

Testimony of Mr. Jason Tharpe
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Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Legislative Hearing
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Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I come before the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries to speak on a topic that is of great personal interest to me and all duck hunters across the United States — the state of our public lands, and especially, the National Wildlife Refuge System. We sincerely appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in the health of our refuge system as well as the critically important role these lands play for both ducks and duck hunters.

Delta Waterfowl

Founded in 1911, Delta Waterfowl is The Duck Hunters Organization, a leading conservation group that has advocated for public lands since its inception. In 1938, Delta established North America’s premier waterfowl research facility at the famed Delta Marsh in Manitoba, and since the 1990s has operated from the organization’s headquarters in Bismarck, North Dakota. Historically, Delta’s work has intensely focused on researching the key issues facing ducks, geese and their habitat. Today, we continue to conduct high-quality scientific research, while also working to produce ducks through intensive management programs and conservation of breeding duck habitat. We also work to ensure the future of waterfowl hunting through a variety of hunter recruitment and retention activities.

I have had the incredible privilege to work for Delta Waterfowl for 25 years as my way of serving ducks and duck hunters. The future of ducks and duck hunting has been the forefront of my life for decades.

As a kid who grew up in the bottomlands around Bastrop, Louisiana, a young adult hunting ducks across the south and now from my post in North Dakota, I have had the rare opportunity to work for and with Delta members, volunteers and duck hunters across all four flyways and learn about their needs. I have also had the blessing of being immersed in the science and biology of ducks and duck habitat throughout my career at Delta — an opportunity to learn from the best and brightest in the field of waterfowl ecology to understand what it takes to sustain the large abundant flights of ducks we all desire. I am here today because of my work with duck hunters throughout the past 25 years, as well as my desire to secure a bright future for ducks and duck hunters.

The National Wildlife Refuge System-The Duck Hunter's Legacy Asset

The majority of the refuges within the National Wildlife Refuge system are the direct result of the purchase of duck stamps by duck hunters. In total, more than 300 of the 573 refuges were at least partially acquired using duck stamp proceeds. It is an exemplary example of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model — the user-pay, public-benefit model that we are all familiar with and cherish as the way we do conservation in the United States. A duck hunter from Connecticut named Frederic Walcott, who was also a U.S. Senator, and long-time leader of Delta Waterfowl, co-authored the bill to create the Federal Duck Stamp in 1934. It is also yet another reminder of the incredible conservation leadership of duck hunters, who early on understood the critical need to conserve some of the most important places for ducks.

These are legendary places for ducks and duck hunters from Blackwater to Klamath and from Chase Lake to Cameron Prairie, these are critical habitats within the annual lifecycle of waterfowl, shorebirds, other migratory birds and a wealth of other wildlife.

In addition, refuges have become critical assets for the public to enjoy outdoor recreation — one of the clear mandates made by Congress in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. Recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidance estimates that refuges provided 2.6 million hunting days each year, not to mention the incredible opportunities for fishing, wildlife viewing and photography and to the general public to enjoy open spaces and wildlife and connect with nature. As access and opportunity for waterfowl hunting and other hunting and outdoor recreation is becoming ever scarcer, we can't overstate the role refuges play in providing the potential for highly desired and highly valuable hunting opportunities.

It is for these reasons that duck hunters care deeply about the state of the refuge system and as a result, it is why Delta cares deeply as well.

A Changing World-The Need for More Out of Our Refuge System

Habitat changes have significant impacts on ducks and duck hunters alike. A wide array of challenges negatively impact the habitat upon which ducks depend during their annual migrations. Water scarcity in the west and intermountain west, coastal erosion along the coast of Louisiana, changes in agricultural production in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, invasive species and many other factors are reducing the food and loafing habitat for ducks in the staging and wintering areas.

For duck hunters, sustaining a culture, recruiting the next generation of hunter/conservationists is predicated on the ability for the average person to spend time in the marsh, leaning against a pin oak or in a boat blind amongst the cypress. In too many places across the country, and despite a significant decline in waterfowl hunters, access is oversubscribed, which means more and more duck hunters are left without a place to watch the sun come up over the decoys and hear whistling wings overhead.

Ducks and duck hunters need the refuge system, but can it provide what is being asked of it?

The Current State

Sadly, the answer to the question is no in many, many instances. While not attributable to one party, nor to a single Administration or to one Congress, the refuge system has found itself to be the victim of steady, incremental decline. Reductions in staff, failing infrastructure, reduced operational budgets have left refuges often struggling to meet their intended purposes — with the impact most frequently observed by duck hunters.

