

It is an honor and a privilege to come before you today. I am Mike Berger, Director of Wildlife for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). I was invited to testify before you today about 2002 Farm Bill programs and the opportunities we see to improve those programs for our constituents through the 2007 Farm Bill. Let me start by thanking Chairman Chambliss and Senator Harkin for their long-standing interest in and support for fish and wildlife conservation and for the role that the state fish and wildlife agencies play in that endeavor. We look forward to continuing to work with you as the next Farm Bill moves through the legislative process.

I come before you today representing the Great State of Texas well as the position of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association), of which all 50 state fish and wildlife agencies are members. The Association represents all of North America's fish and wildlife agencies - promoting sound management and conservation, speaking with a unified voice on important fish and wildlife issues. The Association represents its state fish and wildlife agency members on Capitol Hill and before the administration on key conservation and management policies and works to ensure that all fish and wildlife entities work cooperatively on the most important issues.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has identified 3 key areas for improving the Conservation Title of the next Farm Bill that would greatly benefit our farmers, ranchers, and private landowners as well as the fish, wildlife, and habitat that we manage for all generations of Texans. Incorporation of local guidance, improved program integration, and expanded delivery would better serve our constituents.

Habitat Technical Teams should be established in each state. These teams would be made up of state and federal conservation agencies and NGOs, and USDA agency employees. The teams purpose would be to provide state-level guidance and expertise on fish & wildlife habitat restoration, creation, and management for all Farm Bill conservation programs administered by FSA and NRCS. This cooperative conservation effort would improve integration of Farm Bill programs into existing state and regional fish and wildlife conservation plans while addressing multiple resource concerns and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of technical assistance delivery by both state and federal resource agencies.

TPWD supports strengthening the Sodbuster and Swampbuster provisions in the Farm Bill to prevent the conversion of more fish and wildlife habitat to cropland. Additionally, conservation compliance must be better enforced to be effective and to deliver expected societal benefits from conservation programs.

#### Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

CRP's positive impact on both urban and rural economies needs to be acknowledged. A lot has been said about CRP's potential negative economic impact, but studies show that loss of existing CRP may actually hurt county economies. A 1992 NRCS study, "Economic Evaluation of the Conservation Reserve Program in the Southern High Plains of Texas," found that the average age of program participants was 62, only half still had farming equipment, and the main reason that they enrolled in CRP was that it had become economically infeasible to continue to farm highly erodible land. Ninety percent of all wind erosion occurs west of the Mississippi River and 60 percent of all wind erosion in the U.S. occurs in the Great Plains. Wind erosion rates in the Lubbock area have dropped from an average of 37 tons/acre/yr before

CRP to 2 tons/acre/yr after establishment of this program. This reduction in soil erosion has far-reaching air quality benefits for society as a whole. Without CRP, air, water and soil quality and associated human activities would be negatively impacted in the dust bowl region of the Great Plains.

Wildlife must be afforded truly coequal resource consideration by balancing the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) scoring system so that it provides equal weight to soil, water and wildlife issues, and factors in the combination of both wind and water erosion. TPWD supports the Association's suggested modifications submitted to FSA regarding the current EBI scoring system. Additional improvements should be considered in the next Farm Bill such as the creation of a regional EBI that better incorporates and fairly balances landscape differences, areas of ecological significance, and state and regional conservation priorities.

The Continuous CRP (CCRP) and Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) should be decoupled from CRP county acreage caps. CCRP and WRP target environmentally sensitive acres and are generally small acreage projects. In Texas environmentally sensitive playa wetlands are often plowed to maintain base acres under the current commodities system. Being located in capped counties prevents their enrollment in WRP or Conservation Practice 23A - Wetland Restoration, Nonfloodplain. Such an enrollment would allow the restoration of these important recharge zones for the Ogallala Aquifer, the primary water source for urban and agricultural use in western Kansas, Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. CCRP could be used more effectively to integrate multiple small wetlands into larger blocks of habitat rather than setting maximum buffer widths. Integrated wetland-upland complexes are more beneficial to wildlife and increase the ease and feasibility to farm for farmers.

TPWD supports the expansion/creation of CRP priority areas for addressing important state and regional conservation initiatives such as longleaf pine in the Southeast, lesser prairie-chickens in the Lower Great Plains, sage grouse in the West, and the new prairie duck wetlands initiative in the upper Midwest.

#### Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

TPWD supports the continuation of CREP and suggests reducing the current 20 percent state financial match requirement to 10 percent so that cash poor states can also participate in this beneficial program.

#### Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP's original whole farm resource management system (RMS) approach should be restored. This would help producers install complete management systems that address multiple resources rather than the current practice of installing isolated individual practices (i.e., fences without grazing management systems). Such systems should also integrate local, state and federal resource goals including fish and wildlife, soil, air, and water. This integration could be accomplished through the use of the recommendation from the Habitat Technical Teams mentioned above.

#### Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)/ WRP

The administration and management of these programs should be simplified by using a single

easement deed contract, preferably similar to the current WRP contract, and placing all easement programs under NRCS rather than splitting responsibilities between NRCS and FSA. The GRP should be expanded and contracts should target areas with the highest land fragmentation rates and emphasize conservation and restoration of native habitat.

#### Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Funding for this program should be expanded and Habitat Technical Teams, the State Wildlife Action Plans, and other state and regional conservation strategies utilized in order to strategically implement programs and provide better integration with state and regional fish and wildlife conservation priorities.

#### Forest Lands Enhancement Program (FLEP)

Funding for the only non-emergency Farm Bill program available to 300,000 non-industrial private forest owners in Texas should be expanded. In the past, this money has been diverted to fire suppression and other operations while the technical resource assistance and conservation needs of non-industrial private landowners' across the country have gone unmet.

America's need for locally produced renewable energy should be done in an environmentally friendly, sustainable, as well as fiscally responsible fashion. There has been a great deal of interest in expanding the current Farm Bill energy title to include biofuels, biomass and additional sources of wind generation. Conscientious planning is needed to ensure cash flow to farmers and conservation of water and habitat for fish and wildlife. Careful selection and management of appropriate lands and crops are critical to implement alternative energy programs that sustain our current food supply, positive agricultural trade balance and continue to make gains in fish and wildlife habitat quality and quantity while improving our water, air and soil. State and federal fish and wildlife agencies, NGO's and producer groups can work at the local, state and regional levels to establish guidelines for Farm Bill funded energy independence that maximizes conservation opportunities while minimizing unintentional adverse environmental and financial effects. This joint effort can be used to pinpoint critical research needs, identify beneficial implementation practices and improve multiple resource benefits from programs funded in the Farm Bill.

Let me now just share a few thoughts on USDA delivery of conservation programs. Partnerships among USDA, State and federal fish and wildlife agencies, conservation NGO's and producer groups should be enhanced in order to expedite planning and delivery of holistic conservation programs that simultaneously address multiple resource objectives. Such partnerships could provide "one-stop shopping" opportunities for farmers, ranchers and forest landowners interested in enrolling in conservation programs.

Creative solutions delivering conservation programs need to be identified in light of the tight budget circumstances. Expanded 2002 Farm Bill funding has created a massive workload at a time when Texas NRCS field staff numbers have been reduced to half the number they were in 1967. Statewide this year, 497 NRCS field staff processed 10,275 Farm Bill applications worth over \$123 million. From these applications they developed 5,378 conservation plans worth \$72.5 million. Each year these NRCS field staff workloads increase as they continue to work with landowners to implement parts of multiyear contracts and certify compliance. At public

meetings landowners have expressed their preference for working with local NRCS staff who they trust to provide high quality, unbiased technical assistance.

TPWD understands that the Technical Service Provider (TSP) program was created to handle this extra workload by allowing private contractors to be paid at a comparable rate to what it would cost for NRCS staff to accomplish the job. Because many of NRCS's actual costs are below TSP's actual costs, TSP's continue to select a small number of profitable practices leaving the majority of the work to NRCS staff.

Opportunities to utilize state fish and wildlife agencies as TSP's in the Farm Bill delivery system need to be expanded. The current system which requires states to shoulder 50 percent of the cost of promoting and delivering federal programs inhibits state fish and wildlife agency participation, especially for states with tight or declining budgets. TPWD recommends replacing the current system with a noncontributory system that would allow states to fully recover their Technical Assistance delivery costs for these federal conservation programs. A cost recovery system would be more equitable in comparison to private TSP contracts. Multiyear technical service provider contracts with state fish and game agencies would provide the fiscal stability to acquire the additional staff needed to cooperatively deliver fish and wildlife technical and professional expertise with USDA.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives, and I would be pleased to address any questions that you might have.