



Testimony of
Dr. Karen Waldrop, Chief Conservation Officer, Ducks Unlimited
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Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry
“Challenges and Successes of Conservation Programs in 2020”
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Chairman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa and members of the committee, thank you for providing Ducks Unlimited the opportunity to testify today to discuss the “Challenges and Successes of Conservation Programs in 2020.” This year has certainly been different than any of my previous 17 years in conservation, so we really appreciate the opportunity to talk about the important work we’ve been able to deliver under these trying times.

I am Dr. Karen Waldrop, Chief Conservation Officer of Ducks Unlimited. I operate as the strategic leader for our national and international conservation programs, including science and habitat conservation operations, as well as lead our regional offices across the country that focus on conservation delivery. I received my Ph.D. in Wildlife Biology/Forest Sciences from Clemson University and both my M.S. in Wildlife Biology/Forest Resources and B.S. in Forest Resources from University of Georgia. Prior to joining DU in 2019, I served as the Deputy Commissioner for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

Ducks Unlimited is the world’s leader in wetlands and waterfowl conservation. DU got its start in 1937 during the Dust Bowl when North America’s draught-plagued waterfowl populations had plunged to unprecedented lows. Starting in 1937 and continuing to today, Ducks Unlimited conserves, restores and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America’s waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people. We know that Ducks Unlimited can only achieve our vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever through diverse public and private partnerships to address the full range of factors that affect waterfowl habitat. US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) are fantastic partners for this nation’s conservation delivery.

Wetlands benefit people in many ways, either directly or indirectly through flood control (by storing water during flood events), water quality improvement (by naturally removing nitrogen and phosphorus), erosion control, and provide opportunities for other forms of recreation, like hunting, fishing, kayaking or wildlife watching. Wetland protection and restoration work conducted by DU, NRCS and producers provide wetland-based water solutions for people and wildlife. For example, when we build or restore wetlands in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, these wetlands can temporarily store flood waters during high runoff events, preventing downstream flooding and erosion. Or when our teams construct wetlands in the Midwest, the result is lower levels of contaminants in the water because of the natural ability of wetlands to filter out these pollutants. Similarly, when rice fields are flooded, not only is food available for ducks but flooding helps prevent erosion and controls weeds, so fewer chemicals are needed.

Ducks Unlimited and many other mid-sized nonprofits have been hit particularly hard by many of the government closures and restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Not being made eligible for the Paycheck Protection Program because we had over 500 employees when the COVID-19 pandemic started has certainly limited available financial relief, either. As it has across the world, the coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected Ducks Unlimited, especially in our fundraising efforts. DU relies heavily on our event-based fundraising that generates more

than \$50 million on an annual basis. Our events bring in tens of millions of dollars in major gift payments, as well as thousands of regular memberships that are normally renewed through local event attendance. This Spring, the pandemic severely limited our traditional event fundraising and it continues to do so today. Due to government restrictions, DU has been forced to cancel over 2,000 in-person events losing at least \$17 million in expected event income through June 30 alone. Furloughs, drastic budget cuts, and unfortunately layoffs are becoming part of the new reality for most non-profit organizations around the country. That includes DU. However, a bright spot during these difficult times has been our continued conservation delivery. It is only through the partnerships we've created with producers and the dedicated NRCS staff throughout the country that this conservation has been possible. Much like our friends in the farming and ranching community, DU continues our important work in the countryside where fresh air and open spaces limit the dangers presented by a virus.

Just two weeks ago, NRCS announced that DU and our partners had been awarded a \$8.73 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant to develop a producer-focused program, Scaling Soil Health in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR). The program will offer farmers and ranchers technical and financial assistance, advanced training and mentorship to increase the adoption of soil health practices in the PPR of North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana. This will be a significant opportunity for DU to help more producers access the education and financial support they need to adopt soil health practices. Along with our great partners, we will work with interested farmers and ranchers to help them improve soil quality and wildlife habitat on their lands and produce positive economic results. A diverse array of partners on the project include the South Dakota Grassland Coalition, North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Beadle Conservation District, Millborn Seeds, state game & fish agencies and others. This type of partnership and collaboration on behalf of America's farmers, ranchers and wildlife would not be possible without the help and foundation that is the NRCS.

