

Public Hearing on Outdoor Recreation Impacts During COVID-19

Senate Democratic Policy Committee

Testimony by Timothy D. Schaeffer, Executive Director

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission

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Good afternoon Chair Boscola, Senator Williams, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on the impacts of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (Commission) is one of our state's natural resource agencies with a mission to "protect, conserve, and enhance the Commonwealth's aquatic resources and provide fishing and boating opportunities." Since the onset of this pandemic, we have worked diligently, based on the guidance of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and the Governor's Office to protect our employees, customers, and the public while continuing to meet the diverse needs of the Commonwealth's nearly 1 million anglers and 3 million boaters. We are pleased to discuss with you this afternoon our efforts to preserve public health and safety, maintain mission-critical operations, and provide Pennsylvanians with the outdoor recreational opportunities they need in these unprecedented times.

First, please note that throughout this time, we were encouraged that fishing and boating remained permissible activities due to their life-sustaining, positive impact on physical and mental health. We have seen a surge in fishing and boating activity this summer as more people are spending time out on the water, including

many who are venturing out for the very first time. This is evidenced, in part, by the 20 percent increase we have seen in annual fishing license sales compared to last year, and a 40 percent increase in the sale of non-powered launch permits. It is difficult to find a local retailer right now that can keep kayaks in stock. We welcome these new anglers and boaters and will do everything within our power to keep them returning to Pennsylvania's waters year after year.

As the Commonwealth first began to grapple with the impacts of this pandemic, the Commission took swift and decisive action. We quickly added COVID-19 information pages to our website to respond to frequently asked questions. We embedded clear messages on how to follow COVID-19 public health and safety guidance within our promotional and educational materials. News releases, videos, and articles were disseminated on a more frequent basis during the spring and summer months to keep pace with our increasing new user volume, from severe storm warnings to increasing awareness on the critical use of personal flotation devices (PFDs).

Utilizing our existing contract with Gavin Advertising, we shifted the focus of our marketing, social media, web, and press materials temporarily away from one of sales and promotion to concentrate almost solely on the importance of social distancing. We publicized an English and Spanish version of our social distancing message to ensure that we reached a broad and diverse audience. We were also more mindful of choosing images for our publications and online that provide a visual representation of appropriate physical distancing while fishing. Our agency crafted a slogan and corresponding graphics to encourage anglers to remain "a fishing rod length apart," typically about 6 feet in length, that was quickly adopted by other states' fish and wildlife agencies as an example of a responsible messaging campaign.

In early spring, as a direct response to the Governor's statewide mitigation orders, and in consultation with the Department of Health, the Commission adjusted course for the opening day of trout season, a closely held tradition here in Pennsylvania. To minimize crowding along popular lakes and streams, we announced that trout season was open effective immediately on April 7, a weekday, while simultaneously cancelling our Mentored Youth Day. We then notified our customers that all pre-purchased 2020 voluntary youth fishing licenses will be honored in 2021. These were tough but necessary decisions, and most of the feedback we received from anglers was positive and supportive.

We cautioned the public to avoid carpooling, traveling far from home, or sharing gear and tackle with others. We encouraged customers to complete their license and boat transactions with us over the phone or online, where possible. To protect the health of our volunteers and staff, we did not permit volunteers to help stock trout – including legislators and their staff, with whom we are always grateful to partner for stockings, such as Senator Williams' stocking of Middle Deer Lake in March 2019. We closed or restricted some of our highly visited facilities, such as the state fish hatchery welcome centers, to help stop the spread of the virus, while ensuring that fishing and boating access areas remained open. Many of these decisions were made in direct coordination with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and other agency partners. Looking ahead to this fall, our approach to in-season stockings will strike a similar balance between providing recreational opportunities and protecting public and employee health.

