

**Testimony of Brian Nesvik
Director, United States Fish and Wildlife Service
Department of the Interior
Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Oversight Hearing on “Hunting and Fishing Access in the Great American Outdoors”**

January 13, 2026

Good afternoon, Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Brian Nesvik, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior (Department). Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the Service’s efforts to expand access for hunting and fishing to our public lands and waters.

Since the founding of our nation, hunting and fishing have been an integral part of the American identity and our heritage. Hunters and anglers embody the American values of freedom, self-reliance, gratitude and respect for the natural world. Hunting and fishing provide Americans of all ages with the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and reap the physical and mental benefits of time spent in nature. These activities support local economies and are the foundation of our nation’s system of wildlife management, providing for the continued stewardship of America’s incredible fish and wildlife resources.

In the late 19th century, American hunters laid the foundation for what has become the most successful model of wildlife conservation in the world: the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. This model relies on those who use and benefit from the resource to also pay for its management and conservation. The model is rooted in the idea that wildlife belong to the people and are managed in trust by the government. Hunters and anglers are a critical component in the successful use of the Model. With the passage of the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 and the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act of 1950, Congress established a powerful and widely supported conservation funding mechanism. Today, states continue to rely heavily on these important acts to carry out their trust responsibilities related to wildlife, fish, and the habitats they use to remain viable.

The Service plays a key role both in providing hunter and angler access and in conserving important habitats through its management of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and the National Fish Hatchery System (Hatchery System). Today, the majority of the Refuge System is accessible to the hunting and fishing public. Currently, hunting opportunities are open on 366 of 573 national wildlife refuges and 36 of 38 wetland management districts. Similarly, sport fishing is open on 343 national wildlife refuges and 35 wetland management districts. These opportunities attract millions of hunters and anglers annually: in 2025 alone, approximately 2.7 million hunters and 8.5 million anglers visited national wildlife refuges. The Hatchery System welcomes more than one million visitors annually and supports hunting and angling opportunities across 22 hatcheries.

As we approach America's 250th anniversary, this hearing provides a timely opportunity to celebrate the role of hunters and anglers in shaping our natural heritage and highlight the Trump Administration's efforts to expand hunting and fishing opportunities on Service lands and waters for current and future generations.

Expanding Access for Hunters and Anglers

With President Trump's leadership, the Service is continually working to expand access for hunters and anglers to the Refuge System and Hatchery System through annual updates to station-specific hunting and sport fishing programs. Improving access to Service lands and waters for hunting and fishing plays a critical role in recruiting and retaining sportsmen and the economic benefits they provide.

On July 3, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14313, Establishing the President's Make America Beautiful Again Commission, directing federal land management agencies to ensure their policies encourage voluntary, collaborative conservation and expand access to public lands and waters for recreation, hunting, and fishing. In support of E.O. 14313, the Service is increasing opportunities for hunting and fishing on Service lands and waters, enhancing federal regulatory alignment with relevant state and tribal regulations, and improving the public access infrastructure that supports hunting and fishing on Service lands.

In August 2025, the Service announced 42 new hunting and sport fishing opportunities across more than 87,000 acres within the Refuge System and Hatchery System in its Final 2025-2026 Station-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing Update. This final update opened or expanded opportunities at 16 national wildlife refuges and one national fish hatchery, providing high-quality hunting and fishing opportunities to Americans in 11 states. This included new migratory game bird hunts at five national wildlife refuges in Montana, inaugural hunting opportunities at the Southern Maryland Woodlands National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland, and inaugural sport fishing at the North Attleboro National Fish Hatchery in Massachusetts.

As we look ahead to future annual updates, the Service is committed to maximizing hunting and fishing opportunities across the Refuge System and Hatchery System. Our objective is to ensure that all refuges and hatcheries are open to hunting and fishing within two years with only rare exceptions where legal requirements, public safety concerns or public input indicate hunting or fishing is incompatible with the purpose of the refuge.

The Service is also strengthening coordination with state, tribal, and territorial partners and working to better align Service regulations with those on surrounding non-federal lands. In our final 2025-2026 annual update, we made administrative changes to station-specific regulations that improved the clarity and accuracy of our regulations and better aligned Service regulations with state and tribal regulations. This regulatory alignment addresses the challenges hunters and anglers face when navigating complex federal and state regulations and supports President Trump's goal of unleashing prosperity through deregulation.

Finally, the Service is repairing and modernizing infrastructure that supports hunting and fishing on national wildlife refuges with funds provided by the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (Legacy Restoration Fund), a law

signed by President Trump. For example, Legacy Restoration Fund dollars were used at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to upgrade and improve Jim's Landing, one of the busiest recreational access points to the world-famous Kenai River. This investment drove major public use improvements to the river, enhancing safety and access for thousands of visitors who come to the river to fish, raft, kayak, and view wildlife. In Arkansas, the Legacy Restoration Fund is supporting improvements to enhance access to one of the state's most visited national wildlife refuge—Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is home to one of the most important areas for wintering waterfowl in North America and welcomes nearly 300,000 visitors annually. The Service is working to repair boat launches, transportation assets, and levees, ensuring the refuge continues to provide high-quality experiences to visitors. The President's FY 2026 Budget proposes to reauthorize the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund, which would ensure that we can keep our public lands safe, accessible, and enjoyable for generations to come.

Conclusion

The Service's partnerships with the hunting and angling communities have been the cornerstone of countless conservation successes throughout our nation's history, and the Service is proud to provide high-quality opportunities for Americans to hunt and fish on our nation's public lands and waters. The Trump administration is committed to expanding and improving every American's access to their public lands and waters, and I look forward to working with the Subcommittee and our conservation partners as we advance responsible conservation and hunting and fishing opportunities for current and future generations. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.