

TESTIMONY OF DAN ASHE, DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT, ON “THE SCIENCE OF HOW HUNTING ASSISTS SPECIES CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT”

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Good afternoon Chairman Broun, Ranking Member Tonko, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Dan Ashe, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), within the Department of the Interior (Department). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to testify on how hunting and fishing contributes to the conservation and management of fish and wildlife resources in the United States.

The nation’s sportsmen and women, their passion for the outdoors, and their commitment to ensuring a future for fish and wildlife populations are the foundation of our current commitments to protecting and sustainably managing these resources for all Americans to enjoy. For more than a century, hunters and anglers have worked tirelessly to ensure an abundance of game and the enforcement of wildlife laws to protect wildlife populations, and they have consistently supported funding these efforts through license and user fees on the equipment used in the field. The sporting community continues to dedicate their time, wisdom, and energy to conservation, working side-by-side with a diversity of stakeholders even as the challenges facing fish and wildlife, and their habitat, continue to grow.

In addition to supporting the conservation of natural resources, America’s hunting and angling tradition is a vital part of the nation’s economy. The 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation found that in 2006, hunters and anglers spent \$120 billion pursuing their passion. This is an amount equal to Americans’ spending on all spectator sports, casinos, motion pictures, golf courses, country clubs, amusement parks, and arcades combined. It is roughly equivalent to one out of every one hundred dollars of goods and services produced in our economy.

My testimony today will discuss the historic role of hunters and anglers in wildlife conservation and management, what has been accomplished, the Service’s role, and our recommendations on what needs to be done going forward to ensure we can provide opportunities to the next generation of sportsmen and women.

Hunters and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation

The notion of wildlife as a public resource formed the cornerstone of what is now known as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation—a system that keeps wildlife as a public and sustainable resource, scientifically managed by professionals and agencies such as the Service and our state counterparts. The guiding principles of the North American Model are simple: the nation’s fish and wildlife resources belong to all Americans and they must be managed

sustainably, so that current and future generations can enjoy their abundance. Hunters and anglers are a backbone of the model's success.

It is appropriate at this hearing to provide a brief overview of the legislative trail blazed by hunters and anglers that led to the North American Model.

Fish and wildlife resource management is strongly vested in the states, and the Service works in close partnership with state fish and wildlife agencies to manage wildlife populations, implement federal statutes and administer federal lands.

The North American Model was built upon conservation efforts led by Theodore Roosevelt and contemporary hunters and anglers. After the near decimation of once common species, like bison, wood duck, and wild turkeys, and the dramatic scale of killing birds for food and feathers, they recognized the excesses of commercial hunting and the need to manage the taking of wild animals within limits that ensure the sustainability of wildlife populations. Through President Roosevelt's leadership, the first National Wildlife Refuges were created to provide sanctuary for migratory birds and other wildlife.

As state fish and wildlife agencies, or "commissions," formed across the nation to take actions that would conserve wildlife populations and enforce hunting limits, they were challenged with limited funding to carry out their work. By 1929, Aldo Leopold and other conservation visionaries, political leaders, and state fish and wildlife administrators were crafting a policy for wildlife conservation across the nation. With the support of sportsmen, two innovative statutory mechanisms were created to dedicate sportsmen's dollars toward conservation.

In 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, the Migratory Bird Conservation and Hunting Stamp, or the Federal Duck Stamp, was enacted and required all waterfowl hunters to carry this stamp when hunting waterfowl, again with leadership and strong support from America's waterfowl hunters. This program is one of the world's most innovative wetland conservation programs. Today, hunters continue this long tradition of willingly paying this fee in the name of conservation, and ninety-eight cents of every dollar go directly into a special fund to buy and conserve wetland habitat that is managed as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. To date, Federal Duck Stamp sales have generated more than \$850 million used to purchase and protect more than 5.3 million acres of waterfowl habitat for ducks, geese, other migratory birds and many other wetland dependent species of fish, wildlife and plants.

In 1937, sportsmen and conservation visionaries in Congress and among America's hunters and anglers all came together to achieve the enactment of the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act. This law enables state hunting license dollars to be combined with funds from a user fee on sport firearms and ammunition to fund state wildlife programs. The success of this model served as a foundation for the 1950 enactment of the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act of 1950, which established a user fee for certain fishing equipment, generating more revenues for states to manage recreational fish resources. The Wallop-Breaux amendments of 1984 took another step by establishing a tax on other boating related equipment. Again, hunters and anglers have taken the lead to promote a use-pay system, willingly paying fees to sustain wildlife populations.

