



Written Statement of Mr. Mike McCormick, President

Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation ®

To the

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources**

Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

“Oversight of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act”

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**P.O. Box 1972
Jackson, MS 39215**

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Mike McCormick and I have the distinct honor as serving as the President of the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, based in Jackson, Mississippi. I am also a beef cattle farmer from Southwest Mississippi.

On behalf of the over five million Farm Bureau member families in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, I commend you for your leadership in hosting this hearing to review federal oversight of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation is a statewide organization with members in all 82 counties. One of the most common themes I hear as I travel the state as president of our organization is the growing conflict between agriculture and many bird species protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.

While we fully support reasonable measures to protect these valuable natural resources, we must develop workable policy that protects the species without causing a major economic hardship for private landowners and farmers. We sincerely appreciate the Committee's interest in understanding how farmers and ranchers are impacted by certain species and the challenges they face in balancing farming and with federal policy related to these protected species.

I would like to devote my time today in discussing primarily four species that provide a real challenge for the agricultural industry in my state and surrounding states. These species are the black vulture, the double-crested cormorant, the black-bellied whistling ducks, and Canadian geese.

Black Vultures:

Cattle Threats:

One of the most devastating migratory bird species to our state's cattle producers is the black vulture. The black vulture population in the mid-south area continues to grow and has become a serious problem more than ever before.

In fact, according to a report compiled by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, black vulture populations have been increasing in the U.S. from 1996 to 2015 by an average of 4.77% per year. Although they are native to the southeastern portions of the U.S., they have been expanding their range northward and westward over the past several decades.

I have seen a black vulture attack on my farm with my own eyes. And personally, it's truly one of the most horrific things I've ever witnessed. The black vulture populations swarm a herd of cattle and attack newborn calves just after birth, during their most vulnerable time.

In most cases, the vultures begin by blinding the calf by pecking its eyes out, weakening its ability to navigate its surroundings and puncturing its hind quarters. Once that's accomplished, the calf's ability and strength to fight is over and the vultures will literally tear the newborn animal apart.

In other situations when a mother attempts to defend her calf, the swarm of vultures, sometimes as many as twenty vultures, surround the mother and calf. Over time, the mother will become so stressed and fatigued in fighting off the vultures, that sometimes she will end up accidentally trampling her own calf to death.

And in some occasions, the vultures attack the mother and calf during the birthing process, killing the calf as it exits the birth canal and injuring the mother to the point that the farmer has no other choice but to euthanize the mother.

As a farmer myself, I can tell you how demoralized you feel when this happens on your farm. You spend vast amounts of time and investments in making sure the mother and unborn calf are properly cared for and protected from diseases or adverse weather events; to then see this horrific event happen at the hands of an aggressive predator and federally protected bird.

USDA-APHIS research conducted in 2015 found that 19 percent of predator-related calf deaths in Mississippi were caused by predatory birds. Applying that share to current loss estimates and calf values indicates that predatory birds will account for roughly \$2 million in annual calf losses in Mississippi under current market conditions.

Poultry Health Concerns:

In addition to this ongoing threat to our state's cattle producers, a new emerging threat has recently arisen, impacting our state's poultry producers.

Just this past month, the Mississippi Board of Animal Health was notified of a broiler farm in Mississippi with a positive case of avian influenza. Upon a thorough investigation by state agencies, it was discovered that the spread of avian influenza into the broiler flock was likely linked to a series of black vulture encounters and deaths near and around the impacted broiler farm, which all tested positive for avian influenza.

After additional testing, it was determined that four additional recent avian influenza outbreaks in the state have also been linked to the presence of black vultures near the infected broiler farms.

As a result of this recent discovery, the Mississippi Board of Animal Health has now implemented a new set of regulations requiring newly constructed commercial farms to have vulture abatement measures around the compost pile to deter vultures from feeding on poultry mortality, adding another level of expense and regulatory action for the producer.

Poultry production is Mississippi's number one commodity, and this new discovery is of grave concern to us, from an animal health standpoint.

