

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Of the House Interior Appropriations Committee
By Mr. Virgil Moore, Director of Idaho Fish & Game Department
on behalf of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
March 18, 2015

Good morning Chairman Calvert and Members of the Subcommittee, and thank you for inviting me to be with you today to share the perspectives of the state fish and wildlife agencies regarding the President's FY2016 Budget request. My name is Virgil Moore, and I am Director of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Director Liaison for the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Sage Grouse Initiative, and I serve on the Executive Committee of that regional association as well as the Executive Committee of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association), the latter of which I am representing today.

The Association, founded in 1902, is the professional association for the state fish and wildlife agencies, and our membership includes public agencies charged with the protection and management of North America's fish and wildlife resources. All 50 states are members.

The Association understands the current difficult fiscal circumstances the nation continues to experience and the need to manage federal government spending. However, fiscal discipline needs to be a well-informed process that retains meritorious programs with a demonstrated, successful on-the-ground track record of conservation success, job creation, and economic growth. **The Association's FY2016 recommendations reflect strong support throughout the federal budget for conservation programs that provide funds to states and/or nongovernmental organizations to further leverage state and private funds to implement priority on-the-ground conservation actions and to federal programs that complement, support and are important to the states' work.**

State fish and wildlife agencies are on the front lines of fish and wildlife population and habitat management, and the vast majority of species in the United States are under state management authority. Over the last several years many state fish and wildlife agencies have witnessed constrained budgets resulting in serious impacts to fish and wildlife conservation work. Federal programs and grant opportunities often support state conservation priorities, fill critical pieces of state conservation work, and increase the return on investment for the taxpayer through more efficient and effective use by local staff who know the needs of fish, wildlife and their habitats and have the community relationships and strong partnerships on which to build conservation successes. Our comments below begin with broad, overarching issues and then focus on specific federal agencies and activities therein.

We continue to urge Congress to direct that all new and ongoing initiatives must be well coordinated among state and federal agencies to maximize efficiency and effectiveness while minimizing duplication and conflict. The state fish and wildlife agencies will continue to lead and remain interested in having a meaningful role in both state and federal landscape level conservation initiatives, but many states lack the capacity to participate in all of the federal initiatives due to personnel and funding limitations.

Consolidation of Federal Agency Budget Line Items – The Association remains deeply concerned about the continued consolidation of federal agency budget line items. Without specific budget line items and the commensurate tracking of expenditures and

accomplishments, transparency in operations and accountability to state partners, the public benefits could be compromised. The Association strongly urges Congress maintain individual budget line items for program areas to increase transparency and accountability to the public.

State-Federal Coordination on Sage Grouse Conservation – Protecting and conserving the Greater sage-grouse and its habitat is one of the highest priorities of the Association and many of the western states. State and federal conservation programs, initiatives, and activities are underway across the west at unprecedented levels to ensure the long-term persistence of the bird and avert the need to list it under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The current level of conservation funding, effort and dedication must be maintained and intensified by all partners to achieve our conservation goals, and agencies must implement and monitor these plans to demonstrate conservation gains. The Association thanks the Secretaries of the Department of the Interior and the US Department of Agriculture for their continued dedication, funding, and unprecedented state-federal partnerships and cooperation to secure the Greater sage-grouse, and we emphatically encourage them to continue these state-federal collaborative efforts based on science-driven conservation plans and actions.

Land Acquisition—We urge Congress to ensure land acquisition is focused on protecting important fish and wildlife habitat as well as providing access for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent public uses, and that land acquisitions are made with state concurrence.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – The Association supports moving the LWCF off budget to a dedicated, mandatory fund; parity between the federal and state sides of LWCF; and supports including “fish and wildlife” as a purpose of LWCF.

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE (FWS)--The Association and our state members value our partnerships with the FWS, and our nation’s fish and wildlife resources benefit greatly from our collaborative work. While we understand that human capacity is needed to deliver conservation on the ground as well as work with landowners and the public, the FWS should be encouraged to strike a balance between increasing staff levels and increasing funding needed to implement priority conservation actions for issues such as habitat management on refuges, sagebrush ecosystem restoration, and maintenance and operational needs for aging fish hatchery facilities that produce sport fish. The states have long struggled with similar issues but continue to partner with others as a means to address staffing shortfalls, meet growing conservation challenges, and implement important conservation actions on the ground. We remain committed to long-standing successful partnership models such as Migratory Bird Joint Ventures, National Fish Habitat Partnerships, and State Wildlife Action Plans, all which have strong state-federal-NGO partnership approaches to achieve landscape level conservation and demonstrated success. We appreciate new initiatives that support state priorities and needs.

National Fish Hatchery System and Operations/Maintenance: The states remain extremely concerned about the FWS’s implementation of the hatchery strategic and workforce planning report, and the adverse impacts it could have on local economies. While not closing hatcheries in FY15, the FWS is implementing the report as written without modification. This means sport fish hatchery activities could be reduced or operation and maintenance problems could occur because funding likely will be directed to hatcheries that produce threatened, endangered or imperiled species (T/E/I) first, potentially to the detriment of hatcheries that produce sport fish. Thus, implementation of the hatchery report provides disconcerting uncertainty for states and the fisheries conservation community. The Association supports at least \$2 million more than

the President's FY16 budget to ensure states' sport fish priorities are met and more if needed to continue unabated the health tech centers and broodstock programs.