Since the establishment of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs, hunters and anglers have paid more than \$11 billion in user fees on purchases of firearms, ammunition, archery, fishing and boating equipment. Those funds have in turn been used by state wildlife agencies to maintain and restore fish and wildlife resources, educate hunters and fund sport shooting ranges nationwide. This year alone, more than \$700 million will be distributed to 56 state and territorial wildlife agencies through the Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration programs to fund conservation efforts, shooting ranges and hunter education.

With these funds, the states have developed science-based wildlife management capacity. Lands acquired with Federal Assistance funds or state hunting and fishing license revenue are some of the most valuable assets owned by state fish and wildlife agencies. They are not only an economic asset, but they also provide important fish and wildlife habitat and outdoor recreational opportunities that help connect people with nature—another one of the Service’s top priorities.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Role in Providing Hunting Opportunities

The Service provides hunting opportunities for the public in a number of ways, including through the programs outlined below:

Management of Migratory Bird Hunting

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) was enacted in 1918 to implement international treaties to protect and conserve bird species that migrate between the U.S. and other nations. Today, the Act implements four such treaties between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Russia. Among bird species protected through these treaties are migratory game birds, such as waterfowl, including ducks, geese, and swans; doves; cranes; and woodcock. The MBTA prohibits the “take” of protected bird species without a permit, and provides for the hunting of certain game species. The Service conserves bird species protected by the MBTA through the administration and establishment of annual hunting season and bag limit frameworks for these migratory game bird species.

Migratory birds are cooperatively managed by the Service, the State, and Canadian Provincial wildlife agencies through four administrative migratory bird “flyways”: the Atlantic; Mississippi; Central; and Pacific Flyways. Each Flyway has a Council, consisting of representatives from state and provincial agencies. Since 1948, hunting seasons and bag limit frameworks are created each year through the partnership of the Service and the four Flyway Councils. The Councils are advised by Flyway technical committees consisting of state and provincial biologists who evaluate species and population status, harvest, and hunter-participation data and make recommendations to the Service. The Service then considers these recommendations and establishes the annual hunting frameworks from which States choose their individual hunting seasons.

Federal Duck Stamp

The Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly known as the Federal Duck Stamp, plays a critical role in this conservation partnership and its success story. Originally created in 1934, the Duck Stamp represents the permit required by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 to hunt waterfowl, and every waterfowl hunter is required to possess one while afield. Ninety-eight percent of the receipts from stamp sales are used to acquire important migratory bird breeding, migration, and wintering habitat in fee title and through conservation easements, which are added to the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since 1934, sales of the Duck Stamp have helped to protect nearly 5.3 million acres of waterfowl habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. These protected lands not only benefit waterfowl, but also countless other wildlife species, as well as opportunities for hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The Service administers the National Wildlife Refuge System, which contains 556 refuges and 38 wetland management districts found in every state and territory in the nation. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, enacted in 1997, was the first legislation to state explicitly that compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation) should not only receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management, but that it is “directly related to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.” This organic act for the Refuge System was supported by a broad coalition of hunting groups and environmental organizations, and received overwhelming bipartisan support in the Congress.

The Refuge System hosted 45.7 million visitors in 2011. These members of the public come to their refuges to fish, hunt, hike, or just be outdoors. In a world that is becoming more urbanized, national wildlife refuges are more valuable than ever as places where fish, wildlife—and people—can thrive.

The Refuge System provides some of the most outstanding hunting opportunities in the country; opportunities available to every American with the ability and desire to get outside and hunt. Most refuge hunting programs complement and are coordinated with hunting programs administered by states. There are 327 refuges with hunting programs and 271 with fishing programs. There were nearly 10 million hunting and fishing visits to refuges in 2011. The Service is committed to strengthening and expanding hunting and fishing opportunities wherever those activities are compatible with the primary mission of the refuges on which they would occur

North American Waterfowl Management Plan

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (Plan or NAWMP) is a tripartite agreement among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Established in 1986 by the U.S. and Canada, the Plan was developed to address an alarming decline in waterfowl populations through the 1970’s and early 1980’s. Highly valued by hunters, waterfowl are integral to the natural history and hunting tradition in the nation, and their presence in large numbers during hunting seasons provides key economic support to many communities.

Historical data indicate that about 53 percent of U.S. wetlands had been destroyed since early settlement, while a significant percentage of wetlands in Canada have been destroyed or degraded since settlement. Wetlands that support much of the nesting habitat for North American waterfowl are found in Canada and in the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region, and losses to these wetland habitats have a profound impact on the sustainability of waterfowl populations.

