

Good morning, Chairman Chambliss, Ranking Member Harkin and Members of the Committee. I am Jim Hinkle from Mountain View Arkansas, board secretary of the National Wild Turkey Federation and a seven year veteran board member of the Arkansas Fish and Game Commission. I am pleased to be with you today to support the Farm Bill conservation programs within your Committee's jurisdiction and to recommend improvements in these programs for your consideration as you write the 2007 Farm Bill.

The National Wild Turkey Federation is dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of the hunting tradition. When the National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in 1973, there were only 1.3 million wild turkeys throughout North America. Since then, the number of wild turkeys has increased to nearly 7 million birds thanks to state, federal and provincial wildlife agencies, the NWTF, its members and partners.

Growth and progress define the NWTF as it has expanded from 1,300 members in 1973 to more than 500,000 members today with 2,200 chapters in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico and 14 other foreign countries. With that growth has come impressive strides in wildlife management as the NWTF has forged dynamic partnerships across the country. Together, the NWTF's conservation partners and grassroots members have raised and spent more than \$224 million on conservation projects. This investment has helped conserve and improve more than 9.6 million acres of wildlife habitat and uphold hunting traditions.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today to present the NWTF's views on our current agricultural conservation programs, and to share ideas for improving them in the next Farm Bill.

Conservation Programs are Working

I am happy to report that our Farm Bill agricultural conservation programs work well. Together, we are putting conservation on the ground, helping landowners and producers as well as our communities, land and wildlife. We have invested wisely in our children's future.

It is important to understand that today's positive state of affairs with our agricultural conservation programs has been an evolution. We have had some setbacks, the most significant being that we have not realized the authorized funding levels the 2002 Farm Bill mandated. But the fact is we have expanded agricultural policy beyond production and food safety to include public benefits such as wildlife, water, and soil conservation. These programs which leaders like you have created will continue to improve as we find better ways to conserve soil, water, air and wildlife while enhancing the lives of farmers and forest landowners.

The federal agencies charged with delivering these programs continue to find better ways to get the job done. We recognize the success of agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, state wildlife and forestry agencies, Conservation Districts, and a multitude of non-governmental organizations. We may not always agree, but we believe the success of many of our federal conservation programs has been a result of this team effort.

We also appreciate the strong partnerships that have been forged between federal agencies and the NWTF. One example is the partnership between the NRCS and NWTF to expand NWTF's

Operation Oak program. With funding support from the NRCS, NWTF provided over 15,000 native oak seedlings to private landowners and NWTF local chapters in my home state of Arkansas last year. Through this partnership, we impacted over 25,000 acres of wildlife habitat establishment of mast-producing hardwood trees that are so important to many species of wildlife.

The NWTF strongly believes that a robust conservation policy carried out through agricultural conservation programs can improve the nation's soil, water, air, wildlife and economy. These positive impacts can be made largely within the conservation programs currently authorized and administered under the 2002 Farm Bill. However, these programs must be funded as authorized, we have to do a better job of involving third party technical service providers, and - finally - we need an increased focus on forest management within the Farm Bill Conservation programs.

Together, the Farm Bill's core conservation programs, EQIP, CRP, WHIP, WRP, FLEP and the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) seek to encourage agricultural producers and landowners to better manage their land with a conservation ethic in mind. The NWTF strongly supports these goals and the conservation programs that seek to achieve it.

Today, I would like to share with you our observations on several conservation programs and provide recommendations for improvement as you write the next Farm Bill.

Healthy Forests (FLEP and FSP)

Maintaining forestland is a major challenge because its use continues to be driven by economic value, causing many forests to be converted to housing developments. By improving the quality of our forests for the benefit of wildlife and landowners, we can work to keep our forests intact.

Our nation's forests supply more than 50 percent of freshwater flow to the lower 48 states. An estimated 180 million people depend on forests for their drinking water. Unfortunately, more than 44.2 million acres of private forest are likely to be lost to housing development in the next three decades. If so, these acres will no longer be providing the same benefits to clean water, air, forest products, and wildlife habitat.

