

TESTIMONY OF
PAUL D. DEES, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
DELTA WILDLIFE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, & FORESTRY
9:30 a.m., THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2017
216 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING

Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing to gather input on past and current conservation programs. I hope my recommendations will provide valuable perspective and be helpful to this committee as you begin the process of writing a new farm bill. I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of Delta Wildlife.

My name is Paul Dees and I produce corn, rice, and soybeans in a family farming operation in McGrath, Mississippi. As I mentioned, I'm here on behalf of Delta Wildlife, a regional non-profit organization comprised of farmers, sportsmen, and landowners who agree that locally led, voluntary-based conservation offers the best strategy to address natural resource concerns throughout the Delta. As a landowner, farmer, conservationist, and sportsman, my interests and those of Delta Wildlife are one in the same as we strive to accurately reflect the interests of a majority of landowners and land managers in the region we call home. I am also pleased to speak on behalf of Delta Council, Delta F.A.R.M., Delta Waterfowl, and the Rice Stewardship Partnership, which is a working lands conservation partnership, formed by the USA Rice Federation

and Ducks Unlimited. Our collective message places emphasis on what we believe should be the primary focus of the next Conservation Title: working lands conservation and active management.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, agriculture, forestry and related industries contribute nearly 6% of the United States GDP and represents more than 11% of U.S. employment. Our agricultural and forest lands must continue to work for us, but the food security we enjoy today and the benefits to our economy cannot be sustained unless we manage these working lands wisely. Environmental sustainability provides the only path to ensure economic sustainability in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

There are two primary working lands programs currently offered through Title II that have had more impact on how we manage land today than any others - the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

The Environmental Quality Incentive Program or EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to implement conservation practices on agricultural lands and non-industrial private forestlands. In our region, this program has incentivized many producers to begin using tools that reduce our environmental footprint and enhance wildlife habitat. The incentive is required, as change is not easily embraced when there is uncertainty of success on your farm and a cost associated with that change, even for those who do not meet the programmatic means test. In the Delta it is common for farmers to rent much of their cropland. Renters do not have certainty of

whether they will hold the lease on a piece of ground from one year to the next so it is often not worth the risk to invest significant capital into someone else's land. Cost-share programs like EQIP to bridge that gap, allowing land-renters to install conservation measures while footing only a portion of the cost.

To accelerate our path towards environmental and economic sustainability in our agriculture and forestry sectors, EQIP must be strengthened in the next Farm Bill through simplification and expansion. Simplification can be achieved by giving the states more authority and flexibility to utilize their funds to address statewide and local needs with the help of state and regional partners who have the expertise, access, and trust of private farm and forest land owners. Further simplification can be achieved by abandoning the System for Award Management or SAM. Expansion can be achieved through increased funding and focus on national resource concerns like Water Supply and Soil Health, as well as making a new commitment to other resource concerns that have not always received adequate funding, like Wildlife Management practices on cropland.

The Conservation Stewardship Program or CSP takes a slightly different approach to advancing environmental stewardship as compared to EQIP. CSP requires a producer to take a comprehensive look at their production system and identify areas for improvement. A plan is developed and specific goals are set for the producer to achieve over a CSP contract period. CSP incentivizes smaller incremental changes as compared to EQIP, but it does so on a broader basis.

While CSP has been successful, the consensus in our region suggests it is not adequately funded. 154 eligible producers, including myself, have unfunded applications in my county and those that surround it. Many more producers have not even applied because of the lack of funds. For those who have been enrolled and are seeking re-enrollment, the list of CSP Enhancements are too limited to offer incremental conservation adoption.

While more funding is needed for both EQIP and CSP, I'm pleased to see how the Regional Conservation Partnership Program or RCPP has used private investments to leverage existing conservation title funds. As an example, a RCPP partnership between agribusinesses, Delta FARM, Ducks Unlimited, and USA Rice has helped rice producers across the country conserve ground and surface water supplies.

Beyond traditional working land conservation programs like EQIP and CSP, there are other valuable conservation programs that could yield greater environmental and economic returns through a renewed focus on active management. This Committee provided additional flexibility to Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract holders in the last Farm Bill to more efficiently manage upland and bottomland forests to increase both wildlife habitat and timber quality. This trend towards active management should continue as should the enrollment of new CRP lands restored to appropriate habitat covers including both grasslands and forest. However, similar flexibility has not yet been provided for lands enrolled in Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and its predecessor, the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP).

Demand for WRE is growing, as should funding. Today, there are 2.7 million acres in the U.S. enrolled in WRE and WRP. Much of these lands in southern states have been planted to bottomland hardwood trees with the balance of the acres restored as seasonal and permanent wetlands. Many of these wetland areas are not being managed adequately to provide real benefits to migratory waterfowl and other wetland dependent species. And even less is being done to plan or actively manage these new forests to maximize wildlife habitat and future timber quality.

A greater emphasis must be placed on active wetland and forestry management on WRE and WRP lands. Active management would provide a greater return on the public investment. Greater environmental returns could certainly be measured. And additional annual investments in wetland and forestry management would help to support local businesses and economies that may have been impacted by initial land use changes. If sound forestry management is put in place today, it will begin to yield new jobs and opportunities for the forest products industry.

Before I conclude, I would like to mention a separate issue that is considered by some an epidemic - feral swine. A ten year-old national study places a \$1.5 billion dollar negative annual economic impact on our economy, most of which is in the agriculture and forestry sectors. We have no doubt that those numbers are markedly higher today. Many public and private landowners are working to slow the spread of local populations. USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is working hard to manage feral swine populations, but more help is needed, especially on USDA conservation lands. In line with our message of active management, CRP, WRE

and WRP landowners need more help, either through direct assistance from USDA or their partners in conservation.

On behalf of Delta Wildlife and our partners in agriculture and conservation, we would like to express our most sincere appreciation to you, Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and all the members of the Committee for affording us the opportunity to appear before you today and submit these comments.

Respectfully,

Paul D. Dees, Chairman of the Board
Delta Wildlife