

**Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee,
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries**

Hearing on H.R. 2293, The Cormorant Relief Act of 2025

Date: April 8, 2025

Time: 10:15am

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Introduction

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. 2293, The Cormorant Relief Act of 2025. I also want to thank Rep. Ezell, Rep. Thompson and the other sponsors of this bill for bringing forward this commonsense approach to helping fish farmers while also helping U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) better manage healthy migratory bird populations.

As a lifelong catfish farmer, I have firsthand experience with the challenges faced by catfish farmers, particularly the economic and operational burdens imposed by double-crested cormorants. Our family catfish farm of about 450 acres is located in LeFlore County, MS. We are truly a family operation with my wife and two children working together on the farm. It is more than a job for us, it is our life. I can say with confidence that this is much the same throughout catfish country.

The current system of individual depredation permits is inefficient and fails to provide timely relief to farmers. Restoring a national depredation order would allow for better management of problem birds, reducing financial strain on both farmers and the FWS. Catfish farming is an economically intensive endeavor. This bill would restore a more efficient approach to managing bird depredation on fish farms.

The Economic Realities and Challenges of Catfish Farming

Catfish farming is a capital-intensive industry, requiring significant investment in infrastructure, feed, labor, and disease management. The average cost of production for farm-raised catfish averages around \$1.10 per pound or \$10,000 per water acre, depending on factors such as feed prices, water management, and labor costs.

Despite these high costs, catfish farmers must compete in a volatile market where price fluctuations, imported seafood competition, and regulatory hurdles impact profitability. The added burden of cormorant depredation further strains farm operations, making it imperative to implement cost-effective bird management strategies.

Beyond financial constraints, catfish farmers face numerous operational challenges. Maintaining optimal oxygen levels, pH balance, and ammonia control require constant monitoring and investment both day and night. Rising commodity prices impact feed affordability, making cost reduction strategies essential.

Bird depredation is a constant challenge and cost on catfish farms, including my own. These birds consume up to 1.5/lb. of fish or 10-30 fish per day. Cormorants fly in large groups of 50-200 birds per flock. Without constant pressure and harassment we can lose thousands of catfish in just a few short days. This leads to millions of dollars in both losses and increased costs associated with harassing birds annually. In addition, cormorants cause disease outbreaks on farms that spread rapidly and can wipe out an entire pond.

The average catfish farmer spends \$285 per acre on harassment measures, including labor, vehicle expenses, and infrastructure maintenance. The cost to the catfish industry related to bird depredation can be as high as \$65 million annually. Despite these efforts, harassment alone does not completely resolve the problem.

Individual Permits vs. National Order

Under the current system of individual permits, each catfish farmer is required to apply to FWS for an annual individual permit to take a certain number of cormorants. FWS must administer and approve or deny each application with varying take numbers, based in large part to previous year's data. This creates a patchwork of guessing by FWS on where the main problems will occur each year. For example, I might not have much of a challenge with cormorants next year but my neighbor a few miles away may experience constant bird pressure on his farm. He won't have enough take under his permit while I have much more than I need.

Individual permits also require unneeded inefficiencies for FWS in administering thousands of individual permits. A national order allows for the same monitoring and protection of the overall health of the cormorant population while targeting limited FWS resources in more critical areas. Under a depredation order, farmers are still required to keep accurate take numbers and FWS must work with USDA Wildlife Services to keep adequate population numbers for cormorants to ensure no harm comes to the overall health of the species.

It is important to note, as part of the application process, farmers are required to have in place an approved bird harassment plan. Farmers rely on harassment techniques such as noise cannons, pyrotechnics, and constant patrols to deter cormorants. This will not change under a depredation order. It is always a last resort to take problem birds.

A national depredation order would allow for targeted removal of problem birds, significantly reducing costs and improving management efficiency. By eliminating bureaucratic delays associated with individual permits, farmers could respond immediately to bird threats protecting their fish and reducing disease transmission that can create additional losses.

Conclusion

This bill is a win-win for both farmers and FWS. The Cormorant Relief Act presents a common-sense solution to the challenges faced by catfish farmers and other fish farmers throughout the U.S. By restoring a national depredation order, producers can reduce operational costs, improve disease control, and enhance farm sustainability. I urge the Committee to support this legislation, ensuring that farmers have the tools necessary to safeguard their livelihoods and strengthen the U.S. seafood industry.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions from the Committee.