



**WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE
ON NORTH AMERICAN WILDLIFE POLICY**

Friday, October 3, 2008

Remarks by the Honorable Ed Schafer, U. S. Secretary of Agriculture

Thank you very much. I really appreciate the warm welcome. It's great to be with you for the White House Conference on North American Wildlife Policy and it's a thrill to get out of Washington D.C. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be with you all here and to get out of the office. You know, you don't get much outdoors life living in Washington, so it's always great to be with you. This morning, I got up and went for a nice walk along the Truckee River and, you know, it's gorgeous. The river was running. You could hear the birds start to wake up and it was a beautiful morning out there and, as I was walking along the river, I was kind of thinking about, you know, pretty soon it's going to get colder and there'll be some ice flows there and some ice along the river and pretty frost in the trees and it kind of reminded me of the latest political joke I know. I thought I'd give it to you because this is the season. And, you know, you can use anybody you want if you choose to repeat this joke, but just to grab a couple of politicians out of the air I thought I might talk a bit about Senator Biden and Governor Palin.

You know, after the debate, there were some concerns, seemed to be a tie; they weren't so sure about, you know, who won or who didn't win or who held their own and who didn't and it reminded me that not too long ago they anticipated- they, being whoever they are- anticipated that this might happen so they decided to have a contest between the Senator and the Governor outdoors. They said "Let's have a little competition" so they set up, they said "maybe we should do some ice fishing" and, you know, one lives in Delaware and one lives in Alaska, they kind of split the difference and said "We'll meet in North Dakota". It's seventy-five degrees out there yesterday, by the way, so just bear with me because it's a story, but anyway...They said "Well, we'll go to North Dakota. We'll do some ice fishing" so they agreed to have three days of ice fishing in North Dakota. The first day, Senator Biden went out on the ice; got all geared up, ready to go. Governor Palin followed him out. At the end of the day, they came back and Governor Palin had three, nice wall-eye and Senator Biden had nothing. He was a little concerned about that, said "Well, we'll get them the next day". So, they went out, same thing next day, the second day, they went out and they both came back and Governor Palin had nice, five, nice white bass and Senator Biden, again, had the big goose egg. He was a little concerned about this so he said "Still have the third day to get in". So, they went out fishing again on the ice and Governor Palin came back with seventeen perch out of the lake and, again, Senator Biden was skunked. Some people thought that was kind of 'fishy', so to speak so, of course, CNBC and CNN had to go out and do a big investigation. They searched all over. They interviewed everybody and they finally had

breaking news and they accused Governor Palin of cheating on this ice fishing contest and revealed the fact that she actually cut holes in the ice.

But, I'm really pleased to be with you. You know, thanks again for the invitation. It's really interesting for me to follow the President of the United States by satellite and to follow the Vice-President. I have to tell you, when I first became the Secretary of Agriculture, it was a little different. When I was invited to be on the same stage, I didn't speak. You know, I just kind of stood there. I was the stage dressing, so the secretaries line up and the presidents speak. So, it's fun to be here with you today in a little better mode. Also, right after I figured I was just a stage dressing, I found out that at the United States Department of Agriculture, we have the Executive Dining Room. It's a smaller dining room and I would go up there once in a while and nobody was there. You know, nobody used the Executive Dining Room, so I thought that was curious and then I found out that I was the President's food taster.

So, I have the opportunity to speak today in this new role and I appreciate what you're having to do so you have to bear with me, but I do want to congratulate all of you for the passion and the partnership and the dedication that you bring here this week. It really is an honor for me to be here with you and to recognize the important work that you all do. You know, I really do believe that we are making history here together. I think that someday, perhaps a century from now or when our great-grandchildren and their children look back on this, they're going to look at the state of wildlife conservation and the hunting and opportunities on public lands and their going to view October 2008 as a milestone in the nation's conservation history thanks to the goals that you've set and the work that you've done to get us here.

You know, this is just the fourth ever such national conference on conservation. It's humbling to consider the landmarks that we're following this week, the White House Conference of Governors in 1908, the American Game Conference in 1930, the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in 1973, but it's even more humbling I believe to reflect that we're walking in the footsteps here of visionaries like naturalist, Aldo Leopold, and certainly the father of American conservation, President Theodore Roosevelt. I'm a life-long student and fan of Theodore Roosevelt and know that a young Roosevelt came to North Dakota, my home state. He came at a difficult time in his life when his wife and his mother had died on the same day. He arrived in the western part of North Dakota, broken in soul and broken in spirit. He came to this majestic spot in western North Dakota that we call the 'Badlands'. He made his home near a place called Medora at the Elkhorn Ranch and ranching was good for him. In his own words he said "The charm of ranch life comes in its freedom and the vigorous open air existence it forces a man to lead", that's the land where I grew up and it's something that I've always enjoyed and cherished and something that you can never take for granted.

