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United States Department of Agriculture
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Subcommittee on Forestry, Conservation and Rural Revitalization
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of farm bill programs in supporting species conservation.

The topic of today's hearing gets to the heart of the concept of Cooperative Conservation, as wildlife conservation serves as an excellent example of how voluntary conservation efforts on private lands make a difference. Because nearly 70 percent of federally-listed species have habitat on private lands, farm bill conservation programs can and do make a difference in creating habitat for these species.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has a unique role to play in the development of habitat for endangered, threatened, candidate, and at-risk species. In addition to the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, which focuses on improving habitat on private lands, many other farm bill conservation programs produce ancillary benefits that result in improved habitat for species. NRCS is poised to continue to help landowners make significant contributions in this area by delivering technical assistance based on sound science. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the farm bill conservation programs is also able to offer voluntary assistance that is economically feasible to landowners in the form of financial incentives, cost share for conservation projects, and conservation easements. In 2002, President Bush signed into law the most conservation oriented Farm Bill in history, which reauthorized and greatly enhanced conservation programs. In total, the new Farm Bill enacted by the President provided a \$17.1 billion increase in conservation funding over a ten-year period. In addition, direction was provided to assist agricultural producers meet the regulatory challenges that they face.

In the case of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), USDA is working proactively to help producers address the habitat needs of species protected under the ESA, candidate and at-risk species. Conservation programs, such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP), the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) have had a positive impact on all wildlife, increasing habitat for both game and non-game species.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) implementation procedures require NRCS State Conservationists to include in their Ranking Criteria, "compliance with Federal, State, local or tribal regulations concerning soil, water and air quality;

wildlife habitat; and ground and surface water conservation.” In addition, one of the four national conservation priorities for EQIP addresses wildlife by seeking the “promotion of at-risk species habitat recovery.” This national conservation priority is used by NRCS to allocate additional funding to states in targeted areas to address this resource issue. NRCS has worked to ensure that our programs are helping landowners address species concerns and providing incentives to not only protect Threatened and Endangered Species habitat, but also to develop and enhance new habitat for the future. Here are just a few examples of actions and assistance that USDA recently has offered to landowners with respect to habitat enhancement for targeted species.

The Wetlands Reserve Program

On Earth Day 2004, President Bush announced a Wetlands Initiative that will go beyond the Federal policy of “no net loss” of wetlands, and set a new goal to restore, improve, and protect at least three million acres of wetlands over the next five years. The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is playing a significant role in meeting this goal. More than one-third of the Nation’s Threatened or Endangered species live only in wetlands. The WRP provides restoration assistance and easements of 30 years or permanent in duration to protect wetlands. Through WRP, USDA’s goal is to restore and protect more than 2 million acres of wetlands.

In addition, on May 16, 2005, Secretary Johanns announced the availability of \$4 million in financial assistance for the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) partnership proposals that restore and protect habitat for migratory birds and other wetland dependent wildlife. This new enhancement option within WRP allows NRCS to match resources and leverage the efforts of State and local governments to provide even greater assistance to landowners.

Eastern Bog Turtle and Ivory Billed Woodpecker

Of the \$4 million recently made available for the WREP, a minimum of \$500,000 is offered for partnership proposals that address Bog Turtle Habitat in the eastern United States. The Bog Turtle is a threatened species that has a potential range from New York and Massachusetts south to Tennessee and Georgia. Population declines are due mainly to loss of habitat, which consists of wet meadows and other shallow sunny wetlands, and encroachment of vegetation. This funding will create additional habitat. Bog Turtle-related proposals will compete for funding only with other Bog Turtle proposals under our recent announcement.

Also included in our WREP announcement is a minimum of \$500,000 to assist with Ivory-billed woodpecker habitat in Arkansas. We believe that excellent opportunities exist for developing additional bottomland hardwood wetland habitat projects that will provide long-term benefits. In addition to WREP, NRCS is providing an additional \$1 million in WRP funds, and \$1 million in WHIP cost-share funds, to private landowners for practices that improve and restore native Ivory-billed woodpecker habitat. This includes restoring previously logged areas near deciduous forest swamps to improve and

protect critical habitat. We will be announcing the successful recipients of funding under this program soon, and feel that the excellent response and applications that have been submitted underscore the opportunities for increased private lands conservation of wildlife habitat. In addition, the Farm Service Agency will provide \$2.7 million through the Conservation Reserve Program for Ivory-billed woodpecker habitat.

