



# PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

## EXECUTIVE OFFICE

2001 ELMERTON AVENUE HARRISBURG, PA 17110-9797 | (717) 705-6540

June 3, 2024

Testimony of Executive Director Stephen Smith  
Pennsylvania Game Commission  
Presented to Members of the House Game & Fisheries Committee  
Re: 2019 Performance Audit Recommendations and Report

Good morning, Chairwoman Kulik and Chairman Maloney, and members of the House Game and Fisheries Committee. I am glad for the opportunity to discuss the Auditor General's report from 2019 and the work that Game Commission staff has done toward implementing the recommendations from that report.

The report examined the Game Commission's operations from 2014 – 2017, and, as you would expect, there has been a lot of staff turnover since then, and we have changed our way of doing business in several areas, often in response to this report. In one of the documents we provided, we created a point-by-point synopsis of how we have implemented the recommendations in the report. The first point in plain lettering is the Auditor General's findings, the black text underneath that is our response in 2019, and the orange text is our updated response on where things currently stand, so you can fully track the progress that we have made on each individual point over the past five years.

I would like to highlight a few of those items now, and then I'd be happy to take any questions that you have.

First, I would point out that a significant number of the findings relate to the use of escrow accounts. Generally speaking, these were accounts that were set up with a third party, almost always an entity that had entered into an agreement with the Game Commission to



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conduct natural resource development on game lands. And during the period that the audit occurred, there was a practice of instead of accepting the entire payment upfront all at once, the company would set up an escrow account and set aside a portion of the money that they owed the Commission. This money was set aside to mitigate any surface damage done and loss of habitat as a result of the natural resource development.

And when it was mutually agreed upon by the parties, they would use that money in the escrow account to purchase land, and then transfer ownership of that land to the Game Commission. Again, this was done to mitigate against the loss of land for sportsmen and women as a result of the agreement. However, largely due to the report and some of the concerns that it raised, the Commission discontinued that practice several years back, which is why whenever there is a finding that had to do with the use of escrow accounts, you'll see that we noted that the Commission no longer uses escrow accounts.

Another significant area of findings in the report had to do with accounting of payments made pursuant to natural gas development leases. There were several findings in the report that stressed the need for better accounting and controls to make sure the Commission was receiving the payments it was owed pursuant to lease agreements.

I can report that we made significant progress on that front as well, through increasing staff and developing better internal processes. We also recently entered into an agreement with a consulting firm that specializes in conducting property analysis for government entities, and we have relied upon their expertise to increase our assessment of game lands that have the potential



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for development. All of these steps have been done to ensure that we are maximizing the opportunities for natural resource development on game lands, which in turn means more funding for wildlife.

One other area that I think is worth noting are numbers 10 and 11 under Issue Area 1, which recommend that the Commission institute programs to increase the number of hunting licenses sold. I am pleased to report that we have also made significant progress on that front as well.

A recent study analyzing hunting license sales found that the nationwide trend is for sales to decrease by over 3 percent each year. But Pennsylvania is outlier, with sales remaining steady over the last five years. And there are several reasons why we believe that has taken place, things like starting seasons on dates that allow for more participation, expanding hunting opportunities for more species, increasing marketing efforts, and making hunter-trapper education classes more convenient and accessible. And the General Assembly has helped significantly in this regard as well, by passing the law to allow for three days of big game hunting to take place on Sunday. It is through our joint efforts that we can report significant progress on this critically important issue area.

And finally, the last section that I'll highlight right now, pertains to the issuance of vehicles, which is Issue Area 5. In preparing for this hearing and reviewing of our internal operations, we have identified this as an area that needs additional attention moving forward.



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The Commonwealth has set utilization standards that determine who is eligible to be assigned a permanent vehicle, meaning a vehicle that an employee can take home with them to their residence, and then drive back and forth to their place of work. And I have asked our regional directors and bureau directors to review those who have been issued a permanent vehicle within their chain of command and make sure they are complying with those utilization standards. I fully expect that the majority of the employees who have been issued a vehicle meet those standards, but the area that we need to improve on is that we don't have documentation to that effect. And we are going to change that. We're undergoing a review right now to ensure our vehicle usage is following the Commonwealth's standards.

That concludes my prepared remarks. I am sure members of the Committee have specific questions about certain areas within the report and we will be happy to answer them right now.

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