

Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

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Thank you, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran and Subcommittee Members for the opportunity to testify today. I am Dr. Jon Gassett, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Past President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and current member of the North American Wetlands Conservation Council and the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council. I come here today to speak about the importance of the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program, North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Neotropical Migratory Bird Act, Cooperative Endangered Species all of which are within the US Fish and Wildlife Service budget.

Federal grant programs to states are vital to the conservation of our nation's fish and wildlife, particularly those that are at-risk. Since states hold principal management responsibility for fish and wildlife, these agencies are on the front lines of conservation and critical to preventing endangered species listings. Congress recognized this important role of states in 1980 when it passed the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act. In 2000, the State Wildlife Grants program (later renamed State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program) was started to provide funding for states to better conserve at-risk species through the development and implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans. The purpose of these plans is to prevent endangered species listings and keep common species common through proactive conservation measures.

The development of State Wildlife Action Plans was historic as it was the first time in history that comprehensive fish and wildlife conservation plans were in place in every state, territory and the District of Columbia. In these plans, Congress required that states identify the species that are at-risk, in other words those species that could be facing federal endangered species listing in the future if steps are not taken. The plans identified key habitats, priority threats and needed conservation actions to reverse population declines. The plans used the best science and thinking of leading experts from state and federal agencies and private conservation organizations. The plans were reviewed by and approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

The vision laid out by Congress when it started the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants program was simple; establish a new partnership between the states and US Fish and Wildlife Service to create a non-regulatory alternative to prevent new endangered species listings. I come here today to inform you that this innovative approach is working and the federal investment in these plans through the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants program is indeed preventing new federal listings. I will cite just a few examples of those successes; there are numerous others that can be found in a [Success Stories Report](#) produced by the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies. Next year, summaries of all projects funded through this program will be available to

the subcommittee and the public through the new Wildlife TRACS reporting and tracking system being developed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in collaboration with the states.

The **Pygmy Rabbit** is the smallest rabbit in North America. It is found in the western US and was petitioned for federal listing in 2003. The State & Tribal Wildlife Grants was used to conduct surveys, do research and start a captive rearing program. In 2010, the US Fish & Wildlife Service made a finding that federal endangered species listing is not warranted. This determination was due in large part because of survey work and other conservation actions funded through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program.

The **Eastern Hellbender** is North America's largest salamander. It has been petitioned for federal Endangered Species Act listing. The State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program is being used to develop monitoring protocols using innovative e-DNA which will allow biologists to more efficiently find and determine status for this species. States are also raising hellbenders in captivity and releasing them in suitable habitat, a form of head-starting that is speeding recovery. In my state of Kentucky, we are using funding from the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program to identify streams with healthy reproducing populations of hellbenders so that we can work with private landowners to maintain water quality at those sites. Since the range of this species covers more than a dozen states in the southeast, federal listing would have far-reaching regulatory impacts. We think we can keep this species off the federal endangered species list if we continue investing in proactive conservation.

The **Mountain Plover** is a bird found in the Great Plains that was proposed for federal endangered species listing. The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program is being used to conduct surveys, support research and to start a cooperative nest avoidance program with farmers and ranchers. Through these efforts the number of known breeding pairs has increased from just two to over 400. The conservation work funded through State & Tribal Wildlife Grants was cited as a factor that precluded federal listing for the species. Federal listing could have impacted ranching and other livelihoods in nearly a dozen western states.

Throughout the country, **Freshwater Mussels** have been declining, leading to new federal listings and petitions. In Alabama alone, there are 79 federally listed and candidate mussel species. The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program was used to construct and operate the Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center which is on the forefront of restoring imperiled mussel populations. Surveys funded through the program have even rediscovered two mussels that were believed to be extinct. Virginia and numerous other states are using the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program to propagate at-risk mussels and fish and release them into suitable habitat. In my state we used State & Tribal Wildlife Grants to improve mussel and fish passage and to develop a laboratory at Kentucky's Center for Mollusk Conservation to raise and release rare mussels.

The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program is helping to recover many iconic species. The program is funding conservation work on Sage Grouse, Louisiana Black Bear, Lesser Prairie Chicken, Whooping Crane, Fisher, Spotted Salamander, Bog Turtle, Pica, Swift Fox, Lake

Sturgeon and many other at-risk species. The program was largely responsible for the de-listing of the federally threatened Lake Erie Water Snake in 2011. It's rare when a species is removed from the federal list, but it is possible to do so in a relatively short time when good planning, conservation and funding from State and Tribal Wildlife Grants programs are part of the mix. The program not only conserves species, but it reduces regulatory uncertainties and involves the public through voluntary conservation incentives.

