

**Testimony of Mr. Terry Steinwand
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**

**on the North American Wetlands Conservation Extension Act of 2013 (H.R. 2208) and the
Sportsmen's Heritage And Recreational Enhancement (SHARE) Act (H.R. 2799)**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs of the
House Committee on Natural Resources**

August 2, 2013

Good Morning Chairman Fleming and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the perspectives of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies on HR 2208, a bill to reauthorize the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), and HR 2799, the Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement Act (SHARE) of 2013. I am Terry Steinwand, Director of North Dakota Game and Fish Department and Vice-Chair of the North American Wetland Conservation Council.

My testimony today is from my experience as a member of the NAWCA council appointed by Secretary of Interior where I currently serve as Vice Chair, and as a member of the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture and the Central Flyway Council.

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association) sincerely appreciates the chance to share with you some of the many successes of this truly landmark and landscape-level conservation law we call NAWCA, and we strongly support its reauthorization. The Association, founded in 1902, represents the interests of the public state agencies charged with the protection and management of North America's fish and wildlife resources. The Association, whose government members include the fish and wildlife agencies of all fifty states, has been instrumental for over a century in promoting sound resource management and strengthening federal, state, and Canadian provincial cooperation in this area.

North American Wetlands Conservation Extension Act of 2013, H.R. 2208

Mr. Chairman, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act has been singularly successful in its contributions to wetlands conservation. There are few programs that can boast of their success like NAWCA. It is a unique program, built on a foundation of public-private partnerships, which is wholeheartedly endorsed by the Association and its 50 state fish and wildlife agencies as well as the Flyway Councils and the Joint Ventures across North America. The Association strongly and enthusiastically supports HR 2208 for a number of reasons.

First, NAWCA is a highly successful voluntary, competitive conservation grant program for wetlands restoration and protection that leverages non-federal to federal dollars on an average of over 3:1 ratio. It is simply an incredible return on the taxpayers' investment. Second, it is a program that works for private landowners to restore and protect high priority wetlands, functions and values that are vital to waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species. We believe there are no legislative or programmatic modifications needed to the program to improve

its effectiveness. Third, the wetlands restored through NAWCA projects provide additional societal benefits to the American taxpayer including cleaner water to drink and air to breathe, aquifer and ground water recharge, natural flood control and abatement, carbon sequestration, and can even help maintain wetland-dependent species under state management authority which is fiscally beneficial. Furthermore, NAWCA leverages partnerships and funding at the national, state and local levels to conserve important landscapes that help create non-exportable American jobs across the United States. Finally, NAWCA and its projects contribute to rural economic development activities that are associated with the multibillion dollar outdoor recreation economy. The following testimony expounds on these points and the value of NAWCA to the American people, the Association and its member state agencies.

The world is vastly different than it was 24 years ago when Congress first passed the NAWCA. Large scale environmental, social, political, and economic changes are occurring at an accelerating rate. Since 1989, the world's population has increased 40 percent – from 5 billion to 7 billion people – and is expected to increase by a similar magnitude over the next decade. Since that time we have experienced:

- Global forces of supply and demand for food, fiber, and fuels that affect wildlife conservation efforts. Land use and agricultural production systems continually evolve in response to economic drivers, which in turn affects both conservation programs and the economics and policies of land use.
- Substantial human impact on ecosystems that are vital to waterfowl throughout their annual cycle. For some species of concern like scaup, black ducks and northern pintails, there is evidence that the number of waterfowl able to be supported on existing habitat has been substantially reduced on a continental scale.
- Climate variability, which is particularly troublesome because its effects are inherently unpredictable. For ducks, hydrological changes in prairie wetlands may have profound implications for waterfowl habitats, as might water level changes in the Great Lakes, sea level rise with increasing erosion of coastal marshes, and changes in the ecology of permafrost ponds in the North.
- Increased energy developments are impacting boreal, arctic, coastal and even prairie ecosystems and can have unintended consequences for wildlife.

Yet in spite of this rapid pace of change across the landscape, NAWCA and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan have maintained and grown populations of many species of waterfowl. Even though waterfowl conservation has made significant advances during the past century, much of the waterfowl management enterprise is being pursued under more or less the same model that evolved with the advent of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) and the NAWCA more than a quarter century ago. Clearly, for waterfowl management to survive and thrive in the next decades, managers need to be able to better understand the effects of these large-scale trends on the business of waterfowl management and conservation, and adapt accordingly.

