

Statement of Bruce I. Knight
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United States Department of Agriculture
Before the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Water
September 24, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today to present the Department of Agriculture's perspective on habitat restoration and preservation associated with the sage grouse in eleven western states. I thank the Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear, and I would like to express gratitude to the Chairman and members of this body for your interest in USDA's roles in helping farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners improve sage grouse habitat. Under the leadership of Secretary Veneman, we at USDA have taken proactive steps to provide additional program assistance specifically for sage grouse habitat conservation.

I would like to take a moment to highlight the background of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to place our involvement into context. NRCS assists owners of America's private land 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 and suited to a farmer's or rancher's specific needs. In addition, NRCS offers voluntary assistance to landowners in the form of financial incentives, cost share 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 is estimated to provide 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.

From the standpoint of the mission and perspective of the NRCS, we have recognized that the issue of sage grouse habitat has become of increased concern to many farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners. We also recognize that 28 percent of the existing sage grouse habitat is found on private lands. This area represents about 40 million acres. Our goal is to help agricultural producers maintain and improve sage grouse habitat as part of larger management efforts that provide for multiple land benefits. Mr. Chairman, there exists substantial potential to combine and coordinate sage grouse habitat efforts across governments, with farmers and ranchers, sportsmen groups, businesses and other stakeholders. NRCS is eager to join forces with the many interested parties in accelerating our efforts for sage grouse.

Program Assistance

Last month, the Secretary announced \$2 million in Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) funding available specifically for special projects to help protect sage grouse habitat. The Grassland Reserve Program helps viable ranching and farming operations protect and enhance grassland, rangeland, shrubland and certain other lands and provides assistance for rehabilitating grasslands. Eligible lands are enrolled in GRP through easements and rental agreements. The additional \$2 million for sage grouse assistance was made available in Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Washington. Each state received \$500,000 to protect and enhance sage grouse habitat on GRP easement lands, with technical assistance and additional financial assistance provided

through state and local partnerships. The sage grouse funding was in addition to nearly \$70 million that was made available in fiscal year (FY) 2004 to enroll land in the Grassland Reserve Program nationwide.

The Department also recently announced targeted sage grouse assistance through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). Specifically, NRCS provided \$350,000 to protect habitat of sage grouse at Parker Mountain, Utah. WHIP is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat primarily on private land. Through WHIP, NRCS provides both technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost-share assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. WHIP agreements between NRCS and the participant generally last from 5 to 10 years from the date the agreement is signed. Under the targeted sage grouse initiative in Utah, landowners will use the funds for brush management, reseeding, water development and wildlife habitat management on approximately 104,000 acres.

But our assistance to the sage grouse goes far beyond the targeted funding that has been announced. For example, our agency's flagship conservation cost-share program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is providing nearly \$1 billion in conservation incentives and cost-share assistance nationwide this year, with even greater funding authorized for FY 2005. We also know that the conversion of farm and ranchlands to non-agricultural usage poses a particular challenge to sage grouse habitat. I would note that the Department's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program is providing \$112 million this year to partner with state, local, and non-governmental efforts to protect prime farm and ranchland from development. While it is difficult to quantify the impacts, we know that both of these programs

are making important contributions toward protecting and developing sage grouse habitat.

Combining the efforts of all our programs and technical assistance, NRCS estimates that in FY 2004 more than 80,000 acres of sage grouse habitat will benefit directly from private lands conservation efforts with more than 1 million acres experiencing a secondary benefit. For FY 2005, we estimate that about 1.5 million acres of sage grouse habitat will benefit from primary and secondary effects combined.

NRCS offers both technical and financial assistance that can help producers preserve, restore, and enhance sage brush habitat. In terms of conservation planning, NRCS provides a broad range of expertise, largely through the agency's Conservation Technical Assistance program, that can result in multiple complementary benefits, including the reduction of soil erosion and water quality improvements. Specific examples of NRCS assistance include the following:

- rangeland planting
- livestock fencing
- water developments
- rangeland treatments
- prescribed grazing
- conservation cover
- field borders
- land reclamation for fire control
- critical area planting
- reduction of incidental chemical spraying
- pest management
- brush management
- shrub establishment
- native grass and legume establishment
- riparian herbaceous plantings
- riparian forest plantings
- wetland restoration
- protection of sage brush habitat

While NRCS offers many established conservation planning and practice measures that benefit sagebrush and sage grouse habitat, we are also taking steps to develop new scientific and technical tools to assist our field staff. For example, we recently developed new technical guidance through a collaborative arrangement with the Wildlife Habitat Council, which will assist field staff to implement conservation measures that benefit sage grouse habitat. The guidance is currently in peer review and is expected to be released before the end of the calendar year. NRCS also operates Plant Materials Centers (PMCs), which develop new plant cultivars and planning/management techniques in order to meet conservation objectives. We are directing a new initiative within the Plant Materials program to improve sage steppe restoration efforts, such as developing new science for improving restoration and interspersions of grasses and forbs within sagebrush habitat, and to develop techniques for control and management of invasive species such as cheat grass. Also, this year NRCS committed funding to assess the effects of conservation practices on sage grouse. We believe that we must provide our field staff with as much knowledge, data, and technical standards and specifications as possible, in order to ensure that farmers and ranchers are getting the expert advice that they need. NRCS is also planning a training course on conservation and management of sage grouse habitat for our field conservationists and planners this coming spring.

Outreach and Interagency Collaboration

Mr. Chairman, while NRCS has focused to meet landowner needs, we also want to ensure that we partner appropriately with agencies within the Department of the Interior and government-wide. We know that significant gains are being made on private lands and seek to ensure that the voice of agriculture is being heard and the stories of success on farms and ranches are being

incorporated into discussions and decisions about the sage grouse. Also, we at USDA want to fully understand the perspective and objectives of partner agencies in order to ensure that our work is well directed, not duplicative, and best suits the needs of our customers.

Earlier this year, we initiated a leadership retreat with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in order to give the top leadership staff of both agencies insight into each other's operations. We are also working together to develop many important concepts with respect to how conservation improvements should be regarded in future regulatory decision-making. Mr. Chairman, we know that the relationship between agriculture and wildlife will become a matter of ever increasing importance in the future. We want to ensure that we are in the best position possible to explain the linkages and work toward the most positive outcomes possible for the sage grouse, other species, as well as farmers and ranchers alike.

We are also working with the Western Governors Association (WGA) on ways to further define our efforts, products and develop a strategy for further collaboration. NRCS maintains a full time employee on staff as a liaison with the WGA. We are working to identify ways to engage private land holders up front, on what it means to have sage grouse present by obtaining their presence and viewpoints in early meetings. Also, NRCS has developed a joint publication with the Western Governors Association on the interrelationship of private lands and sage grouse habitat.

Mr. Chairman, we recognize there will be many challenges ahead, but we are enthusiastic about what is being done on private lands, and about all of the further progress that is possible.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for inviting USDA to participate in today's hearing. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that Members of the Committee might have.

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