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Pennsylvania's conservation police understaffed and underfunded

By Ed Zindell

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It was April 4, 2008, and Pennsylvania Wildlife Conservation Police Officer Clint Deniker made a choice that heroes make, even though he would tell you he was only doing his job.

He came upon a car crash where the driver was trapped in an overturned and burning vehicle. He didn't worry that the car might explode. Officer Deniker charged in, cut the seat belt and carried the driver 50 yards to safety.

Officer Deniker's deed is just one example of the brave work done each day by Pennsylvania's Wildlife Conservation Police Officers and Waterways Conservation Police Officers.

Most Pennsylvanians believe these officers spend their time checking licenses and patrolling state game lands and waterways, but their work is no different from any other police department.

Our conservation police officers are charged with an enormous responsibility. As one of the most populated states in the nation, Pennsylvania's forests and waterways need these officers because these areas provide plenty of cover for criminals. That means Pennsylvania's conservation police officers play a front-line role as drug and weapons agents, DUI enforcement officers, environmental investigators, detectives and beat cops -- all wrapped into one.

But these dedicated men and women need help in the form of more full-time officers. For example, just one waterways conservation police officer is responsible for protecting an average of 575 square miles.

In Somerset County, one wildlife conservation police officer is responsible for protecting 713 square miles. It is not uncommon for one conservation police officer to have an entire county as a primary patrol district.

Despite millions in surplus funding available, the Pennsylvania Game Commission and its counterpart, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, have failed to fill their respective complements and continue to ask these officers to do more with less. Keep in mind -- the money that is generated by these agencies is through user fees, not tax dollars.

There simply isn't any excuse for piling up surpluses and asking a conservation police officer to be solely responsible for hundreds of miles of state game lands, waterways and our natural resources. In fact, the PGC has not had a class of cadets enter the academy since spring 2007, and PF&BC is still far below its allowed

complement. Anticipated retirements and promotions will further deplete ranks.

The dangerous work these conservation police officers do has led to their involvement in several high-profile cases, including:

--Conservation police officers were first to identify a group of terrorists known as the Fort Dix Six, who trained on Pennsylvania game lands and would later be arrested for plotting a massacre at Fort Dix in New Jersey.

--A conservation police officer played a key role in helping the FBI and Pennsylvania State Police find the hidden weapon caches of Carl Gugasian, also known as the "Friday Night Bank Robber," who was responsible for 50 or more bank robberies along the East Coast over three decades.

--A routine investigation in the Yellow Breeches Creek in Cumberland County led a waterways conservation police officer to the discovery and eventual destruction of a marijuana farm.

--Waterways conservation police officers were actively involved in flood response in the eastern portion of the state in the early morning hours of June 28, 2006. Officers were credited with 19 rescues.

Funding certainly shouldn't be an issue for staffing needs, and we don't need to raise taxes because all revenue is generated from fees.

According to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, there was a \$46 million surplus in revenue in 2008. The Fish and Boat Commission boasted an \$8.3 million surplus in 2008.

We cannot afford to ignore such a need to improve the service to and protection of millions of people who enjoy Pennsylvania's outdoors.

Salaries are a problem because both agencies fail to compete with conservation agencies in neighboring states, as well as other agencies in Pennsylvania. According to the Game Commission's 2007 annual report, the officer ranks suffered numerous defections to the Pennsylvania State Police academy and other agencies "that have a superior salary and retirement structure."

It is time for the commissions to put more full-time officers in the field and give conservation police officers the support they need for such dangerous work.

Doing so will ensure the safety of Penn's Woods and waterways for all to enjoy.

Ed Zindell is vice president of the Pennsylvania Conservation Police Officers' Lodge 114 of the Fraternal Order of Police.

By [Bob Frye](#), TRIBUNE-REVIEW OUTDOORS EDITOR

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http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/sports/outdoors/s_638408.html

Labor negotiations heat up with commissions

The fate of contract negotiations between the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and its waterways conservation officers may hinge on the outcome of other labor talks.

