

TESTIMONY OF

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

REPRESENTING THE VIEWS OF

THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION
AND
THE AGRICULTURE AND WILDLIFE WORKING GROUP

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

ON

2007 FARM BILL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Julie Sibbing. I am the Senior Program Manager for Agriculture and Wetland Policy for the National Wildlife Federation. The National Wildlife Federation is America's largest wildlife conservation organization, representing more than 4 million members and supporters throughout the United States and 47 affiliated state and territorial conservation organizations. My testimony today will represent those of my organization, as well as those of the Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group, of which NWF is an active member.

Over the past two years, the AWWG partners, made up of 16 of our country's leading hunting, fishing, and conservation organizations, has worked to outline goals and recommendations for the future of agriculture conservation programs. We received input from America's farmers, ranchers, foresters, U.S. Department of Agriculture personnel, Congressional staff, and resource professionals with state and federal agencies. As a result of this effort, participating organizations in AWWG reached consensus on a set of recommendations, and released a report entitled Growing Conservation in the Farm Bill. I am entering that publication into the record as

part of my testimony. Organizations represented by the AWWG include:

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies * American Sportfishing Association
Ducks Unlimited * Izaak Walton League of America
Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation * North American Grouse Partnership
National Wildlife Federation * Pheasants Forever * Quail Forever
Quail Unlimited * Ruffed Grouse Society * The Nature Conservancy
The Wildlife Society * Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited * Wildlife Management Institute

This unprecedented collaboration, collectively representing millions of conservation minded citizens across the country, has led to solid recommendations for conservation programs in the 2007 Farm Bill. Our groups feel strongly that conservation programs provide substantial, and broad benefits that justify their continuation and expansion in the 2007 Farm Bill. I will attempt to briefly summarize the AWWG recommendations today.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) - The CRP has overwhelmingly proven its worth since its inception 20 years ago. The program has protected an estimated 36.7 million acres. By setting aside these often-marginal and highly erodible lands, the CRP has reduced cropland soil loss by 450 million tons per year, sequestered 48 million tons of carbon, produced 13.5 million pheasants per year, and supported 2.2 million ducks annually- just in the Prairie Pothole Region. It is estimated that the program provides \$122 million each year through migratory waterfowl hunting, \$392 million in runoff reduction benefits per year and \$629 million in wildlife viewing activity per year.

The AWWG recommends that the CRP be expanded to 45 million acres.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) - WRP is the nation's largest wetland conservation program, with more than 1.7 million acres of wetlands and associated uplands protected to date. The program has provided excellent habitat for fish and wildlife, as well as increased ground-water recharge, carbon sequestration, and treatment of polluted runoff. The program is also extremely popular with producers who are able to take unproductive wet areas out of production and restore them to a useful purpose as wetlands. Unfortunately, three times as many producers have been interested in the program as have been accepted for enrollment. As of 2005, there was a backlog of nearly a half a million acres.

The AWWG supports reauthorizing the WRP program and raising its annual enrollment level from 250,000 to 300,000 acres.

Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) - The GRP has an enormous potential to help conserve one of America's most endangered ecosystem, our native grasslands, while maintaining these areas for grazing use. More than 900,000 acres have been enrolled in the program to date. But in 2004, 9,000 applications for 6.2 million acres of land went unfunded.

The AWWG supports increasing the GRP to 2 million acres per year, requiring that a minimum of 60 percent of these agreements be in the form of long term easements, and incentives for

enrollment of remaining large tracts of native grasslands.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) - The AWWG supports a gradual increase in WHIP funding from \$100 million to \$300 million over the course of the 2007 Farm Bill, with a significant portion of these new funds dedicated to aquatic restoration activities, including instream habitat improvement projects. We also support increased incorporation of states, municipalities and non-government organizations in delivering and managing WHIP.

Sodsaver - The current agriculture safety net provides substantial price support and risk protection to crop producers which make crop production economically viable even where yields are consistently poor. The reduction in economic risk for crop production, combined with advances in herbicides and genetically modified crops provides incentives to break new ground - even where that ground is not likely to be productive.

Along with strengthening Swampbuster and Sodbuster compliance provisions, the AWWG supports adoption of a "Sodsaver" provision in the 2007 farm bill whereby noncropland that is converted to cropland is made ineligible for any federal benefit, including but not limited to price and income support payments, crop insurance, disaster payments, conservation program enrollment, and FSA farm loan benefits.

Access - The AWWG supports inclusion of a new provision in the 2007 Farm Bill to provide \$20 million per year in grants to fund state-managed voluntary public access programs. Program funds shall be used to enhance fish and wildlife management and improve recreational opportunities on land enrolled in farm bill conservation programs. AWWG also supports providing a higher enrollment priority to conservation program applications that include a public access component. We believe giving producers opportunities to voluntarily provide access to hunters and anglers will greatly increase support for Farm Bill programs and strengthen the alliance between producers and conservationists.

Forestry - Two-thirds of our nation's forests are located on private land, with the vast majority in the hands of families and individuals. More than one million acres of intact forests are converted to development every year. Yet programs to assist farmers in keeping forestland in forest cover and in managing their forests to improve forest health and value for wildlife are quite small compared to the need for such assistance.

The AWWG supports increased technical assistance, education, and outreach to forest landowners through existing programs such as the Forest Stewardship Program and others that provide much needed funding for cost-sharing of forest management practices on private lands. We also support increased funding for the Healthy Forests Reserve Program and inclusion of a permanent easement option.

Conservation Security Program (CSP) - The AWWG supports reauthorization of CSP with improvements to ensure that the program provides increased, measurable and consistent benefits for fish and wildlife conservation. CSP should require fish and wildlife habitat components for all program tiers and require that NRCS engage federal and state fish and wildlife agencies and non-government conservation organizations when developing fish and wildlife and habitat criteria and assessments. CSP should enhance other USDA conservation

programs and not replace or reduce their funding.

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) - The AWWG supports reauthorization of FRPP at \$300 million per year and provisions that: eliminate restrictions on forest land participation, allow for transfer of water rights on enrolled lands, and allow for landowners to prohibit non cropland conversion on easement lands.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - The AWWG supports reauthorization of EQIP, with an increased allocation percentage for fish and wildlife practices, and increased opportunities for private forestland owners. The AWWG also supports a requirement that that any water saved as a result of a conservation practice remain instream. EQIP funding should be allowed only for eligible practices that do not adversely impact wetlands, riparian zones, streams,

Biofuels and Renewable Energy - The AWWG supports research and development funding to promote the next generation of biofuels and renewable energy technology based on sustainable polycultures that are consistent with fish, wildlife, soil, nutrient management and water conservation goals. The Energy Title of the 2007 Farm Bill should be used to promote the next generation of biofuels and renewable energy.

On behalf of the National Wildlife Federation and the AWWG, I thank you for the opportunity to share with you our collective desires for the future of conservation. We look forward to working with you and the other members of the Committee to develop and support a comprehensive array of strong conservation policies and programs in conjunction with the 2007 Farm Bill that will continue and build on the legacy and framework of federal policies and programs supporting natural resource conservation that has been started. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.