

**TESTIMONY OF JEFF TRANDAHL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION,
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE REGARDING
STRENGTHENING CONSERVATION THROUGH THE 2012 FARM BILL
February 28, 2012**

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) was established by Congress in 1984 to leverage federal and private funds to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Since inception, NFWF has been successful in bringing together public and private partners to build strategic partnerships to address the most significant threats to fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.

NFWF works actively with 14 federal agencies and more than 50 corporations and private foundations to coordinate and leverage funds for conservation through competitive grant programs. To date, NFWF has leveraged \$576 million in federal funds into \$2 billion through 11,600 conservation projects. Through our grantmaking, NFWF strives to support conservation actions that are cost-effective and maximize sustainable outcomes for fish, wildlife, plants and other natural resources while positively impacting working lands and local economies.

The goal of NFWF is to ensure abundant wildlife species in order to allow the economic health of our nation to continue. The key elements of our approach include:

- (1) Leverage
- (2) Efficiency
- (3) Partnerships
- (4) Impact
- (5) Measurable Outcomes

Since inception, NFWF has focused on the stewardship of private working lands and provided hundreds of grants to agricultural organizations to benefit thousands of agricultural producers in all 50 states. To advance these efforts, NFWF established a formal partnership in 2000 with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to work with other federal agencies and private partners to provide grants for working lands conservation in specific geographies and habitats.

Our partnership has expanded in recent years to include technical assistance grants and this effort with NRCS has been formalized through NFWF's new Conservation Partners Program. This partnership approach has proven to be successful and we believe it is a model that should be replicated in the 2012 Farm Bill.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss our innovative partnerships with NRCS, NFWF's Conservation Partners model, and our role in partnering and leveraging to provide more technical assistance for the effective delivery of Farm Bill conservation programs.

NFWF's Conservation Partners Program

NFWF is successfully building bridges between the federal government and private sector to benefit NRCS's mission to "work with landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems". As the NFWF-NRCS partnership has grown, we have identified positive alignment in many of our conservation priorities and opportunities to further leverage our resources. As a result, more financial and technical assistance is available for landowners to keep working lands working while providing conservation stewardship of natural resources.

To achieve success, we have worked with NRCS to select the best opportunities to bring together limited resources to maximize conservation outcomes for select species, habitats, and regional landscapes. This approach culminated in the announcement of a new NRCS partnership with NFWF that focuses on providing technical assistance to landowners in priority conservation areas. The Conservation Partners Program (CPP), administered by NFWF, will provide nearly \$20 million in grants on a competitive basis to support field biologists and other habitat conservation professionals working with NRCS field offices in providing technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, foresters, and other private landowners to optimize wildlife habitat conservation on private lands. These grants will increase the technical capacity of NRCS, leverage additional funds for their work, and expedite the delivery of programs such as Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

CPP will build on NFWF's existing partnerships with NRCS to benefit species and ecosystems of mutual interest. CPP grants will be awarded in the following priority areas: Great Lakes, Shortgrass Prairie, Longleaf Pine, Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay, Northeast Forests, Upper Mississippi River Basin, Prairie Potholes, and Bay Delta. Several of these established conservation initiatives in which CPP will be utilized are described below.

- **Great Lakes** - Concurrent with the federal government's Great Lakes Regional Collaboration in 2005, NFWF established a grant program in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, NRCS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. ArcelorMittal, the world's leading steel company, joined the partnership in 2008 and contributes significant resources to the program. The purpose of the Sustain Our Great Lakes grant program is to sustain, restore and protect fish, wildlife and habitat in the Great Lakes basin by leveraging funding, building conservation capacity, and focusing partners and resources toward key ecological issues. The program helps to implement the federal government's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative through on-the-ground habitat restoration projects and conservation technical assistance to private landowners.

To date, Sustain Our Great Lakes has awarded 133 grants worth \$20.6 million in federal and corporate partner funding. Grantees matched this funding with an additional \$21.8 million, for a total conservation investment of \$42.4 million. Priority investments include improving the quality and connectivity of tributary, wetland and coastal habitats, controlling aquatic invasive species, and reducing phosphorous inputs to streams and lakes. Within this priority

framework, this year's grants will include a stronger focus on agriculture-based conservation. We expect to make significant technical assistance investments in projects that address dairy operations in the Fox River watershed in Wisconsin, sugar beet farms in the Saginaw River watershed of Michigan, and corn and soybean farms in the Maumee River basin of Michigan and Ohio.

- **Shortgrass Prairie/Lesser Prairie Chicken** - NFWF and NRCS also share an interest in conserving the shortgrass prairie ecosystem and improving habitat for the Lesser Prairie Chicken. Historically, NFWF has awarded various grants in Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas to benefit shortgrass prairie species. Grant recipients include the Playa Lakes Joint Venture, Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, and various Resource, Conservation & Development Councils and Conservation Districts. Support from NRCS has enhanced NFWF's ability to leverage and coordinate a diverse array of federal and private resources for the region.

