



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, April 13, 2026
Subject: Legislative Hearing on 4 Bills

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will hold a legislative hearing on four bills: H.R. 4219 (Rep. Case), “*National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Team Act of 2025*”; H.R. 6251 (Rep. Begich), To amend the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 to allow importation of polar bear trophies taken in sport hunts in Canada before the date the polar bear was determined to be a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973; H.R. 7288 (Rep. Johnson of SD), “*Western South Dakota Water Supply Project Feasibility Study Act*”; and H.R. 8195 (Rep. Walberg), “*Responsible Cormorant Management and Control Act of 2026*”.

The hearing will take place on **Thursday, April 16, 2026, at 10:00 a.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 Wednesday, April 15, 2026, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- H.R. 6251 allows for the importation of polar bear trophies legally taken in sport hunts in Canada before the date the polar bear was determined to be a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.
- H.R. 7288 authorizes a feasibility study for the Western Dakota Regional Water System to evaluate water supply solutions for the region.
- H.R. 8195 facilitates the establishment of regional management frameworks for overseeing the responsible taking of double-crested cormorants. These measures are designed to ensure effective, science-based management of these birds, which jeopardize fisheries and wildlife populations throughout the U.S.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Members of Congress)

- *To Be Announced*

Panel II (Administration Witness)

- **Mr. David Miko**, Acting Deputy Director for Operations, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. [*H.R. 4219, H.R. 6251, and H.R. 8195*]

Panel III (Outside Experts)

- **Ms. Kristin Conzet**, Executive Director, Western Dakota Regional Water System, Rapid City, South Dakota [*H.R. 7288*]
- **Ms. Madeline Demaske**, Litigation Associate, Safari Club International, Windsor, Colorado [*H.R. 6251*]
- **Mr. John Jones**, President, Lowchow Ranch Pond and Lake Management, Bryan, Texas [*H.R. 8195*]
- **Ms. Christy Martin**, Program Manager, Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii [*H.R. 4219*] [*Minority witness*]

III. BACKGROUND

[H.R. 4219 \(Rep. Case\), “National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Team Act of 2025”](#)

The National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is a network of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)-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 comprising 571 national wildlife refuges (refuges), 38 wetland management districts, 5 marine national monuments, and 63 refuges with wilderness areas.⁴ Together, these units encompass nearly 900 million acres, of which 146 million acres are in refuges and roughly 705 million acres are in mostly marine national monuments.⁵ Of the refuges, over 90 million acres are located in the 50 states, while the remaining acreage is located in the U.S. territories and insular areas.⁶

FWS defines invasive species as non-native plants, animals, and other organisms that thrive outside their natural habitats and cause, or are likely to cause, economic, environmental, or health-related harm to humans, animals, or plants.⁷ Some commonly known examples of invasive species are feral hogs, nutria, brown tree snakes, and cheatgrass.

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

² 16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.

³ *Id.* Eric P. Nardi, “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: An Overview,” Congressional Research Service, July 20, 2018, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45265>.

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

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

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ “Invasive Species,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, <https://www.fws.gov/program/invasive-species>.

FWS employs Invasive Species Strike Teams (ISSTs) to protect the System from the detrimental effects of invasive species.⁸ As of the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, 21 ISSTs are in operation nationwide, ensuring that at least one team is present in each FWS region.⁹ These teams receive funding through dedicated base allocations from the System’s invasive species program.¹⁰

ISSTs are specifically designed to be flexible and mobile, enabling them to respond rapidly to newly identified threats from invasive species. The ISST program is focused on early detection and rapid response (EDRR), as established in its initial guidance and reinforced by subsequent congressional directives.¹¹ This emphasis on EDRR reflects a commitment to preventing the establishment of invasive species through swift and effective intervention, an effective and cost-efficient approach to managing these threats.¹²

H.R. 4219 expands the ISST program. The bill requires the establishment of at least one ISST in each FWS region, collaboration with non-federal entities, and the development of a “set of consistent taxonomy standards.” The bill also allows FWS to provide technical assistance or enter into cooperative agreements to address invasive species on lands adjacent to the System. The bill authorizes \$15 million per year through FY 2030 to carry out the ISST program.

[H.R. 6251 \(Rep. Begich\), To amend the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 to allow importation of polar bear trophies taken in sport hunts in Canada before the date the polar bear was determined to be a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.](#)

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA), jurisdiction over marine mammals is split between FWS and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).¹³ FWS has jurisdiction over polar bears, West Indian manatees, sea otters, and Pacific walruses,¹⁴ while NMFS has jurisdiction over all other marine mammals.

The MMPA has been amended several times, with the latest and most extensive amendments occurring in 1994.¹⁵ The 1994 amendments allowed the importation of polar bear trophies from Canada.¹⁶ The Secretary of the Interior was authorized to issue a permit for the importation of polar bear trophies from Canada, if the following criteria were met:

- (1) the applicant provided proof showing that the polar bear was legally harvested in Canada by the applicant; and

⁸ “FY 2024 Invasive Species Strike Team Annual Summary,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, [fy24_nwrs_isst_program_summary_report_508.pdf](#).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Anthony R. Marshak, “The Marine Mammal Protection Act (P.L. 92 -522): Primer and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, January 5, 2024, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R47892.pdf>.

