



ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

ENVIRONMENT

Looking to keep wildlife out of the 'emergency room,' states expand managers' role

Habitat loss, pollution and climate change are making that job much more difficult.

BY: **ALEX BROWN** - MAY 19, 2025 5:00 AM



📷 The Mojave desert tortoise is among the species in Utah in need of conservation help. Earlier this year, state lawmakers enacted a tax on renewable energy development to provide more funding for wildlife managers to support non-game species. (Photo by Dana Wilson/Bureau of Land Management/Flickr)

State wildlife agencies have a big job.

While the federal government protects animals listed under the Endangered Species Act, states are tasked with keeping the vast majority of other species out of the “emergency room.” Habitat loss,

pollution and climate change are making that job much more difficult.

At the same time, states are finding it harder to count on the hunting and fishing revenues that have long funded most of their work. Agencies say they have more challenges than ever before, and less money to take them on.

In many states, lawmakers are rethinking the long-standing model for wildlife management. They're considering new funding sources to make the agencies less reliant on license fees. They're asking wildlife managers to expand their work beyond traditional "game" species, adding protections for threatened insects and other animals. And some are scrutinizing the commissions that have long governed wildlife management.

Some of the proposals have seen broad support from outdoors lovers who want to strengthen their wildlife agencies. Others have drawn opposition from sporting groups, who fear the new focus will diminish hunting and fishing opportunities.

"We're seeing quite a bit of action this year," said Logan Christian, wildlife and habitat specialist with the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, a forum for state lawmakers. "We definitely have noticed that states are working on strengthening their wildlife agencies."

As Stateline previously [reported](#), New Mexico enacted the most sweeping overhaul this year. It renamed the Department of Game & Fish as the Department of Wildlife, giving it a more explicit focus on non-game species. Budget writers provided \$10.5 million in new funding over the next three years to help threatened species. And lawmakers created a new process for appointing the agency's commissioners, with guidelines ensuring a diversity of expertise and experience.

Wildlife advocates in other states say the New Mexico overhaul was a game changer. But lawmakers elsewhere are taking a more piecemeal approach.

Dollars

Numerous states are reconsidering their wildlife agencies' funding model.

"There's definitely a growing awareness that the current management system is outdated and really unfit for 21st century

challenges,” said Michelle Lute, executive director of Wildlife for All, a nonprofit focused on overhauling state wildlife governance. “State wildlife agencies are seeing that they can’t rely on hunting and fishing license fees to be able to do this work.”



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– Michelle Lute, executive director of Wildlife for All

Earlier this year, lawmakers in Utah enacted a new tax on wind and solar projects that will help fund the state’s wildlife agency. The revenue could double the department’s funding to protect non-game species, from \$5 million to \$10 million.

“We have a funding model in place for game species,” said Paul Thompson, administrator of the Species Protection Account with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. “Funding to work on some of our native species programs has been really hard to come by.”

The new revenue could allow the agency to invest in more biologists, conservation easements, watershed restoration projects and native fish hatchery programs. State Rep. Casey Snider, the Republican who sponsored the bill, argued that the clean energy sector should pay because its development is harming Utah’s habitat.

“Wind and solar projects have an outsized impact on [non-game] species, and they have not been contributing financially,” he said.

But industry leaders said the law will threaten the state’s energy development.

“[The measure will] severely strain the economics of an existing project and send a negative message to developers and the financial institutions that provide capital for these projects,” said Theresa Foxley, chief of staff to rPlus Energies, a renewable developer, in testimony to lawmakers.

Lawmakers in Oregon are considering an increase to the state's tax on hotel and short-term rental stays to help fund non-game wildlife work. The [proposal](#) would bring in about \$30 million annually. State Rep. Ken Helm, the bill's Democratic sponsor, said the state wildlife agency's division to manage non-game species "has come and gone over the last 30 years as funding is available."

Growing concerns about climate change and biodiversity have created urgency to find a stable funding source, he said. Helm said the lodging tax is a logical source, because the state's tourism industry is centered on the outdoors. He noted that Oregon's natural resources agencies receive only a tiny fraction of the state's general revenue.

Travel and tourism groups oppose the bill, arguing it could drive visitors elsewhere. Helm has also proposed a bill that would bring in wildlife funding through an income tax increase.

He said his message to fellow lawmakers was: "I've given you two ways to get the money we need for this agency. Nobody's been able to come up with a better idea. Just pick one."

The bill was heard in committee earlier this month, but has not yet advanced.

As states rethink wildlife management, New Mexico offers a new model



For years, outdoors enthusiasts in New Mexico have pushed to overhaul the state Department of Game & Fish — an agency plagued by leadership turnover, funding woes and the scorn of hunters and tree-huggers alike. Now, state lawmakers have given the agency a new name, a new mission, new

leadership and a boost in funding ... [Continue reading](#)



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Meanwhile, lawmakers in Hawaii approved a “green fee” – a lodging tax increase of 0.75% that Democratic Gov. Josh Green’s office estimates will bring in \$100 million annually to help protect the state from climate change. While the fund is not explicitly focused on wildlife, it’s expected to contribute to efforts such as coral reef restoration and watershed protection that will benefit important habitats.