A recent succession of wet years throughout much of the Prairie Pothole Region has caused midcontinent duck populations to increase. Yet their breeding habitat is being increasingly altered by recent land use changes, and this will inevitably lead to a population decline when

drier conditions return. The depth of that decline, given substantial habitat loss, cannot be predicted. What is predictable is that an increasing global demand for food, fiber, and energy will continue to affect the conservation of critical wetland and grassland habitat upon which many of our nation's waterfowl depend. Considering these landscape level pressures, NAWCA is a critical tool needed for working with private landowners to voluntarily conserve wetlands and habitats that are vitally important to waterfowl and other wetland-associated species.

Waterfowl migration and wintering habitats, many of which have already lost the vast majority of their wetlands, are being further threatened by invasive plant species, degraded water quality and diminished water supplies. The food and energy demands of nonbreeding waterfowl are often met by the seasonal availability of agricultural foods, and few areas have sufficient food and habitat secured in perpetuity. Waterfowl managers are concerned about their ability to secure breeding, migration and wintering habitat, particularly given the extremely high costs of conservation in some areas. Sea level rise, salt water intrusion, nutrient loading, coastal erosion, offshore and tidal energy developments and increased urbanization – acting alone or in combination – are rapidly degrading important coastal habitats.

Many issues affecting waterfowl populations and their habitats are unprecedented, and can be addressed only through additional research and novel conservation programs. However, of equal or even greater significance are social and ecological changes that affect the ability of wildlife managers to conserve the waterfowl resource, cope with global trends, and ensure that approaches to management are effective and efficient. NAWCA and its projects can help facilitate an adaptive management process for wetland conservation.

Conservation goals can only be achieved with broad public support and by influencing land use decisions over strategic areas of the continent. Most of these areas are privately owned “working lands” and critical landscape components for migratory birds. Support from the public and participation by landowners hinges on striking the right balance between conservation outcomes and the socioeconomic drivers that influence land use decisions. NAWCA provides the right tools for achieving the delicate balance for private working lands by enabling landowners to continue working the land and earning a good income, while protecting a habitat resource of national significance. As detailed in the 2013 State of the Birds on Private Lands report, more than 75% of both the breeding and wintering distributions of American Black Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintails, and Wood Ducks are found on private lands. Herons, egrets, and other waterbirds also depend on private wetlands throughout the year.

In my State of North Dakota, working with private landowners is critical to the success of NAWCA. For example, the Missouri Coteau Habitat Conservation Project (MCHCP) area encompasses 7.7 million acres in the heart of the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR). Since European settlement, over 60% of the prairie pothole wetlands in North Dakota have been lost to agricultural practices.

Ducks Unlimited, Inc. and its partners recently received NAWCC support to use \$2,000,000 in NAWCA grant funds and \$2,102,918 in match funds to acquire grassland and wetland easements to protect 11,720 acres for migratory birds habitat in the MCHCP area. Perpetual wetland and grassland easements are an effective and attractive approach to conserving wetland and wetland-

associated grassland habitat. The perpetual grassland and wetland easements will be secured on private land and will be open to public use at the discretion of each individual landowner. The easements are extremely popular with landowners.

By State Law, only funds obtained by non-profits, corporations, private individuals, Land and Water Conservation Funds and NAWCA can be used for perpetual easements in North Dakota. Consequently, the number of landowners interested in selling grassland easements exceeds the funds that are available. There are 440 landowners in North Dakota waiting for funding to protect over 79,360 acres of native grassland and wetland. Over \$36 million dollars are needed to secure the habitat being offered by these private landowners.

Segments of society differ in their connection to the outdoors and wildlife. Hunters tend to have a close emotional connection and have played an integral part of waterfowl and wetland conservation for nearly a century. The 1986 NAWMP was intended to provide waterfowl populations to meet the recreational demand of hunters, along with millions of viewers. At the time, waterfowl and hunter numbers were both plummeting, and it was generally assumed that the loss of habitat was largely responsible for the decline in waterfowl populations, and that associated conservative hunting regulations and reduced bird abundance triggered a loss of waterfowl hunters. Today, the U.S. has 2.6 million migratory bird hunters – that is six times the number of NCAA student athletes, and it is greater than the population of 16 states.

