

Testimony of

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on

2018 Farm Bill Priorities

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, I am Becky Humphries, Chief Conservation and Operations Officer of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), and I appreciate the opportunity to testify as you begin discussions for the next Farm Bill. Founded in 1973, the National Wild Turkey Federation is a national non-profit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and preservation of our hunting heritage. The National Wild Turkey Federation is 230,000 members strong and maintains local chapters in every state. With the successful restoration of the wild turkey complete, the National Wild Turkey Federation has focused its efforts on our "Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt." initiative, which connects both parts of our mission by recognizing the importance of quality habitat for wildlife conservation and its' significance to our hunting tradition. Through this initiative, our "Save the Habitat" efforts are largely focused on creating and maintaining healthy forests through active management.

NWTF is unusual among conservation organizations. We do not simply advocate for what we want, we actually do serious forestry work and put conservation directly on the ground on private and federal public lands. The NWTF has over fifty professional conservation staff located across the nation, including nine professional foresters. These staff work daily with state agencies, federal agencies, and private landowners to implement forest management and other wildlife habitat projects on the ground. The NWTF has a long-standing formal partnership with the United States Forest Service (USFS) dating to 1986 and with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for over a decade. We have worked together to deliver thousands of projects benefiting wildlife and wildlife based recreation. The NWTF has been a leader in stewardship contracting, implementing one of the first projects by a non-profit organization a decade ago. Since, we have partnered with the USFS on 93 successful stewardship contracts and agreements. These projects demonstrate the benefits of partnership and have resulted in thousands of acres of sustainable forest management and enhanced wildlife habitat. As a result of these agreements, over the last decade the NWTF has consistently been one of the top 20 purchasers of federal timber on a volume basis, ranking as high as fifth. We understand first-hand the power of collaboration and partnerships, the value of categorical exclusions to getting work done in an efficient manner, and the challenges faced by the federal agencies and private landowners in getting active management implemented on the ground.

Professionally trained wildlife biologists know that forest diversity at the landscape level is the key to proper management to achieve robust species diversity. There are four fundamental criteria each forest species needs for survival: food, water, shelter, and space. Depending on how a forest is managed, various amounts of these criteria become available to the animals living there. Wildlife managers consider **active management** the best solution to meet the habitat requirements of the largest variety of species. Active management creates young forest habitat, which provides adequate food sources, nesting habitat, and hiding places for forest dependent wildlife. Throughout the U.S. we are losing this diversity on a landscape-level scale, in many cases because our forests are becoming more homogenized and over-mature. The U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have recognized the need for young forest habitat, and thanks to this Committee's work, those agencies provide funding and guidance to provide habitat for imperiled species such as the golden-winged warbler, New

England cottontail, gopher tortoise, and red-cockaded woodpecker. These benefits extend to numerous other species of wildlife, and result in a greater diversity of plants and animals.

2014 Farm Bill – what was good

The National Wild Turkey Federation recognizes and appreciates the authorities and tools that have been granted in recent years by the Agriculture Committees to expand the ability of private landowners to manage their lands and federal agencies to manage federal forestlands. We believe that the 2014 Farm Bill provides important tools aimed at streamlining processes, increasing multi-party collaboration, directing closer cooperation with state fish and wildlife agencies in order to achieve fish and wildlife population objectives, transitioning towards landscape-level (“all lands”) management while respecting private landowners property, building capacity, improving watersheds, addressing forest health risks (e.g., fire risk and insect/disease infestations), and generally enhancing the pace and scale of management for healthy forests. The permanent authorizations of Stewardship End-Result Contracting and Good Neighbor Authority, along with the establishment of Insect and Disease Area designations in the 2014 Farm Bill are very helpful additions. The specific focus of each tool varies, but all strive to increase the pace and scale of restoration on forest lands by addressing contracting and process inefficiencies; dealing with specific ecosystem/forest health concerns within designated geographical units on public lands; allowing for coordination of management activities on federal lands and adjacent private lands within a watershed; and enabling non-governmental organizations and state agency partners to provide additional resources through cooperative agreements for the mutual benefit of all parties. If utilized to their fullest extent, such programs and authorities will lead to healthier forests, which in turn will provide quality wildlife habitat, much needed economic benefits, clean water, and public recreational opportunities.