¹⁴ “Marine Mammals,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, www.fws.gov/program/marine-mammals.

¹⁵ Anthony R. Marshak, “The Marine Mammal Protection Act (P.L. 92 -522): Primer and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, January 5, 2024, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R47892.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Implementation of the 1994 Amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.” *FWS.gov*, 2026, www.fws.gov/testimony/implementation-1994-amendments-marine-mammal-protection-act, accessed April 8, 2026.

(2) the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Marine Mammal Commission and after notice and opportunity for public comment, found that:

- a. Canada had a monitored and enforced sport hunting program, consistent with the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears;
- b. Canada's sport program was based on scientifically sound quotas that ensured a sustainable population; and
- c. the exportation and importation of the trophy would have been consistent with the provisions of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species.¹⁷

The Secretary of the Interior was also authorized to charge a permit fee of up to \$1,000 for each trophy import application. The collected fees were authorized to be directed into a fund for the conservation of polar bears in the U.S. and Russia. Following the 1994 MMPA amendments, Canada and FWS worked together to ensure that imported polar bear trophies came from hunts conducted in a sustainable manner. Canada has management authority over 13 of the 19 worldwide polar bear populations. After reviewing Canada's management actions, FWS created a list of approved polar bear populations in Canada.¹⁸ In 2008, six of the 13 Canadian polar bear populations were considered approved populations, and a polar bear trophy from one of these populations could be imported into the U.S. after the hunter paid an importation permit fee.¹⁹ According to FWS, between 1997 and 2008, 969 trophies were taken in Canada and imported into the U.S., raising \$969,000 for the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Conservation Fund.²⁰

On May 15, 2008, the Secretary of the Interior listed the worldwide polar bear population as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).²¹ Threatened and endangered marine mammals are considered depleted under the MMPA, and the importation of them is banned. At the time of the polar bear listing, there were 41 hunters with legally hunted polar bear trophies pending permit approval.²² Legislation is needed to allow for the importation of these trophies.

H.R. 6251 amends the MMPA to allow the Secretary of the Interior to issue permits to eligible hunters who legally took polar bear trophies from approved populations prior to the 2008 ESA listing.²³

[H.R. 7288 \(Rep. Johnson of SD\), "Western South Dakota Water Supply Project Feasibility Study Act"](#)

Western South Dakota is experiencing rapid population growth, resulting in a significant increase in water demand.²⁴ Accordingly, the Western Dakota Regional Water System

¹⁷ 16 U.S.C. Chapter 31 (2010), available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2010-title16/html/USCODE-2010-title16-chap31.htm>.

¹⁸ 50 CFR 18.30(g).

¹⁹ 73 FR 28306.

²⁰ H. Rept. 113-202.

²¹ "Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Determination of Threatened Status for the Polar Bear (*Ursus Maritimus*) throughout Its Range," Federal Register, May 15, 2008, www.federalregister.gov/documents/2008/05/15/E8-11105/endangered-and-threatened-wildlife-and-plants-determination-of-threatened-status-for-the-polar-bear.

²² *Id.*

²³ H.R. 6251, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6251>.

²⁴ "Progress," Western Dakota Regional Water System, 2026, <https://wdrws.org/progress>.

(WDRWS) was formed in 2021,²⁵ in response to concerns about the region’s increasing vulnerability to drought and its limited groundwater and surface water sources. Once completed, WDRWS will supply western South Dakota with supplemental water drawn from the Missouri River, securing a long-term, sustainable water supply for the region.²⁶ Completed project milestones include the acquisition of a state-issued future use permit for 20,765 acre-feet of water per year from the Missouri River and the development of conceptual designs for a Missouri River intake and transmission system.²⁷

H.R. 7288 authorizes the appropriation of \$10 million for the Bureau of Reclamation to conduct a feasibility study to evaluate the project’s potential benefits and costs, with a federal share not exceeding 50 percent.²⁸

H.R. 8195 (Rep. Walberg), “Responsible Cormorant Management and Control Act of 2026”

Double-crested cormorants (cormorants) are one of six cormorant species native to North America, with the largest concentration located in the Great Lakes region. Cormorants were listed under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) in 1972, when their population had contracted alongside the widespread use of chemicals like dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT).²⁹ Today, however, FWS estimates the population of cormorants in the continental U.S. and Canada to be between 871,001 and 1,031,757 birds,³⁰ indicating a much-improved situation.

A cormorant’s diet consists mostly of fish, averaging a pound of fish per day. According to FWS, cormorants “are opportunistic and generalist feeders, preying on many species of fish by concentrating on those that are easiest to catch.”³¹ This approach can make commercial aquaculture facilities and free-swimming fish populations optimal feeding grounds for cormorants. A 2021 study estimated that cormorants imposed economic losses of roughly \$64.7 million per year on fish farms, including the costs of non-lethal management techniques and revenue lost from cormorant depredation.³² Additionally, in 2018, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources testified at a House Committee on Natural Resources field hearing that cormorant predation was a “major explanatory factor” in the decline of perch populations in the Great Lakes.³³

In 2021, FWS created an individual-permit system based on a Population Take Limit (PTL) model to better manage cormorant populations. The PTL model is based on nest counts and requires individuals to apply annually for permits. When FWS issues a permit to take

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ H.R. 7288, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/119/bills/hr7288/BILLS-119hr7288ih.pdf>.