Wetlands conservation is important to us all. Many scientific studies have shown that coastal and inland wetlands are crucial to the health of our environment. The loss of wetlands impacts both human and conservation values: for example, water quality, water storage, flooding, erosion, and fish and wildlife habitat. Wetlands provide habitat for a diversity of fish, wildlife and plant species, which in turn support numerous recreational and commercial activities. The value of wetlands for a wide variety of important reasons cannot be understated or underestimated.

The Economics of Wildlife and Conservation

The Conservation Economy in America is a key element of the overall economic well-being of our nation. The restoration and maintenance of the quality of the natural environment depends on monetary investments by government agencies as well as individuals and organizations in the private sector. The economic benefits that emanate from conservation investments can be valued in several ways.

- the economic activity associated with direct spending of public and private dollars for conservation-related improvements on the ground;
- the recreational activity at places where conservation investments enhance the attractiveness of sites as recreation locations;
- the lower taxpayer dollars expended for air and water quality, water quantity, waste management, flood control/abatement/response, and energy generation among other benefits associated with health natural systems (so-called ecosystem services); and
- the economic value that people might assign to the social and cultural benefits of maintaining healthy ecosystems.

In February of this year, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation released a groundbreaking report that documents the direct investments in conservation in each state and the resulting

economic benefits. Investments included in the study were those that support the protection or management of native fish and wildlife species and/or land and water acquisitions to protect their habitats, including mitigation dollars and legal settlements when the funds are directed towards habitat. Including multiplier effects in the national economy, the \$38.8 billion of direct spending on conservation activities in the United States generates \$93.2 billion of total economic activity. In other words, if conservation investments in the U.S. were no longer made and these dollars were not invested elsewhere, U.S. economic activity would fall by \$93 billion.

According to the report, conservation's economic contributions include supporting over 660,000 jobs with \$41.6 billion of income (salaries and wages) while adding \$59.7 billion to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The resulting economic activity returns \$12.9 billion in the form of tax revenues to the state, local and federal governments. In effect, this can be considered a "conservation rebate" of the public's original conservation investment. Conservation activities across the country, including those spurred by NAWCA projects, contribute to these non-exportable jobs and economic security.

These conservation investments are not only important at the national level, but also at the individual state level. For example, in North Dakota the annual direct conservation investments include \$384 million by the federal government, \$46 million by the state government, \$4.8 million by local governments, and just over \$72 million by the private sector. That is a total direct investment annually of \$507.9 million. These direct investments generate 5,236 jobs with salaries and wages of \$291.6 million in North Dakota. Furthermore, these investments contribute \$380.6 million to GDP, \$34.5 million to state and local tax revenues, and \$59 million to federal tax revenues.

Not surprisingly, the economic contributions at the state level vary considerably. At the upper end, conservation investments are associated with over 57,000 jobs in California, 31,700 jobs in Florida and 22,200 jobs in Oregon. Even in the smallest states, direct investments in conservation support more than 1,000 jobs and approximately \$100 million of income.

Conservation investments are critical to creating and protecting the water resources for recreational and commercial fisheries and wildlife habitat for hunting and other outdoor recreation. In turn, providing access to America's natural resources is essential to the success of the entire outdoor recreation industry – from manufacturers, to wholesalers, retailers, and the hospitality industries. In 2011, the combination of outdoor recreation, nature conservation and historic preservation in the U.S. provided 9.4 million jobs, \$107 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues, and added \$1.06 trillion in economic activity (equivalent to GDP). Outdoor recreation spending was one sector of the economy that continued to increase throughout the recent economic downturn – it never slowed down like the housing and manufacturing sectors.

In 2011, hunting alone generated \$38.3 billion in retail sales, which is more than the annual sales of Best Buy, and twice the sales of JC Penny. Migratory bird hunting alone created 68,827 jobs and generated \$3.4 billion in sales – 61% more sales than Under Armour. Migratory bird hunting not only provided revenues within the retail sector, but it generated one billion dollars in tax revenue – enough to support 18,000 teaching jobs. The investment of NAWCA in 2011 also generated significant economic returns, as every dollar invested generated over three more

dollars by other partners. A total of \$161.7 million dollars were generated from the initial \$51.6 million from NAWCA.