Despite these many successes, the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants program has been cut by over 35% since 2010. The program was never bloated. At the current funding level of less than \$60 million, direct funding to states and territories averages just \$800,000. This equates to just \$3,750 per at-risk species. The cost to recover a single endangered species is often in the millions of dollars. The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program is a cost effective and efficient approach to conserving at-risk species. We need to scale up investments in this kind of work, not reduce it at a time when petitions for federal listing are skyrocketing, including 600 new petitions just within the last three years.

Another grant program that is important to the states is the **North American Wetland Conservation Act**. This program has spurred an innovative federal, state and private partnership to conserve our nation's wetlands in support of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The program has resulted in the conservation of more than 26.5 million acres of wetlands and associated habitat since 1991.

Since 2010, funding for the program has declined by 30%. The loss of funding is slowing the conservation of wetlands that are not only vital to many at-risk species but are also important for flood retention and soil and water quality protection. These cuts come at time when we are seeing increasing threats to wetlands in many places, especially in the Great Plains due to drainage and drought. As a nation we have already lost over 50% of our wetlands and continue to lose over 80,000 acres annually. This program is helping to reverse that trend.

The North American Wetland Conservation Act is one of the federal government's most cost-effective conservation programs and leverages over \$3 in non-federal funding for every federal dollar spent. These expenditures create nearly 7,500 new jobs annually in the United States, generating over \$200 million in worker earnings each year. More than 4,500 separate partners have been involved in 2,216 projects nationwide, including all 50 state fish and wildlife agencies, hundreds of private landowners, private conservation organizations, corporations, businesses, tribes, and local governments. Many projects also improve access for hunting and other recreational pursuits.

The **Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act** program promotes the long-term conservation of many at-risk migratory birds. The program has been cut by over 25% since 2010. More than 3 million acres have been conserved through the program during the last decade and it leverages \$4 in non-federal funds for every federal dollar. The modest investment in these grants is needed to ensure the full lifecycle requirements of migratory birds are met. This will help ensure investments made in the US through State and Tribal Wildlife

Grants, Bird Joint Ventures, National Wildlife Refuges etc. are sustained. We can do all the conservation work money can buy in this country on the breeding grounds, but if wintering habitat is disappearing elsewhere in the hemisphere, at-risk bird species will continue to decline. This is the same approach that has been used for decades to ensure continental waterfowl populations are maintained.

The program also has a significant impact on the economy and jobs by helping ensure migratory birds return to the US each year. In 2011, the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-associated Recreation reported that 17.8 million people traveled to watch birds, resulting in millions of dollars being contributed to local economies. Helping communities take ownership of their natural resource wealth and cultivate it to create new jobs and opportunities is an important step to fostering security and good international relations throughout the Hemisphere.

The **Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund** has been cut by over 45% since 2010. The program provides assistance to state fish and wildlife agencies for at-risk species recovery and land conservation. Grants awarded through this program assist states with monitoring of federally listed species and incentivizes the development and implementation of habitat conservation plans that help ensure species recovery is compatible with economic development and job creation. Many States rely heavily on this funding to implement endangered species conservation programs. This funding greatly enhances the States' ability to implement conservation to recover listed species and to preclude the listing of candidate species. Grants allow the US Fish and Service, States and their partners to work cooperatively on recovery actions identified in species recovery plans. In Kentucky a Habitat Conservation Plan is being developed for the Northern Cumberland Region which will allow the states of Kentucky and Tennessee to minimize and mitigate impacts to 22 federally endangered or threatened species.

In summary, these federal grant programs are important to continuing the long-established partnership between state and federal agencies to conserve fish and wildlife, especially those that are at-risk. The recent spending cuts to these programs are slowing progress to conserve at-risk species at a time when success is being demonstrated. There are few issues that are as bipartisan as preventing endangered species listings but positive outcomes are only possible with sufficient federal, state and private investment. Even in this era of declining budgets, it is wise to invest in preventative proactive conservation measures so we can reduce the need for federal intervention and regulation that can negatively impact local economies and jobs.