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Testimony on the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and other Related Agencies

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran and members of Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for the Fiscal Year 2014 Interior Appropriations bill. I submit this testimony on behalf of the Partners for Conservation (PFC), a landowner-led not for profit organization where I serve as the Vice Chairman, and for myself, a private rancher and farmer near Highmore, South Dakota. As private landowners working in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we respectfully request that the subcommittee approve \$75 million for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the full amount authorized in the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act as well as full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund to be used for conservation easements in priority areas that are crucial to future sustainability of this country. The PFC sincerely appreciates the opportunity to present this testimony and we appreciate the subcommittee's consideration of our requests.

PFC is landowner-led and operates under the following principals: collaboration gets work done; local lessons have national impact; voluntary and incentive based programs create trust and breeds success; and sustainability is achieved by balancing ecology and economy. Quite simply, PFC BELIEVES A HOLISTIC APPROACH AND COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL TO THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. We seek to improve the quality, productivity, and economic viability of working landscapes and the communities that depend on them. PFC, although not yet at full strength, has the goal to have landowner representation in all fifty states.

PFC, with our growing membership across the country, strongly supports the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) Program. This program is the most efficient and low red tape program in government today. The Partners Program has huge economic and environmental spinoffs that support families across the country, as well as maintaining viable populations of fish and wildlife that rely on private lands for their habitat needs. The Partners Program is a voluntary program that has personally helped me protect my native grasslands and wetlands, keeping my ranch, as well as ranches across the country, in business — even in years of drought. This is very important to me as a rancher, but is probably more important to your constituents and those constituents of your colleagues across the nation; I will expand on that value in following comments.

The Partners Program works extremely well for landowners. Partners for Fish and Wildlife biologists work directly with the landowner so that the projects are a win-win for both the agency and the landowner. The Partners Program has provided recreational opportunities on my property for pheasant and deer hunters, while also providing good grass and good water for my cattle operation; clean water and flood control; quality and productive crop yields on my farm grounds; as well as preventing costly and disruptive listings of Threatened and Endangered

Species. These indirect benefits have a huge economic and non-landscape value that should be expanded and should be the model for other government programs. It is critical during these tough times in our Nation that we keep working lands working. We cannot think just about today, but instead need to think about tomorrow and the days after that for our children and grandchildren.

We understand budget concerns and the need to cut spending. However, we believe these spending cuts should be accomplished with priorities in mind. We should look for efficiencies and support those programs that are working. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is one program that is working. The Partners Program is a cost-share program, which requires a match from the landowner or other partners. The Partners program, therefore, is leveraging each Federal taxpayer dollar with at least three additional dollars for each project. We cannot afford to cut programs like this one that help bring money and jobs to the table.

Why, and how, would I leave my ranch during calving season, a season that determines our economic success for the year, to come to Washington, D.C. with this very important request? I believe I have explained the why, but please allow me to explain how I was able to leave the ranch at such a critical time.

I was able to answer PFC's request for a Board member to submit testimony and travel to our nation's capitol to present it because I have a very capable daughter and son-in law that are a part of our family ranch operation. They represent the next generation on the land that is concerned about the landscape and everything connected to it. A young family that is raising the next generation and future natural resource caretakers. A young family that is involved in church and community. A young family that is not drawing unemployment, but instead is paying taxes to the United States Government. So why are they so successful that I can be in attendance today? They were able to be the next generation on the land because of incentives to do what was right for their land in the Prairie Pothole region of South Dakota and were granted conservation easements to maintain native grasslands and wetlands. These are vitally important to this area because both native grasslands and wetlands are disappearing at alarming rates. They were also able to improve these easements through the help of the management assistance within the Partners for Fish and Wildlife. Conservation easements and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife helped them be caretakers of a landscape that is very crucial to the United States and our future existence.

The PFC, and my family and I, respectfully request that you fund the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, as identified in the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act, at \$75 Million, the full amount authorized. With this request, we further strongly encourage you to support U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director, Dan Ashe's, request to move the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to the National Wildlife Refuge System. My observation, and the observation of many landowners across the country, is that the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is most effective and efficient when it is managed as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Our request today is to have the program moved to the National Wildlife Refuge System across the country, both at Headquarters as well as all Regions. Partners' projects will remain in private ownership and the administrative move to the Refuge System will maintain this fact and meshes perfectly with the Refuge System's focus on community-based conservation. The combination of

a full \$75 million dollar appropriation, with the efficiency of having the program consistently managed across the country, would be the best way to guarantee success.

On behalf of myself and members of PFC, I also request full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund to be used for conservation easements in priority areas that are crucial to future sustainability of this country.

Respectfully, the members of PFC and I thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Members of the PFC and I are happy to answer any additional questions or concerns you may have regarding this request as you move towards a decision on this very important issue. I invite and encourage each and every one of you, along with all your colleagues to visit our ranch, or any number of other landowners in your home states to witness the value of the programs outlined in this testimony. I could not do justice to the value of these programs and what they accomplish for natural resources and landscapes with just my comments. Seeing is believing.

Thank you sincerely for your consideration.

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