In 1994, the Plan was updated, adding Mexico as a signatory. On May 31st, 2012, Secretary Salazar signed a revision to the Plan that has three overarching goals for waterfowl conservation: (1) abundant and resilient waterfowl populations to support hunting and other uses without imperiling habitat; (2) wetlands and related habitats sufficient to sustain waterfowl populations at desired levels, while providing places to recreate and ecological services that benefit society; and (3) growing numbers of waterfowl hunters, other conservationists and citizens who enjoy and actively support waterfowl and wetlands conservation.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) was enacted in 1989 to implement NAWMP by supporting partnership efforts to protect and restore habitats for migratory birds like waterfowl that depend on wetland habitats. Through NAWCA, matching grants are provided to private organizations, agencies, and individuals to carry out wetlands conservation projects in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Since its inception, this program has been among the most successful leveraged funding mechanisms for the conservation of wetland habitats that benefit waterfowl and other birds, as well as other wildlife species. NAWCA-supported wetland conservation projects help to ensure that the waterfowl populations enjoyed throughout the U.S. are supported with sufficient nesting, wintering, and migration habitats.

The past 22 years have witnessed remarkable achievements in conservation through this landmark legislation. Partnerships applying NAWCA funds to wetland conservation projects include nationally recognized conservation organizations, State fish and wildlife agencies, local governments, grass-roots organizations, and private landowners. They have supported thousands of cooperative projects across North America, leveraging billions of partner dollars and affecting more than 27 million acres of bird habitats.

NAWCA projects provide wetland habitat where it is needed across the country and the continent, including in the northern breeding grounds, along widespread migration routes, and in southern areas where some species spend the winter months. For example, in the critical waterfowl breeding grounds of the prairie pothole region in the north-central U.S., a portion of NAWCA funding has conserved more than 2.2 million acres of wetland and associated grasslands by leveraging \$113 million in Federal funds to generate another \$180 million in partner contributions since the start of the program in 1991.

Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program

The Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program (WSFR), which is celebrating its 75th year, is one of the most significant and successful partnership approaches to fish and wildlife

conservation in U.S. history. As previously described, the programs known as Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson raise funds through user fees on hunting and fishing equipment. The funds are administered by the Service and allocated to each state to support fish and wildlife conservation and hunting and fishing programs. Since its inception, WSFR has provided \$14 billion for fish and wildlife conservation, supplied jobs for many Americans, and benefitted local economies through boating, fishing, hunting and shooting activities.

Looking Forward

Although the states and the Service, buoyed by the support and engagement of the sport hunting and fishing public, have accomplished so much over the past century, there is still much more work to be done. For example, agricultural policies and prices have led to more land being taken out of conservation status in the Prairie Pothole Region – an area critical for nesting waterfowl. Fish and wildlife populations are facing great challenges presented by habitat loss and changes in the climate. To help species adapt, and to ensure long term hunting opportunities, wildlife managers and scientists must work together at delivering conservation at a landscape scale. To achieve this, we, and our partners, support increasing the price of the Federal Duck Stamp and reauthorizing the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. Finally, we need to recruit the next generation of hunters to continue the conservation tradition of the past century.

Duck Stamp Price Increase

Through both the current and past Administrations, annual budget requests have included an update to the price of the Federal Duck Stamp. The price of the Federal Duck Stamp is statutorily set through the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act. It has remained at its current price of \$15 since 1991.

Price increases of crops and other factors have expanded conversion of native prairie to farm lands, while a warming climate is evaporating prairie “pothole” wetlands. Land prices in prime waterfowl nesting habitat have increased as well, reducing the buying power of funds raised through Federal Duck Stamp sales.

Based on the Consumer Price Index, the stamp would need to cost more than \$24 today to have the same buying power that \$15 had in 1991. As an example, in 1991, revenue from the Duck Stamp enabled the Service to acquire 89,000 acres of habitat for the Refuge System at an average cost of \$306 an acre. In 2010, the Service was able to acquire significantly less habitat because land values had tripled to an average of \$1,091 an acre.

Consistent with the Administration’s FY2013 budget request, bipartisan legislation in the Senate (S. 2156) would require the Secretary of the Interior to establish a price for the Federal Duck Stamp every 5 years, in consultation with the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, beginning with calendar year 2013, and the Service testified this year in support of this proposal.