State Rep. Amy Perruso, a Democrat who was among the advocates for a green fee, said the COVID-19 pandemic was a wakeup call.

“With the absence of tourists, we saw a lot more fish in the ocean, everything about the environment was so much more healthy because we didn’t have 10 million extra people,” she said. “If we’re going to do something to protect the environment, [tourism] is a logical connection.”

Washington state was among the first to significantly invest in non-game conservation through state tax revenue, with legislation enacted two years ago. The budget passed by lawmakers this session continues that work, with \$14 million set aside for biodiversity and species recovery each of the next two years.

Lawmakers in Kansas and North Carolina also proposed using more general fund revenue for wildlife work, although those measures have not advanced.

Mission

In other states, lawmakers are focused on expanding their wildlife agencies’ mission to more non-game species. Last year, Colorado gave wildlife managers the authority to manage insects and other invertebrates, as well as rare plants.

“Invertebrates are wildlife, and their conservation benefits the entire ecosystem, including the species [state wildlife officials] traditionally managed,” said Richard Reading, vice chair of the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission. “They do everything from creating our soils to filtering our water to pollinating the food we eat.”

Reading also serves as vice president of science and conservation at the Butterfly Pavilion, an insect zoo. He noted that studies are showing that many invertebrate species are in rapid decline. In addition to expanding the agency’s authority, lawmakers provided funding for six staff members to take on the additional work.

A similar bill in Nevada, focused on invertebrates, advanced through the Assembly's natural resources committee.

"There's definitely concerns about declines in pollinator species," said Assemblymember Howard Watts, a Democrat who sponsored the bill. "Our wildlife agency can and should take proactive action to do research, surveys and habitat improvement to keep these species off the [endangered species list]."

Watts said the bill would allow wildlife managers to consider insects in state plans to protect imperiled species. He said the Nevada Department of Wildlife has requested an entomologist position if it's asked to take on the additional species. Beyond that, he said, the measure would not require additional money, as it's focused on voluntary, proactive work, rather than additional regulations.

State wildlife agencies focus on 'hook and bullet' work. Some see a new path.



SEATTLE — The Cascade red fox, which lives high in the mountains of Washington state, is struggling to survive. State wildlife managers want to send researchers into the field to find out why. They're also aiming to vaccinate pygmy rabbits against a deadly virus, restore habitat to support the Taylor's checkerspot

butterfly and establish new ... Continue reading



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Another bill in Pennsylvania would expand wildlife managers' authority to include insects. That measure has been approved by the House Environmental and Natural Resources Protection Committee.

Sporting groups have largely been supportive of efforts to provide new funding sources to manage non-game species. But some are skeptical of plans to expand agencies' mission without an increase in revenue.

“Most hunters and anglers understand that healthy game populations are dependent on ecosystem integrity,” said Devin O’Dea, Western policy and conservation manager with Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, a nonprofit focused on public lands. “But when you take a model that’s been developed with the intent of enforcing regulations for fish and game species, expand that scope without funding and additional capacity, it’s a recipe for something to fall off the plate.”

Governance

Meanwhile, some legislators want to rethink the commission model that oversees wildlife governance. Critics say that governors often select commissioners who are hunting guides, farmers and political donors. Once appointed, they enact wildlife policies to suit their economic interests.

Florida state Rep. Anna V. Eskamani, a Democrat, drafted a bill that would overhaul the state’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Her proposal would increase the board from seven to nine members. It would designate seats for scientists, conservationists, local officials, farmers, hunters and anglers.

“The commission has made decisions not based on science or conservation, but based on developers or landowners that engage in agricultural practices,” she said. “We tried to strike a balance to ensure there are voices with an environmental background, with a conservation and wildlife background, with an academic background.”

The bill did not advance, but Eskamani said grassroots support is building for systemic changes in wildlife management.

Some sporting groups are more wary of commission overhaul proposals.

“We have seen examples where proposed changes to commissions were politically motivated or motivated by anti-hunting and anti-angling interests,” said Kent Keene senior manager for Western states and agriculture policy with the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, a group that promotes hunting and fishing priorities on Capitol Hill. “When those changes are focused on science-based needs, then the sportsmen’s community has a long history of supporting those steps to ensure we are protecting our heritage.”

Some hunting and fishing groups have emphasized that the expanded mission should come with additional funding, so agencies aren't stretched thin. Keene noted that hunters and anglers pay an excise tax on the purchase of gear, which provides an important funding source for wildlife agencies. Some have proposed a similar "backpack tax" on gear for hikers, birdwatchers and others.

Another proposal in New Hampshire would give the wildlife agency's executive director the authority to make policy decisions, relegating the Fish and Game Commission to an advisory body. That bill did not advance.

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