

# QUAIL VII, A DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Welcome to the 7<sup>th</sup> National Quail Symposium! I am Jon Gasset, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, and Chairman of the NBCI Management Board. I would also like to extend the welcome of Nick Wiley, my co-chair, and Executive Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. I see a lot of friends in the audience, and quite a few new faces as well, and on behalf of the Board, I want to thank you all for the heart and soul that you each put forth for the sake of the northern bobwhite.

## THE PAST

As some of you may know, I grew up in Georgia and spent my earliest hunting years following behind some of the best bird dogs known to mankind...those raised by my grandfather – or at least I thought so as a seasoned 8-year old hunter.

That was a time when birds were still relatively plentiful, and if you were lucky enough to have a granddad that sold Ford trucks to the farming communities south of the fall line in Georgia, you had plenty of farms to hunt on. But as is inevitable, times have changed.

Land use patterns, farming practices, private leases, and competition for life needs have resulted in a long protracted slide in quail numbers as well as the people that pursued them. The 40-year decline of this prince of game birds was already apparent even before the passing of my last bird dog and of my grandfather whose footsteps I used to walk in.

This story is the same for many of the state fish and wildlife directors throughout this country. Growing up hunting small game with family and friends - dreaming of finding a way to make a career of spending time outdoors every day – going to college to major in Wildlife Biology, of all things – landing that first job as a wildlife biologist and working in the field – then getting promoted to your level of incompetence until you are forced to stay inside, ride a desk, push paper, and manage personnel and budgets and to run an agency instead of being outside with the critters.

State agency directors have long held an interest in the restoration and recovery of the native fish and wildlife species of their respective states. White-tailed deer, wild turkey, elk, waterfowl, black bears, furbearers, eagles, and

many others all have their place among our long history of successes.

However, few, if any, have held the intrigue, or generated the frustration levels comparable to that of the iconic northern bobwhite. This species, which has tormented and delighted professionals and laypersons alike, has rightfully taken its place among state agencies as the Holy Grail – the prince of game birds - a highly desirable and lofty, yet sometimes, seemingly unattainable recovery goal.

Where the recovery and restoration of other species are shining examples of what we are all capable of, few demanded sweeping landscape level changes to succeed. Most were simply the case of having adequate preexisting habitat conditions and simply moving critters around to fit our needs.

Northern bobwhite recovery has always presented a unique challenge – that being, to change the attitudes of people to affect wholesale landscape level changes to habitat that are essential to their recovery.

A decade ago, the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative had, as its genesis, a collective group of southeastern state directors acting on the good advice and recommendations of the Southeast Quail Study Group.

The thought of bobwhites once again taking to the sky behind one's hunting dog whetted the appetites of several of those directors, and we asked, then begged and finally arm-twisted each participating state to carve out baseline funding to get the Initiative off the ground.

However, the task was daunting. . .the restoration of a species that has succumbed to decades of habitat loss or conversion was comparable only to the recovery of our nation's migratory waterfowl populations, but without the federal authority, protection, and funding, through the Duck Stamp and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, to help us move the needle toward success.

It was the idea of a range-wide recovery approach, garnering support at the State, Federal, NGO, and private sector level, rather than a piecemeal state-by-state approach, that sparked the interest of those southeastern directors, generating support, both financially and politically, and leading to the birth of regional recovery strategy that soon evolved into the full blown, range-wide effort of which we are all now a part.

With a foundation steeped in science and sound policy, and with guiding principles that contain language like: Heritage, Stewardship, Landscape, Working Lands, Habitat, Partnerships, Adaptive Management, and Col-

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laboration, the NBCI is well developed to be THE road to recovery for the northern bobwhite.

## THE PRESENT

So I would like to provide one Director's perspective of the first 10 years of the NBCI. To do this, we might ask ourselves, "How have we done over the past 10 years?" "Are there measures of success from Generation One of the NBCI plan?" "Has NBCI met directors' expectations?" or are we just proving the definition of insanity - doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting a different result?

I won't speak for the other state directors, those types being the fickle, opinionated and contrary folks that they can be...but I will say that my interactions with them indicate that many of us share similar feelings on the NBCI and its work over the past decade.

We have laid a fantastic framework from which to stage the recovery of this most challenging species. Scientists, managers, and policy makers have come together to develop, nurture, support, and even fund our first efforts. And we have had successes.

Across the range of the bobwhite, individual success stories of farmers and landowners are cropping up like weeds. The public is beginning to re-engage on the quail issue, and this is critical to driving the plan forward into Generation Two.

More broadly, we are seeing regions within states take on the issue with bobwhite focus areas -intensively managed multi-county areas with local and state level buy-in. And nationally, we are engaging in negotiations with Farm Bill lawmakers, NRCS, and FSA at levels that we formerly only dreamed.

With the revision of the NBCI plan late last year, we are poised to take the next step. By painting the picture that northern bobwhites are a keystone species for grassland ecosystems, the new plan revision has the potential to generate support from a much larger conservation community.

Incorporation of the latest GIS and data management tools into a Conservation Planning Tool give us the ability to focus on both broad scale recovery efforts as well as more localized approaches - all from the same data source.

The Adaptive Resource Management approach incorporated into the new revision allows us to use a structured decision-making process that will indicate where we are hitting our mark and where we are falling short.

"The State of the Bobwhite: Grassland Conservation at a Crossroads"- our review of the status of the species - was sobering. It would have some asking if the bobwhite has a place on the Endangered Species List rather than on a covey rise in front of a good pointing dog, or next to the potatoes, biscuits, and gravy.

