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STATE/FEDERAL/PRIVATE COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN WILDLIFE DAMAGE CONTROL
--Panel Discussion--

Charles D. Kelley[1/]

During my 30 year tenure as Alabama's Game and Fish Division Director it has been very gratifying to witness the successful restoration of wildlife populations. We have been able to allow long hunting seasons with liberal bag limits for our popular game species. However, as conditions improved from a recreational standpoint we also experienced an escalation of wildlife damage complaints. Every member of the Alabama Game and Fish Division staff is involved to some extent in answering calls, providing information and otherwise assisting with resolution of wildlife damage complaints.

We do not have the resources required to actively pursue every complaint received. Furthermore, we do not have absolute authority to act on our own in many situations. For those reasons, cooperative relationships with other agencies are of great important to us.

Our primary approach to wildlife damage complaints is to get the complainant to help himself. This means suggesting actions that can be taken, providing reference material, referrals to specialists, and advice on legal aspects of control measures. This frequently requires the involvement of other entities. We also find that this aspect of our relationship with other state/federal/and private agencies has the most strength. Agencies readily join in and provide their ideas, advice, publications and moral support. In most cases this is sufficient and does as much to resolve the complaint as can be reasonably expected.

If the primary approach fails and further action is needed to resolve the situation, the relationship between agencies has less strength. Responsibility gets passed from one entity to the next; time passes; more people get involved; many telephone calls are made; letters are written; inspections are scheduled then canceled and rescheduled; etc. Frequently, the damage situation runs its course with little action attempted.

This is the aspect of cooperative relationships that needs to be strengthened. Agencies need a better understanding of each others responsibility in wildlife damage control. The lines of communication need to be improved. Authority to act in given situations needs to be clarified in advance. Dissemination of information and transfer of new technology needs improvement.

Crop damage permits have been used successfully to enable farmers to protect their investments. Many are issued for deer damage situations. State Game and Fish agencies are heavily involved with handling those problems and could benefit from assistance from other agencies such as the State and Federal agriculture departments. We need a wider range of expertise to evaluate the need for crop damage permits and to predict their effectiveness.

A stronger program is needed to prevent animal imports and exports from contributing to damage problems. Strict laws and regulations are needed and better cooperation among agencies is needed to insure their effectiveness. The Alabama Department of Agriculture's efforts to screen reports of feral hog translocations is an example of a situation where cooperation between agencies can help head off a problem that is developing rapidly.

The tendency to overprotect wild animals must be vigorously resisted. The alligator was given protection under the Endangered Species Act even though it was responding well to protection afforded by state laws that were already in effect. Overprotection applies to the blackbird problems that management agencies have struggled with for decades. Cattle egret problems have

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developed rapidly in Alabama under the umbrella of Federal protection.

Many of the species that cause serious damage have some economic value if harvesting is permitted. There are people interested in taking advantage of legal harvests even at a low rate of return for their efforts. We have much to gain by capitalizing on that interest.

We are holding our own in dealing with wildlife damage control at present but we can expect greater problems in the future. Our efforts in this area of wildlife management must be better coordinated if we are to successfully deal with damage situations in the future.