Conservation Success through Partnerships

State funding, matched by conservation partners like Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon, and by NAWCA provides the foundation for continent-wide partnerships necessary to protect and restore waterfowl habitat. For example, Louisiana duck hunters harvest more ducks than any other state in the U.S. However, because Louisiana is a wintering state for waterfowl, the state relies on good habitat conditions on the breeding grounds in places like North and South Dakota and in Saskatchewan and Manitoba in Canada to produce the birds. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) was the first state agency to provide funding for breeding grounds conservation outside of its boundaries starting in the early 1960's.

Because of the great waterfowl traditions and hunting heritage, Louisiana waterfowl hunters and the LDWF feel a responsibility to support breeding habitat projects in other parts of the continent that produce the ducks they harvest in the fall and winter. That responsibility to participate in habitat conservation on the breeding grounds has manifested itself into state law, which provides an amount equal to ten percent of the fees collected from the sale of hunting licenses to the development and preservation of breeding grounds for migratory waterfowl. The Louisiana law states that the funds are to be expended through Ducks Unlimited, Inc. or under the direction of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission at its discretion to support conservation activities on the breeding grounds.

NAWCA funds are used as a consistent source of funds for creating and maintaining partnerships at the flyway scale or regional scale such as in the Central Valley of California. The Central Valley is one of the most important regions for waterfowl in the U.S. Over 5 million waterfowl are supported by wetland and agricultural habitats each winter, comprising 60% of the Pacific Flyway population and 20% of the continental population. The conservation needs of the region are based on the most current scientific information available, and the habitat conservation objectives consider the needs of local agriculture and encompass six different bird group plans. The Central Valley Joint Venture is an amazing partnership of 21 State and Federal government agencies, conservation organizations, and one private corporation. The Joint Venture partners work together at local and regional levels to promote conservation for the benefit of birds, associated wildlife, and the American people. The Joint Venture partnership has conserved 762,000 acres with the assistance of \$87 million in funding from NAWCA, and \$343 million from other federal and non-federal funding partners.

The Pacific Coast Joint Venture (PCJV) delivers conservation programs within the Pacific Flyway. The PCJV includes the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii and the Canadian province of British Columbia. The Joint Venture partners, in 2012 alone, completed 82 projects for a total cost of almost \$43 million and protected, restored, and enhanced over 81,000 acres of habitat. Since the establishment of the Joint Venture in 1991, the partners have protected, restored, and enhanced just over one million acres and influenced total investment of \$1.69 billion. NAWCA projects amounted to total federal and other partner expenditures of over \$716 million within the PCJV. Clearly, NAWCA funded projects leverage other significant non-federal conservation investments.

In the State of Washington, the San Juan Islands project lies in the heart of Puget Sound and within 50 miles from Seattle. The San Juan Islands have experienced tremendous development pressures, including the loss of coastal and inland wetlands and associated uplands. The partners' long-term goal is to protect, restore, and enhance approximately 2,000 acres of the islands' habitats. The area is important wintering habitat for Pacific brant goose and supports several thousand waterfowl and shorebirds during migration periods, including lesser and greater scaup, and northern pintail. The project also benefits a variety of seabirds, shorebirds, marine mammals and fish. The San Juan Islands are home to the largest number of breeding bald eagles in the lower 48 United States, and also home to the orca or killer whale.

The partners included Ducks Unlimited, the San Juan Preservation Trust, San Juan County Land Bank, landowner Scott Meyers, San Juan County Conservation District, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, San Juan Islands School District and Friends of the San Juans. The local community was involved in the project with volunteers providing 1,900 hours of work for coastal riparian replanting projects to help improve shade or forage fish spawning habitat, to provide bank stabilization, and to enhance overall habitat function and diversity. The project partners contributed over \$2.2 million to match the one million dollars received from NAWCA.

