

TOPIC: Public Trust Policy: Implications for State Wildlife Professionals
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HOST: Dan Decker and Chuck Geisler

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Abstract: This presentation draws upon and feeds back into scholarship on public trust policy by offering a perspective grounded in practice. Effective public trust policy requires a clear understanding of its implications for natural resource managers. The public trust doctrine (PTD) is a legal and policy framework for managing and conserving natural resources, including wildlife. It applies in the United States and in other countries globally. This presentation describes the obligations that PTD bestows upon wildlife professionals working at the state level in the United States. These obligations include equal consideration of the interests of all beneficiaries, current and future, in the management of wildlife populations.

Elected and appointed officials, especially in the legislative branch, have policy-level decision-making authority that makes them trustees of wildlife under PTD. In contrast, career professionals working for state wildlife agencies have ministerial duties as trust managers. The differences between the roles of trustees and trust managers are important but are often overlooked in the academic literature. By focusing on their role as trust managers, while supporting and respecting the role of elected and appointed officials as trustees, state wildlife agency professionals can more effectively advance public trust policy.