Partnership is what drives DU's conservation delivery. One area of the country where our partnerships are really taking off is in Iowa, where DU has been working with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) to help deliver the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Many of the wetlands created through this program collect tile drain water and use natural wetland processes to breakdown nitrates into inert nitrogen gas. A properly designed wetland can remove 30-70% of nitrates and 90% of herbicides. So far, the CREP program has constructed just over 100 wetlands treating approximately 100,000 acres of farmland in central Iowa over 15 years. To meet the goals of Iowa's Nutrient Reduction Strategy, we will need approximately 5,000 wetlands to treat runoff from 5-10 million acres. The popularity of this program continues to grow as farmers receive an easement payment to restore wetlands on what is most often marginal farmland. DU, in coordination with IDALS and USDA have been able to bring in diverse corporate partners like Wells Fargo, Microsoft and Nestle Purina to help scale up the conservation delivery effort to meet producer demand.

An example of partnership driven conservation delivery work that DU is extremely proud of is our ongoing collective rice efforts that have been vitally supported by NRCS through the RCPP. USA Rice, California Rice Commission and Ducks Unlimited are in the process of delivering conservation on more than 790,000 acres on nearly 1,000 farms. Ducks Unlimited and USA Rice Federation's Rice Stewardship Partnership was created to support farmers first, and this is an effort that DU takes pride in. Coordinating with NRCS field offices and Soil and Water Conservation Districts, DU's conservation staff is improving customer service by meeting farmers right in the field where they are to better understand their challenges and opportunities. These on the ground conservation practices address a number of natural resource concerns but, perhaps most importantly, support farmers' livelihoods by minimizing their risk and offering income diversification to their farming operations. These practices are especially important this Summer in the face of multiple storms impacting the Gulf Coast. Approximately 1.5 million gallons of floodwater is stored in one acre of wetland. When Hurricane Sally, Hurricane Laura, and other storms made landfall in these Gulf states, existing wetlands created by these very same Farm Bill programs played an important role in limiting the severity of flooding in some areas. For example, when Sandy hit the Atlantic coast in 2012, an estimated \$625 million in flood damage was prevented across 12 states in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States thanks to coastal wetlands. While it would be unrealistic to suggest that the presence of wetlands could ever eliminate flooding caused by hurricanes and tropical storms entirely, they have proven to help save millions of dollars by protecting our coastlines and acting as natural reservoirs during severe storms.

Last month, Ducks Unlimited signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, The Public Lands Council and Safari Club International to outline the groups' shared commitment to conservation of natural resources through sustainable multiple use. The MOU outlines the groups' efforts to cultivate healthier ecosystems, wildlife populations, and economies through active management like livestock grazing. Hunting, fishing and managed grazing are all key components of successful, comprehensive management plans for our nation's lands and resources. The MOU highlights decades of successful voluntary conservation programs and formalizes a partnership to allow these groups to coordinate projects in the future. Cattle and beef producers, hunters and other conservationists, will continue to engage in conservation partnerships that maintain wildlife habitat, honor the cultural and historical value of landscapes and empower local communities and rural economies. Cows and ducks get along great. We know that when we have ranchers and cattle on the landscape, we have grasslands and wetlands. That means waterfowl and other wildlife have places to nest, breed, forage, rest and migrate. Conservationists and ranchers are linked arm in arm in keeping family farms on the landscape, with vibrant grasslands intact and functioning for the good and wellbeing of us all.

Increasing and improving conservation delivery during the COVID-19 crisis drives economic activity to rural areas and provides ecosystem services like flood protection to urban areas at the same time. One such project that is a good example of this is the instillation of two bridges in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area in California. A 350-ton hydraulic truck crane placed precast

concrete bridges that replaced narrow pipes regularly blocked by beavers and debris, improving drainage and water supply to the wildlife area. The bridges are part of a \$4 million project scheduled for completion in October. The investments in infrastructure will create 200 acres of new wetlands, improve management for rice fields, reduce on-site flooding and improve access for environmental education programs.

Another great example of conservation on working lands is USDA's newly released Prairie Pothole Water Quality and Wildlife Program, which will invest millions into voluntary protection of wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region. Producers will be eligible to receive payment for wetlands less than two acres in size wholly within privately owned working cropland. This new program will be carried out through our continued partnership with producers and NRCS to get the most value out of each acre for farmers and ranchers while also conserving waterfowl habitat.

