

GAME WARDEN FOP LODGES: SERVICE to FRATERNAL MEMBERS and the COMMUNITY

Anyone in law enforcement is aware of the existence of Fraternal Order of Police Lodges for traditional police forces but there are only a few lodges in the country solely representing conservation law enforcement officers. The Arizona Game Ranger Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #71 (AGRL) is one of those lodges and has been in existence since the early 1990's. The Lodge had a bit of a rocky start, but the end result was a tremendous win for the Arizona Game Rangers. Prior to the formation of the Lodge, the Arizona Game & Fish Department (Department) had Wildlife Managers (Game Rangers/Game Wardens) under two different retirement programs, the Arizona State Retirement System (ASRS) and the Public Safety Personnel Retirement System (PSPRS for commissioned officers). Officers working for the Department recognized that due to the differing benefits in each of the systems, serious inequities existed, not the least of which was the line of duty death benefit.

Due to the inequities with the retirement systems and other work-related issues, several Game and Fish officers decided that an advocate group should be formed to support the Game Rangers. The organization was formed and called the Arizona Game Ranger Association (AGRA). The purpose was to represent the officers on issues important to its members and at the same time support the mission of the Department. At that time officers within AGRA were members of FOP Lodge #32, which was the Arizona Department of Public Safety FOP Lodge, this was the case, so Game and Fish officers had FOP representation and support.

Shortly after AGRA was formed a request was filed with the Game and Fish Director's Office to bring all officers under the more appropriate PSPRS. After a lack of action by the Director to make this happen, AGRA voted to sue the agency. It was not the preferred action

but there was no other choice. AGRA retained an attorney who took the case for \$50 per officer. The lawsuit was filed, and Arizona Attorney General's Office advised the AZGFD Commission they had violated a joinder agreement they had signed with PSPRS and ordered the Department to put every Game Ranger under PSPRS

Following the lawsuit, it was decided that AGRA should be an FOP Lodge so that the focus of its efforts could be tailored to the needs of conservation law enforcement officers and the De-

partment. Forming a Game Ranger FOP Lodge also included representation and support at not only the State level but National level as well. As an FOP Lodge, AGRL falls under the umbrella of the Arizona State FOP Lodge (over 10,000 members) which in turn is under the National FOP Lodge (over 356,000 members in 2,100 local lodges).

Over the years, there have been a series of ups and downs for AGRL due to turnover of Executive Board officers and waning interest in the Lodge for various reasons. While most FOP Lodges consist of officers in a specific centralized location, AGRL members are spread over the entire state of Arizona. This presents unique challenges when holding required meetings, obtaining a vote on issues, or gathering information on leadership includes compliance with the Officer Bill of Rights, uniforms and uniform Allowance, On-call status, pay inequities, and availability of unmarked vehicles.

Over the past two years, the Lodge Executive Board has had a complete turnover. In 2021, a new President, Secretary and Treasurer were voted in and in 2022 a new Vice President was voted in. The rest of the Board consists of regional representatives for each of the six regions and Department headquarters, Chaplain, Immediate Past President and Sergeant at Arms. Several of these positions also have new individuals.

AGRL has a somewhat unique financial structure that enables the Lodge to provide support and benefits for not only fraternal members but also to conduct outreach activities to benefit communi-



ties and community members around the state. The Lodge general fund is a 501 (c)(8) nonprofit, and its Charity Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit. This allows AGRL to expend funds to operate the Lodge, support its members, and to fund activities such as fishing clinics for disadvantaged and/or physically/mentally challenged children and adults. Over the years AGRL has held numerous fishing clinics and events for various groups which not only furthers the mission of the Lodge, conducting community outreach, but further the Department's mission to foster interest in angling and outdoor recreation for future generations.

In March of this year, the Lodge hosted a youth fishing clinic at a mountain lake near Tucson Arizona. It was a community-based collaborative event between the AGRL Charity Foundation, the La Frontera Center, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the U.S.

Forest Service Coronado National Forest Santa Catalina District, and the Scouts BSA, Catalina Council. Participants included scouts, and youth affiliated with the La Frontera Center. La Frontera is a multi-faceted community service organization that supports youth from challenged backgrounds in experiencing a safer, stronger, and healthier community.

AGRL members, Arizona Game and Fish Department employees, and volunteers from various organizations were on hand to assist and mentor anglers. Tackle was provided for the children that did not have their own and the La Frontera children were able to keep their fishing rods and tackle. A Bar-B-Q lunch was provided and various prizes such as field guides, tackle boxes, fishing rods, camping gear, were raffled off and trophies were given for the first and largest fish caught. The Department was able to stock the lake immediately

prior to the event and allow officers to assist with the event while on duty. In total there were approximately 60 participants. Planning for more events like this are currently underway.

With the infusion of new blood on the Executive Board and new younger officers joining the Lodge, it is again moving forward, planning outreach events and activities and tackling issues important to the members. 🦞

👉 *Article written by Tim Wade, AGRL Treasurer and Kurt Bahti, AGRL Vice President, retired Arizona Game Rangers. Photos taken by Shelly Shepherd, AGRL President/retired Game Ranger.*

For more information about AGRL or how to become an FOP Lodge contact Shelly Shepherd at agrl71pres@gmail.com or Tim Wade, Treasurer at agrl71treas@gmail.com.



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