The facts are clear, if a landowner can't make a profit off their land, they will usually sell it when the price is right. The best tool we have to at least slow the process of forest fragmentation is to provide effective technical assistance to forest landowners and incentives to practice good conservation.

Technical assistance and cost-share programs are critical for several reasons. First, technical assistance provides the information landowners need to improve the profitability and ecological function of their forest. Because most landowners are not trained as natural resource managers, they often lack the knowledge of active forest management, which is necessary to achieve their goals. A vast amount of heavy science has been completed, and we generally know what works in this regard. In addition, we have 33 NWTF wildlife biologists on staff implementing good conservation practices in every state. The best tools to actively manage a forest include timely tree harvest, thinning stands, prescribed fire, and the removal of invasive plant species,

just to name a few. For example, many species of declining wildlife are species that need timber classes of varying ages. Bobwhite quail, ruffed grouse, and the golden-winged warbler are several examples of species declining because active forest management is not widely practiced. Wild turkeys need a variety of forest stand ages to meet their annual needs for food and nesting cover. Although the wild turkey needs some older-growth forest, clear cuts and thinned timber stands are necessary as well.

Also, Farm Bill research dollars should be used to evaluate the effectiveness of forest management requirements in Farm Bill Programs on nonindustrial private forest lands. These data should be used in an adaptive management fashion to facilitate appropriate practice changes when necessary to achieve the greatest wildlife benefit for the dollar.

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP), administered by the USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry, is one of the best programs ever developed to help private forest landowners. Through this program, natural resource professionals have written more than 260,000 forest management plans improving almost 30 million acres of land. Because the state forestry agencies, in collaboration with other state and federal agencies, deliver this program, the FSP provides outstanding technical assistance to our nation's forest landowners. However, the program does not provide cost-share assistance to landowners; therefore it falls short of what it could accomplish. It is imperative that we allow for cost-share funding for forest landowners so we can teach them how to actively manage their forests for wildlife, and long-term economic viability.

Providing technical and cost-share assistance is a financial investment that returns revenue to our communities and state and federal governments. By producing healthier, sustainable forests, state and local governments benefit from more forest-related jobs and increases in tax revenue. The NWTF strongly urges your continued support of the Forest Stewardship Program.

Perhaps our greatest frustration regarding forestry conservation programs is with the Forest Land Enhancement Program. The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) is a well-intentioned program this Committee authorized and funded, yet FLEP has had its authorized funding diverted to other uses despite strong support. As we stated earlier, cost-share programs for forest landowners are critical. Most landowners would do more conservation practices if they had cost-share funding. Without substantial and consistent funding, future efforts to improve forest management on private lands through this and other programs will suffer. To improve forest management, we support the continued funding of the FLEP at no less than current levels to reach the goals of the program. If it is not feasible to reinvigorate the FLEP program, then we would urge FLEP's authorities and funding be included in one of the other conservation programs so active forest management and cost share assistance for forest landowners can continue to be enhanced through the Farm Bill.

Forests and Working Lands Programs (CRP, EQIP, WHIP, WRP)

Even incidental woodlands associated with agricultural operations can provide valuable wildlife habitat when actively managed. The wild turkey and bobwhite quail are two popular game species that significantly benefit from agricultural practices, especially when actively managed forests are available. In addition, the wildlife benefits of many conservation practices offered

through the Farm Bill could be improved with more attention towards forest management. Specifically:

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, and optimizes environmental benefits. EQIP provides cost-share payments and other incentive payments to producers to address soil, water and related natural resource concerns. Although half of the EQIP funding is directed to agricultural waste management, landowners have successfully used this program to cost-share activities such as prescribed fire, invasive species management, planting wildlife openings, and timber stand improvement practices. In Missouri approximately \$1 million dollars is spent annually on forestry and wildlife practices through EQIP. Between 200-250 contracts (15% and a 60% acceptance rate) since 2002 have been impacted by adjusting ranking points that include early successional habitat restoration, forest stand improvement, streambank erosion, and rare and declining habitats.