2018 Farm Bill Priorities

As in previous Farm Bills, NWTF is a steering-committee member of the Forest in the Farm Bill Coalition. We are working cooperatively with conservation and forestry stakeholders toward common goals that help producers and landowners better manage their lands for forestry and wildlife. While the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition is still developing its specific recommendations, I can say now that NWTF’s general “asks” of this Subcommittee will be to:

Continue landscape scale wildlife and habitat management consistent with NWTF goals of large regional focal areas.

Enhance cooperation between federal forest management agencies and state fish and wildlife agencies to meet land/habitat management objectives consistent with fish and wildlife population objectives.

Continue longleaf pine enrollment in CRP and ensure that proper active management is applied to ensure maximum wildlife benefit.

Continue to improve mid-contract management on forestry practices to require proper thinning, prescribed fire, and other management on enrolled acres.

Continue to streamline the Technical Service Provider (TSP) rules to reduce paperwork and make it easier to get conservation on the ground and offer flexibility to landowners who want to manage for forestry, wildlife, water quality, or other purposes.

Explore and implement further incentives for forest plan design by collaboratives, including enhanced use of categorical exclusions as contemplated by NEPA and administered under CEQ rule and policy. Also, consider allowing road maintenance – not road building – for the purposes of public safety or to enable hunter access be included in Stewardship End Result Contracting authorities.

Consider increasing the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limits for participation as well as updating payment limits on forestry and conservation programs so larger landscape scale tracts could be enrolled in programs that meet priority conservation objectives. If you expand current payment caps to better reflect today's larger family farm budgets, you will remove disincentives for larger conservation-minded landowners to participate and enable landscape scale restoration of habitat.

Management & Wildfire

This Committee has a history of addressing large multi-committee issues as it develops long-term farm bills. Accordingly, this Committee should develop a fix to the forest management and wildfire funding issues faced by the U.S. Forest Service. We are agnostic on the budget process that Congress chooses to accomplish this, but we need to resolve the “borrowing” of appropriated funds designated for wildlife, forest management, fire prevention, recreation, etc. to cover catastrophic fire suppression costs. There also needs to be a cap on the 10-year average of fire suppression costs used to calculate this line item in the budget, otherwise as the costs of fire suppression continue to escalate, budget items for wildlife, recreation, forest management and fire prevention will continue to decline. The House - with the support of this committee - passed legislation (Westerman Bill) in the 114th Congress to address both but that legislation failed to pass the Senate.

NWTF fully supports using the Farm Bill vehicle for true forest management and wildfire funding reform that would yield success. As we have observed earlier, our current funding model for fighting catastrophic wildfires remains a severe problem. Over the last 30 years, the length of the fire season has increased by more than 2 months. In addition, the intensity of many fires has increased largely due to an increased fuel load that is a result of decreased timber harvest and reduced active forest management. During the same time period, the cost of wildfire suppression has increased an average of more than 22% annually and now accounts for over one-half of the U.S. Forest Service's annual budget. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually to fight forest fires. Unfortunately, these fires often result in scorched earth that all agree is not good for wildlife, water quality, recreation, or local economies and jobs. Active forest management to prevent wildfires costs less than suppression and is proven to be extremely effective at preventing wildfires, as well as helping

