

Testimony
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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
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Good morning, Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries. Chair Hageman, thank you for the invitation to testify about the importance of H.R. 1676, the “Making SWAPs Efficient Act,” which U.S. Rep. Donalds (R-FL) and U.S. Rep. Moskowitz (D-FL) introduced on February 27, 2025. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) thanks them for their leadership on this important issue. Also, I want to thank U.S. Rep. Webster (R-FL) and U.S. Rep. Soto (D-FL), who both serve on the House Natural Resources Committee, for all their efforts on behalf of the state of Florida.

My name is Roger Young, and I am the executive director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which is the state agency that manages fish and wildlife for the citizens of Florida. Florida is the third most populous state in the country, has 12,133 square miles of water, 53,625 square miles of land, and 1,350 miles of coast. Our beautiful state is home to some of the most diverse and unique wildlife in the world. It is an honor to lead an agency with 2,000 employees who are dedicated to improving wildlife conservation for this generation and future generations. While I can talk for hours about Florida’s well-known and respected wildlife conservation management, today my testimony will focus on H.R. 1676 and why it closes a gap for state fish and wildlife agencies in achieving their conservation missions.

H.R. 1676 is a simple bill. It would place a six-month deadline on the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to approve a state-developed, peer-reviewed State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), and if the USFWS has not approved a submitted SWAP within six months, then the SWAP is deemed approved. I am not here today to criticize the actions of or impugn the motives of the USFWS. I am here to advocate for this bill and explain why it is needed and why it is supported by many organizations.

Prior to explaining why Congress should pass H.R. 1676, I need to start with a federal program called the State and Tribal Wildlife Grant (STWG) program. This program is funded annually by Congress, and the level of funding fluctuates from year to year. States, tribes, territories, and the federal district receive an annual grant that is based on state population and land mass. As a condition of receiving a grant under this program, states are required to submit a State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) where, working with constituents, other state agencies, and local governments, they identify Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), and the suite of factors that impact those species: their habitats and the threats they face as well as conservation actions and how to monitor for success. SGCN are species that need attention and conservation management to prevent them from being listed as Threatened or Endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which nobody wants. States and tribes use State and Tribal Wildlife Grants to implement conservation management for these Species of Greatest Conservation Need, guided by information in the SWAP. States submit a comprehensive plan revision every 10 years. When Florida’s last SWAP was approved, 690 species were listed as being Species of Greatest Conservation Need in our great state. In the United States, 12,000 species were identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Once a state prepares a SWAP, as a part of the approval process, it is shared with state wildlife managers within its region who spend hours reviewing it, asking questions, and, ultimately, approving it. This peer review process is rigorous and is an important step in the overall process. While Florida’s new plan will be submitted in 2026, it is my understanding that 45 states plan to submit their SWAP for federal approval

in 2025. Currently, in the Southeast, there are 10 states that will be submitting their SWAPs by October of this year. The FWC is part of the Regional Review Team and is reviewing five of our southeastern states' SWAPs. We have allocated a total of 200 staff hours to complete this review in a 1-month timeframe. Once the SWAP has been approved regionally, it is submitted to the USFWS in Washington, DC, to review and, then finally, to approve it.

Sounds like a simple process: state developed, peer reviewed, and then federally approved, right? Ten years ago, when Florida went through the process, it took 18 months. In our frequent collaborations and check-ins with other state agencies, we have found that we were not an anomaly. Other states reported 18 months, and with one state reporting it took three years for the federal government to approve its SWAP. To address this delay, our staff, along with staff from other state wildlife agencies, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and USFWS, worked to develop a streamlined process to prevent these long delays in approval. This delay is a problem for us and other states, and because we believe the federal government could do a better job, we have worked collaboratively to identify ways to improve the process and the state's role in it.

These delays in final approval could prevent critical implementation of conservation management for certain species. While it is easy to point fingers and assign blame, I do not want to do that. I want to solve the problem, and we believe H.R. 1676, which would set a six-month deadline for USFWS to approve a state-developed, peer-reviewed SWAP, is the solution. The streamlined review process we have collectively developed can be accomplished in 6 months, and although the USFWS has indicated they are committed to achieving this timeframe, there is currently no requirement for this. Deadlines are good. They provide accountability and certainty to states when they submit their State Wildlife Action Plans for approval. The USFWS holds states accountable within the SWAPs and the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program for achieving effective conservation, and we are requesting the same accountability of our federal partners in allowing states to move forward without unnecessary delays. That is why H.R. 1676 has the support of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, which is the trade association for state wildlife agencies, and other organizations.

Congress has taken steps in the past to address delays in the federal government approval process in our industry. A few years ago, after complaints from fishermen, fish processors, and states about the delay in approving federal fishery disasters, the Fishery Resource Disaster Improvement Act, which established deadlines for the federal government to make fishery disaster determinations, became law with unanimous and overwhelming support from Congress.

We believe H.R. 1676 can enjoy the same unanimous and overwhelming support from this Congress, and the FWC is ready to assist in advancing this much needed bill.

Thank you.