The Commission has also adapted our educational and instructional programming. We are continuing to adhere to the guidance set forth on gatherings, and we postponed or cancelled many events that could not safely meet those requirements. Our approach in recent weeks has taken a new form – we have

shifted to hosting “hybrid” instructional events with a smaller registration cap, an online instruction component to replace the indoor classroom setting, and the use of personal protective equipment with social distancing during the in-person portion that takes place along a stream or lake. Your constituents can view our calendar of events at www.fishandboat.com for information on how to register for these hybrid event programs around the state, which have proven to be popular.

The Commission has maximized our available IT resources to continue providing seamless customer service. Nearly 40 percent of all fishing license sales have been sold online through *The Pennsylvania Outdoor Shop*, compared to 18 percent in 2019. We also promulgated regulations that allow anglers to store and display their fishing licenses on their mobile device, rather than needing to print out a hardcopy. We thank the legislature for the passage of Act 40 this session, a comprehensive bill aimed at increasing boater safety and which also removed an antiquated requirement in Title 30 for our licenses to be signed “in ink”, which was formerly a barrier to this sort of accommodation. Our long-term goal is to add additional features to the *FishBoatPA* mobile application to better allow customers to purchase and store their license on their mobile device, along with many other helpful features for finding local places to recreate. We will keep the General Assembly updated on these customer service improvements in the months ahead.

While our education staff was not able to hold in-person events this spring, they were able to develop new interactive, online Commission resources while working remotely. These resources target individuals and families looking to utilize online activities, which are more popular than ever. Our website now features an online Activities & Education Portal on our Learning Center webpage with “edu-tainment” resources for educators and families including videos, skills-building activities, printable coloring pages and crafts, newsletters, and more.

Utilizing that same approach, teachers and administrators who partner with us for the Trout in the Classroom program will receive emails with new virtual lesson plan options as they await a rescheduled January shipment of rainbow trout eggs to their classrooms this school year.

For our boating customers, the Commission actively encouraged them to take advantage of online courses for obtaining their boater safety certification this year. Once certified, this credential is good for life, so it is time well-spent, for youths and adults alike, while so many of us are staying at home. Continuing boater education is a strong tool for improving the safety and wellbeing of both new and experienced boaters. To date in 2020, there have been nine boating-related fatalities in Pennsylvania. All nine victims were not wearing a life jacket. At least five of the victims had either not taken, or it is unknown if they had taken, a formal boating education safety course. Alcohol use is suspected in three (33.3%) of those cases, and our Waterways Conservation Officers (WCOs) have reported a notable uptick in instances of boating under the influence (BUI) this season. So far this year, our officers have made 52 BUI arrests, compared to 44 total arrests for 2019.

The surges we have seen in activity and user volume speak to the importance of having the resources and authority necessary to carry out the Commission's mission. On behalf of our Board of Commissioners and staff, thank you to the General Assembly and Governor Wolf for the final passage and enactment of several bills that position the Commission to continue to fulfill our role in natural resource conservation and public safety well into the future. From designating our Board with authority to set license fees in Act 56, to the enhanced enforcement of public safety markings at low-head dams in Act 39, to stricter penalties for BUI

offenders in Act 40, these important initiatives will ensure the Commonwealth's aquatic resources are safeguarded for future generations.

Finally, thank you to the General Assembly for widely sharing safe boating messages on lifejacket wear and BUI prevention through numerous channels. Personalized PSA videos were created with more than 30 House and Senate members during the peak of the summer boating season. Members also helped us share these messages through their websites, newsletters, and social media. If you have not already done so, we encourage you to please schedule a time with us to film a similar video message with our agency, as boating and paddling activity will continue to be popular well into the late fall.

In summary, while COVID-19 has presented many diverse challenges to the Commission and our operations, I am proud of how our staff and customers have risen to the occasion and found innovative ways to overcome these obstacles. We will continue to proactively work with the Governor's Office, Department of Health, and General Assembly in the months ahead as we seek to protect public health and safety during this ongoing pandemic. Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions.