

Small Game Hunter R3: Key Issues and Recommended Actions

A Report to the AFWA Directors

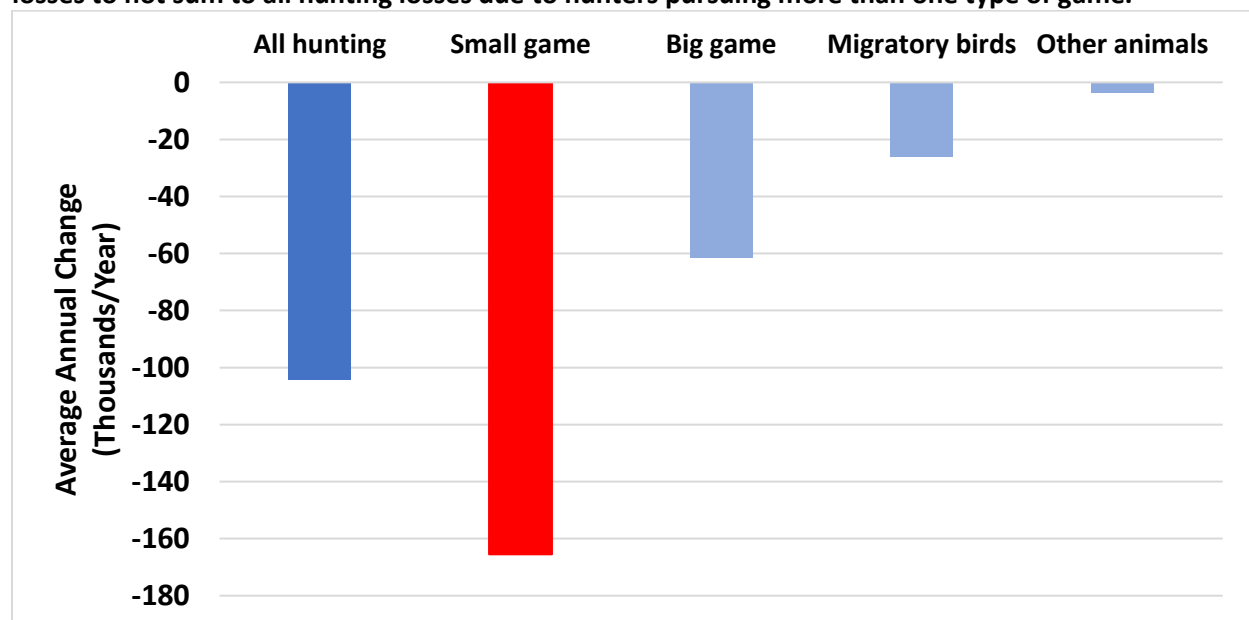
Jointly Submitted by the
AFWA Bird Conservation Committee &
Hunting/Shooting Sports Participation Committee
March 12, 2021



Background

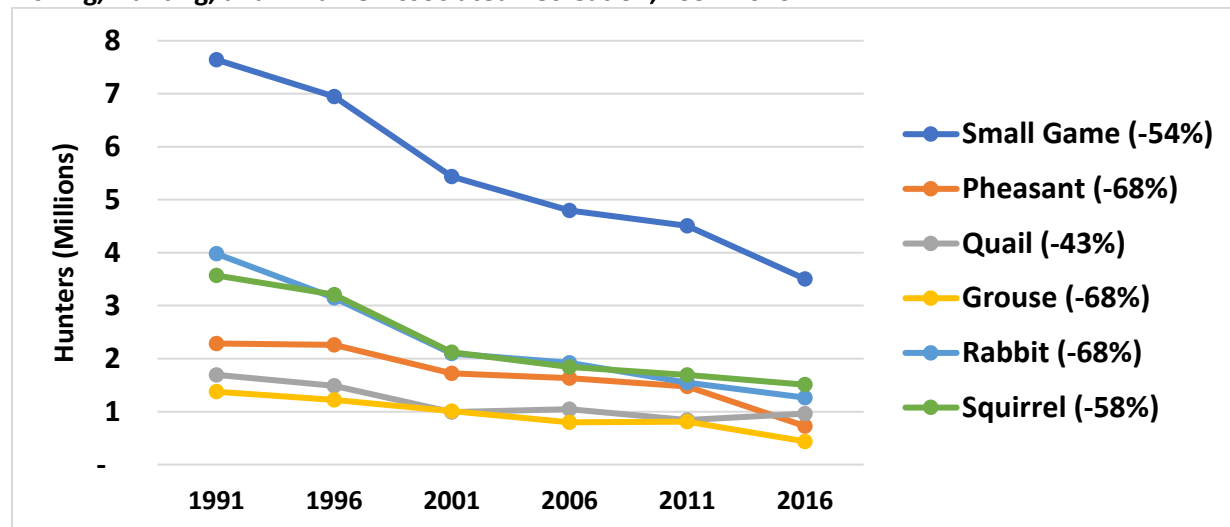
According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation ("National Survey"), small game hunters have ceased participation at a rate that far exceeds those for other hunting categories (Figure 1), suggesting that overall hunter losses are largely driven by small game hunters. Rates of hunter loss are steep for all types of small game (defined by the National Survey as including rabbits, squirrels, and all resident game bird species except wild turkey) and suggest if current trends continue, small game hunters will become "extinct" in less than 20 years (Figure 2). National-scale cooperative action is needed to understand these phenomena and, if feasible, design effective and efficient mitigation measures.

Figure 1. Average annual change in hunter participation by type of game pursued, as measured by the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 1991-2016. Categorical losses to not sum to all hunting losses due to hunters pursuing more than one type of game.



To that end, AFWA's Bird Conservation Committee and Hunting/Shooting Sports Participation Committee jointly advanced a resolution to call attention to this issue. AFWA Resolution 2019-05-10 (Appendix 1) was subsequently proposed and endorsed by the AFWA Directors. It called for the two committees to cooperatively identify and prioritize 1) a set of key questions and issues, and 2) a set of recommended actions related to addressing the long-term decline in small game hunter participation and its implications. Drafts lists were developed by representatives of both committees for review, and final content was approved in Spring 2021. We recommend the issues and recommended actions below be considered among AFWA's priorities for multi-state funding and committee work items.

Figure 2. Rates of small game hunter decline by species group, as measured by the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 1991-2016.



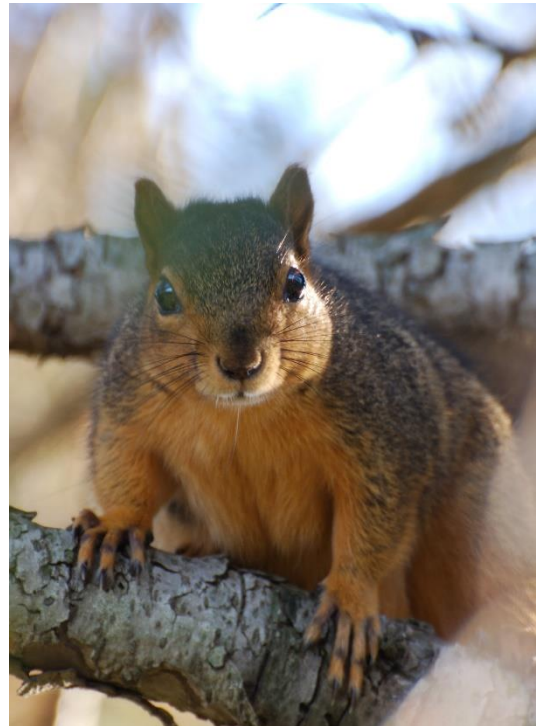
Key Questions and Issues

1. Given current hunter demographics and participation trends, how many U.S. small game hunters are there likely to be in 10, 20, and 30 years?
2. Besides agency revenue, which is in theory replaceable, what else is lost as small game hunters decline? Is there anything indispensable that cannot be supported through other types of hunting?
3. If participation declines continue, at what point are current hunter-supported NGO contributions to state conservation programs likely to be compromised?
4. How influential are game abundance and land access to small game hunter retention, recruitment, and reactivation, relative to other factors and to each other?
5. From an industry perspective, why is there a perceived shortage of marketing toward small game hunters? Is the customer base lacking, or does the sport (compared with big game and waterfowl hunting, for example) not lend itself as well to developing and marketing new products?

6. What legislative or policy changes could help states mitigate or adapt to declining small game hunter participation?
7. What interventions have states taken to maintain small game hunter participation, which interventions have been adequately evaluated, and which have proven to be most cost effective?

Recommended Actions

1. Strongly encourage continuation of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation such that measures of national small game hunter participation and demographics are maintained for direct comparison to those from previous surveys.
2. Sponsor a forum of representatives from the hunting industry, small game hunting-related NGOs, and AFWA committees to discuss the relevance of small game hunter declines, marketing challenges, and potential cooperative actions that could be taken to increase participation.
3. Sponsor cooperation among agencies and relevant AFWA committees to 1) compile and synthesize relevant literature and unpublished state-level analyses about factors affecting small game hunter participation, including R3 program evaluations; 2) gather, organize, and maintain available state-collected data on small game hunter participation, demographics, success, access, R3 interventions, and small game species abundance; and 3) perform multi-state analyses to reveal relative effects of these factors on small game hunter retention, recruitment, and reactivation.
4. Solicit feedback from state directors about what types of hunters (categorized by the species they pursue) are their agency's highest priority to retain, recruit, and reactivate, then make the responses readily available to relevant AFWA committees, working groups, members, and staff so that future activities can be prioritized accordingly.
5. Sponsor a forum or other collaboration of relevant AFWA committees and working groups to discuss potential policy interventions addressing the problem of maintaining game management programs as hunter participation declines, including 1) analysis of existing statutes and administrative rules deemed relevant to small game hunter R3 [see AFWA Legal Strategies Advisory Council 2021-2023 Work Plan Project P2.2.A], and 2) potential statute changes allowing the voluntary creation of state-controlled, interest-bearing game management trust funds (analogous to federal WSFR trust funds), with non-federal contributions to such funds being eligible for PR reimbursement.



Appendix 1.



RESOLUTION 2019-05-10

ADDRESSING THE LONG-TERM DECLINE IN SMALL GAME HUNTER PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND MITIGATING ITS EFFECTS ON HABITAT CONSERVATION DELIVERY

WHEREAS, according to the 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, small game (i.e., rabbits, squirrels, and resident game birds excluding wild turkey) hunter participation has declined 54% since 1991, far outpacing declines observed in migratory bird (-22%), big game (-14%), and “other animal” (-7%) hunter participation; and

WHEREAS, revenue from small game license sales is an important but declining funding source for many state wildlife agencies; and

WHEREAS, small game species and their pursuit create a unique impetus for upland habitat conservation initiatives on public and private lands in many states, which in turn benefit other species of conservation concern; and

WHEREAS, non-governmental organizations whose membership is composed primarily of small game hunters are key conservation partners in many states and nationally, and declines in participation-driven membership threaten the continuance of the conservation benefits these partnerships deliver; and

WHEREAS, several states have expressed a lack of confidence in their current methods of monitoring small game hunter participation and harvest, and the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Related Recreation will no longer estimate hunter participation and associated metrics at the state level unless individual states choose to pay for additional sampling, making it difficult to detect and understand differences in trends among states or regions; and

WHEREAS, current national R3 plans and initiatives include goals to bolster hunter participation generically, but do not specifically acknowledge the loss of small game hunters as a primary driver of overall hunter participation declines nor the irreplaceable role of small game hunters in supporting and justifying the states’ upland habitat management initiatives; and

WHEREAS, achieving the goals of the 2016 National Hunting and Shooting Sports National Plan is unlikely unless a more specific response to declining small game hunter participation is formulated;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that AFWA finds the decline in small game hunter participation is a serious national conservation concern that will require a coordinated effort among states to understand and address; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that AFWA directs its Bird Conservation Committee and Hunting/Shooting Sports Participation Committee to cooperatively assess this challenge of declining small game hunting participation, and present a prioritized list of key questions or issues and recommended steps for subsequent actions to this body in a timely manner.

Submitted by the Bird Conservation Committee and the Hunting and Shooting Sports Participation Committee.

Adopted by the Association on September 25, 2019 in St. Paul, MN