So, you can imagine how I felt when the opportunity arose that I could help the U.S. Forest Service acquire the 5,200 acre Elkhorn Ranch, the very ranch that Theodore Roosevelt lived and worked his land. I was delighted to jump in and help with the project and it was completed last year and certainly it was great and efforts like Lowell Bear and

Bob Model and, my friend, Simon Roosevelt, in the course of that work we were able to accomplish this task. It wasn't easy. It took about four years I think or more, but you know now it's there and it's preserved for the rest because it was there that Theodore Roosevelt saw how important it was to conserve this great land. In the course of that work, I certainly had the pleasure of meeting the great, great-grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, Simon. Simon is here with us today. Simon, would you stand and say "Hi" to everybody.

But, it was at the Elkhorn Ranch where Theodore Roosevelt learned to rope and to ride, where he became an avid hunter and a life-long outdoorsman. As he came to appreciate the many uses of the land, he grew concerned about the civilization's impact on that land and on native animals and wildlife. For Roosevelt, the North Dakota 'Badlands' were healing and they were enlightening and encouraging. The Elkhorn Ranch which now stands adjacent to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park helped shape his character and inspired his conservation legacy and no wonder so many conservationists consider the Elkhorn Ranch the cradle of conservation in America. As Roosevelt himself said "Had it not been for my life living and working in North Dakota, I never would have been President of the United States" and what we're doing here this week is celebrating and building on that life that Roosevelt led in one of the great achievements of the Roosevelt Presidency.

You know, in October of 1907 when President Roosevelt invited the governors to the White House for the Conservation Congress which eventually took place in May of '08, but in that October of '07, he wrote "Facts force me to believe that the conservation of our natural resources is the most weighty question now before the people of the United States of America" and, you know, it was an interesting time, one that we might even recognize today, that time, in history, in October, one hundred and one years ago- and this comes from the book, Theodore Rex, The Life of Theodore Roosevelt after he became President and you read in there what was going on when he was calling this wildlife conference. He said- or it was noted- that, as he came back to the White House on the 21st of October, he was met with this problem. The money was almost unobtainable on Wall Street. The call loan rates had risen to a hundred and twenty-five percent and the entire credit structure of the United States of America was under siege, kind of interesting, isn't it? But, he said "It seems to me that this is the time for our country to take account of its natural resources and to inquire how long they are likely to last". You see, T.R. knew that the strength was in the land. He knew that the cycle of nature would continue. He knew of the resiliency of the people of our country.

And, so, it is under that setting that he said "If this is so, the proposed conference which will be the first of its kind will be among the most important gatherings of our history and its effect on the welfare of all of our people". You know, one hundred years later, the conservation of our natural resources is as urgent of an issue now in the beginning of the 21st Century as it was then in the beginning of the 20th. With his Executive Order last year, President Bush asked us to look at the wildlife problems of our times. He asked us to set the stage for the modern, professional, wildlife conservation effort. In many ways, this is a deeply-felt request for the President. The President is an enthusiastic angler and

outdoorsman. He's a land owner. He's a hunter. And, like us, he's committed to that hunting heritage and the future of wildlife conservation. And, like us, he recognizes that we face tough challenges, the challenges of urban sprawl, of forest fires, of drought, of fewer people taking up the outdoors way of life. And, like us, he understands that these issues have the potential to seriously limit hunting and wildlife conservation and the President is sounding the call that the time to act is now.

With these challenges in front of you, you've given a year of intense and dedicated effort to bring a strong bi-partisan voice to this conference and I greatly appreciate that and want to thank you again for your efforts. My thanks to the Sporting Conservation Council, the American Wildlife Conservation partners for responding to the President's Executive Order with a partnership and with a broad, diverse, various groups of interest that came together building a clear vision to the President's request for a ten-year action plan that will guide future administrations and shape conservation policy for this century. This is a partnership that we value and we depend on just as USDA needs your perspective as we build on gains for restoring wetlands and improving habitat for many species. Last January, for example, we launched what we called the "SAFE" program, "State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement". This program which fine tunes the Conservation Reserve Program is quickly becoming a success story and it wouldn't have come about at all if it weren't for the vital support of conservation groups like Pheasants Forever and others. SAFE projects aren't a shotgun blast to the approach to conservation, but it's a series of targeted rifle shots in areas where we can make a difference. Most contracts cover, most CRP cover small acreages. They focus on habitat needs of wildlife species that have environmental, social, and economic value and this cooperative conservation is the best, showing once again that production agriculture and good conservation can work hand-in-hand. Well, you know, last January was a big month for conservation. We celebrated the one-millionth acre enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. From coast-to-coast, on over a million acres in-between, the CREP has been tackling some of our most urgent and challenging problems like protecting the endangered salmon in the Pacific Northwest.

