



## Overview

Most over-arching state wildlife management decisions are made by a governor-appointed wildlife commission (also known as a 'wildlife board'). These commissions oversee important decisions related to the funding and prioritization of species conservation, setting of regulations, the formation of agency-NGO partnerships, opportunities to expand outdoor access and engagement, and many other activities. While wildlife commissions are tasked with making these decisions for the benefit of all wildlife and all people, they have historically been homogenous in demographic makeup and mostly representative of hunting, fishing, and agricultural interests. Without guidelines for ensuring diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and experience on wildlife commissions, wildlife agencies may be ill-suited to respond to the variety of challenges presented by the biodiversity crisis and rapidly growing demand for outdoor recreation.

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## Policy Options

- **Commissioner Appointment Criteria:** Many states require that a majority of their wildlife commissioners have fishing, hunting, or farming/ranching experience. Virginia, by contrast, has much more inclusive appointment criteria: that commissioners "shall be knowledgeable about wildlife conservation, hunting, fishing, boating, agriculture, forestry, or habitat." See [New Hampshire H.B.118](#) and [New Mexico H.B.254](#) for examples of recently introduced legislation addressing commission appointment criteria and processes.
- **Commission Authority:** Most state wildlife commissions have regulatory authority focused on hunting and fishing management. However, commissions can also have authority that is more broadly applicable to all wildlife and people, such as "preventing and guarding against the pollution of streams and lakes" ([Illinois](#)). Alternatively, since state wildlife agency staff have extensive knowledge about the wildlife they manage, some commissions only serve in an advisory capacity to the state wildlife agency ([North Dakota](#)). Recent proposals in [Vermont](#) and [Washington](#) would change their commission to an advisory role.

## KEY POINTS

- Although some states require that at least some commission seats be reserved for people who hunt, fish, and trap, most do not. Nonetheless, approximately [75%](#) of wildlife commission seats are filled by people who engage in one of these activities.
- A 2021 NCEL analysis found that state wildlife commissions are seriously lacking in gender diversity. Only 16% of commissioners are women, and approximately 30% of commissions have no women. NCEL is working on collecting self-reported race data for wildlife commissions.
- The biodiversity crisis will require that wildlife officials have knowledge and expertise in species conservation, yet only one state in the US ([Hawaii](#)) requires that wildlife commissioners have a formal degree in conservation and natural resources.



## Other Resources

- **National Wildlife Federation:** [State wildlife commission fact sheet](#)
- **Wildlife For All:** [Overview of wildlife commissioner appointment requirements by state](#)