

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of America's cattle producers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the impact that Black vulture predation is having on family-owned operations like my own.

My name is Charlie Beshar. My wife Donna and I are cow-calf producers based in Bollinger County, Missouri, in the southeast corner of the state. We raise registered Hereford cattle and seven grandkids in the foothills of the Ozarks. I bought my first parcel of land at the age of 24, and I have been working to grow the operation ever since, with a prioritization on soil health, water quality, and rotational grazing.

In addition to producing high-quality beef for our nation's food supply chain, I am proud to promote environmental stewardship within the industry at both the state and national level. I currently serve as Chair of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) committee on property rights & environmental management. I am also honored to serve as President of the Missouri Forage and Grasslands Council, Secretary of the Missouri Cattlemen's Association, and Vice Chair of the National Grazing Lands Coalition. In recent years, I have also been active with the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef.

I am testifying today on behalf of NCBA, the trusted leader and definitive voice of the U.S. cattle and beef industry. Initiated in 1898, NCBA is the American cattle industry's oldest and largest national trade association. In addition to our nearly 26,000 direct members, NCBA represents 44 state cattle associations with collective memberships numbering about 178,000 producers. It is important to note that well over 90 percent of those members are, like myself, family-owned businesses involved in the cow-calf, stocker/backgrounder, and feeding sectors of the supply chain. The majority of NCBA members have a herd size of 100 head or fewer. Each of our members has a voice in our organization's century-old policymaking process, and it is from the grassroots resolutions and policies resulting from this process that NCBA takes positions on legislation.

An integral part of responsible stewardship of our working lands, farms, and ranches is cultivating and maintaining the habitat to support a diverse range of wildlife species. More than 93 percent of the land in Missouri is privately owned, so by necessity, landowners like cattle producers play a pivotal role in the success of species conservation.<sup>1</sup> In our state, cattle producers have participated in numerous voluntary programs to safeguard habitat and actively manage populations of elk, black bears, white-tailed deer, purple martins, bald and golden eagles, and freshwater species like the pallid sturgeon and paddlefish. On our own operation, we worked closely with Quail Forever to establish native warm season grass, to the benefit of our land and the birds. These kinds of collaborations are not unusual; in everything we do to improve our operation, we also consider the benefits for wildlife as a factor.

Missouri ranchers — like tens of thousands of other cattle producers across the country — are not opposed to sound, science-drive wildlife conservation. On the contrary, we are deeply invested in passing on healthy, resilient, and balanced ecosystems to the next generation. These are the grasslands and forests where we live, work, and raise our families each day; we

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<sup>1</sup> *Hunting on Private Land*. Missouri Department of Conservation. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

have no interest in eliminating the abundant wildlife that is part of what makes our way of life so special. Because we are so close to the land and so invested in its stewardship, we are often some of the first people to raise the alarm when some aspect of Mother Nature is out of balance. That is the alarm I want to raise with the Subcommittee today.

Half a century ago, Black vultures were a species of concern in the United States due to decades of lethal take, trapping, and exposure to the eggshell-thinning effects of DDT. The species was listed under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and has been federally protected from take ever since.<sup>2</sup> However, since the 1970s, the bird has rebounded and become a strong, abundant species across the country and indeed, across North America. Black vulture population numbers have grown steadily by approximately 3.4 percent every year from 1966 to 2019.<sup>3</sup> The Black vulture's global breeding population now numbers approximately 190 million strong, and the multinational conservation organization Partners in Flight has rated the species a 4 out of 20 on their Continental Concern Score, indicating that they are of low conservation concern.<sup>4</sup>

As their population grows, so does the species' harmful impact on cattle producers. From 2015-2019, requests to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for depredation permits to help control Black vultures increased by 26 percent.<sup>5</sup> Depredation by the species on cattle has been confirmed in 18 states, with attacks in other areas likely going unrecorded.<sup>6</sup> As far as the frequency of attacks, this varies from state to state. In some areas, only 15 percent of producers may experience Black vulture depredation. In the most heavily impacted states, it can be much higher. For example, in Florida alone, more than 33 percent of all producers experience calf loss due to Black vulture depredation each year.<sup>7</sup> When you recall the average herd size of NCBA membership is 100 head or fewer and the average herd size for all cattle producers nationwide is even smaller, that constitutes a significant portion. While we do not have extensive records of frequency of attacks in every state across the Southeast and Midwest regions — where Black vultures are most abundant — we can infer that their impact is growing due to the increasing number of permits requested of USFWS and the growing calls for assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Wildlife Services division. According to Wildlife Services, the arm of USDA tasked with assisting cattle producers and other industries with reducing human-wildlife conflict, the number of Black vulture attacks on cattle and calves increased by nearly 25 percent from 2020 to 2022.<sup>8</sup> In 2022 alone, Wildlife Services was called upon to disperse 84,020 Black vultures and euthanize 13,195 across 22 states. Just last week, on my own operation, we discovered a nest in our barn