The NWTF strongly supports the goals of EQIP. Agricultural production done right is compatible with environmental quality. EQIP has enhanced biodiversity. However, approximately one percent of EQIP funds are spent on forest management, and only about five percent of funds are for wildlife. Overall, this \$1.1 billion dollar program in 2006 spends less than \$10 million annually in forestry cost-share assistance to landowners. Dedicating enhanced EQIP funding to wildlife and forestry will yield substantial benefits.

In addition, there is a need for greater cost-share and technical assistance to private landowners. The types of practices needed differ according to region. In the Southeast, thinning, prescribed fire and control of mid-story hardwoods are needed. The Northeast requires improving timber stands, managing spring seeps, and establishing more diverse stands of timber.

The NWTF recommends strengthening the regulations and underlying law to implement EQIP to ensure more funds are targeted to wildlife activities that improve the biodiversity and health of our forests. In addition, we believe an increase in funding will further enhance opportunities to improve wildlife habitat, including forests. Finally, we recommend that EQIP require more contribution agreements to allow NGOs to assist private landowners without going through the cumbersome technical service provider process.

Another area of improvement we recommend, especially in EQIP and WHIP, is matching the appropriate technical assistance (TA) professionals to the job at hand. For example, a forester or wildlife professional with the appropriate training should be consulted when developing EQIP contracts on forestland or when the practice targets wildlife habitat. More appropriate technical assistance can be accomplished by continued partnering with state wildlife and forestry agencies, and non-governmental organizations. We support the continued availability of conservation technical assistance to provide landowners with technical assistance that is not directly tied to a farm bill program. We ask the committee to provide funding in the next farm bill that provide both technical and financial assistance for conservation practices and recognizes that not all landowners are seeking financial assistance, but do need technical assistance.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has an excellent long-term track record for providing landscape-level conservation of soil, water and wildlife habitat throughout the country. This is especially true since sign-up number twenty, when significant wildlife benefits were added. In addition to serving its initial objective to conserve soils on highly erodible lands, the CRP provides significant wildlife habitat, especially for many grassland species. This voluntary program is popular with landowners. In Missouri about 50% of the accepted acres, with an 80% acceptance rate, occurred within the 30-county bobwhite quail/prairie chicken priority area. Mid-contract management practices are required on all new sign ups. Through this program 54,000 new acres of prairie restoration plantings and 180,000 new acres of NWSG plantings have been accomplished already.

Future funding of this program is critical, not only for protecting soil and water, but for wildlife as well. To further this mission, we recommend that additional incentives such as higher rental payments, extended contracts, and improved mid-contract management be provided in CRP. The NWTf recommends a minimum continued CRP enrollment of 39.2 million acres, at 2002 Farm Bill levels.

The NWTf also supports continued refinement of the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) to further produce high quality wildlife habitats. Specifically, we support clarifying that wildlife is a co-equal benefit to water quality and soil erosion. In addition, the NWTf recommends encouraging wildlife-friendly plantings on CRP land such as hardwoods, longleaf pines, native grasses and forbs. On-the-ground application of certain practices should be improved to better address wildlife habitat. For example, many CRP seeding rates for native warm season grasses are too high to adequately address one of the program's national priorities of promoting at-risk wildlife habitat. In this example, seeding rates are more aligned with grazing priorities than providing cover for wildlife.

We also would remove restrictions on Continuous CRP which prevent incidental grazing around harvested cropland. This current restriction is a significant obstacle to many landowners due to required fencing under the current regulations.

Recently, there has been discussion of utilizing CRP as part of an energy reserve for the production of switch grass. Done correctly - with caution and proper research and planning - we feel there are dramatic opportunities to use CRP to provide for conservation AND help our country reduce its reliance on oil. For example, thinning CRP pine timber for biofuels not only helps with our need for energy, but is a proven practice to help many wildlife species we are concerned about. We look forward to working with the Committee as it makes policy in this area.