Ducks Unlimited believes strongly in the idea of voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs. When given an economically viable opportunity to improve their land through conservation practices, producers have proven to have a strong appetite for these programs year after year. Voluntary, perpetual wetland and agricultural land easements offered through NRCS are great examples of popular conservation programs that producers continue to seek out. Best among these "working lands" easements are those that protect wetlands, prime soils, and other conservation values without compromising a landowner's ability to sustainably, and prosperously, produce food and fiber. In fact, there continue to be waiting lists of producers to gain access to wetland easements as demand far exceeds supply. DU will continue to follow the lead of our partners in agriculture and urge Congress' continued support of these critical conservation tools.

We often talk about the good work of DU in regions like the Lower Mississippi River, but DU is also helping to deliver innovative Wetland Reserve Easements in Northern California. Through a collaborative effort between NRCS, Feather River Land Trust, Northern Sierra Partnership and the Nature Conservancy; Ducks Unlimited is working to rehabilitate the Decker Dam in the Sierra Valley of northern California. This area is an important spring and fall migration area and supports important local nesting and brood-rearing. The dam structure has existed since the 1930's to provide water for livestock and flood irrigation to more than 330 acres of wet meadow pasture in the immediate vicinity, but also to help maintain irrigation capacity to over 1,000 acres of wet meadow pasture upstream of the structure on neighboring ranches. Over time, the structure has become dilapidated and no longer functions at its original intended capacity. DU is providing technical engineering services to help design a rehabilitated structure that will restore the original capacity for flood irrigation purposes and wildlife habitat benefits.

Agricultural Land Easements have also proven to be an important tool in the toolbox for producers and conservationists alike in California and across the country. More than 95% of the historic wetlands in the Sacramento Valley have been lost, and wintering waterfowl, shorebirds and other waterbirds are now heavily dependent upon rice lands to meet their nutritional needs.

About 68% of the nutritional needs of wintering waterfowl in the Central Valley are being met by agricultural lands, primarily rice. However, most of the rice lands in this area have no long-term protection and the Central Valley is one of the nation's most threatened farming regions. Establishing conservation easements on wildlife-friendly agricultural lands is an effective way to provide long-term protection to important Pacific Flyway habitat while allowing those lands to remain in private ownership and wildlife-friendly agricultural production. Easements help to keep farmers and ranchers on the land, help producers manage risk, and give ranch and farm families the opportunity to raise the next generation on the farm.

ACEP-WRE is one of our Nation's most successful voluntary conservation programs. The program restores previously converted wetlands and provides willing landowners and producers a financially viable alternative to farming marginal land with low or negative profits while still retaining property ownership. It is also a sound investment of taxpayer dollars and serves to help focus federal investment in commodity and crop insurance on the most productive lands for agriculture. In fact, a study recently conducted by Doug Lawrence, a noted natural resource program economist, suggested that when land is voluntarily enrolled in WRE, there is a significant savings in government expenditures of commodity and crop insurance programs on these lands. This analysis estimates that enrolling 100,000 acres of cropland in WRE would save approximately \$292 million over 10 years. For example, enrollment of one acre of cropland in WRE saves \$53 per acre per year from those programs. 100,000 acres of enrolled cropland will yield a savings of approximately \$292 million. In addition to these benefits to taxpayers, WRE also improves water quality and creates habitat for migratory birds, at-risk species, and resident wildlife, which in turn boosts rural economies as sportsmen and other wildlife enthusiasts recreate on these lands.

Ducks Unlimited has been uniquely successful in continuing to carry on our mission during the COVID-19 pandemic. We seek to help farmers and ranchers that face similar immense financial challenges to continue to feed and provide for our nation. DU greatly values our producer partners who are the stewards to the wetlands and grasslands needed for waterfowl to feed and nest successfully. Whether through the obvious recreation opportunities and waterfowl habitat protections offered by wetlands, or the more discrete benefits provided by the many ecosystem services that the average person likely doesn't even know they benefit from, wetlands are the answer for a lot more problems than you'd think. Perhaps now more so than ever, we rely on our public and private partnerships to continue to deliver on our mission to conserve and restore waterfowl habitat that provides countless benefits for both people and wildlife.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Please don't hesitate to ask if you have any questions that I may be able answer.