The states are concerned that funding increases provided for fish hatcheries in FY15 may not have been directed to hatcheries with sport fish propagation programs but instead were mostly directed at hatcheries focused on T/E/I species in keeping with the FWS's hatchery report priorities. We request Congress direct the FWS to prioritize funding for hatcheries producing sport fish equal to those producing T/E/I species. Because some of the sport fish and broodstock programs occur in hatcheries that are over 100 years old, we urge Congress to provide operation and maintenance funds to these facilities at levels that are equal to other FWS priorities to prevent disastrous losses of sport fish or broodstock genetics that could arise from neglect and to avoid disasters like that of the Willow Beach Hatchery in Arizona. Furthermore, given the importance of the FWS's national oversight of the AADAP program and the potential conversion of these assets to other programs, the Association recommends Congress ensure, at a minimum, the base funding of \$800,000 continues for AADAP and that all fees collected by the program are used to support continued drug approval research.

In light of the above continued concerns, the states in cooperation with the fisheries community will work with the FWS to identify goals and objectives that can establish a common path forward and provide certainty from year-to-year for the National Fish Hatchery System, in particular, and Fisheries and Aquatic Conservation priorities and direction, in general.

Aquatic Invasive Species--Invasive species management and control costs the US an estimated \$120 billion dollars each year. States have produced Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS) plans that are designed to identify and address each state's priority ANS issues, and are reviewed and approved by the FWS. The funding for these plans has been appropriated at approximately \$1M. With 42 currently approved plans, this translates into <\$24K per state. We request appropriations at the fully authorized amount of \$4M, thereby giving each state nearly \$100K to stay on top of, or ahead of, these costly invaders.

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (SWG)--The Association commends the President's budget request for its increase in SWG funding to \$70m. The FWS proposes to target the funding increases to Tribes and competitive grants. However, an increase in funding through apportionments is preferred since it allows states to drive priorities and provides for more efficient delivery of resources.

Joint Ventures --The Association applauds and supports the President's FY16 budget request to increase funding for Joint Ventures to provide minimal funding for all 21 migratory bird Joint Ventures. Joint Ventures are highly effective, all-bird conservation entities that address state and local community conservation priorities. They serve as a model for coordination and effective, efficient conservation delivery mechanisms on the ground.

National Fish Habitat Action Plan and Adaptive Habitat Management --Fish Habitat Partnerships are created by grassroots conservation movements supporting local communities to conserve fish and fish habitat across the country. Funds are leveraged by the states and other partners to improve the health of fish populations and fish habitat, supporting the \$97.7 billion per year recreational fishing industry in the U.S. The Association recommends funding these programs at the highest levels possible, but no less than \$7.6 million in FY16.

Conservation and Law Enforcement—The Association supports the law enforcement functions of the FWS, and their partnership with the states to protect precious fish and wildlife resources

at home and abroad. However, funding for activities abroad should not be increased at the expense of enforcement needs at home. We recommend funding at the President's FY16 funding level, but we recommend Congress prioritize funding to protect native species at home above other interests abroad to reduce over-exploitation of our natural resources.

North American Wetland Conservation Fund—The President's budget proposes level funding for the program when the need for wetland conservation, especially in the Prairie Pothole Region, is at a critical level. We request as robust levels as possible for NAWCA.

US FOREST SERVICE (USFS) -- Forest and Rangeland Research -- The Forest Service administers the federal government's largest natural science research program and are conducted in partnership by leveraging expertise, funding, capacity, and local support to find solutions to solve problems and inform management decisions. Many of these research endeavors directly benefit the states and have management implications for the species they manage. We support continuing the USFS's research and development work at FY2015 funding levels.

USFS International Forestry Program—The Association supports the work of the International Forestry Program and recommends FY2015 level funding at \$8 million because of its benefits to the states. This program works to support priority conservation activities for migratory birds throughout their range, thereby preventing the need for listing under the ESA and protection conservation investments made in the US.

Support Wildland Fire Management -- The Association strongly encourages Congress to pass legislation that addresses the wildland fire suppression funding and to stop the cyclical wildfire-invasive species cycles across the country. Putting habitat conservation first should reduce the number and intensity of wildfires across the country -- saving lives, natural resources, taxpayer dollars, and local economies from devastation.

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT (BLM): Sage-Grouse Conservation --We support the Administration's sage-grouse conservation efforts as reflected in the FY2016 proposed budget, with \$45 million for plan implementation and \$15 million for assessment, inventory, and monitoring. Funding for monitoring progress and habitat response is necessary to fill data gaps and detect conservation successes that can be reported to the FWS and the states. Congress should provide as much funding as possible to help BLM and other agencies conserve this iconic western bird.

Wild Horse and Burro Management—If the BLM is to be successful at conserving sage-grouse, they must manage wild horses and burros (WHBs) on western rangelands, reducing populations to the Appropriate Management Level (AMLs). WHBs are quickly erasing any conservation gains made toward conserving sage-grouse and restoring rangeland health. Additional funding is needed to manage WHBs and to reconcile the tremendous habitat damage they cause. Furthermore, WHBs should be managed at AMLs to facilitate *sustained yield* of fish and wildlife populations, to meet BLM's mandated mission, and to enable the state fish and wildlife agencies to meet their fish and wildlife management goals.

US GEOLOGICAL SURVEY-- Cooperative Research Units Support State Needs--For many state fish and wildlife agencies, the Cooperative Research Units are the collaborative yet independent research arm with which our agencies closely work; the information from which is used to improve management decisions and applied conservation actions across species, habitats and landscapes. The Association strongly supports the President's FY 2016 budget request for Cooperative Research Units at \$20 million.