I have to tell you I was on a salmon stream restoration project last week in the Tongass National Forest and it's amazing to see property that didn't even have a water flow now have salmon charging up the stream and jumping the falls to their spawning areas. The CREP agreements address something that's easy to lose sight of. Half of our nation's, half, fifty percent of our nation's total land area is used for agriculture production. Think about that. Fifty percent of all the land are in the hands of the farmers and landowners who represent less than two percent of our citizens and I know what farmers also understand and that is the environmental aspects of their own ownership and their own piece of property. Those farmers who love the land and I know what they can accomplish.

Each day, they weave into the part of the American fabric the eco-systems and the watersheds that Aldo Leopold spoke about seventy years ago. And, I'll share with you one more conservation success story. You might be familiar with the Prairie Pothole region of the Northern Great Plains, covers nearly 350,000 square miles from the U.S. into Canada, much of that in my home state of North Dakota and I have some good news.

The United States Geological Survey recently found that the CRP and the Wetlands Reserve Program had benefited more than five million acres of wetlands and grasslands habitat in this region. The voluntary conservation efforts at the heart of these programs benefit wetland acres that can provide critical breeding and nesting and brood habitat in what's known as our nation's "Duck Factory".

For the past six years, the administration has made habitat conservation a priority under the 2002 Farm Bill. That legislation was the largest commitment of resources to conservation in private lands in the history of the United States and we're excited about the potential that's now built-in to follow that in the 2008 Farm Bill. Thanks to your partnership, we have legislation that does build on that 2002 legislation. It increases our nation's investment in conservation programs by more than four billion dollars over the life of this bill and that's a jump of thirty-eight percent over the 2002 Farm Bill. This new legislation re-authorizes all the key programs that are in the conservation portfolio and we're particularly pleased that Congress followed your direction and our direction and expanded the Environmental Quality Incentives Programs or EQUIP, as we know it.

So, what does this mean for our hunting heritage and for our wildlife habitat? From the Chesapeake Bay watershed to those salmon streams of Alaska, from the nation's farm and ranch lands, the grasslands, the wetlands, this legislation's conservation programs will have a positive impact on wildlife habitat all across this country and you should be proud of that accomplishment. It was your efforts and your work that made that happen and keep in mind that it comes on top of the gains that have been made in the last six years. For example, in the next few weeks we're going to hit a new milestone, two million acres enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program. It's one of our key wildlife programs, two million acres. Like so many of our programs, the WRP represents locally-led conservation and we look to you to help us achieve harmony between man and the land, as conservationist, John Meuer, said over a century ago: "When we try to pick anything out by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe".

Early in the last century at the prompting of visionaries like President Theodore Roosevelt and John Meuer and Gifford Pinchot, we set aside our nation's special places, national parks, and national forests. Today, the 193 million acres that the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service manages are among our nation's greatest treasures. They're home to eighty percent of the elk and big horn sheep habitat in the continental United States. They're home to five million acres of wetlands and two million acres of lakes. With this kind of awesome responsibility, we're grateful for your partnership last year in restoring nearly twenty-five hundred miles of stream habitat plus two hundred and seventy thousand acres of wildlife habitat across this country. These are the kinds of actions that we take quietly, consistently, side-by-side with us to hold on to the character of our land.

This week, we had the privilege and the burden of charting a national course for wildlife conservation and our hunting heritage into the 21st century and we're here with the same sense of urgency that prompted Theodore Roosevelt to call our nations' governors together a century ago. Building on his legacy and driven by our sense of what's at stake

for our lands and wildlife, we have the opportunity to make an historic mark on this great nation and it's time to make T.R. proud.

It's time to follow the lead of President George W. Bush and put in place this ten-year action plan for hunting and wildlife conservation that we have been charged with and have an opportunity to influence policy on hunting and wildlife and conservation issues for the next decade. Take advantage of what you have heard here and to educate your county commissioners and your game and fish directors and state legislators and members of congress in the importance of these policy issues. And, with the new administration on the horizon, you will be needed to educate them on the issues, on the ten-year action plan and how that action plan is a framework for those who follow as we develop public policy to conserve and protect and enjoy the outdoors. You know, it really is a time for us to adopt and continue on with these policies and I know it's a lot of hard work. It's difficult. There are many barriers in the way, but Theodore Roosevelt left us with a charge. He said "Aggressive fighting for the right is a noblest work the world affords" so hit the line hard, don't foul, don't shirk, but hit the line hard. As you do, I appreciate all your work and your efforts. I know this will make a difference. And, as we all leave here to make a difference outdoors, I wish you God speed in your efforts.