

Testimony of Anne Marie Doramus
Commissioner, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
before the
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
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Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, members of the committee, I am Anne Marie Doramus, Commissioner for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC). Governor Asa Hutchinson appointed me to the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission in June, 2019. I am the first woman appointed to a full term on the commission in the state's history, a life-long friend and advocate of the outdoors, an avid duck hunter and bass angler and committed to the conservation of our natural resources. I'm a graduate of the University of Arkansas and vice president of special projects and sales for Arkansas Bolt Company, a fastener distributor and OEM supplier based in Little Rock. I serve on the Board of Directors for the Arkansas State Fair and Livestock Show and served on the Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation. I am a founding member of the Arkansas Outdoor Society, a group for young adults who are passionate about conservation and outdoors in Arkansas and directly support the mission of the Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation and Commission. In addition to duck hunting and bass fishing, I also enjoy fly fishing, mountain biking, golf, tennis, and working with my retriever, Baron.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of the State of Arkansas, and for the invitation to be here today to express the importance of the Farm Bill to conservation in Arkansas and across the country.

Arkansas's position as an agricultural industry leader and outdoor recreation destination gives us a unique perspective about the Farm Bill and its implications to Arkansas's citizens, including producers and outdoor recreationists. Agriculture is Arkansas's largest industry, adding \$19 billion to the state's economy annually, supporting over 250,000 jobs. Outdoors-related recreation generates more than \$4.9 million a day in Arkansas, and hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers spend nearly \$2 billion on wildlife recreation in Arkansas. Waterfowl hunting alone has generated over \$230 million in retail sales, supported over 4,700 jobs and provided over \$29 million and nearly \$24 million in state/local and federal tax revenue, respectively. I see this first hand every time I fill up my bass boat at McSwain's, or drive through the rice and duck capital of the world on the road to hunting camp.

The state of Arkansas has a long history of collaborative conservation partnerships. AGFC, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA) and many partners have worked proactively with producers statewide to conserve and restore the Natural State from the pine oak forests of the Ozark Plateau to the bottomland hardwood forests of the Mississippi River Delta. Shared conservation vision, planning and a strong sense of place bind together partners from all walks-of-life who ultimately view conservation, working lands and nature issues as *quality of life issues*. We have a proven record of collaboration with state and private investments in numerous Regional Conservation Partnership Programs (RCPP), a large

Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI), cost-shared and collaborative efforts in the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), and the state was home to the very first Conservation Delivery Network (CDN) chartered through the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture. Conservation delivery at a regional scale cannot happen without farmers, ranchers and forestland owners, as well as other conservation organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, National Wild Turkey Federation and Quail Forever.

Arkansas is a diverse state, with diverse land-use practices and a strong agricultural industry. More than 60 percent of the U.S. and 90 percent of Arkansas's land base is privately-owned. The Farm Bill's conservation programs represent the single largest investment in private land conservation that this nation makes on an annual basis. Strong conservation programs provide economic, environmental and social benefits that promote resilience in farming and ranching operations while promoting ecological sustainability. AGFC appreciates this committee's leadership in securing a robust conservation title in the Farm Bill.

Arkansas is the nation's largest rice-growing state, producing half the nation's rice and nearly nine billion pounds annually. Arkansas grows rice on more than 1 million acres each year from 40 counties, mainly in eastern Arkansas counties from Louisiana to Missouri. Our state is a world renowned duck-hunting destination, and it's no secret that rice fields and ducks go hand-in-hand. However, the rice landscape is changing. Many rice fields do not provide the food resources today that they once did, but practical solutions are available to ensure Arkansas's agricultural landscapes continue to be a destination for waterfowl and people who enjoy waterfowl. For example, AGFC is using over \$2 million of Voluntary Public Access - Habitat Incentive Program funding to incentivize producers to conserve waste rice while opening their lands to compatible public use through the agency's Waterfowl Rice Incentive Conservation Enhancement (WRICE) program. This program offers unique opportunities for members of the public to recreate on working lands they may not otherwise be able to access. Our relationships with our NRCS state office are allowing us to grow this program as we speak, using special-purpose EQIP funds to enroll additional producers in practice 646 to provide more acres of winter water for wildlife.