In Kansas we have initiated an effort with TradeWind Energy to offset the impact of its Caney River, Kansas wind farm. TradeWind has provided \$8.5 million to NFWF to permanently protect 18,200 acres of native prairie, restore thousands of additional acres of prairie and support needed research on ground nesting birds including Greater and Lesser Prairie-chickens. This is a landmark project that seeks to proactively and comprehensively offset the wildlife impact of a wind farm. To achieve maximum wildlife benefit in this program we are working closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and NRCS.

We anticipate awarding \$1.5-2 million of federal and non-federal funds in the near future to benefit Lesser Prairie-Chickens and other imperiled species of the short grass prairie. Importantly, a focus of the program is to support field biologists and other habitat conservation professionals to work with NRCS field offices in providing technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners to optimize Lesser Prairie-Chicken conservation on private lands. We have already seen the success of this model in New Mexico where nearly a dozen new private lands biologists will be working for the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts and with private landowners to improve grassland conditions within the shortgrass prairie in 2012. We expect at least 100,000 acres of habitat to be improved, thereby accelerating recovery of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken and other grassland birds.

- **Gulf of Mexico** - NFWF has a long history of grantmaking in the Gulf region and was well-positioned to respond immediately when the Deepwater Horizon oil spill occurred in 2010. NFWF staff quickly met with biologists, species experts, and other partners, including NRCS, to discuss both short and long-term actions to protect fish and wildlife affected by the oil spill. The consensus was that migratory birds would be some of the hardest hit species and a comprehensive approach focusing on areas outside the spill zone was necessary to minimize impacts to these species. NFWF worked with NRCS to develop a strategy to encourage farmers and other private landowners to rapidly create aquatic and wetland habitats for stopover and overwintering habitat in advance of the fall migration.

Through philanthropic contributions by BP and WalMart, NFWF granted a total of \$4 million to Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Mississippi Wildlife Foundation, Texas R.I.C.E, and other local organizations with technical capacity to help NRCS enroll landowners into Farm Bill Conservation programs. NFWF's ability to leverage private contributions greatly accelerated the agency's Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative and helped create over 500,000 acres of new habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds in the Gulf region.

- **Longleaf Pine** - Building on nearly a decade of investment to restore vanishing longleaf pine forests in the southeastern United States, NFWF established the Longleaf Stewardship Fund in 2011. This is a landmark public-private partnership that includes NRCS, U.S. Department of Defense, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Southern Company. With the combined financial and technical resources of the group, the expanded program will support accelerated restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem and implementation of the Range-Wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine.

Organizations will receive grants to expand technical assistance to landowners in order to promote longleaf pine ecosystem stewardship on private lands. NFWF is working with our corporate and federal partners to establish specific measurable conservation goals that can be tracked over time. These goals will support the recovery of important keystone species of the longleaf pine ecosystem and advance specific habitat restoration goals outlined in the Range-Wide Plan.

- **Chesapeake Bay** - NFWF established the Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund in 2000. NRCS is a long-term federal partner in this public-private partnership, along with the other partners in the Chesapeake Bay Program including key partners such as EPA and the Forest Service. The Federal partnership has helped to attract corporate funders such as Altria and FedEx. The program plays a critical role in local implementation of the most innovative, sustainable and cost-effective strategies for restoring and protecting water quality and vital habitats within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Grants, technical assistance, information sharing, and monitoring are all important components of the program that ensure project success and sustainable outcomes.

Chesapeake Bay grants specifically focus on accelerating adoption of proven and innovative conservation practices on farmland, including outreach to Plain Sect farmers and others who may not be participating in Federal cost-share programs. The Fund has invested in livestock exclusion fencing, rotational grazing, cover crop decision support tools, precision agriculture, demonstrations of manure injection technologies, as well as alternative uses for excess manure. The Fund also invests in targeted habitat restoration on farmland, including wetland, forest buffer and stream restoration. With support from federal and private partners, more than \$10 million was awarded for grants in the 5 states located within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed region and Washington, D.C. in 2011.

Background on NFWF-NRCS Partnerships

For over a decade, NFWF has worked with NRCS to provide grants to local organizations with the technical capacity to work with farmers, ranchers, foresters and other private landowners to conserve habitat on private lands and effectively deliver Farm Bill Conservation Programs. NFWF's partnership with NRCS began with direct congressional appropriations to NFWF and has grown through multiple cooperative agreements with the agency. Through these arrangements, NFWF has demonstrated our ability to leverage NRCS funds, coordinate strategic conservation activities, and effectively partner with NRCS programs to maximize federal investment in getting conservation on the ground. A brief summary of these partnerships is provided below.

- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)** - In 2010 and 2011 NFWF was awarded five Conservation Innovation Grants through a competitive process that total approximately \$2 million. CIG projects include "Accelerating and Sustaining Longleaf Conservation on Private Lands," and "Using Excess Manure to Generate Farm Income on the Chesapeake's Phosphorous Hot Spots." These are public-private partnerships that involve non-profit organizations such as the Longleaf Alliance and state agencies such as the Maryland Department of Agriculture. The multiple benefits to having all of these partners at the table include leveraged financial resources, developing a cohesive and coordinated strategy, and having common metrics to measure success.

