



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Republican Members
From: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Staff: Richie O’Connell (richie@mail.house.gov), Doug Levine (doug.levine@mail.house.gov), Kirby Struhar (kirby.struhar@mail.house.gov), and Jackson Renfro (jackson.renfro@mail.house.gov); x5-8331
Date: Monday, January 12, 2026
Subject: Oversight Hearing titled “*Hunting and Fishing Access in the Great American Outdoors*”

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will hold an oversight hearing titled “*Hunting and Fishing Access in the Great American Outdoors*” on **Tuesday, January 13, 2026, at 2:00 p.m. in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.**

Member offices are requested to notify Hannah Garrett (hannah.garrett@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Monday, January 12, 2026, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- Promoting access and multiple use on our nation’s public lands and waters, including access for hunting and fishing, is a key priority for House Republicans.
- Every year, hunting and fishing activities on public lands are responsible for thousands of jobs, billions of dollars of economic activity in rural communities, and millions of dollars in funding for species conservation.
- The future of hunting and fishing access on public lands depends on healthy ecosystems. The diverse ecosystems found on America’s federal land desperately need the federal land management agencies to better steward existing resources and harness new funding opportunities, such as enhanced public-private partnerships.
- Enhancing access for recreational fishing in federal waters is necessary to ensure that coastal communities have a successful economic future.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Administration Witness)

- **The Honorable Brian Nesvik**, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C.

Panel II (Outside Experts)

- **Mr. Jason Tharpe**, CEO, Delta Waterfowl, Bismarck, North Dakota
- **Mr. Paul Johansen**, Chief, Wildlife Resources Section, West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, Charleston, West Virginia
- **Mr. Chris Butler**, President, Butler Marine, Beaufort, South Carolina
- **Mr. Ryan “Cal” Callaghan**, President and CEO, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Missoula, Montana

III. BACKGROUND

The National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is a network of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)-administered lands, submerged lands, and waters that provide habitat for fish and wildlife resources across the U.S. and its territories.¹ The System is governed by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966,² which consolidated areas into one unified system³ and comprises 571 national wildlife refuges (refuges), 38 wetland management districts, 5 marine national monuments, and 63 refuges with wilderness areas.⁴



Picture 1: Ducks resting at Hola Bend National Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas.
Source: FWS

These units encompass nearly 900 million acres, with over 90 million acres of refuges located in the 50 states, and the remaining acreage in the U.S. territories and insular areas.⁵

¹ “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: An Overview.” Christopher R. Field. Congressional Research Service. July 20, 2018. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45265>.

² Public Law 89–669.

³ 16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.

⁴ “Visit a National Wildlife Refuge Facility.” U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/visit-us>.

⁵ “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: An Overview.” Christopher R. Field. Congressional Research Service. July 20, 2018. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45265>.

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife System Improvement Act (Improvement Act),⁶ which established that “the mission of the System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the [U.S.] for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”⁷

Sportsmen’s Access in the System

Hunting is allowed at 401 refuges, 35 wetland management districts, and 20 national fish hatcheries.⁸ Each of these units is managed differently, and in some cases, hunting is allowed for certain species or in certain sections of a particular refuge. Hunting and fishing in the System are governed by state laws on hunting seasons and licensing.⁹

According to the Service, “[a]s practiced on refuges, hunting does not pose a threat to the wildlife populations—and in some instances it is necessary for sound wildlife management.”¹⁰ Science-based hunting is used to manage species populations that, if overpopulated, can threaten habitat for other vital species. Harvesting wildlife on refuges is regulated on a case-by-case basis, with the Service assessing conditions at each refuge unit rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all mandate across the System.¹¹

Revenues generated from hunting and fishing activities result in billions of dollars in conservation funding each year. The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 (Pittman-Robertson) established an excise tax on the sale of hunting materials, such as firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment.¹² The revenues are deposited directly into the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Fund in the U.S. Treasury, and the Service allocates this funding to the states for wildlife restoration, multi-state species conservation, and hunter education and safety programs.¹³ In Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, the Service apportioned \$914.3 million in Pittman-Robertson receipts, of which \$749.4 million was made available for wildlife restoration.¹⁴ For fishing, the Dingell-Johnson Act requires similar excise taxes on fishing equipment and dedicates the revenues for fisheries conservation.¹⁵ In FY 2025, this program generated \$416 million for states for fisheries conservation.¹⁶

⁶ Public Law 105–57.

⁷ 16 U.S.C. §668dd(a)(2).

⁸ “Hunting.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/activity/hunting>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ “Why Hunting is Allowed on National Wildlife Refuges.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/story/why-hunting-allowed-refuges>.

¹¹ *See id.*

¹² “The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act.” Erin H. Ward, et al. Congressional Research Service. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12229>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ “Final Apportionment of Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Funds for Fiscal Year 2025.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/program/sport-fish-restoration>.

¹⁵ “Sport Fish Restoration.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/program/sport-fish-restoration>.

