

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Senator Lincoln, and Committee Members.

It is an honor and a privilege to come before you today.

I am David Goad, Deputy Director for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC). I was invited to testify before you today about the Technical Service Provider (TSP) Program, authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill, administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Let me start by thanking Chairman Crapo and Senator Lincoln 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 Arkansas as well as the position of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), of which all 50 state fish and wildlife agencies are members.

The AFWA 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 AFWA 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.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is in the process of trying to identify all the marginal farmland that is still in production today. It should be a cooperative conservation goal to target these acres and restore them to the wetland habitat that they once were. Had this been a goal when the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) were first conceived, just think of the wildlife corridors and stream side buffer zones that could have been restored; thus, resulting in less and less sedimentation, fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides flowing down our rivers and streams today. Without immediate conservation measures, this will continue to get worse; something needs to be done now.

There is no better time than today to target this environmental pollution occurring across our farms in the southeast United States as well as other areas of the country that drain into the Mississippi River. Farm Bill conservation programs have the funds and ability to help us reverse this trend of degraded water quality and landscape health and at the same time integrate wildlife features that will also target declining wildlife populations such as bobwhite quail and grassland/forestland songbirds.

The 1996 Farm Bill was the first to provide wildlife habitat as a co-equal status with soil and water conservation. Wildlife as a priority was continued in the 2002 Farm Bill. The addition of wildlife habitat as a clear purpose along with traditional soil and water conservation purposes injected a new conservation objective only incidentally provided in previous conservation planning efforts with agricultural producers. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has few trained wildlife biologists on state staffs to ensure wildlife needs are adequately considered and integrated in all conservation plans with agricultural producers.

With the 2002 legislation, NRCS was charged with numerous newly funded programs along with increased funding for existing programs. We believe the intent of Congress through the Technical Service Providers (TSP) provision was to provide the agency the ability to reach outside for technical support to meet all of the objectives- soil, water and wildlife- of this landmark conservation title. We also believe the intent of Congress was to include state fish and wildlife agencies in the TSP process.

The Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference (Conference Report) text that illuminates the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 [Title II - Conservation, Subtitle E - Funding and Administration (5) Third Party Providers] states, "It is the intent of the Managers that the third-party technical assistance certification program will result in a pool of individuals and organizations and agencies that are qualified to provide technical assistance to producers related to the development and implementation of conservation practices. The Managers intent is for the Secretary to seek to optimize the delivery of technical assistance through public and private sources, and in conjunction with USDA staff, to effectively, efficiently, and expeditiously deliver conservation programs."

In addition, in the Conservation Title of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, Section 1242 (b) (4) of Subtitle H - Funding and Administration states, "The Secretary may request the services of, and enter into cooperative agreements or contracts with, non-Federal entities to assist the Secretary in providing technical assistance necessary to develop and implement conservation programs under this title." Item (b) (2) that precedes this specifically mentions, "The Secretary shall ensure that persons with expertise in the technical aspects of conservation planning, watershed planning, environmental engineering (including commercial entities, nonprofit entities, state or local governments or agencies, and other Federal agencies), are eligible to become approved providers of the technical assistance." Not only do we believe that state fish and wildlife agencies are eligible to be included in the TSP process, we are confident they will work at the landscape level to identify the correct Farm Bill program necessary to obtain the required objective of any wildlife need.

Since 1997 and prior to the 2002 Farm Bill and the availability of TSP agreements, AGFC had been an active partner with NRCS where we actually developed the State of Arkansas Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) plan that was submitted and approved by NRCS Headquarters. The first year of the program, Arkansas received in excess of \$1.2 million in WHIP funding. Agency biologists ranked and assessed WHIP applications and provided wildlife technical assistance for the wildlife conservation plan. Not only have we been providing wildlife technical assistance to NRCS district conservationists since 1997, AGFC has provided a supplemental 25% cost-share for approved landowners in excess of \$600,000. So as you can see, we have been a very engaged and active partner in cooperative conservation for some time now with USDA at our cost.

Missouri, Kentucky, and other states have been very successful for years with cooperative conservation agreements, which are cost-shared with USDA. These state fish and wildlife agencies have funded additional wildlife biologist positions to specifically provide TSP wildlife support for multiple Farm Bill programs. Arkansas, as well as other states, should have similar opportunities to achieve greater fish and wildlife conservation results. Currently, USDA will

only commit TSP funding to states on an annual basis.

Farm Bill conservation program delivery is an on-going commitment for USDA and technical assistance needs are continuous. It is not reasonable to expect state agencies, with limited staffing resources, to set aside state workloads to handle federal workloads without funding, particularly when Congress provides such funding to USDA. Most state fish and wildlife agencies must request staffing increases through their state legislatures and show how the money to fund salaries will be provided. Most state agencies will be hesitant to increase positions without a longer horizon of funding, in this case TSP funding. We recommend that state fish and wildlife agencies be allowed to enter 3 to 5 year TSP agreements with their state USDA leadership with assurance that funding will be provided to cover this period of time so that additional positions can be approved by their state legislatures.

The bottom-line is that state fish and wildlife agencies have principal authority and responsibility for fish and wildlife conservation within their borders for their citizens, even though Congress has given certain federal agencies some conservation responsibilities. With the 2002 Farm Bill mandating that wildlife features are an integral part of these conservation programs, states have a much greater opportunity to manage wildlife on private land in cooperative conservation efforts with the USDA and to meet the legislative intent of Congress while also fulfilling state constitutional authority for fish and wildlife resources. Furthermore, since Farm Service Agency (FSA) and NRCS may be facing additional staffing cuts and since state fish and wildlife agencies have the necessary expertise to manage lands for fish and wildlife, our assistance to private landowners is critical to ensuring USDA is successful in meeting Congress's intent under the current and future Conservation Titles. If the TSP program is adequately funded and if state fish and wildlife agencies are able to enter into multi-year cooperative conservation agreements with USDA, we can achieve the congressional intent.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we owe it to the American public to provide landowners quality conservation technical support to ensure the viability of farming and ranching for future generations and to get the greatest fish and wildlife benefits from our federal conservation dollars. By forming a new and stronger alliance to increase our cooperative conservation efforts across the landscape, we can achieve the congressional intent, which includes keeping soil on the farm, improving water quality and restoring wildlife populations.

I would respectfully request your consideration of two things: (1) require TSP agreements with state fish and wildlife agencies to effectively incorporate wildlife conservation into all conservation planning and USDA programs; and (2) fund TSP at an adequate level necessary to fully administer these programs through multi-year agreements that allow states to hire additional personnel to address these vitally important Farm Bill objectives. We believe that state fish and wildlife agencies in a cooperative conservation partnership with USDA can do it much more efficiently; thus, saving taxpayer dollars while providing a quality product that ensures wildlife conservation is truly a co-equal objective of conservation planning and program implementation.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our perspectives, and I would be glad to

answer any questions you might have.