

Testimony of

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Biotechnology**

Supporting Farmers, Strengthening Conservation, Sustaining Working Lands”

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Good morning, Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Tokuda, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on my perspectives of voluntary, locally led, incentive-based Farm Bill conservation programs.

My name is Chris McLeland, and I am the Managing Director of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited in the Great Lakes and Atlantic Region. When I'm off the clock, I enjoy spending time on the farm, with my daughters and our cattle. Growing up in a rural community in north-central Missouri, I learned from a young age that agriculture and wildlife conservation were not mutually exclusive activities. In fact, they can very much mutually inclusive and complementary. It has been my passion for agriculture and wildlife conservation that has guided me throughout my career and is a passion that I am working hard to instill in my children.

As a proud partner of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Ducks Unlimited (DU) has a long history of working with ranchers, farmers, and other private landowners across the country to enhance and restore millions of acres of critical waterfowl and other wildlife habitats. The organization was established in 1937 amid the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. DU was founded by people who understood the value of wetland resources and bolstered by the passage of the first federal duck stamp in 1934. With more than one million supporters across North America, DU has become the premier organization for wetlands and waterfowl conservation with a mission to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for the continent's waterfowl, other wildlife, and people. To date, DU has restored and enhanced more than 19-million acres across the continent focusing heavily on the priority landscapes for waterfowl populations.

The voluntary, locally led, incentive-based conservation programs that are authorized and funded through the Farm Bill are the backbone of DU's cooperative conservation work. Many of the remaining wetlands in the United States are on private lands, where most waterfowl are raised, migrate and winter. To further our mission, DU supports agricultural policies that can help American farmers and ranchers be more competitive and successful in meeting demands for food, fiber and energy while conserving soil, water, wetlands, grasslands and forests. The Farm Bill is the most effective tool for conserving wildlife habitats on private land.

DU collaborates with USDA and other partners in helping deliver Farm Bill conservation programs, including the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. Our focus is not just on the financial assistance dollars delivered for agriculture producers and land stewards for on-the-farm conservation practices, but also as a technical assistance partner working hand-in-hand with USDA and program participants on their lands. We are proud of our ability to deliver quality, science-based assistance to agriculture producers cooperatively with NRCS.

Wetlands in the Farm Bill

The federal flagship wetlands restoration program, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE), is an NRCS program that is popular and oversubscribed. WRE is a voluntary, non-regulatory, incentive-based way for private landowners, farmers and ranchers to protect and restore agricultural lands and wetlands on their property. WRE has multiple benefits and can be tailored to many types of wetland ecosystems, including the prairie potholes (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota,

Minnesota and Iowa), floodplain wetlands and coastal tidal marshes. Ducks Unlimited provides technical assistance to implement practices on WRE that, for example, restore and manage wetlands to filter pollutants, which naturally leads to water quality improvements.

WRE also provides landowners and producers a financially viable alternative for transitioning farmland with high inputs and low or negative profits to functioning wetlands while continuing to focus investments and production on their more suitable lands as key to sustaining property ownership and promoting generational transition of agriculture and forest lands. I have personally witnessed the impacts on the farm viability and ecological improvements that extend beyond the farm-gate. We see this program as a win-win for farmers and ranchers and our North American waterfowl.

In my home state of Missouri, wetland restoration programs such as WRE have been extremely popular among producers, recreational landowners, and conservation partners alike. Missouri is a state that can experience extreme flood events. Programs like WRE provide an avenue for landowners to restore wetland acres, provide a diverse array of wildlife habitats, create outdoor recreational opportunities, while also reducing operational risk in the form of lost revenue. Through the hard work of partners such as USDA-NRCS, the Missouri Department of Conservation, and groups like Ducks Unlimited, Missouri has restored over 167,000 acres of wetlands through the WRE program.

Using the Lower Mississippi Valley as an example, since 1998, Ducks Unlimited has partnered with NRCS in reforestation and hydrology restoration activities in states from Missouri to Louisiana. In Louisiana alone, DU has helped reforest 52,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods by enrolling these acres in WRE. Prior to WRE, an estimated 80 percent of the bottomland hardwood wetland forests were converted. With Louisiana being one of the most intensive farmed regions in the nation, WRE projects and the restoration of bottomland hardwood forest ecosystems ultimately filter out sediment, nutrients and farm runoff that would otherwise end up in the Mississippi River.

There is also a stewardship component to WRE where NRCS works with landowners to implement conservation practices on older WREs (formerly known as WRP), allowing these lands to continue to provide multiple ecosystem benefits to local communities. One of DU's biggest priorities for the next Farm Bill is to ensure NRCS provides landowners these long-term stewardship opportunities. It is critically important that the program provides these additional tools to landowners to maintain their WRE and retain the associated habitat benefits. In addition, DU has advocated to modify the county cap restriction on WRE. Focused on the more marginal lands, this provision provides flexibility to NRCS allowing more acres in areas where duck habitat is critically important. We are excited, both of these provisions were included in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act (that passed out of the House Agriculture Committee last Congress). Thank you, Chairman Thompson and members of the Committee, for including this critically important language.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program

Building on the success of WRE, the Emergency Watershed Protection Program incorporates floodplain easements as an alternative tool to landowners, farmers and ranchers who seek long-term protection of life and property and avoid future agriculture crop losses after devastating natural disasters. It is proven that wetlands provide flood control, slowing the flow of water and allowing it to replenish the ground water supply and reduce flood damage in areas downstream. DU partners with NRCS to implement voluntary floodplain easements to restore floodplains, forests, or

conservation practices to pre-disaster conditions. We firmly believe USDA should leverage the easement purchase by adding habitat value similar to those provided by the WRE. For minimal additional restoration investment, we can see substantial improvement in hydrology, habitat quality and wildlife usage of these easements that are positioned in our most critical flyways.

