

SLA Annual Meeting & Dinner Recap – Chuck Nelson’s Presentation

Dr. Chuck Nelson was the guest speaker at the 2007 annual meeting. Chuck, a long-time faculty member at MSU’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, is currently on sabbatical and working with the Michigan DNR. He discussed hunter recruitment and retention and the current funding situation for conservation in Michigan:

“Recent legislation reducing the hunting age from 12 to 10 for small game and archery deer and from 14 to 12 for private land firearm deer has boosted hunter recruitment and retention levels. There was a 19% increase in the number of junior licenses sold during the 06-07 season as opposed to the previous year. The new apprentice license program also increased participation with 11,300 people purchasing a total of over 14,000 apprentice licenses. And on a positive note, not a single one of those apprenticed licensees was involved in a hunting accident.

Michigan’s short and long term conservation funding situation is difficult. In the short term, the Game and Fish Protection Fund (a restricted fund where monies from hunting, fishing, and trapping license are used for fish, wildlife, and conservation law enforcement programs) is facing a deficit of over \$8 million for the upcoming fiscal year. While this and other restricted conservation funds were protected by voters last fall with the passage of Proposal 1, no additional conservation money was provided; Prop 1 only protected what had already been paid. The deficit is driven by a variety of factors: a loss of general fund tax dollars (income & sales tax plus the single business tax) to other purposes (corrections, education, social programs, etc.), senior citizen license discounts (nearly \$3 million annually) that the legislature was supposed to reimburse but has not, a decline in the number of hunters and anglers (14% and 22% respectively) in the last 20 years, no significant DNR license fee increases in the past decade, and continuing inflation for essential goods and services like gasoline, utilities, and health care.

Long term, conservation faces even greater challenges. Other key sources of conservation funding are declining. State forest timber revenues are down (a result of dropping timber prices), general fund dollars continue to be removed from the DNR budget, and half of the general fund dollars that remain are passed through to local governments as property tax on DNR-managed state lands. For the current fiscal year, the governor only appropriated 9% of the DNR’s budget from the general fund, with the rest coming from user-paid revenues (camping fees, hunting and fishing licenses, etc.).

General fund monies are critical to maintaining fire-fighting capacity on the 3.9-million acre state forest system as well as in the rest of the northern Upper and Lower Peninsula, which is mostly private property. Another impact is the fact that since 2003, the state parks have received absolutely no general fund support; they operate solely on camping fees, motor vehicle permits, and a trust fund setup up by voters when they approved Proposal P for Parks in the late 1990s.”

Dr. Nelson thanked the SLA for their support of conservation and their efforts to get people of all ages involved in the outdoors. He noted that right now conservationists have an opportunity to tell lawmakers how they feel and how important conservation is for the economic future of Michigan and for the quality of life in this state.