Pallid Sturgeon

To enhance habitat for the pallid sturgeon, NRCS offers cost-share assistance to help landowners downstream from the Fort Peck Dam prepare for increased flows which are released to simulate spring runoff, these are areas that have not been flooded in recent years. Eligible practices included retrofitting, relocating, and/or replacing irrigation pump sites, and wetland enhancement. These practices will help to minimize the damage to irrigation pump sites, limit the potential for pollution of the Missouri River, and allow farmers to continue raising crops. Wetland enhancements will help to protect fragile areas from erosion and silt deposition. Now in the third year of providing assistance to impacted producers, NRCS has funded approximately \$900,000 in contracts.

Salmon

In February, Secretary Johanns announced \$2.8 million in the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to help restore and conserve salmon habitat in Alaska, California, Idaho, Maine, Oregon, and Washington. These funds are part of the WHIP Salmon Habitat Restoration Initiative, which NRCS initiated in March of 2004. Through the initiative, NRCS helps landowners with projects that restore habitat for Pacific and Atlantic salmon and include increasing riparian areas to provide shade along streams, restoring gravel spawning beds, removing barriers to fish passages and reducing nutrient runoff from farming and ranching operations. In addition to this year's funding, NRCS signed 47 contracts and agreements with landowners, tribes, and municipalities in fiscal year (FY) 2004. These projects totaled more than \$3.3 million and improved nearly 900 acres of riparian habitat and opened hundreds of miles of streams for fish passage. We are pleased with the gains being made to improve salmon habitat, and are confident that NRCS can continue to build upon this success for the future.

Sage Grouse

Habitat conservation for the Greater sage grouse in the western United States serves as a prime illustration of the role of Farm Bill programs and conservation planning assistance. Accelerated assistance provided through NRCS has had a positive impact on improving sage grouse habitat. NRCS provided more than \$2.5 million in incentives for sage grouse habitat conservation, primarily through the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and WHIP in FY 2004. Just two weeks ago on July 13, Secretary Johanns announced an additional \$5 million for sage grouse special projects in 11 western states. This doubles USDA's commitment over fiscal year 2004. NRCS estimates that with the funding last fiscal year more than 80,000 acres of sage grouse habitat benefited directly from private lands conservation efforts, with more than 1 million acres experiencing a secondary benefit. For FY 2005, we estimate that roughly 1.5 million acres of sage grouse habitat will

benefit from primary and secondary effects combined. Partially, as a result of this additional effort, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made a decision not to list the Greater sage grouse as Threatened or Endangered under the ESA. In that decision, the Fish and Wildlife Service emphasized the importance of ongoing and future conservation efforts that benefit this species over the long-term.

Conservation Practices

Mr. Chairman, the breath and width of conservation practices that NRCS provides to enhance habitat under these different programs and for the different species is immense. Examples of just some of the types of practices implemented include:

- Fish Passage;
- Conservation Buffers;
- Wetland Creation/Enhancement/Restoration;
- fencing with livestock management and off-site water developments;
- in-stream fish structures; and
- seeding and creation of shallow water areas for wetland dependent wildlife.

Other Activities

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 authorized the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) through which USDA will make payments to private forest landowners who agree to protect forested acreage to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species. This program has an authorization of appropriations of \$5 million from FY 2004 through FY 2008, and can enroll up to 2 million acres. Program contracts can take the form of 10-year cost-share agreements and easements of 30-years or up to 99-years in duration. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act also contains innovative provisions relating to “safe harbor” or similar assurances under the ESA to landowners who enroll land in HFRP and whose conservation activities result in a net conservation benefit for listed, candidate, or other species. USDA is working collaboratively with the Department of the Interior’s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on establishing these procedures for HFRP.

Summary

In a broad sense, the Administration’s commitment toward Cooperative Conservation will mean greater emphasis on assisting producers to identify opportunities for improved and increased fish and wildlife habitat. Mr. Chairman, my statement has highlighted just a few of the programs and provided a general sense of the kinds of species targeted and work that private lands conservation is accomplishing. But there are numerous other species that are benefiting everyday from conservation efforts on farms and ranches across America. To provide an idea of the scope and magnitude of our efforts, NRCS will provide over \$1 billion in funding through the EQIP program this year. Couple these funds with the additional half billion dollars dedicated through our other conservation programs including the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) and Conservation Security Program (CSP) this year, it becomes quite clear that wildlife

habitat and many species of concern are receiving major benefits from the work of NRCS. I note that under the CSP, wildlife habitat plays a major part in that program, as any farmer or rancher with wildlife habitat issues on their property must fully address those needs in order to qualify for participation at the highest levels.

We will continue to seek innovative means of protecting and restoring fish and wildlife habitat by offering farmers and ranchers incentive-based programs and planning assistance. We also will continue to seek out opportunities to best target our resources and assistance when special opportunities or circumstances necessitate. Rural America has an excellent story to tell. If we provide solid information, financial resources, and technical assistance, we can achieve a win-win for American agriculture as well as for wildlife conservation.

I would be happy to respond to any questions that Members of the Subcommittee might have.