EWP has been a critically important program along our country's big river systems, with the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers being no exception. An example of EWP in action is the Dogtooth Bend project. Dogtooth Bend is a 17,000-acre peninsula in Southwest Illinois created by a meander of the Mississippi River. Its fertile soils in the Mississippi floodplain have made it attractive for row crop agriculture. To prevent flooding a levee system was completed around 1943 and stood until the great flood of 1993. The levee was rebuilt but flooding continued repeatedly, through the 2010s, culminating in a major event in 2019 that deposited massive amounts of sediment across the peninsula. The EWPP-FPE Easements (~2600 acres) were critical to helping landowners recover from this disaster as the site is no longer economically viable to farm.

Again, the Farm, Food and National Security Act, included DU's priority of language that promotes management and restoration of floodplain easements, as well as restoring the land for the long-term health of the watershed.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Mr. Lucas as you well know, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) which was originally authorized when you were Chair of the Committee has been a resounding success. As you well know, the rice industry's symbiotic relationship with waterfowl led DU to a historic partnership with USA Rice, called the Rice Stewardship Partnership (RSP), in 2013. While both organizations have separate missions and methods, we have managed to collaborate and develop goals for our Partnership, including work on RCPP where our focus is to work with producers to maintain lands in agriculture production while managing those acres to supplement wildlife food and cover, improve water quality and promote water conserving practices.

The Rice Stewardship Partnership's RCPP projects have pulled together nearly one hundred diverse partners to help implement their goals, communicate successes, and ultimately share the cost of investment in working lands conservation programs. The Rice Stewardship Partnership has had phenomenal success in delivering on-the-ground conservation to rice farmers. Since the creation of RCPP in the 2014 Farm Bill, the RSP has beneficially impacted over 800,000 acres of rice and rice rotation ground and provided over \$100 million in additional conservation funding. From Missouri to Texas and California in the west, America's rice producers have literally filled the void in critical wildlife habitat needs by adapting their operations to include wildlife benefiting water and cover management practices,

For the upcoming Farm Bill, Ducks Unlimited would note the complexity plaguing RCPP and its impact on the long-term viability of a crucial partnership program to rice farmers. Congress should work to address barriers for partners including the overly detailed and complicated application process, multiple layered agreements, the length of time it takes to finalize an agreement, and burdensome accounting for technical assistance within the agreements. Simplifying RCPP will help deliver more timely assistance to producers. While administrative barriers can present unnecessary obstacles and costs for partners, Ducks Unlimited asks Congress to provide thoughtful and targeted solutions that allow the program to successfully function as it has for nearly a decade without the overly bureaucratic process that has plagued the program over the last

several years. The House Agriculture Committee worked tirelessly last Congress to address these concerns in the Farm, Food, and National Security Act. We thank you for your thoughtful attention to these concerns and encourage Congress to support these provisions in the Farm Bill.

CRP

I must also mention another important voluntary conservation program at USDA under the Farm Service Agency, CRP. CRP is a prominent component of the farm safety net by providing farmers and ranchers with financial options while improving soil health, enhancing water quality, and supporting wildlife habitat, in particular nesting cover. Ducks Unlimited primarily provides technical assistance to landowners and producers who enroll in the CRP Continuous sign up. This sign up allows eligible land to be enrolled at any time, targeting high-priority conservation practices such as buffer strips, riparian buffers, and wetlands.

We thank FSA and Administrator Beam for opening CRP General and Continuous enrollment and appreciate the committee's efforts in addressing policies in last Congress' Farm Bill that promote locally led activities, reinstate management tool options like mid-contract management, and increase rental rate payments for practices under Continuous CRP and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE).

Working Lands Programs

Working lands programs, like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), serve as economic drivers and provide farmers and ranchers with the support they need when considering conservation plans on their land. EQIP is one of the largest conservation programs within the Farm Bill. It helps producers maintain working agricultural lands and improve farm infrastructure like fencing, water irrigation, post-harvest flooding and more. We at Ducks Unlimited support working lands programs as a way to retain critically important habitats and to sustain working farms and ranches.

Technical Assistance

Across all the Farm Bill programs and all of USDA's conservation programs, I have discussed our partnership with NRCS in providing technical assistance in advance of, and when, delivering these programs. From program outreach to conservation planning, conservation practice design, implementation and evaluation, this staff assistance provided directly to agriculture producers is essential to the success and long-term sustainability of a producer's conservation system. We are concerned about the recent downsizing and loss of personnel in the field, on the front lines with our private land stewards. As USDA realigns their personnel resources and program policies, DU will work alongside our NRCS colleagues and producers to fill gaps as this process moves forward. While we have resources to contribute in support, the technical assistance component of each of the farm bill programs is as essential as the financial assistance provided. We ask that you continue to provide for sound, science-driven, field-based technical assistance directed at the field level to each participating agriculture producer.

Conclusion

Ducks Unlimited is a proud partner with NRCS and the passionate farmers, ranchers and landowners who invest their own financial resources to bring these Farm Bill conservation programs to their land. DU's mission to conserve, restore and maintain wetlands and waterfowl habitat would not be possible without the voluntary Farm Bill conservation programs and our partnerships with many in the agricultural industry. I encourage Congress to pass a Farm Bill that

supports strong funding levels for conservation programs, maintains the integrity of the conservation programs and sustains wildlife and the farm economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and share my perspectives on the Farm Bill conservation programs.