reduce fire containment and suppression efforts. By reducing the obstacles to sustainable forest management on our federal lands, not only can we reduce the likelihood of wildfires and the costs of fighting them, but we can also realize additional benefits of improved public safety, the protection of private and public property, quality wildlife habitat, improved water quality, fewer invasive species, enhanced recreational opportunities, and more robust local economies.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The EQIP program has been a bedrock conservation program that has worked well. This committee has worked to incorporate forest management into the program and now around 5% of the program is used to improve forested lands adjacent to farmland. That's where the wildlife lives and is usually what helps control soil erosion and thus improve water quality. We suggest that over the life of the Farm Bill, the Committee increase the minimum amount of EQIP funds for forestry and wildlife conservation practices to at least 10 percent annually. We also support incorporating state input to target EQIP wildlife funds towards priority fish and wildlife species, as identified in State Wildlife Action Plans. Further, we support increasing the availability of and emphasis on long-term incentive payments and contracts (such as those up to 10 years) to private forest landowners to encourage sustained management for wildlife. We also believe that eligible land should include lands capable of production in addition to those lands currently in production. These lands were previously eligible for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), but eligibility was not carried over into the wildlife portion of EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill. We also support allowing forest landowners the option of managing their forest land specifically for wildlife habitat, timber production, or both, depending on their priorities.

Finally, we support including guidance reiterating the need for USDA to convene State Technical Committee meetings on at least an annual basis for the purpose of soliciting input from members on the implementation of EQIP within the state. The timing of such meetings should allow for meaningful input prior to final decisions being made on program and practice implementation for the upcoming year.

Forestry

The direct forestry tools in the Farm Bill have ebbed and flowed over time. Because of their critical nature in preserving wildlife habitat, controlling soil erosion, and improving water quality, we hope the committee will continue to invest in forestry programs. We support the continued authorization of the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) with mandatory annual funding at \$12 million. An even more important goal for the forestry title is to fully support utilizing prescribed burning as an effective management tool and increasing the financial and technical capacity for prescribed burning on private lands to improve forest health and enhance wildlife habitat. The committee should also consider expanding Stewardship End Result Contracting authorities to all Federal agencies.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Unlike EQIP, the CSP program has not yet developed into a program that fully supports wildlife and forestry. Recent changes to the program may improve that, but it is too early to tell. The Committee should insure that CSP rankings and payments reward enhancements and practices with higher conservation benefits, regardless of whether they are generated from new or ongoing conservation work. The program should be focused on sustained conservation outcomes, not on the timing of when a conservation activity was initially adopted. Like in EQIP, the Committee should include guidance language reiterating the need for USDA to convene State Technical Committee meetings on at least an annual basis for the purpose of soliciting input from members on the implementation of CSP within the state. The timing of such meetings should allow for meaningful input prior to final decisions being made on program implementation for the upcoming year. Further, lands expiring from CRP with low-quality wildlife cover, such as monoculture or low-diversity introduced grass cover, should not be given priority to be re-enrolled into CSP.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

NWTF has participated in a limited number of RCPP projects with partners and we are seeing a tremendous benefit to private landowners and to conservation through its use. We, however, have some concerns with this program that are reducing our ability to participate fully. We support reauthorization and maintaining funding levels for RCPP. We believe that the Committee should allow a limited portion of partners' administrative costs to be funded through RCPP and that USDA should be provided with the necessary technical assistance and administrative funds to implement the program. This amount should be a fixed percentage of RCPP funding and not be negotiated after grants are awarded to partners, as is the case now.

Conclusion

As shown through our continued partnership with conservation programs within the USFS and the NRCS and our conservation efforts through our "Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt." Initiative, the National Wild Turkey Federation is a strong proponent of active, sustainable forest management and the conservation programs that support these efforts. The benefits to numerous wildlife species, their habitats, and forest health are matched with economic benefits that contribute to vibrant local economies. Our recommendations above will improve current programs that in turn will help farmers and private landowners meet both production and wildlife goals. Members of this Committee have much of which to be proud. You have helped conservation and forestry with past legislation and the suggested updates will improve that effort. Thank you for your time and consideration and for your desire to address these critical issues. I would be happy to answer any questions.