TESTIMONY OF

James E. Inglis

PHEASANTS FOREVER, INC.

BEFORE THE:

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

REGARDING:

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Lujan Grisham and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Jim Inglis and I am the Governmental Affairs Representative with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever based out of St. Paul, Minnesota. I am a wildlife biologist by education and experience; grew up on a dairy farm in Western New York, and currently live in Upper Sandusky, Ohio.

I am here today representing our 750 community based Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever chapters; and 142,000 members and volunteers that work every day to promote and implement conservation programs. Each year our chapters complete more than 30,000 individual projects with farmers, ranchers and forest owners. To complement the work of our dedicated volunteers, we have a team of Farm Bill Biologists that work as natural resource professionals with expertise in fields such as wildlife biology, forestry, and range management. They work with landowners every day to find the best voluntary based, conservation solutions that fit producers' needs as part of their agriculture operations and personal goals.

Over the last 12 years, these Farm Bill Biologists have worked on over 148,000 projects with landowners covering over 5.1 million acres. These projects involve the establishment of quality habitat that meet the life cycle needs of a wide variety of wildlife, not only pheasants and quail, but other species such as Golden-winged warbler in Pennsylvania, Lesser Prairie Chickens in the Southern Great Plains and the iconic Elk and Sage Grouse in the West, and Monarch butterflies throughout the country. In addition to wildlife benefits, all Americans benefit from improved soil health and water quality and quantity by implementing these practices.

We are here today to discuss Farm Bill implementation and I would like to spend a few minutes discussing a couple of the individual programs.

Conservation Reserve Program

First, I would like to highlight the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As many of you know, the CRP celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, and farmers, ranchers, landowners and sportsmen will tell you that the program has been, and continues to be popular and productive. We support CRP's ability to deliver a variety of conservation practices to landowners, both options of larger general CRP signup periods, and more targeted continuous practices are important for addressing landscape scale wildlife and natural resource concerns. We supported Secretary Vilsack's recent announcement that USDA will host a general signup the end of this calendar year, as well as open 800,000 additional continuous acres. We are also thankful to have the opportunity to work with USDA to make improvements to CRP, to better carry out the intent of Congress to conserve soil, water, and wildlife, providing conservation benefits to taxpayers as well as financial incentives to producers. Included with my written testimony are details on CRP implementation recommendations that several sportsmen and wildlife groups, including PF/QF, recently drafted for USDA and FSA leadership at their request.

Unlike some programs discussed today, the CRP rule has not been released so our recommendations are on how the CRP can best be implemented. On May 27th, a group of wildlife organizations including Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever provided our combined recommendations for the Conservation Reserve Program to USDA and FSA leadership. The below recommendations aim to help maximize enrollment on both the general and continuous sides of the program, in order to give landowners and producers a robust set of tools with which to implement conservation on their land.

Signups and Expiring Acres

One of the first priorities from several groups was that USDA hold a general signup as soon as possible, which will occur in December of this year. In addition, we recommended that USDA provide re-enrollment options to producers for the ~2.17M acres that are set to expire at the end of this fiscal year (267,000 acres extended from FY14 and 1.91M acres set to expire FY15). USDA announced that producers will have an option to reenroll for one year, allowing enough time to enroll lands under the general signup, or potentially a more targeted CCRP practice.

We also believe USDA should expand CCRP initiatives to cover areas with high contract expiration rates. As these acres come out of a general contract and are not extended/re-enrolled, we would ask USDA to promote keeping environmentally sensitive/important lands in CCRP practices. The trend has been that when a general CRP contract expires, the entire field is brought back into production.

Conservation Practices, Initiatives, and Management

We thank and support that USDA addressed the acres of CP38 State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) and CP37 duck nesting habitat as part of the recent announcement. We also would ask USDA to clarify with states their requested for acres and modifications to existing initiatives (e.g. CP33, CP38, CREP). We encourage USDA to reevaluate initiatives and practices that are stagnant, with specific attention to improving incentives and/or lowering enrollment caps on those underperforming practices, and consider raising caps on the most successful initiatives.

We would like to see USDA continue to enroll lands in the highly erodible lands initiative, but better balance water quality and soil erosion with habitat and upgraded grassland cover. We think it is important for USDA to reevaluate the mid contract management cost share annual caps to encourage quality habitat management. The current caps, which have not been updated since 2002, do not adequately address management cost to achieve maximum benefits.

Working Grasslands

One of the most exciting additions to the CRP was adding 2 million acres of grassland eligibility. We would recommend fully enrolling the authorized 2 million acres by 2018. We also would like to see USDA prioritize limited acreage around specific resource concerns: target areas of high rates of native grassland conversion, maintaining perennial cover, especially on native grasslands & existing CRP enrollments; enrolling acres in areas with high risk of conversion; provide priority wildlife habitat through diverse, vegetation and large tract enrollment as appropriate to the species, protecting grasslands with proximity to wetlands or in regions with high wetland densities. In addition, we urge USDA to collect and publish data on native grassland loss annually.