The commission's conservation officers have been working without a contract since July 1, 2007. Talks about a new deal have been ongoing, but little progress has been made. In fact, officers authorized their union, the Fraternal Order of Police, to call a strike — perhaps next spring — if there's still no new contract in place then.

The two sides have tentatively agreed to meet again in September to continue talks.

But in reality, it's contract talks involving another group that might ultimately break the logjam.

Wildlife conservation officers for the Pennsylvania Game Commission have likewise been working without a contract since July 1, 2007. Their union and the commission have agreed to binding arbitration, however. A decision is expected before year's end.

Fish and Boat Commission officers don't have the right to go to arbitration, but their pay has historically paralleled that of Game officers. Officers from each agency earn the same amount up to their 20th year on the job.

Given that, word is that both the Fish and Boat Commission and its officers are waiting to see what the arbiter decides in the Game Commission's case before further addressing their own situation.

Wilkes-Barre Times Leader

Working in an office that floats

<http://www.timesleader.com/news/> Staff Writer

HARVEYS LAKE Not many can say they have an office that floats.

Don Carey/The Times Leader

Waterways Conservation Officer John Cummings from the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission can.

I would go stir crazy if I was in an office all day, Cummings said on a recent hot and humid afternoon in the middle of the 658-acre Harvey's Lake. I love boats and love being on the water.

Cummings is assigned to the Northeast Region patrolling bodies of water, streams and creeks from Ricketts Glen State Park in Fairmount Township to Falls in Exeter Township.

Waterways Conservation Officers are certified police officers trained in all aspects of fisheries conservation, watercraft safety and enforce environmental laws and regulations.

A graduate of East Stroudsburg University with a degree in outdoor recreation and environment, Cummings began his career with the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry until he moved to the Fish and Boat Commission in 1997.

A lot of what we do is designated for youth recreation and education, Cummings said. The key to boating and environmental safety is education.

Cummings was first assigned to Cumberland County, where he spent two years patrolling the Susquehanna River. He was moved to Lake Wallenpaupack on the border of Pike and Wayne counties, where he spent seven years on the state's largest man-made lake; and has been in Luzerne County for nearly three years.

The Back Mountain is a gorgeous area, there are a lot of good people here, Cummings said. One thing I noticed when I came here is the difference in people. At the Pack (Lake Wallenpaupack), there are vacation homes and people who come from New York to vacation. Here, the people live here year-round and are more educated about the water and boats.

Cummings patrol cruiser is a 150 horsepower, 18.5-foot boat he drives on Harvey's Lake.

While his boat skims across the surface, Cummings is turning his head looking at different watercrafts that are either moving or anchored. He constantly looks through binoculars to determine if a boats registration is current, if boaters are wearing life preservers and if boaters are riding too close to the

shoreline.

Cummings said he doesn't like issuing tickets, favoring a lecture on boating safety when he stops a boater. He'll likely give a lecture and a ticket if he sees an infant wearing an adult-size life preserver, something he's seen a handful of times in his career.

On this sunny day, Cummings stops two men riding Jet Skis going too fast near the shoreline.

Like a police officer on the street asking a driver to see their license and registration during a traffic stop, Cummings requests to see the Jet Skis certificate. He also asks to see and inspect the Jet Skis fire extinguishers and checks that life preservers are easily accessible.

Laws don't stop at the shoreline, Cummings said.

People need to understand that they're on water. If something happens on the road, you have the luxury of standing on the curb, Cummings said. Out here, they don't have that luxury and it makes it more difficult if they're not wearing a life preserver.

Fortunately, Cummings said, he doesn't see many cases of boating while under the influence of alcohol.

Cummings is also trained in teaching boating safety classes required for all operators of watercrafts that are more than 25 horsepower, or anyone born on or after Jan. 1, 1982.

I love being outside, Cummings said. It's an interesting job.