

**Statement of Glenn Olson
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**to the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Legislative Hearing on
America's Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act (H.R. 7408)**

March 6, 2024

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the America's Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act. I am Glenn Olson, and I serve as the Donal O'Brien Chair in Bird Conservation at the National Audubon Society. Audubon's mission is to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. Audubon has more than two million members and supporters, 510 affiliated chapters and 55 nature centers across the country.

In 2015, Audubon was asked to join a panel established by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to consider the current system of conservation funding. I joined the Blue Ribbon Panel along with leaders from the business sector, hunting and sportfishing groups, private landowners, state fish and wildlife agencies, and other conservation groups. The panel was chaired by John Morris, the founder of Bass Pro Shops, and David Freudenthal, the former Governor of Wyoming. All the participants on the Panel had a common goal to find the most effective and efficient method of funding conservation that would guarantee the long-term health and survival of wildlife species—from songbirds to big game.

We spent over a year together developing our recommendations. We held a DC hearing that included positive feedback on our approach from both the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Realtors. The concept of pro-actively and intentionally sustaining wildlife populations so that future listings of threatened and endangered species would not be necessary was well-received as a sound approach to guide investments.

After considering a multitude of options, the panel recommended that Congress dedicate \$1.3 billion annually to the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program under the Pittman-Robertson Act - the financial investment the Panel determined was critical and necessary to carry out Congressionally-mandated State Wildlife Action Plans and recover and conserve 12,000 identified species of greatest conservation need. Implementing the Panel's recommendation would offer proactive and cost-effective support in preventing species from becoming threatened or endangered, through long-term collaborative and voluntary conservation.

Emerging from the Panel's recommendations was the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, legislation sponsored by Congresswoman Dingell with significant bipartisan support, and which passed the House in the 117th Congress. This legislation was supported by Audubon and a broad and diverse coalition of supporters and stakeholders—similar in breadth and scope to the parties who engaged with the Blue Ribbon Panel. I would like to thank Congresswoman Dingell and the

other Members of the Subcommittee who supported that legislation for your efforts on this important issue.

We are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis, and no species is being spared, which has profound effects on people and communities. North America has lost nearly 3 billion birds since 1970 – or about 1 in 4 birds – with widespread declines across nearly all groups of birds, including a 40% decline in Western Meadowlarks, the iconic state bird of Wyoming, Oregon, Montana, Kansas, and others.

Birds are experiencing ongoing threats from habitat loss and degradation, climate change, and many other challenges. Habitat loss affects a bird's ability to find food, water, and safe places to raise their young and migrate. Even common backyard birds are at risk.

Wildlife Action Plans have identified more than 400 species of birds with conservation needs. Recovery of dwindling populations to prevent more species from becoming threatened and endangered requires sustained, dedicated investment, as populations can take decades to bounce back to sustainable levels.

Birds are a major economic driver in communities across the country. Birdwatching brings in significant revenue to local economies. The latest survey by the Fish and Wildlife Service found that 96 million people in the U.S. engaged in birdwatching in 2022, contributing \$100 billion to the U.S. economy every year. Birds also provide cultural significance, and critically important and valuable pest control to agriculture and forestry.

For this reason, legislation that meets the moment of the biodiversity and wildlife conservation crisis is key. We appreciate the intent of the America's Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act to provide funding toward the goal of conserving and restoring wildlife habitat. And we appreciate the Act's goal of engaging private landowners in cooperative conservation on their forests, ranches and farms - we need this approach.

However, the proposed funding levels and sunset of these investments, coupled with the rescission of Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding, and the inclusion of other policy measures, gives us concern and therefore Audubon is unable to support the bill as currently written.

The legislation provides \$300 million to States and \$20 million to Tribes annually for five years. This funding is only a fraction of the Blue Ribbon Panel's recommended \$1.3 billion in dedicated annual funding. The legislation would require reauthorization every five years, which could cause inconsistency in funding levels and uncertainty for multi-year conservation. A consistent funding source is needed to ensure the effectiveness of these projects.

Tribal investments are critical to wildlife conservation and management. Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians manage an area of the nation's wildlife habitat almost as large as California without the benefit of revenue from hunting and fishing license sales and federal tax revenue that state wildlife agencies are able to utilize. Under the America's Wildlife

Habitat Conservation Act, Tribes would receive only \$20 million for the next five years compared to \$97.5 million annually under the Recovering America's Wildlife Act.

The legislation also rescinds critical funds for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Bureau of Reclamation. The rescission of these funds would affect important freshwater and coastal restoration and aging infrastructure upgrades—which are critical for conserving natural resources that communities depend on.

In closing, we need the pillars of what the Blue Ribbon Panel recommended is necessary to protect thousands of at-risk species; and which was reflected in the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. That legislation incorporated the needs and concerns of a broad, diverse coalition of stakeholders, and reflects years of collaboration and partnership. It has enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and deep support among states, Tribes, and the conservation and business communities.

We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to build on today's discussion and pursue bipartisan measures that align with the recommendations and findings of the Blue Ribbon Panel, and that effectively address the biodiversity crisis that is driving alarming declines in wildlife populations that we hold near and dear.