¹⁶ “Final Apportionment of Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Funds for Fiscal Year 2025.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/program/sport-fish-restoration>.

Opportunities for Partnerships

According to the Service, the System currently has a deferred maintenance backlog of approximately \$2 billion.¹⁷ This sizeable backlog leaves habitat and wildlife unmanaged, roads impassable, and critical infrastructure non-functional, which artificially limits hunting and fishing opportunities. One option, which has garnered bipartisan support, to help address this challenge is to give the Service greater flexibility to partner with non-federal partners to improve conditions across the System.

Granting Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to the Service has been one step Congress has taken to achieve better coordination with non-federal partners. Congress established GNA to enable states, counties, and tribes to assist with active forest management on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. States, counties, and tribes can enter into Good Neighbor Agreements with the Service to conduct restoration projects, such as fuels reduction, habitat improvement, and road restoration. In 2024, Congress granted the Service GNA identical to that accorded to USFS and BLM.¹⁸ Still, various legislative proposals have contemplated granting the Service expanded GNA authority, in recognition of its unique mission and distinct needs.¹⁹



Picture 2: Trail repairs at Jenny Lake before, during, and after construction.

Source: Grand Teton National Park Foundation.

Another potential vehicle to improve habitat and increase access to the System is Stewardship Contracting Authority. This approach would allow the Service to partner with non-profit organizations and private companies. Stewardship contracting has been successfully utilized by other land management agencies, including the U.S. National Park Service. At Grand Teton National Park, for example, the Grand Teton National Park Foundation has successfully leveraged park funding into additional philanthropic support, financing important undertakings like the Jenny Lake Renewal Project.²⁰

¹⁷ “Infrastructure Management.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/program/infrastructure-management>.

¹⁸ See Sec. 443 of Public Law 118-42.

¹⁹ See “Title III – Conservation and Management for Wildlife Refuges,” in H.R. 7408 from the 118th Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/7408/text?s=2&r=1>.

²⁰ “Jenny Lake Renewal Project Completed in Grand Teton.” Grand Teton National Park Foundation. <https://www.gtnpf.org/jenny-lake-renewal-project-completed-in-grand-teton/>.

Recent Trump Administration Actions

On August 27, 2025, as a part of the final “National Wildlife Refuge System, 2025-2026 Station-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing Regulations” rule, the U.S. Department of the Interior announced new hunting and fishing opportunities at 16 units of the System and the National Fish Hatchery System.²¹ This expansion included 42 separate opportunities across 87,000 acres, which represented a threefold increase in the number of opportunities and a fivefold increase in the number of units opened or expanded compared to the rule proposed by the Biden administration.²²

Further, on December 16, 2025, Service Director Brian Nesvik announced a review of the System.²³ The goal of the review is to “ensure that the Service is directing its resources to meet [its] highest mission priorities.”²⁴ The scope of the review encompasses all System units, with unit-specific factors considered for each. These factors include whether the purpose of a specific System unit no longer aligns with the Service’s mission, organizational structure, current resources, and asset and infrastructure management. A “list of actionable recommendations with associated necessary actions” is due to the Director by February 15, 2026.²⁵

Recreational Fishing in America’s Waters

America’s waters support critical sectors of the recreational economy, including fishing, tourism, and other related activities. The latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) showed that outdoor recreation, including fishing, accounted for 2.3 percent of America’s gross domestic product in 2023, generating nearly \$640 billion in economic activity.²⁶

The Biden administration’s outdated data and burdensome regulations and proposals resulted in, or threatened to, impose access limitations on America’s waters for fishing and other recreational activities. Undue access restrictions for anglers directly harm coastal economies and reduce funding for state conservation budgets nationwide.

One of the largest threats to accessing America’s waters was a Biden-era proposal to expand an existing speed restriction rule along the Atlantic coast with the stated goal of protecting the North Atlantic right whale from collisions with vessels. In 2008, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) finalized a rule establishing a 10-knot speed limit for vessels 65 feet or longer.²⁷ However, in 2022, the Biden administration proposed a dramatic

²¹ 90 FR 41900.

²² “Interior Expands Hunting and Fishing Access at Refuges and Hatcheries.” Vanessa Kaufman. U.S. Department of the Interior. August 27, 2025. <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2025-08/interior-expands-hunting-and-fishing-access-refuges-and-hatcheries>.

²³ “Requirements and Expectations – Review of the National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery System.” December 16, 2025. Director Brian Nesvik. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/policy-library/do230>.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ “Outdoor Recreation | U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).” U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. 2017. www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation.

²⁷ 73 FR 60173.

expansion of this rule, which would have applied it to vessels as small as 35 feet.²⁸ A 10-knot speed restriction for such small vessels would have created unsafe boating conditions, particularly in hazardous weather. Further, had the rule been finalized, it would have limited recreational and charter fishing activity and threatened the operations of other maritime sectors.