Finally, and we understand this is sensitive, we would urge the Congress to provide enough funding for FSA to have full-time employees to manage compliance of CRP contracts. The agency is doing about as good as they can with the constraints placed on them by OMB. However, most of the concerns we have about CRP could be addressed by having ample numbers of qualified wildlife science professionals to ensure producers are in compliance. This would avoid the bad ecological mistakes like broadcasting herbicides over entire plots of

mostly native grasses to control isolated cases of invasive plants. Broadcasting kills the invasive species and the beneficial native ones as well. Mr. Chairman, we can't depend solely on technology to accomplish this kind of oversight. It requires well trained professionals who build relationships with growers to get the job done right. In the end, everything we do is really about people. We must work one-on-one with landowners to be successful.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) has provided significant benefits to both agricultural producers and wildlife. The NWTf supports an increased emphasis in WHIP toward managing native plant communities and increasing biodiversity. Currently, states often target WHIP funding to benefit one or two species of concern, such as bobwhite quail and the American woodcock. However, we recommend that WHIP broaden the number of targeted species and place more focus on the long-term benefits of a practice (such as prescribed burning or targeted mast producing oak planting).

Previously, WHIP has seen dramatic cuts in the amount of funding that is ultimately appropriated. From 2005 through 2007, WHIP was approved at \$85 million annually. However, only \$45 million was provided. In Missouri during 2005 1.3 million dollars in cost-share applications were submitted yet only \$541,000 was available. NWTf supports continued funding for WHIP at \$85 million annually.

The Wetlands Reserve Program was designed to restore wetlands in cropland areas and develop habitat for wetland-associated wildlife, especially threatened and endangered species. WRP provides suitable habitat for many species of wildlife, especially since the program includes management on upland areas in addition to wetland areas. WRP was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill to enroll up to 3.275 million acres. Lands are enrolled through the use of permanent and 30-year easements, restoration cost-share agreements, or some combination. Missouri is one of 5 states that has restored over 100,000 acres of wetlands and associated habitats through WRP. WRP is an effective program that benefits the resource and is popular with landowners. NWTf strongly supports continued funding for WRP and recommends that the Congress maintain and fully fund the annual enrollment of 250,000 acres.

The Conservation Security Program was designed to reward landowners within targeted watersheds for current stewardship and additional enhancements including: variable application of nutrients, pest management, recycling motor oil, and irrigation water management in addition to substantial commitments to wildlife. Bill Holmes of Oran, MO farming 1,800 acres of land in the bootheel used the CSP program to double the acres he floods for wetland dependent wildlife. Bill and others like him have increased important wintering waterfowl habitat by over 20,000 acres using CSP. Between 8,000 and 10,000 acres of grassland field borders and 15,000 acres of re-flooded rice fields were made possible through CSP. This program is an additional catalyst for integrating wildlife management with practical farm operations in a focused approach with landscape level results.

Building Public Support for Conservation and Farm Programs

Public Access/Hunter Access: Hunting is an American tradition with nearly 18.5 million

participants that annually contribute over \$30 billion to our economy. Opportunities for public access to hunt private land are an economic benefit to local communities, the hunting industry, and the general public as a whole. .

To increase the benefit of agriculture conservation programs to all citizens, we recommend adding additional points to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) for landowners that open their land to public hunting. If two properties rank equally, the landowner willing to open their land to public access should have preference for funding eligibility.

The NWTF supports providing incentives to open private lands to hunters, anglers and trappers. These incentives could be provided through additional points or direct incentive payments given to landowners who open their land. NWTF supports private property rights and would never support forcing landowners to void those rights, but many landowners are willing to provide access to sportsmen. Incentives or rewards should be provided for the benefit of more access to green space while broadening support for farm and conservation programs.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, Mr. Chairman, the NWTF believes that our agricultural conservation programs protect and enhance wildlife habitat, while providing other conservation, hunting, and recreation benefits.

With some moderate administrative and statutory adjustments, and improved mechanisms to protect the funding promised for conservation, NWTF is confident these programs can provide even greater future benefits to wildlife, people, and the economy. Please know that NWTF stands ready to work with you to craft these adjustments over the months to come, and to invest our own funding and sweat equity into these conservation efforts.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our comments with you today.

I will be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.