



Protect and Reauthorize Forever Wild

By Grady Hartzog, AWF President

I hope everyone had a great Christmas and kicked-off the New Year with a bang. It's hard to believe that 2010 has already started and the holidays are behind us. This will be an exciting and active year for AWF Members as we celebrate our 75th Anniversary. AWF has been and continues to be the leading organization for conservation education, resource stewardship, and promoting of our hunting and angling heritage in Alabama. Throughout 2010 in *Alabama Wildlife*, with the help of friends old and new, we will reflect on the past 75 years and the accomplishments that you, and those before us, have empowered AWF to make through your support, dedication, and service.

2010 also marks an important milestone relative to the Forever Wild program. This year we, and all supporters of Forever Wild, must begin the process of reauthorizing the funding for the Forever Wild program. At the same time, we must protect the funding for Forever Wild that was approved by an overwhelming 83 percent of Alabama voters when the Forever Wild Constitutional Amendment was passed in 1992.

Why is it important that we start now? Forever Wild funding is scheduled to expire in 2012 unless the Alabama Legislature takes action to cause it to continue. That means that we have three legislative sessions to secure reauthorization, 2010, 2011, and 2012. Conventional wisdom immediately dictates that we should not wait until the last minute, especially knowing that the legislative process can be complex and the tendency for even good legislation to get caught in the web of legislative grid-lock. Many a good bill has failed to pass simply because the clock ran out on a legislative session. That being said, the 2010 and 2011 sessions are the most desirable timeframes to act. Starting this effort in 2010 gives us the security of an additional opportunity for passage in 2011, before we are up against the deadline, in case 2010 election year complexities lock down the process.

At the same time, we must also work to protect Forever Wild from efforts that would attempt to raid the funding. Several years ago, legislation was introduced to divert Forever Wild funding for other uses. That effort was defeated by supporters of Forever Wild, including key legislators who understood the value of the program. With that history, a tremendously positive Forever Wild track record, and public support for Forever Wild as high, or higher, than what it was when it passed in 1992, it is hard to believe that anyone would oppose continuation of the program or attempt to raid the funding. Surprisingly and disappointingly, there are a few groups who have expressed a desire and intent to oppose reauthorization of Forever Wild unless some of the Forever Wild funding is diverted for them or their projects. This is compounded by the current economic climate and the fact that many people and projects are looking for new sources of revenue.

Although I understand that people and organizations with otherwise worthy projects will always from time to time look at Forever Wild funding as a potential revenue source, Forever Wild funding is not the proper source. The Forever Wild program was put into place to provide ALL the people of this great state a place to recreate and enjoy our wonderful natural resources – hunters, anglers, birdwatchers, hikers, field trailers, scout groups, church groups, and the list goes on. The concepts that have been put forth as the cause for raiding Forever Wild funds go against this basic premise and would divert funds to programs where this benefit to ALL, one of the primary reasons Forever Wild enjoys such broad public support, would be erased. Forever Wild represents a truly great



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program established by the people of this state. That fact should be honored and continued.

To be clear, the lands that Forever Wild has purchased to date, some 200,000 acres, will not go away. Once secured, those lands were placed in “Trust” for the state and all its citizens to use and enjoy while at the same time protecting those lands for the long-term as wildlife management areas, nature preserves, and/or state parks. What we will lose, if no action is taken by the Alabama Legislature before October 1, 2012, is the funding mechanism for Forever Wild to make additional purchases.

When we compare Alabama to our southeastern states, we find that Alabama has the lowest percentage (4.4 percent) of public lands available for recreational use and land conservation, even after Forever Wild’s purchase of 200,000 acres over the last 17 years. Add to that the fact that the availability of public hunting lands has been trending down in the last decade, and is expected to continue as the value of private hunting lands remains high into the future, it remains important that funding for Forever Wild and Forever Wild land purchases continues. Should Forever Wild seek to purchase lands indefinitely? Absolutely not.

The vast majority of Alabama lands should remain in private ownership. However, even if Forever Wild purchased another 200,000 acres over the next 20 years, matching its performance during its first 20 years, the overall percentage of publicly owned lands in Alabama would increase by only one-half of one-percent – and Alabama would still have the lowest percentage of public land ownership in the southeast.

For all of these reasons and more, it is important that we, and all supporters of Forever Wild, begin now to “protect and reauthorize Forever Wild funding.” I encourage you to read Commissioner Barnett Lawley’s thoughts on Forever Wild in our Executive Director’s column and use all of this information as your stimulus to contact your local legislator and obtain their rock-solid commitment to “protect and reauthorize Forever Wild funding” for the benefit of ALL the people of Alabama.

Enjoy the rest of the hunting season, be careful, and remember your direct involvement and communication with your local legislators will be necessary to keep Alabama “Forever Wild.”



WILLIAM'S DOVE

Every fall I host a youth dove hunt for the Alabama Conservation and Natural Resources Foundation. It is always fun to see the youth – our future - learning to enjoy the outdoors in a safe and fun manner. It was especially gratifying this year as my godson, William Pritchett, made it down to Barbour County from Birmingham. Everyone got to practice on some skeet before the hunt and William busted a few clays on his own. The parents and kids were put on the fields and the hunt started. William got his first dove and stuffed it in his pocket. Later he put it in a Ziploc bag and slept with it that night. I never found out if Rebecca ever got to clean the bird.