



**NWTF's Board of Directors welcomes new NWTF CEO George Thornton to the Wild Turkey Center (left to right) NWTF Chairman Jere Peak, George and Beth Thornton, NWTF President Peggy Vallery.**

continue to pursue the conservation mission as we have in the past.

The hunting heritage side of the mission is equally challenging because we have an urbanizing society; we have very vocal groups who are anti-hunting and anti-gun ownership. We have to tell our story in a way that's balanced and compelling.

I would like to see us expand our membership [and] our funding. I would like to see us reinvigorate the relationship with our partners in Mexico with the Mexican Federation. The Canadian experience has been positive, but we can do more there.

I would like to see us talk about the benefits we're providing for other species—programs and benefits that tie in like hand in glove with the turkey mission.

I'd like to see us reach out to sister organizations. We already have deep, long ties with virtually all the other conservation federations and associations. But they're facing the same challenges we face, and I think there's strength in unity.

***What message do you have for our members who have supported our organization all of these years?***

**Thornton:** A very simple one: Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of all of our hearts as staff of the Federation. Nothing would be possible without the good works and the commitment of [your] time and money. Help us understand your challenges. Help us understand

ways to reach out to ever-widening communities so that we can fund the good work that's being spearheaded in [conservation]. That's who we are. That's why we're here. Let's not lose sight of that.

I've met some of our sponsors, not all of them. Sponsors are so important to everything we do.

[They] support us for two reasons: One is because of belief in the mission, and that's fundamental. It is also a business proposition, and we need to add value to them [by] expressing our appreciation for the contributions they are making to us. In exchange, we want to make their support visible to the membership so that it is a value-added experience for them.

***What are your feelings about our outreach programs—Women in the Outdoors, JAKES, Wheelin' Sportsmen? How do you think they fit into the overall mission of the NWTF?***

**Thornton:** That is something that has been foremost on my mind. This will sound critical, [though] it is more just an observation: I don't believe our outreach programs are separate programs or silos to be managed independently. I believe they are part of the core fabric of the Federation. The specific activities and goals of those programs need to be incorporated into our major banquet, fundraising and educational activities. Outreach programs are a big part of who we are and an even bigger part of who we will be.

***What are the biggest issues you see facing hunters right now?***

**Thornton:** Access to hunting lands is a big issue. In my lifetime the access issue has gone from not being an issue to being a significant issue. As a child, [I] could walk

onto someone's porch and knock on the door after school and ask permission to hunt, and it was more often than not granted. That's no longer possible in many parts of the country. We've got to continue to promote access on public—state and federal—lands for people. Without access it becomes a moot point.

***Are there other issues?***

**Thornton:** I think there are significant issues; I would call them perception issues. There are groups and voices that are absolutely opposed to hunting—on ethical grounds, on safety grounds. Some of that is out of a deeply held conviction and commitment. I think some of it is based on ignorance of who hunters are [and] why people hunt.

That perception issue is very difficult to address. It takes a lot of resource [and] time, and it takes a lot of listening. It's one thing to go out and project a defensive measure, but sometimes that's not the most effective way. If we can listen to what people are saying and understand why they object to hunting, then we may be able to help them find ways to understand why hunting is an important part of the whole outdoor experience.

***What are some of the ways that hunters can work toward passing those opportunities on to our children, our grandchildren and future generations?***

**Thornton:** The inter-generational experience is something that strikes a chord with me. It is one of the best ways for a grandfather to take a grandchild, or a father or mother, or an aunt or an uncle to take a child and spend the day with them. They can go out, they can hunt, they can understand wildlife behavior, they can understand the interaction with habitat. That process teaches them an awful lot about planning, preparation [and] execution of a plan. Those are experiences we carry through all of our lives. You don't get that with a video game. I'm a big fan of team sports, but you don't get that one-on-one learning with a team sport.