

Statement of Sara Braasch
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United States Department of Agriculture
Before the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Water
July 13, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to appear before you today to present the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) perspective on habitat restoration and preservation on America's private lands. My name is Sara Braasch, and I serve as the Regional Assistant Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for 13 western States, as well as the Pacific Basin. I thank the Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear, and I express gratitude to the Chairman and members for your interest in USDA's roles in helping farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners improve wildlife habitat. 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 can make a difference.

I would like to take a moment to highlight the background of the NRCS to place our involvement into context. NRCS assists owners of America's private land to conserve their soil, water, and related natural resources. Local, State and Federal agencies and policymakers also rely on our expertise. We deliver technical assistance based on sound science, that is suited to a farmer's or rancher's specific needs. In addition, NRCS also offers voluntary assistance to landowners in the form of financial incentives, cost share 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 regulatory challenges that they face.

Conservation programs can and do help reduce the burden of regulation. 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, and at-risk species.

Conservation programs such as the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) addresses the needs of these species.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) rule includes the requirement for NRCS State offices to include in their Ranking Criteria, “Compliance with Federal, State, local or tribal regulatory requirements 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 provides additional emphasis in allocation of program funding; direction is also provided to states to include national priorities in ranking individual applications.

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 with respect to habitat enhancement for targeted species.

The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program

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. The Wetlands Reserve Program (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. The 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 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. Bog Turtle-related proposals will compete 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 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 Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (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 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 through the Conservation Reserve Program will provide \$2.7 million for Ivory-billed woodpecker habitat.

Salmon

In February, Secretary Johanns announced \$2.8 million in the 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 vegetative 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 believe 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 had a positive impact on improving sage grouse habitat. NRCS has 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. NRCS estimates that in FY 2004 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. As a result, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made a decision not to list the Greater sage grouse as Threatened and Endangered under the ESA. In that decision, they emphasized the importance of ongoing and future conservation efforts to the long-term health of this species.

Other Assistance

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 authorized the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP). The Act authorizes HFRP to make payments for 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 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 Interior 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, and it becomes clear that wildlife habitat is receiving major benefits. 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.