²⁹ “Expanding Management of Conflicts Associated with Double-crested Cormorants: Frequently Asked Questions,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, <https://www.fws.gov/node/417891>.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² Carole R. Engle, et al., “Principal economic effects of cormorant predation on catfish farms,” *Journal of the World Aquaculture Society*, 2021, 52:41–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jwas.12728>.

³³ Testimony of Randall Claramunt, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Oversight Hearing on “Fisheries Impact from Double-Crested Cormorant Populations in the Great Lakes,” June 11, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/115/meeting/house/108380/witnesses/HHRG-115-II00-TTF-ClaramuntR-20180611.pdf>.

cormorants, it specifies the number of cormorants allowed to be taken under that permit. Currently, FWS allows an annual take of up to 121,504 cormorants.³⁴ At a legislative hearing on April 8, 2025, the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries heard testimony about how the PTL model “creates a patchwork of guessing by [FWS] on where the main problems will occur each year.”³⁵

H.R. 8195 changes the existing management framework by requiring FWS, in consultation with the four regional flyway councils (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific), to develop regional management frameworks for the take of cormorants. The bill requires these frameworks to ensure that the cormorant breeding population is maintained at a sustainable level in accordance with the MBTA. The legislation also requires the frameworks to consider the effects of overabundant cormorant populations on fisheries, sensitive vegetation, other migratory bird populations, and federally listed species. Under the bill, FWS must identify management actions that can be taken in the System to address cormorant populations. Finally, H.R. 8195 requires the regional frameworks to be updated every five years, based upon population surveys that must also be completed every five years.

IV. MAJOR PROVISIONS & ANALYSIS

[H.R. 4219 \(Rep. Case\), “National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Team Act of 2025”](#)

Section 2. National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Team Program.

- Requires at least one ISST in each FWS region, collaboration with non-federal entities, and the development of a “set of consistent taxonomy standards.”
- Expands the ISST program by allowing FWS to provide technical assistance or enter into cooperative agreements to address invasive species on lands adjacent to the System.
- Authorizes \$15 million per year through FY 2030 to carry out the ISST program.

[H.R. 6251 \(Rep. Begich\), To amend the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 to allow importation of polar bear trophies taken in sport hunts in Canada before the date the polar bear was determined to be a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.](#)

Section 1. Permits for Importation of Polar Bear Trophies Taken in Sport Hunts in Canada.

- Amends the MMPA to allow the Secretary of the Interior to issue permits to eligible hunters to import polar bear trophies from Canada, provided that the bears were legally harvested before the May 15, 2008, listing of the species as “threatened” under the ESA.

³⁴ “Expanding Management of Conflicts Associated with Double-crested Cormorants: Frequently Asked Questions,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, <https://www.fws.gov/node/417891>.

³⁵ Testimony of Chris McGlawn, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries, Legislative Hearing on H.R. 839, H.R. 1809, H.R. 2293, and H.R. 2316, April 8, 2025, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250408/118118/HHRG-119-II13-Wstate-McGlawnC-20250408.pdf>.

[H.R. 7288 \(Rep. Johnson of SD\), “Western South Dakota Water Supply Project Feasibility Study Act”](#)

Section 3. Western South Dakota Water Supply Project Feasibility Study.

- Authorizes appropriations of \$10 million for the Bureau of Reclamation to conduct a feasibility study of the proposed rural water supply project, with a federal share not exceeding 50 percent.

[H.R. 8195 \(Rep. Walberg\), “Responsible Cormorant Management and Control Act of 2026”](#)

Section 2. Regional Management Frameworks for Take of Double-Crested Cormorants.

- Requires FWS, in consultation with the four regional flyway councils, to develop regional management frameworks for the take of cormorants.
- Requires the frameworks to ensure the breeding population of cormorants is maintained at a sustainable level in accordance with the MBTA and to consider the effects of overabundant cormorant populations on fisheries, sensitive vegetation, populations of other migratory birds, and federally listed species.
- Requires FWS to identify management actions that can be taken in the System to address cormorant populations.
- Requires the frameworks to be updated every five years, based upon population surveys, which are also to be completed every five years.

V. COST

A formal cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is not yet available for any of the bills. However, CBO found that a substantially similar bill from the 115th Congress, H.R. 224, would have an insignificant effect on the federal budget and not affect direct spending or revenues.³⁶

VI. ADMINISTRATION POSITION

The Trump administration’s position on any of these bills is unknown at this time.

VII. EFFECT ON CURRENT LAW

[H.R. 6251](#)

³⁶ “Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate: H.R. 224, Polar Bear Conservation and Fairness Act,” June 6, 2018, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/costestimate/hr224.pdf>.