

Testimony of Mike Shields
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Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1676, H.R. 3538, H.R. 3857 & H.R. 3858
June 24, 2025

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. 3858, the Sport Fish Restoration, Recreational Boating Safety, and Wildlife Restoration Act of 2025. My name is Mike Shields, and I am the President of American Fishing Wire, based in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and a proud member of the American Sportfishing Association.

At American Fishing Wire, we've been manufacturing sportfishing equipment for over four decades. We produce wire leaders, terminal tackle, and other products that help anglers—from weekend hobbyists to professional guides—connect with fish and with nature. I can say with confidence that our company, and the sportfishing industry as a whole, is deeply rooted in conservation. We know that without healthy fish populations and access to clean, fishable waters, our business doesn't exist. That's why we don't just support the federal excise tax on sportfishing equipment, we're proud to pay it.

The Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund traces its roots back to the Dingell-Johnson Act of 1950, which created a dedicated source of federal funding for fish conservation and recreational fishing programs by placing an excise tax on fishing equipment. It was modeled after the highly successful Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 for wildlife restoration. Over time, the Sport Fish Restoration program has been expanded to include motorboat fuel taxes, small engine fuel taxes and import duties on boats and tackle. These funds are on dedicated to a wide range of boating safety, infrastructure, and aquatic resource projects. The program represents one of the most effective conservation funding mechanisms in the world and is built on a strong partnership between anglers, boaters, manufacturers, and state fish and wildlife agencies.

This excise tax, collected at the manufacturer level and administered through the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund, is one of the greatest conservation success stories in American history. Along with its companion for wildlife restoration, this program represents a model that other industries and countries have looked to emulate: a user-pays, public-benefits system that connects those who use our natural resources with those who manage and conserve them.

For every rod, reel, lure, spool of line, and many other categories of fishing equipment sold, a portion goes into a national trust fund that is then distributed to state fish and wildlife

agencies to support aquatic habitat restoration, fish stocking, boating access improvements, public education programs, and more. Since the program's inception, over \$12 billion has been invested directly into fish and wildlife conservation, helping to recover fish populations, enhance angler access, and fund jobs in fisheries management and outdoor recreation.

And these dollars don't just fund conservation—they also fuel economic growth. Recreational fishing is a \$230 billion industry in the U.S. and supports over one million American jobs. Every dollar invested through the Sport Fish Restoration program is multiplied many times over through increased participation, outdoor tourism, and retail sales. For a manufacturer like American Fishing Wire, we see firsthand how investing in healthy fisheries pays dividends—not just ecologically, but economically.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of participating in a “Partner with a Payer” event with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission. Organized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Office of Conservation Investment, these events are designed to connect companies like mine – those who pay into the excise tax system – with the agencies who receive and implement those funds on the ground. It was a powerful experience.

The day began at our American Fishing Wire facility in Coatesville, where we gave agency staff a tour of our operations and discussed how we design and manufacture products that anglers rely on. It was a valuable opportunity for the state to better understand the business side of the funding mechanism—and for us to better understand how our tax dollars are being used.

Later that day, we traveled to Huntsdale State Fish Hatchery, one of several hatcheries operated by the Commission. There, I got to witness the restoration work funded in part by the very taxes we pay—seeing fish being raised for stocking, learning about habitat enhancement projects, and observing education programs that inspire the next generation of anglers and conservationists. It made the whole system feel tangible, and made me even more committed to supporting it.

In an age where many question where their tax dollars go, this is one tax that has clear accountability, measurable impact, and broad public support. The return on investment isn't just measured in fish populations – it's seen in children learning to fish for the first time, in improved water quality, in expanded access for anglers of all backgrounds, and in vibrant local economies built around healthy aquatic ecosystems.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to Representatives Debbie Dingell and Rob Wittman for their leadership in introducing H.R. 3858. This bipartisan bill reauthorizes the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund and ensures that this critical source of conservation funding continues without interruption. Their commitment to conservation and to America's outdoor heritage is deeply appreciated by manufacturers like myself, by anglers, and by the broader outdoor recreation economy.

H.R. 3858 reflects the priorities and consensus of the Angling and Boating Alliance (ABA), a coalition of organizations representing the recreational fishing and boating industries, conservation groups, and state fish and wildlife agencies. This group works collaboratively to ensure that the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund continues to meet the evolving needs of the communities and ecosystems it supports. As a manufacturer and a member of the American Sportfishing Association – one of the founding members of the ABA – I am pleased to see this bill incorporate the ABA’s thoughtful, consensus-based recommendations.

H.R. 3858 includes several targeted improvements that will strengthen and modernize the program:

- Extends the Trust Fund’s authorization through 2031, providing certainty and continuity for conservation and boating safety programs that rely on it.
- Updates the way interstate fisheries commissions are funded, moving from a flat appropriation to a percentage-based allocation that will allow their annual apportionments to grow as trust fund receipts (presumably) increase over time. This adjustment will provide a small but meaningful increase in funding to support regional coordination, habitat restoration, and data collection.
- Promotes expanded access to domestic fuel options for boaters by allowing infrastructure grant applicants under the Boating Infrastructure Grant (BIG) program to receive priority consideration if they provide alternative marine fuels. This is a forward-looking, no-cost update that supports energy flexibility for recreational boating.
- Addresses a long-standing fairness issue for bait bucket manufacturers by reducing the excise tax on integrated aerated bait buckets from 10% to 3%. This levels the playing field with bucket and aerator components sold separately, while having a negligible financial impact on the Trust Fund.

Each of these updates is smart, responsible, and preserves the core mission of the Sport Fish Restoration program: to reinvest user-generated funding back into the resources, infrastructure, and access that sustain our fisheries and our industry.

While H.R. 3858 includes recommendations from the Angling and Boating Alliance, it does not currently include provisions from a related bill – the Sporting Goods Excise Tax Modernization Act (H.R. 1494). This legislation is strongly supported by the Alliance and would address a gap in the administration of the excise tax system that funds the Trust Fund. Online sales of fishing equipment from foreign manufacturers to U.S. consumers typically bypass collection of the excise tax, resulting in lost conservation funding and creating a competitive disadvantage for tax-paying companies. The ABA is hopeful H.R. 1494 will move as a standalone bill before reauthorization of the Trust Fund is finalized.

However, if progress on H.R. 1494 stalls, the ABA would welcome the opportunity to work with the House Natural Resources Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee to explore incorporating its provisions into this reauthorization. Clarifying and updating the excise tax system will improve efficiency, strengthen compliance, and ensure that all applicable products are appropriately contributing to conservation.

In closing, I want to reiterate: the success of the Sport Fish Restoration program rests on a rare alignment of industry, government, and public interest. It works because manufacturers like American Fishing Wire are willing to contribute. It works because state agencies are trusted stewards of those contributions. And it works because Congress continues to provide the legislative support necessary to keep this partnership strong.

On behalf of my company, my colleagues in the American Sportfishing Association, and millions of anglers across the country, I urge you to support H.R. 3858 and ensure the continued success of this essential program.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'd be happy to answer any questions