Habitat management for ducks in the staging and wintering grounds is a challenging task. It necessitates timely water deliveries, working pumps, sound levees and working water control structures. It also requires real time on tractors, discing to maintain high-quality moist-soil plants and combat undesirable vegetation. It requires real people with real expertise, a passion for habitat and for ducks. When we eliminate functioning water deliveries or the annual management, then habitat quality quickly deteriorates and the value to ducks disappears.

And it should be recognized that the benefits or lack thereof of a well-functioning refuge extend far beyond the blue goose signs. Refuges frequently provide core habitat or serve as the hub that has a broad zone of influence over surrounding properties, duck clubs or state wildlife management areas at a regional scale. When refuges are providing excellent habitat, the surrounding landscape flourishes. And when the core suffers, so do ducks and duck hunters in the region.

A New Future for the National Wildlife Refuge System

The Refuge System is clearly an American conservation success story — a remarkable testament to our early conservation leaders such as Roosevelt, Darling, Beck, Leopold and Salyer, who had the vision for a network of lands conserved and most importantly managed for the benefit of both wildlife and people. It is the product of dedicated USFWS staff who have worked on the ground to acquire and manage this incredibly diverse resource.

The eve of our 250th anniversary of our Nation provides an opportune moment to recommit to one of our greatest ideas and express a bold new vision to prioritize refuge investment, look for new tools for management, address failing infrastructure and redouble our commitment to enhanced public use to realize a refuge system that can once again provide incredible habitat benefits to ducks and fulfill the promise to duck hunters of their incredible investment into these critical lands.

1. Infrastructure

The USFWS current estimate of deferred maintenance system-wide is \$2.6 billion. This includes addressing facilities, roads, trails and other infrastructure needed to sustain high-functioning

refuge operations. Work by Delta Waterfowl and Ducks Unlimited staff in the spring of 2020 identified over \$250 million in critical wetland management infrastructure needs on priority waterfowl refuges alone.

We believe the time is now to act on this critical need. Senator Daines and Senator King this spring introduced the America the Beautiful Act (S.1547) to reauthorize the Legacy Restoration Fund, which would invest significantly in the USFWS infrastructure needs. We are eager to work with Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman and members of the Committee to develop a House companion to reauthorize the Legacy Restoration Fund and invest in the infrastructure critical to managing waterfowl habitat.

2. Harnessing Private Sector Capacity

Delta Waterfowl has been visiting with staff to explore new authorizations for the USFWS to engage the private sector habitat managers to aid in meeting the annual management needs on refuges. There is a wealth of expertise within state agencies, non-profit organizations and private duck club managers that could — under the direction of USFWS staff and guided by refuge comprehensive conservation plans — assist in water management, moist soil management, addressing invasive species and the many other high-value habitat management tasks. These people could augment USFWS staff capacity. We are eager to continue to work with the committee to explore this opportunity.

3. Historic Opportunities for Enhanced Access

The USFWS annual “Hunt/Fish” rule has been a historic means to creating new hunting opportunities on refuge lands. During the first Trump Administration, and under the Secretarial Order 3356 by then Secretary Zinke, increased emphasis was placed on identifying increased access to refuge lands. Delta Waterfowl has worked extensively with our members and volunteers to annually compile a list of priority waterfowl hunting opportunities on refuge lands, which we have shared those USFWS leadership. Under the leadership of Director Nesvik, we are hopeful that sustained progress will be made to enhance access. Because duck hunters are the primary funders of the National Wildlife Refuge System, we believe it is wholly appropriate that enhanced hunting opportunities disproportionately benefit waterfowl hunters, while simultaneously recognizing the legal and management needs for inviolate sanctuary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are grateful the Committee has chosen to highlight the critical nature of the National Wildlife Refuge system, and recognizes its crucial connection to the conservation of waterfowl other wildlife and high-value habitat and its intrinsic connection to duck hunters. Please know you have a ready and willing partner in Delta Waterfowl to secure a brighter future for our National Wildlife Refuges and for ducks and duck hunters.

Finally, we also recognize that the Committee lost one of its longstanding and committed members with the passing of Congressman Doug LaMalfa. We extend our sympathies to you as his colleagues, and to his staff, his family and friends. The Congressman was a champion of many conservation causes and was keenly interested and committed to issues important to ducks and

duck hunters. We are saddened by his sudden passing, and we will miss his commitment on behalf of ducks and duck hunters.