NFWF partnered with NRCS in 2008 through a cooperative agreement to administer the entire national Conservation Innovation Grants Program and the Chesapeake Innovation Grants Program for a total of \$19 million. Grants ranged from "A Cooperative Conservation Framework for Improving Watershed Health" by the Iowa Soybean Association to work by the University of Missouri on "Helping Corn and Cotton Producers to Reduce Nitrogen Loss Using Crop Sensors." NFWF has been working with fifty-six organizations toward the completion of these projects.

- **Private Lands Technical Assistance Program (PLTAP)** - In 2010 NFWF and NRCS partnered through PLTAP to provide technical assistance at the field level. This program's intent was to try and get "more boots on the ground." NRCS field staff and local and state partners have been finding that they have a greater need today for this type of assistance than ever before. Farmers and ranchers need a variety of technical disciplines to get proper conservation plans in order to enter into Farm Bill programs that address energy development, modern agronomic practices, endangered species, water issues, and a host of other challenges facing agricultural production.
- **Coral Reef Conservation** - NFWF and NRCS established the Coral Reef Task Force Initiative in 2010 to provide support for underserved and disadvantaged farmers in the Guanica Watershed of Puerto Rico to reduce runoff from their crops that negatively impacts corals.

- **Long Island** – NFWF is helping to provide technical assistance to growers on Long Island to implement conservation practices that will help preserve the tradition of sweet corn production on the Island.
- **Strategic Watershed Action Teams** - NFWF is administering Strategic Watershed Action Teams, or SWATs, in the Longleaf Pine region (SC, GA, FL) and in New Mexico for Lesser Prairie-Chicken and Shortgrass Prairie habitat.
- **Direct Appropriations FY 2000-2006** - NFWF received an average appropriation of \$3 million annually to further the mission of NRCS through a matching grant program focused on private lands conservation. Together, NRCS and the Foundation supported over 500 grants to conservation districts, universities, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, and non-profit organizations who partner on working lands with farmers, ranchers, and foresters to support conservation efforts on private land.

Through direct appropriations, NFWF leveraged \$21 million in NRCS funds into more than \$85 million to conserve fish and wildlife habitat, reduce agricultural runoff, and remove invasive species. NFWF-NRCS grants were specifically targeted in specific geographies like the Great Lakes and working landscapes such as sagebrush and private forestlands. Examples of corporate and foundation partners in these efforts included Anheuser-Busch, ConocoPhillips, Kellogg Foundation, McKnight Foundation, and Southern Company, all of whom have a special interest in conserving habitat on private agricultural lands.

Recommendations

There is significant potential to strengthen the delivery of Farm Bill Conservation Programs through innovative partnerships with the non-profit sector and other non-federal entities. We are applying this paradigm in our CPP partnership and we encourage the Committee adopt a similar approach in the 2012 Farm Bill and to consider the consolidation of existing programs, such as Agricultural Water Enhancement Program and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, that are similar in function.

In addition, we recommend that the Committee consider the following items to promote collaborative efforts and continue the success of agricultural stewardship within the Farm Bill:

- **Flexibility** – NRCS has been successful using existing authorities to achieve positive outcomes through public-private partnerships. New and/or consolidated programs should be streamlined, avoid additional bureaucracy and structured to implement programs in a timely manner. Importantly, NRCS needs the freedom to establish innovative and strategic partnerships with non-federal organizations.
- **Leverage** – The 2008 Farm Bill identified the importance of leverage. This should be reinforced and prioritized in the 2012 Farm Bill. There is significant potential to complement NRCS programs with the financial resources of non-federal organizations in the form of cash, equipment, people, or products. This is the basis for quantifiable leverage, meaningful partnerships and impactful projects.

- Measurable Outcomes – NRCS is incorporating measurable outcomes into their programs and this should continue. As a partner, NFWF is also committed to tracking and demonstrating results and seeks to promote adaptive management, demonstrate results, and continuously learn from project investment. It is important that all NRCS partnerships require demonstrable outcomes for fish, wildlife, water, soil, and other natural resources.

Conclusion

NFWF and NRCS have an incredible history of partnership and success. NFWF was established to leverage federal funds with private contributions to conserve fish and wildlife habitats and we have effectively catalyzed partnerships to benefit the mission of NRCS and voluntary conservation activities. NRCS has a variety of popular and successful programs that are critically important to the future of sustainable agriculture and stewardship of our natural resources. It is our objective to make the best technical assistance available, foster participation, and help NRCS meet the demand for enrollment in their programs.

NFWF adds value to NRCS and Farm Bill Conservation Programs by providing financial and other resources and, ultimately, helping to bridge the divide between agricultural production and working lands stewardship. During a time of fiscal constraint and limited staff within NRCS and other federal agencies, enhanced partnerships with non-federal organizations are especially important and mechanisms to foster these partnerships, at the lowest cost and greatest efficiency, should be prioritized in the 2012 Farm Bill.

We look forward to our continued partnership with NRCS and providing assistance to effectively deliver the 2012 Farm Bill Conservation Programs.