A key Farm Bill program in Arkansas and beyond is the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). ACEP provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Migratory birds are a continental resource, and many birds that migrate through or winter in Arkansas depend on Wetland Reserve Easement lands. Several states boast substantial WRE acreage, but Arkansas is a national leader with over 270,000 acres permanently protected and restored to wildlife habitat through voluntary landowner agreements. Approximately 70 percent of these acres have been reforested, playing a major role in the restoration of what was once a vast landscape spanning over 20 millions acres of bottomland hardwood forest. The economic and environmental benefits of these lands, from groundwater recharge, to filtering runoff to providing habitat for unique birds and the people who view them, are enormous and worthy of maintenance. This extensive public investment in and private landowner commitment to conservation warrants continued stewardship to maximize benefits. For instance, water bird habitat is most productive when effectively managed over the long run following initial restoration. AGFC supports continued growth in WRE stewardship opportunities.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is yet another important component of the Farm Bill and gives landowners the opportunity to conserve lands and habitat that are critical to a wide array of wildlife. The ducks that winter in Arkansas and provide the rich hunting quality we enjoy come from places like North and South Dakota, Montana and elsewhere in the U.S and Canadian breeding grounds. As a result, Arkansans depend on high quality breeding habitat in those areas. Conservation of small wetlands and ample nesting cover are important to produce ducks. Programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) play an incredibly important role in ensuring a strong fall flight of ducks for Arkansas and beyond. Lands enrolled in CRP, for example, also help address other resource concerns, such as absorbing runoff before it hits a ditch or stream, helping recharge groundwater resources and helping keep soil on the landscape. For these reasons we support an increase to the national CRP cap, an increased allocation to CRP grasslands and, finally, a robust voluntary incentive based working lands program, one that works hand-in-hand with producers to secure wildlife habitat while ensuring producer flexibility and sustainability.

A key factor in the success of the programs mentioned thus far is properly aligning conservation incentives for farmers with federal farm program supports. One such incentive that is paramount to this is conservation compliance. A strong and reliable safety net for our nation's farmers and ranchers, as well as our soil and wetlands, is a critical component of the Farm Bill and the future of agricultural sustainability. For more than 30 years, conservation compliance has been a central part of federal farm programs and this has been renewed by both Congress and bipartisan Administrations. We support the perpetuation of common-sense assurances that farming and risk management practices are done in a way that minimizes impacts to our nation's highly erodible lands and wetlands.

Although we are sitting in the heart of rice and duck country now, Arkansas boasts a diverse array of landscapes and natural resources. RCPP (a new program championed by Chairwoman Stabenow in the 2014 Farm Bill) leverages federal funds with private partner investments to promote the sustainable use of soil, water and wildlife in critical conservation areas. AGFC was grateful to be one of twenty partners in a new RCPP project to incentivize open pine landscape restoration in Arkansas and Louisiana. Led by the AR-LA Conservation Delivery Network, this project will use multiple approved conservation practices to improve open forest conditions, reduce hazardous fuel and the threat of wildfire and improve watershed condition. This project represents one of five active RCPP projects in Arkansas and one of eight active in the past five years. AGFC and its partners want to expand this important partnership program in the next Farm Bill, while making some changes that will improve program delivery, further spur innovation, and ensure partners have the resources and tools they need to be successful.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has a long history of partnering with NRCS and FSA to deliver Farm Bill programs. A full-time staff of about a dozen biologists annually conduct nearly 250 landowner site visits and craft nearly 150 wildlife management plans impacting over 11,000 acres using Farm Bill programs. We recently partnered with NRCS to bring on an additional eight Quail Forever biologists to work with producers to address resource concerns in upland habitats. Producer demand is high for Farm Bill conservation programs in Arkansas. We

see great potential for increasing capacity for similar work in other habitats and helping reduce barriers to producer participation if increased technical assistance resources were available.

In closing, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify. AGFC stands ready to continue working with you and our partners to achieve a strong conservation title in the Farm Bill, which is essential to the economic prosperity and resiliency of our nation's landowners, producers and rural communities and serves as a backbone to conserve our nation's valuable soils, forests, wetlands, grasslands and wildlife resources.