Depredation Sub-permit Process:

In 2021 the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation obtained a statewide depredation permit for black vultures from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The MFBF statewide depredation permit provides livestock producers with the opportunity to apply for a Livestock Protection Depredation Sub-Permit, which allows legal “takes” of black vultures attacking livestock. While we are very grateful for this program, it is simply not responsive enough to the needs on the ground when farmers discover that black vultures are attacking their newborn calves. They simply don’t have time to call and get a permit to save their livestock.

For this reason, I commend the committee in July 2025 for passing the Black Vulture Relief Act (H.R. 2462), introduced by Representative John Rose of Tennessee and Representative Darren Soto of Florida. This legislation would allow livestock producers the ability to take black vultures that are causing death, injury, or destruction to their livestock without a permit. This is common sense legislation that supports the ability for our farmers to protect the livestock under their care. I would urge House leadership to bring this legislation forward for a vote, as this relief is desperately needed.

Double-Crested Cormorant:

Another agricultural commodity that is heavily impacted by other migratory birds is our farm-raised catfish industry. The double-crested cormorant is a federally protected migratory bird that has cost the catfish industry millions of dollars over the years.

Cormorant depredation is a constant challenge on catfish farms. These birds consume up to 1.5 pounds of fish or 10-30 pounds of fish per day. Cormorants fly in large groups of 50-200 birds per flock. Without constant pressure and harassment actions to keep the birds away from the ponds, catfish farms 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, disease outbreaks spread rapidly and are often exacerbated by wild bird activity on catfish farms. 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.

In March of 2025, our very own members from Mississippi, Representative Mike Ezell and Representative Bennie Thompson, introduced House Bill 2293, the Cormorant Relief Act of 2025. This legislation would require the Department of the Interior to reissue the depredation order for double-crested cormorants at aquaculture facilities. Reissuing this order authorizes landowners, operators, tenants, and employees of entities engaged in aquaculture to take double-crested cormorants that are causing or threatening harm at aquaculture facilities and state and federal fish hatcheries. We thank the Committee for its leadership in passing this legislation and ultimately, passing the full House in December 2025. We are now urging the Senate to act swiftly to provide this relief to our catfish farmers as soon as possible.

Black Bellied Whistling Ducks:

Black bellied whistling ducks have also become a serious financially burdensome and ecologically challenging migratory bird species. Presently their impacts have been felt most directly in Louisiana, with tens of thousands of birds that have taken up permanent residence on the Mississippi river corridor at our nation's largest ports causing real threats to international bulk shipments of grain.

The export terminals along the Mississippi river from Baton Rouge to the mouth of the Gulf of America are essential infrastructure to farmers across two-thirds of this nation or greater. Our customers around the world rely on sanitary shipment thresholds that America holds as a leader in the world grain trade.

However, my friends in Louisiana are experiencing such high numbers of these whistling ducks with very little freedom for deterrence or take of these birds, this system is becoming threatened. As large, ocean-going vessels are being filled, thousands of black bellied whistling ducks attempt to eat grain both from the vessel and the barges that they are being loaded from. Inadvertently whistling ducks become trapped in the grain, causing costly disruptions to these elevators to ensure safe and sanitary shipments. Furthermore, these birds cause direct impact to Louisiana rice farmers all across south Louisiana and continue to press northward.

The LSU AgCenter estimates these birds cause roughly \$3 million in damage annually to rice farmers and that number grows each year as the migration of these birds lessens and their residency pushes northward. Both groups, international grain buying companies and our farmers, share in these financial impacts. It is imperative that reasonable federal policy be adopted to address this ongoing issue.

Canadian Geese:

Another emerging concern that I hear from landowners across the state is a growing problem with flocks of Canadian geese destroying annual rye grass fields that are planted for cattle grazing in the fall. Essentially hundreds of geese swarm fields of freshly emerged rye grass and within a few hours, the field is absolutely leveled. Additionally, this level of activity in concentrated areas poses major issues with water supply sources to grazing cattle, where geese can contaminate watering ponds and tanks, comprising animal health. Additionally, we are seeing a trend where the Canadian geese are actually no longer "migratory" in nature. We have definitive data that indicates they are both wintering and summering in the state in a significant and growing way.

Summary:

In closing, I want to commend the committee for hosting this hearing to review federal oversight of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share some perspectives from the farm on these important issues. I welcome any questions that you may have.