Why We Need NAWCA

The overall rate of wetland loss has slowed; however, the fact remains that we continue to lose wetlands in North America, including in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR). It is estimated that during the period of Colonial America, the area now encompassing the lower 48 states had 221 million acres of wetlands. As of 2009, there were only 110 million acres of wetlands remaining with approximately 5 percent being saltwater wetlands and about 95 percent being freshwater wetlands. Freshwater wetland losses were primarily attributed to urban and rural development and silviculture operations. Urban and rural development combined accounted for 23 percent of the wetland losses. As reported to Congress in 2011, the most recent study on the status and trends of our Nation's wetlands resources indicated that the overall estimated net gain in all freshwater wetland areas was substantially lower than what was reported for the period between 1998 and 2004. The wetland loss rate showed an increase of 140 percent from 2004 to 2009. Even though NAWCA has contributed much to the protection of freshwater wetlands, we continue to lose wetlands at an alarming rate, and more needs to be done to protect and restore these wetlands and the multiple societal benefits they provide.

Losses of freshwater marshes at the local or regional level can be much higher, which is the situation in the U.S. portion of the PPR that encompasses parts of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa. Wetland area has also declined in other Midwestern States including Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Losses have also been observed in the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Plain States of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana and the southeastern States of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. These losses can be attributed to various market and economic drivers as well as land use and ownership changes over time.

The NAWMP identified the PPR as the continent's top priority for waterfowl conservation and established the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) in 1987 as one of the original six joint ventures to conserve and protect the U.S. portion of this region. The Prairie Habitat Joint Venture (PHJV), a complimentary effort by our Canadian colleagues, was created to protect the Canadian portion of the region. The PPR is one of the most altered landscapes in the world due to productive soils and the relative ease with which the landscape can be altered.

Historic wetland losses across the Prairie Pothole States ranged from 27% in Montana to 89% in Iowa. Grassland areas are some of the most important ecosystems for modern human subsistence, because they occupy large areas of continent interiors and supply the majority of the world's food. This has created a trade-off between cropland production, rangeland production, and conserving native grasslands, a struggle that grasslands have historically lost. According to the U.S. National Agriculture Statistics Service, the U.S. PPR accounts for approximately 33% of the nation's annual production of corn, wheat, and soybeans and is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world.

U.S. grasslands west of the Mississippi River declined by 260 million acres from 1850 to 1950, with an additional loss of 27 million acres between 1950 and 1990. Grasslands in the PPR complement wetlands, because many species of wetland-dependent birds nest in surrounding grasslands. Grass cover is essential for successful nesting for a wide variety of ground-nesting birds, including waterfowl. Despite historical losses, 26.4 million acres of grass cover remain within the PPJV, excluding CRP areas, but it still remains one of the most imperiled ecosystems in North America. Conservation investments by governments and the private sector are essential to have a positive influence on continued breeding, migration, and wintering waterfowl habitat in North America.

Unfortunately, the PPJV grassland protection goal will be difficult to achieve in the face of current rates of habitat loss and current conservation spending trajectories. Private landowner acceptance of conservation programs will be imperative given the amount of land privately held (90–98%, in the PPJV, with the exception of MT). This point is increasingly important when we recognize that conservation easements on private land accounted for 93% of grassland and 66% of wetland protections during the past decade. Wetland goals may be attainable in the PPJV, however, achieving the goals is contingent upon conservation funding increasing proportionately to land prices, continued landowner interest in protection, and the rate of wetland loss being slowed. During the past decade, the price of agricultural land has doubled within the states that make up the PPJV, while funding targeted toward wetland conservation has not increased. However, by working together and leveraging state, local and other resources we can make great strides toward achieving our wetland goals.

Energy development is known to directly influence wildlife by altering habitat use and population dynamics, and indirectly by facilitating spread of non-native invasive plants and new diseases such as West Nile. Large increases in energy production, whether wind, oil and gas extraction, or biofuels, is having major effects on land use. There have been substantial oil and gas developments and wind and solar energy developments all across the U.S. By working with private landowners and using NAWCA and its associated leveraged non-federal funds, we can work together to conserve the most important habitats affected by these land use changes.