Despite facing substantial opposition from the maritime community, the Biden administration continued with its heavy-handed regulatory approach. Accordingly, the House Committee on Natural Resources conducted robust oversight of this proposed rule and advanced legislation²⁹ in September 2024 to overturn the misguided regulation after hearing repeated concerns from coastal communities and other affected stakeholders. Following continued oversight and public outcry, NOAA withdrew the proposed rule on January 16, 2025.³⁰

In addition to regulatory threats, inadequate data on recreational fishing has resulted in policies that restrict access in many parts of the country. At the center of this issue is NOAA’s Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), which is administered by NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). In 2023, NMFS’s Office of Science and Technology published a report titled “Evaluating Measurement Error in the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey,”³¹ which found that the MRIP model’s “current design is likely overestimating fishing effort.”³²

Congress and fishery managers must ensure high-quality data informs fisheries management decisions, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Additionally, state fishery managers have at times led the way in science-based, responsible fisheries management that has promoted access where federal management has failed, most notably in the management of prized recreational fisheries like red snapper. During President Trump’s first term, the five states along the Gulf of America worked to assume state management of this fishery;³³ this year, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina have submitted applications to NOAA for Exempted Fishing Permits to research state management of red snapper in the South Atlantic in a manner similar to the approach taken in the Gulf.³⁴ Empowering states to assume this management authority places management decisions in the hands of those closest to these resources and the communities that depend on them.

²⁸ 87 FR 46921.

²⁹ H.R. 8704. 118th Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/8704?s=10&r=1>.

³⁰ 90 FR 4711.

³¹ “Evaluating Measurement Error in the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey.” NOAA Fisheries Service, Office of Science and Technology. https://apps-st.fisheries.noaa.gov/rpts/main/public_docs/Evaluating%20Measurement%20Error%20in%20the%20FES%20Consolidated%20Final%20w%20Review.pdf?method=PUB_MANUSCRIPT&id=32268.

³² *Id.*

³³ “South Atlantic States Chart New Course for Red Snapper Management—Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation.” Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation. September 22, 2025. <https://congressionalsportsmen.org/news/south-atlantic-states-chart-new-course-for-red-snapper-management/outh Atlantic States Chart New Course for Red Snapper Management – Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation>.

³⁴ Letter from South Atlantic states fisheries managers to Co-Chairs of South Atlantic Red Snapper Task Force. September 12, 2025. https://republicans-naturalresources.house.gov/UploadedFiles/SA_states_letter_Atlantic_red_snapper_state_management_to_Cong_task_force_09_12_2025_Final.pdf.

These efforts all align with the priorities the Trump administration laid out in Executive Order 14276, “*Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*.”³⁵ Streamlining and reducing regulatory burdens, and improving the data used to inform management decisions promotes Americans’ access to our nation’s vast fishery resources. This, in turn, benefits the economy and supports the millions of Americans who enjoy these recreational activities.

Recent Legislative Actions

Since House Republicans took the majority in 2023, the House Committee on Natural Resources has advanced into law the following legislative measures related to hunting and fishing:

119th Congress

H.R. 187 (Rep. Blake Moore), “MAPWaters Act of 2025”

H.R. 187 enhances access to the nation’s outdoor recreational opportunities by digitizing and standardizing mapping information, such as access points and permissible uses, relating to federal waters, and making that information easily accessible to the public.

H.R. 2316 (Rep. Hurd), “Wetlands Conservation and Access Improvement Act of 2025”

H.R. 2316 extends through 2033 the period during which interest accrued on unallocated Pittman-Robertson funds may be used to supplement congressional appropriations under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). This extension ensures that the NAWCA Program will have the resources necessary to continue providing high-quality habitat for migratory waterfowl on which hunters depend.

118th Congress

H.R. 6492 (Rep. Westerman), “EXPLORE Act”

H.R. 6492 improved public land access for sportsmen and women by creating new target shooting ranges and modernizing technology to improve visitor experiences, such as increasing broadband connectivity and creating digital recreation passes.

S. 788 (Sen. Kennedy), “Duck Stamp Modernization Act of 2023”

S. 788 modernized the Duck Stamp program and gave waterfowl hunters the option of immediately purchasing an electronic Duck Stamp, which they can carry with them on their license or phones for the entire waterfowl season. Historically, sportsmen and women have been required to carry a signed copy of their Duck Stamp attached to their license.

³⁵ “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.” The White House. April 17, 2025. www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/restoring-american-seafood-competitiveness/.

S. 3791 (Sen. Carper), “America’s Conservation Enhancement Reauthorization Act of 2024”

S. 3791 reauthorized and amended conservation programs authorized under the original America’s Conservation Enhancement Act, which was first signed into law in 2020. These programs, such as the NAWCA Program and the National Fish Habitat Partnership, directly support hunting and fishing access. This bill was the Senate companion of H.R. 8811, which was sponsored by Congressman Rob Wittman (R-VA).