, yet important species.

The control center is located at the commission's Harrisburg headquarters, but regional offices are geographically located around the state. The Southwest Regional Office in Somerset houses law enforcement, maintenance staff and fisheries management personnel and is responsible for the entire southwestern part of the state, including Pittsburgh's three rivers.

The regional office houses the area fisheries managers and normally at least one other fisheries biologist. These professionals are responsible for gathering data from fish surveys and other sources, and analyzing it. They then determine, creel limits, special regulations, stocking quotas and other management decisions for the region that are designed to protect the aquatic resources and also maximize the recreational potential of them. This scientific-based balancing act is both challenging and essential to maximize use and limit abuse of aquatic resources.

"There are many more angling opportunities today than there were in the last century. Many waters are cleaner today than they have been in the past 100 years. Hence, fish populations are also better," Area 8 aquatic fisheries manager Gary Smith, out of Somerset, said in regard to the southwest region.

He also points out some specific examples. Smith suggests that among the best of the improving waters are the west branch of the Susquehanna River, Little Conemaugh River, Stonycreek River, Kiskiminetas River, Casselman River and the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

The commission's law enforcement division is responsible for enforcing and overseeing the management regulations. The waterways conservation officers, along with their deputies, are on the ground and on the front lines in ensuring that the state's clean stream laws are

followed, and the state's water quality is protected.

There are also many other divisions of the agency, such as the engineering bureau that designs and implements boat launches and other commission facilities and properties. There is a maintenance staff that maintains these facilities all year. There are also legal, financial, technical, informational and education sections, all of which perform tasks behind the scenes. There are many diverse public programs for the angling and boating public.

The commission is overseen by a 10-member legislatively approved and state-appointed board of commissioners, all of whom are unpaid volunteers. Don Anderson, of Meyersdale, is serving his second stint as District 4 commissioner.

"Angling in the southwest has improved greatly in the past 30 years and not just trout fishing. We have great warm water opportunities with the Quemahoning Reservoir and High Point Lake and of course we will get Somerset Lake back and better in the near future. We also have great small-mouth rivers such as the Casselman and Youghiogheny rivers that are both under appreciated and underutilized," Anderson said.

Anderson said he is aware of the explosion in kayaking and other boating interests in recent years.

"We have worked hard in the commission and with local partners to ensure that we have launch and access points. Our boating facilities grant program has played a key role in that," he said.

The commission receives no tax revenue from the state's general fund. It must sustain itself from license fees, registrations and federal contributions from taxes on the sale of sporting equipment. The commission has not been granted a license increase by the state legislature since 2005. That, and the pandemic, have constrained the agency like never before.

Despite these challenges, the commission remains on the front lines of resource conservation and the continuation of a \$2 billion recreational-based industry that is a powerful economic generator for the state, benefiting every citizen whether they fish or boat.



Photo by Len Lichvar

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Executive Director Tim Schaeffer stocks trout in Somerset County's Shaffers Run. Schaeffer traveled from Harrisburg to assist local commission staff who are making the effort to provide viable trout angling opportunities across the state despite the many challenges created by the pandemic.

Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape

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The Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape is a consortium of both professional and volunteer conservation organizations in the Laurel Highlands. It is a program of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and provides a forum for sharing information and providing assistance in developing resource conservation projects.

A recent project spearheaded by the group is the Value of Clean Water Study and Report that determines the ecosystem value of clean water in the Loyalhanna, Conemaugh and Youghiogheny river watersheds.

The development of the report was overseen by a steering committee consisting of members of the supporting organizations and was completed by Key-Log Economics.

Economic values and impacts for resource conservation, recreation and other conservation endeavors have always been difficult to properly determine. Ecosystem benefits are services that people receive from such things as clean water and air, scenic views, experiences in nature and fertile soil to grow food and sustain domestic and wild animals. Stresses in watersheds such as development and pollution can reduce or disrupt these services, which cause an economic negative cost to society.

The take-home message of the study is that regional watersheds provide \$3.7 billion a year in benefits to residents of the Laurel Highlands region.

"We are the first to create a premier study such as this and it replaces previous studies by having developed a much more rigorous model and deliverables that can be used to prioritize funding and determine its impact. This moves us toward a data-driven conservation advocacy for conservationists to use to justify their cause, just as business and industry do to justify theirs," Monty Murty, a steering committee member, said.

Program manager Marla Papernick added that it's a tool to convince citizens, decision-makers and elected officials that water quality is a worthwhile investment.

The study puts nature and natural resource conservation into the marketplace of real, documented economic impacts. The group will soon bring this important information into the public venue through a public relations effort, brochure and other initiatives aimed at reaching residents in an understandable and informative method.



Photo by Len Lichvar

Mountain Laurel Chapter of Trout Unlimited volunteers work on a stream improvement project on Clear Shade Creek in Somerset County.

Trout Unlimited

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The Mountain Laurel Chapter of Trout Unlimited is officially based out of Johnstown, but it sponsors resource conservation projects in Cambria, Somerset and Bedford counties.

"Trout Unlimited is not a fishing club and too much emphasis is put on that, especially from people who are not involved in it," said longtime chapter President Randy Buchanan, who resides in Richland Township but grew up in Wilbur.

"Trout Unlimited is a cold water conservation organization that operates on the national, state and local chapter level because everyone needs clean water to live, not just fish."

The local chapter has 300 members and has organized litter cleanups, stream improvement projects, cold water conservation programs and related activities for over 25 years. As one example, the local chapter has worked in the Bens Creek Watershed in Somerset County for two decades. In cooperation with landowners and other organizations such as the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission and the Somerset Conservation District, members have stabilized stream banks, reduced soil erosion, improved water quality and increased recreational opportunities in the watershed.

Recently the chapter partnered with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to create a geographic information system database and mapping of the entire watershed in order to better coordinate and identify future projects in the watershed.

The chapter also sponsors the Trout In the Classroom project in local schools in Cambria and Somerset counties that enables students to raise trout and learn about how important clean water is for life to survive. The chapter conducts fish releases and combines it with field days for the students in the spring that provide added conservation education for the students.

Trout Unlimited at the national, state and local level also promotes the enhancement of wild trout resources and encourages and works with professional fishery managers and agencies to protect and improve that valuable cold water resource wherever possible.

The local chapter produces a quarterly newsletter and holds an annual fundraising banquet each year. The money raised goes back into local cold water improvement projects.

"You do not have to be an angler to be a member. We have members who support our cause who either rarely fish or do not fish at all. Trout Unlimited is also a great place to meet like-minded, conservation-oriented people and forge friendships that you otherwise would not have," Buchanan said.

Organization treasurer Pat Buchanan said he joined because of the projects.

"I joined Trout Unlimited because of the water quality improvement projects not the fishing. My motivation was the need for clean water because as a nurse I know clean water is an important issue and directly connected to human health problems now and will be more so in the future," he said.

The chapter's meetings are on hold because of the pandemic, but they normally meet at 7:30 p.m. the first Thursday of the month at the Richland Township Municipal Building. Information on how to join and to become involved can be found at www.mltu.org.

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