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<sup>2</sup> The Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibits the take (defined as killing, capturing, selling, trading, or transport) of listed species without prior authorization by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

<sup>3</sup> *The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Results and Analysis 1966-2019*. USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> *Avian Conservation Assessment Database Scores*. Partners in Flight. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> *Black vulture conflict and management in the United States: Damage trends, management overview, and research needs*. USDA-APHIS, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> *Spatial risk modeling of cattle depredation by black vultures in the midwestern United States*. Journal of Wildlife Management. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> *Vulture-Cattle Interactions: A Survey of Florida Ranchers*. USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> *Program Data Report G*. USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

and at least one individual — but when we called USDA for assistance, they were unable to come for another three days, and when they arrived, they elected not to take the bird.

Black vultures are opportunistic predators. They primarily attack and feed on calves — particularly during parturition — because they are weak, and their mothers are incapacitated and unable to defend themselves during and immediately after giving birth. We are surrounded by nature and by predator-prey relationships on the farm but even still, the predation habits of Black vultures still stand out as unusually harrowing. The birds take an average of 3.5 hours from start of an attack to death of their prey.<sup>9</sup> They kill a calf by first puncturing and consuming its softest tissues; the eyeballs, the anus, and the rear flank (akin to the groin of a human) that, when gouged, gives the birds easy access to the calf's organs. Again — we are not naïve to the realities of nature around us. But even for the most experienced farmer or rancher, these kills are a very gruesome way to see an animal go, especially when it's a baby that you have long awaited and invested in its health. Not only is Black vulture depredation gruesome, but it is also financially costly to cattle producers in a variety of ways. Each kill represents an immediate financial loss due to livestock death; ongoing financial loss due to stress, reduced weight gain, and/or injuries to mother cows; and persistent disruption to operations due to livestock's hesitancy to graze forage in pastures that are habitually frequented by Black vultures. In a Florida study, researchers found that each instance of Black vulture depredation cost the producer an average of \$2,000.<sup>10</sup>

The bipartisan "*Black Vulture Relief Act of 2023*" would address this growing challenge by allowing farmers and ranchers to lethally take Black vultures without first acquiring a sub-permit. Due to the bird's status under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a federal permit is required to engage in lethal take of the bird. Permits are issued by USFWS to the states, and states in turn issue sub-permits to producers. Sub-permits only allow for three takes a year, with the option to go up to five in select states. In my home state of Missouri, we are seeing these birds descend on calving pastures in flocks are 40 to 50. Taking three birds, one time per year, is not sufficient to deter depredation. This legislation would remove the requirement for a sub-permit, allowing farmers and ranchers to take Black vultures as needed, in the moment, when the threat to livestock is greatest. The bill preserves the requirement for reporting of take on the back end, consolidating this information into a once-yearly report to the appropriate USFWS Regional Office. This will allow USFWS and state wildlife officials to continue to monitor the Black vulture population and uphold responsible stewardship of the species.

Even in years of strong rainfall and strong markets, ranching is a business of daily adversity and slim margins. The majority of cattle producers in the United States are running small, family-owned operations, not the large feeding operations or packing facilities often focused on by the media. For these family farmers and ranchers, one persistent issue like Black vulture depredation can make the difference between making the numbers work for another year or being forced to downscale or close operations.

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<sup>9</sup> *Black vulture conflict and management in the United States: Damage trends, management overview, and research needs*. USDA-APHIS, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> *Vulture-Cattle Interactions: A Survey of Florida Ranchers*. USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services. [Accessed](#) July 21, 2023.

The challenge of Black vultures is one that Congress has the ready tools to address, and we can do so without eradicating the species or threatening its long-term viability. There is no longer the need to protect these birds as if any affirmative management could contribute to their decline. To do so makes about as much sense as treating squirrels or rats as endangered animals in Washington, D.C. I urge you to pass the "*Black Vulture Relief Act of 2023*" and equip producers with the flexibility they need to protect their livestock against this predator species.

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this critical issue and the commonsense solution that has been put forward for the Subcommittee's consideration. I look forward to answering any questions.

Respectfully,

Charlie Beshar  
Property Rights & Environmental Management Committee Chair  
National Cattlemen's Beef Association