However, as alarming as this report appeared, there is a positive side. Most great conservation efforts started with a threat, sometimes of extinction, that led to a call to arms. When wetlands were being drained at an alarmingly

reckless rate, we secured the federal duck stamp for their protection under the National Wildlife Refuge System, and later secured further protections for private wetlands in the swampbuster provisions in the Federal farm bill.

When waterfowl reached historic lows in many areas, we implemented Adaptive Harvest Management Techniques, developed the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), and its funding source, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

We can draw a number of comparisons between the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative. Both are science-based approaches. Both focus on landscape level habitat needs. Both are responsive to long-term declines in population numbers. Both focus on significant, but obtainable recovery goals. Both go through a periodic comprehensive review that is the cornerstone of adaptive management. Both have ties to the Joint Ventures. And both have extensive involvement and buy-in from state fish and wildlife leadership.

From its genesis in 2002 through its revision in 2011, State Directors have never flinched from the concept that the NBCI is a long-term approach to conservation. We didn't get here overnight, and we won't see recovery happen that quickly either.

But success takes funding. From the development of NAWMP in 1986 and its subsequent updates, we have seen significant recovery of waterfowl populations. We have also seen a cash infusion of around 6 billion dollars through the joint ventures - a number that dwarfs the restoration price tag of any other species of which I am aware. NBCI's next major goal, should be to work towards that level of funding for our Initiative.

## THE FUTURE

So what about the future? What's next? What should we expect from the state directors and the NBCI Management Board, specifically? And more broadly, where is the NBCI headed?

The battlefield for bobwhite recovery is mapped out by the good science that you do, and you managers out there are our infantry. But battles are won by moving troops and resources across that field in a strategic manner. This is the area where state directors, generally, and NBCI board members, specifically, should be making their living.

The scientists and managers have their part to play, but if the commanders of the battle, the policy makers, have lost sight or interest in success, then we will all fail. The job of the NBCI Management Board is to make sure that our state fish and wildlife directors don't lose sight of the NBCI goals and don't lose their interest in success. We will make sure this doesn't happen.

This can be a difficult challenge, as you might imagine. State agency leaders tend to be very accomplishment-oriented. In times of increasing budgetary constraints, conflicting demands on time and resources, and difficult, sometimes hostile political pressures, directors want results, and results, and more results!

We need results that are not just those of the scientific variety. Science is a critically important aspect of wildlife management, and a place where quail coordinators and biologists play well, but we need results on many different fronts. Public opinion, changes in behavior, shifts in public policy, anything that results in increasing awareness and importance will, by its nature, assist in providing the support and funding necessary to carry out our task.

Remember that science can explain how the internal combustion engine in your car works, but ultimately somebody still has to put gas in the tank to make it go.

Success on the ground is the litmus test of the success of the NBCI, but it takes results at all levels to accomplish our mission. We have good science and will continue to develop more.

But the ultimate battle for success, which you can read as the battle for funding and public support, will be determined by how successfully we can use that science in the halls of Congress, in our State Legislatures, and with our public.

So how do we continue to build upon an already successful Initiative? As a part of the NBCI, should we all become advocates for quail recovery? What about the conflict between science and advocacy?

The short answer is: yes, we should. The longer version was best put into words by the great conservationist, President Theodore Roosevelt. In one of his greatest speeches, he stated:

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly. So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."*

Scientists are cautioned from their first research experience about straying into the nefarious world of advocacy. Their job, they are told, is to simply develop hypotheses, collect data, make analyses, draw conclusions based on the previous 3 steps, and repeat.

Taking a position for or against something because it's the right thing to do is simply not the sandbox that scientists are supposed to play in, or so they are taught.

Folks, we don't have time for that kind of nonsense. As leaders, we expect you do good science, and produce valid, reproducible results. As managers, we expect you to apply to the ground what science indicates are the best practices.

But if you stop at that, and sit around waiting for the advocates to ride in with bags of money and convince the unwashed masses that restoring bobwhites is the right thing to do for conservation, then we have already lost the war.

As an example, I would like to spend a second talking about a recent wildlife threat that I have been intimately involved with that I think will demonstrate my point.

White-nosed syndrome is a fatal disease that is ravaging the populations of our cave dwelling bats. It appears to have a fatality rate approaching 100%, but the science isn't there yet. It appears to be spread by human and bat movement between caves, but the science isn't there yet. The one thing it does do is kill bats - millions of bats. And some, I suspect, have sat on their hands, content to simply document the decline of the bats, and fail to manage, for fear that active management may cause more harm. And others, I suspect, have sat on their research - not releasing it until it is published for fear of getting scooped - while the managers sit waiting for the scientists to tell them the right thing to do.

Meanwhile, the bats will be decimated, and many species will likely go extinct, because we lack the intestinal fortitude to do something...to dare greatly.

So there are those that watch things happen and those that make things happen. Restoration success stories are written by those that make things happen. Critics have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines, watching things happen, and pointing out our missteps and mistakes, but those types seldom make history.

There is a time and place for science, for management, for advocacy, and for action. We know a lot about bobwhites, but there will always be more we want to know. We also know that their recovery is a one of the greatest challenges we will face, but it will also be one of our greatest successes, and we don't need science to tell us that.

It is time now for our state and federal agencies, our NGOs, private partners, and our scientists and managers, under the umbrella of NBCI, to do for northern bobwhites what we have done for the ducks. To fight for what we know is the right thing to do. We have to get into that arena, get sweaty and dusty and bloody, and we have to win. We all have to get in the arena and dare to do great things!

Thank you for having me here today and thanks for all that you do for the NBCI and for bobwhite conservation!