Based on a cooperative, voluntary, non-regulatory approach NAWCA engages the federal government in partnerships which include local and state agencies, conservation groups, businesses, sporting groups, landowners, private citizens, ranchers, farmers and communities, to name a few. NAWCA has invested nearly \$1.26 billion in grants and involved approximately 5,000 partners in 2,305 projects since its inception. These partners have contributed another \$2.61 billion in matching funds to affect 27.3 million acres of habitat across North America. The return on the federal investment under this program has been remarkable. In the United States, over 1500 projects have been funded, at least one in every state and these have provided significant economic benefits, often in rural communities. This exemplary program offers outstanding returns on the Federal investment in wetland ecosystem conservation.

Since its enactment in 1989, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act has been extraordinarily successful. It has contributed to the protection, restoration and enhancement of millions of acres of wetlands and adjacent (buffer) acres for the benefit of wetland dependent wildlife and the people who enjoy them. The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies enthusiastically supports HR 2208, and recommends continuing the existing authorization for the next five years through 2017, as provided in H.R. 2208. An authorization period of five years would also be consistent with updates to the NAWMP, which is complimentary to NAWCA.

In summary, wetland restoration, protection and conservation provides an important and diverse array of long-term environmental, social and economic benefits to the citizens of the United States. Let us not lose the momentum we have now gained with our willing conservation partners. The Association urges you to ensure the reauthorization of NAWCA at its current \$75 million level of funding authority. This would indicate a continuing commitment to wetlands conservation and allow for the potential to help meet society's ever changing demands for outdoor recreation and their love of nature. Annual requests for NAWCA grants continue to exceed available funding. If funding is reduced for NAWCA, it will impact negatively on a number of sectors of the economy and state fish and wildlife programs. Furthermore, the NAWCA is working exceptionally well as currently structured, and we do not recommend any program changes or modifications be made to the existing statute.

I want to recognize and commend the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission and my fellow members of the North American Wetlands Conservation Council on a job very well done. These bodies are charged with the responsibilities of ensuring that projects approved are consistent with the Act and that an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems are secured, restored and enhanced. By their very nature wetland ecosystems are dynamic and extremely diverse across landscapes. So too, must be their management. The Act provides the necessary flexibility to ensure that the most appropriate wetland ecosystem management options are available.

We appreciate the support of Mr. Wittman, Mr. Thompson, Mr. King, and Mr. Dingell for introducing HR 2208, and the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs for scheduling this reauthorization hearing. We truly believe that the North American Wetlands Conservation Act is an excellent example of the application of an ecosystem or landscape

management approach to conservation of our natural resources, and we recommend the Committee expedite passage of HR 2208.

H.R. 2799, the Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement (SHARE) Act

Mr. Chairman, I wish to turn our attention to the Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement (SHARE) Act (H.R. 2799), and thank Representatives Latta, Thompson, and Walz for their support of this bill. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies supports this bill in concept and welcomes the opportunity to permanently establish the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council (Council), an advisory committee to the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture. If enacted, this legislation would provide the opportunity for the Council to continue to provide their invaluable insight and advice to the Secretaries on wildlife and habitat conservation issues, hunting and shooting sports needs, public access concerns and challenges as well as enhance coordination between the states, federal agencies, tribes, the wildlife and hunting community and industry.

The Association appreciates recognition of the important role we play in representing the 50 state fish and wildlife agencies through the Ex Officio designation. Furthermore, we thank the bill sponsors for inclusion of individual state fish and wildlife agencies' eligibility in the discretionary membership category. As you are well aware, close coordination between the state fish and wildlife agencies and our federal agency partners is critical if we are going to successfully navigate the wildlife conservation challenges in today's increasingly changing landscapes. We support the Council's intent and believe it serves an important role with the Administration.

We do notice the committee composition has changed from that of the existing Council, and the Association would like to work with the bill sponsors and committee staff on understanding the rationale for this change. We believe that representation on the Council should draw from a diverse suite of interests from the wildlife conservation and habitat, hunting and shooting sports, and private land sectors, and therefore, we believe that the full suite of categories from which discretionary members are chosen in the existing Council charter is more fully representative of those diverse perspectives and interests. We look forward to working with staff on some perfecting language to ensure the broadest representation of views possible on the Council.

Mr. Chairman, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act has been singularly successful in its contribution to wetlands conservation. There are few programs that can boast of their success like NAWCA. Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives with you today, and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.