We would to like to see USDA implement the program similar to the CRP SAFE by accepting federal, state, local agencies and partner proposals for collaborative, stakeholder-sponsored enrollments but partners should not be required to contribute financial assistance as in CREP. We would greatly support an exemption of working grasslands acres from CRP county caps since these lands will be in agriculture production. We would also like to see USDA require a comprehensive conservation plan for all enrollments. Finally we recommend giving this new program a distinctive and recognizable name to avoid confusion by participants, partners, and USDA staff.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Another program that I would like to highlight is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) by providing a specific example. We are one of 22 partners in the Regional Grassland Bird and Grazing Land Enhancement project being coordinated by the Missouri Department of Conservation, which is being implemented in Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. The partnership utilizes NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Agriculture Land Easement (ALE) programs to improve forage quality on grazing lands while benefiting the greater prairie chicken, bobwhite quail and numerous other grassland wildlife. Ultimately we are enhancing grazing systems and wildlife habitat that will be more resilient to periods of drought, like we experience in this region in 2012. These working lands will be more productive, have the ability to absorb more water and reduce erosion in high rainfall events. Preliminary sign up results just in the last couple weeks suggest that there is more interest from landowners than funds available.

Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Improvement Program

The last Farm Bill conservation program we would like to highlight is the Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) that we work on with our state wildlife agency partners. As you are aware, hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation can be an economic driver in many parts of the country. Hunters and anglers spend approximately $75 Billion pursuing their passions every year. In addition wildlife watchers spend about $55 billion each year. These expenditures include everything from rods and reels, guns, ammunition, boats, decoys, bows and arrows and tree stands, to hotel stays and dinners in small rural towns across the country. As you may also recognize public access for hunting, fishing and recreation can be a factor in the lost participation because some areas of the country are limited on amount of accessible lands, especially in those landscapes that are comprised by mostly private ownership. VPA-HIP helps address that by working with state and local partners to provide incentives for landowners to voluntarily open up their lands for recreation, while conducting wildlife habitat improvements. We support the announcement of the first $20 million earlier this year, and look forward to the remainder of the funding allocation in the near future.

Improving Habitat Quality

One of our organizations top priorities, along with many of our partners, are to maximize the wildlife benefits, soil health, and water quality through voluntary federal, state and local conservation programs on as many acres of fields, farms, ranches and forestlands as possible. This includes, for example, considering individual wildlife species life cycle needs, such as with pollinators, in the design of conservation plans that compliments an ecosystem approach. This can be accomplished by something as simple as updated seeding specifications and management techniques that establish and maintain a diversity of vegetative cover in conservation planning process. This will result in longer term natural resource benefits with a reduced need for management in the future.

We feel there are several opportunities to increase the value of conservation program plantings for pollinators like honey bees and Monarch butterflies as well as a wide range of upland wildlife. Some of the updates to USDA conservation programs that would have an immediate and positive impact on pollinators and wildlife include implementing up to date USDA seeding specifications currently being used to design conservation program seeding mixtures in some states. Examples of seeding specification improvements include:

1). Allow and encourage the use of a broader range of species adapted to a geographic area. Both Honey Bees and Monarch Butterflies are known to receive increased benefits from highly diverse seeding mixtures. The more species that are included in a seeding mixture, the more pollinator species the seeding mixture will benefit. As an example, several state seeding specifications currently do not allow for the inclusion of critically important species for Monarch butterflies like Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and other species critical for fall migration.

2). Update seeding specifications to build seeding mixtures based on Pure Live Seed (PLS) seeds per square foot instead of the outdated PLS pounds per acre method. A continued reliance on PLS pounds per acre seeding specifications in some states produces an inconsistency within USDA about how conservation program seeding specifications are written and applied. Pollinator mixtures increasingly require the use of wildflower species with a very wide range of seed sizes and weights. In order to create a balanced, properly designed and cost effective seeding mixture, the mixture needs to be based on the number of seeds that are being planted per given area and not the bulk pounds of species that have a wide range in the size of the seeds. This is an important update as some of the most important states to honey bee and Monarch butterfly health have not yet made these updates to their USDA seeding specifications.

3). Move forward with the adoption and use of a USDA 'Seed Calculator' in creating conservation program seeding mixtures that are based on PLS per square foot seeding specifications. The use of a "seed calculator" to help create mixtures based on ratios assigned to species is important, yet many states that use a seed calculator still rely on PLS pounds per acre. Examples of seed calculators already exist within both USDA and the private sector that are function using PLS per square foot. There has been discussion within USDA regarding the creation of a USDA seed calculator for use by USDA staff for several years. Such a tool would enable staff to better design seeding mixture recommendations that are balanced, cost effective, had a higher diversity and provided increased quality pollinator habitat.

4). Implement seed establishment practices that allow a broader range of establishment options that includes dormant seedings in the fall and no-till drill seeding without disking ahead of seeding. In several of the states that are the most important for Honey Bee and Monarch Butterfly foraging habitat, USDA seeding specifications provide direction that limits several of the best establishment practices. Seeding specifications to establish high diversity, pollinator habitat should allow the use of dormant seedings, broad cast seeding and eliminate field disking recommendations prior to establishment.

Each of these recommendations are already successfully in place in some of the state USDA seeding specifications in the country. Unfortunately, some of the most critical states for Honey Bee and Monarch Butterfly health have not yet incorporated these updated seeding specifications. When these seeding specification recommendations are all applied, the benefits include establishing habitat with significantly increased wildlife habitat quality, mixtures that are more cost effective and providing tools that allow resource professionals to design improved seeding mixtures.

Closing Statement

I need to emphasize that these successes wouldn't be possible without numerous partnerships that we have with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, State Fish and wildlife agencies, and other national, state and local agencies and organizations. There are hundreds of other partnership positions at the county and state levels that leverage funding for conservation practices, and for "boots on the ground" delivery.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, we often hear the term precision agriculture as the way of the future, and with the technology and partnerships we have available across this great country, we can also have precision conservation. The voluntary, incentive based, conservation programs in the Farm Bill, clearly deliver that.

Thank you and I look forward to any questions.