Reauthorization of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act

In 2006, Congress reauthorized appropriations for NAWCA through fiscal year 2012, reflecting the continued support of Congress and the public support for NAWCA's goals. Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in both the House and the Senate (H.R. 1960 and S. 2282) to extend its authorization, at current funding levels, through FY 2017. We support this bill and look forward to continuing to administer this outstanding program to build on its impressive legacy of accomplishment for both the American people and the wildlife it treasures.

Building Science Capacity

The Service has made the building of science capacity a priority, establishing an Office of the Science Advisor to the Director (OSA). This was done in part to strengthen the Service's tradition of scientific excellence in the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitat. The priorities for the OSA are: (1) to continue to build a foundation for scientific integrity in the Service's utilization and development of scientific data and products and implementing the Department of Interior's Scientific Integrity Policy; (2) to continue to provide a scientific foundation for the Service to address the impacts of climate change on fish and wildlife populations; (3) to coordinate the Service's commitment to the establishment, implementation, and participation in Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs); and (4) to continue to provide science support for the Service's programs, including access to the best available information via our library system, and making sure our scientists and biologists have the science tools to do their jobs. While science excellence has always been a hallmark of the Service's work, the OSA provides both guidance and resources for our scientists and managers to ensure the quality of fish and wildlife management and conservation efforts, including the management of migratory game birds and the technical assistance we provide for fish and wildlife conservation to state fish and wildlife agencies. Through the Science Support Partnership (SSP) Program, the U.S. Geological Survey partners with the Service to understand and provide the critical science information required to effectively manage our nation's resources. Through this partnership, the USGS has undertaken 350 projects in support of FWS local, regional, and national programs.

The Service's focus on landscape-level conservation, supported through the LCCs, the Joint Ventures Program, and the National Fish Habitat Program, applies modern, science-based conservation principles for the strategic identification of priority conservation work that is needed across landscapes that support game and other fish and wildlife species. For all species, actions taken on lands both in and around their habitats will affect their long-term survival. This has clearly been the case for migratory birds, and wildlife scientists are finding it to be true of more stationary species, as well. The Service's science capacity and support serves hunters and sport fishermen, as well, by helping to ensure that conservation measures we take to conserve game species are supported, monitored, evaluated, and adjusted by strong science.

Recruiting the Next Generation of Hunters, Anglers and Conservationists

Our society has undergone major changes – moving from rural to suburban/urban life, and playing with technological devices rather than going outdoors. We need to get kids outside to be physically fit, mentally healthy, and to understand and enjoy the outdoors. More specifically, we need to recruit new hunters and anglers. The steps outlined above and others are not possible

without the continued support of sportsmen and women, now and in the future. We need to recruit new hunters and anglers and enlist their support in our conservation mission.

According to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation and information from previous surveys, the number of hunters 16 and older declined by 10 percent between 1996 and 2006. The number of anglers dropped 15 percent. Recruitment rates of youngsters in hunting and fishing have stabilized after declining through the 1990s. According to data from the 2006 survey, 42 percent of our nation's youth have gone fishing and 8 percent have gone hunting at least once.

We need to continue building the ranks of hunters, anglers and other folks who enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation. Their support is critical for fish and wildlife and, as the National Survey demonstrates, it's also good for the economies of local communities. In 2006, more than 87 million Americans, or 38 percent of the United States' population age 16 and older hunted, fished or observed wildlife. As previously noted, they spent \$120 billion that year pursuing those activities – an amount equal to Americans' spending on all spectator sports, casinos, motion pictures, golf courses, country clubs, amusement parks and arcades combined. This is roughly equivalent to one out of every one hundred dollars of goods and services produced in our economy.

For fishing, 30 million Americans or 13 percent of the U.S. population fished and spent a total of \$41 billion. There was a 15 percent decline in fishing participation during the last decade and a 16 percent decrease in spending.

For hunting, 12.5 million Americans or 5 percent of the U.S. population hunted and spent a total of \$23 billion. There was a 10 percent decline in participation from 1996 to 2006 and a 14 percent decrease in spending.

We are concerned with the impact declining number of hunters, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts will have on the ability of states, in particular, to retain the capacity to manage and conserve their fish and wildlife resources. This is why the Service places a high priority on connecting kids with nature. The Service supports the states in their efforts to recruit new hunters and anglers through youth fishing programs and hunter education, mentoring, and safety programs.

Conclusion

Today, millions of Americans deepen their appreciation and understanding of the land and its wildlife through outdoor experiences. Hunting and angling organizations contribute millions of dollars and countless hours of labor to various conservation causes each year. The Service values hunters and anglers, acknowledges their critical role in conserving the natural wonders of the country for all Americans.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing, and for the opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.