Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the Conservation and Forestry Subcommittee, my name is Marissa Jensen and I serve as the Education & Outreach Conservation Leadership Program Manager with Pheasants Forever (PF) and Quail Forever (QF) based out of St. Paul, Minnesota.

I am here today representing our 750 community-based Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever chapters; and 400,000 members, volunteers, and supporters who work every day to promote and implement conservation programs across the country. Additionally, I am here representing over 400 members of my team who work for Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, many of whom deliver boots-on-the-ground services on private and public lands. This team works one-on-one with state and federal partners, and landowners to help deliver critical conservation practices. As one of the nation’s largest employers of conservation professionals, we know first-hand the importance of developing the next generation who will work with agriculture producers and land managers to implement conservation programs now and into the future.

As “The Habitat Organizations,” Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever’s mission is to “conserve pheasants, quail, and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public access, education, and conservation advocacy.” This is meaningful work, and one we do not and cannot accomplish alone. Beginning in South Dakota in 2003, our Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist program has helped leverage funding with state and federal agencies and numerous partners, with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) being a significant partner in these efforts. These partnerships have worked to develop cooperative biologist positions that provide one-on-one conservation technical assistance to private landowners interested in implementing conservation practices. Supported by funding from NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance and Farm Bill conservation programs, as well as the Farm Service Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies, and others, our staff have directly impacted over 22,000,000 acres, with active partnerships in 40 states. This dedicated team delivers federal and state voluntary conservation practices and programs at the county and community level, much of which comes from Farm Bill conservation programs that reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and wildlife habitat, and provide a host of other ecosystem benefits. Thanks to these partnerships over the last nearly 20 years, they have been one of the most successful, and largest boots-on-the-ground implementation efforts in the country.

My Journey to Conservation

I am thrilled to be here today, representing my team of conservation professionals, members, and volunteers. In addition, I would like to share my journey to a career in conservation. I am a biologist by education and worked as an emergency veterinary technician prior to my career shift into wildlife and habitat conservation. Throughout my career, I have learned how to navigate temporary positions through
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in various roles. Four years ago, I began my journey with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, and I am excited to help the next generation of conservation leaders find their place in their careers.

I live in Omaha, Nebraska with my son and two bird dogs. Although I have lived a life in the city, my parents were born and raised in the small, rural town of Minden, Nebraska and I continue to stay connected to this community. This town has provided me with a framework of knowledge regarding land management and conservation practices that benefit us all, which I continue to build upon to this day. At an early age, I learned the importance of habitat from my father and grandfather's backyard garden full of milkweed and monarchs, and along with this, the knowledge of the impact one has, even from our own backyards.

Although my connection to the outdoors was strong, I did not grow up in a family of hunters and was not exposed to or interested in hunting for most of my life. With no previous knowledge of how conservation happens or is funded, I never made the connection between the outdoors, wildlife, funding, and conservation. Once I gained this knowledge, coupled with my love for spending time outdoors and the ability to connect this to food, I went on my first hunt at the age of thirty and have not looked back since. In an effort to inspire others, I joined colleagues in the field to share my story as an adult-onset hunter. This video can be viewed here.

**National Youth Leadership Council**

Today, I want to tell you about what we are doing as an organization to ensure that there are passionate people in the field of conservation into the future. In 2006, PF & QF began a new endeavor to work with and provide education for the next generation of conservation leaders through our National Youth Leadership Council. This group has historically included about twenty-five high school students from across the country who are interested in being leaders within their age group and providing inspiration, education, and advocacy for our organization's mission.

Our group of talented youth have made the trip to Washington D.C. to see first-hand, how important the legislative and administrative processes are in our great Country. They develop their professionalism and learn how to be leaders for the conservation values we share. Many of these students report back years later, sharing the impact just one trip to Washington D.C. had on their career path.

Many of these young adults have since chosen a career path in conservation or agriculture, and as such, have become leaders among their peers in college and careers. Additionally, some of our students have shown their leadership skills by serving our country in the military. All of them will be - and have been - future leaders in conservation, either professionally, or in their personal lives as supporters and volunteers in their communities.

Through our National Youth Leadership Council and the organization’s growth in conservation leaders, we had the ability to evaluate and restructure our efforts and grow this program to include hundreds of students who want to make a difference in their communities and beyond. We will do this as we transition our National Youth Leadership Council into Journey to Conservation Careers - a program designed for high school students who have an interest in a career in conservation.

**Journey to Conservation Careers**

This exciting new addition is currently in its pilot phase and is aimed toward reaching a larger, more diverse audience of students. We recognize the importance of meeting students and participants where they are at, to help break down barriers in participation and work toward building an inclusive community and workforce.
To do this, we have partnered with Bellevue University (Bellevue, NE) to develop a self-paced, online curriculum where students will cover three unique modules: Conservation Past, Present, and Future; Upland Bird Biology and Ecology; and Conservation Responsibility. During the third module, students will have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience and start learning how to network and build their community through a job shadowing opportunity with those in the conservation field within Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and hopefully other federal and state agencies, and conservation organizations.

Monthly virtual webinars will take place as part of this program, where students will have the opportunity to “meet” conservation career professionals and leaders from across the country. Through these sessions, students will have the chance to ask questions and learn what tools and resources are available to set them up for success.

Additionally, Journey to Conservation Careers will offer scholarship opportunities for students in our efforts and priority to reach historically underrepresented communities and break down barriers to participation in the program. We will do this by reaching out and working directly with high school teachers and counselors, environmental education associations within each state, marketing and outreach efforts, and with the help from many of our partners.

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, like many other sectors, are recognizing a downward trend of resumes and applications for open positions. We know that our partners with federal and state agencies are experiencing the same phenomenon. To elevate our efforts, the organization partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to host its first Conservation College and Virtual Career Fair, as part of our Journey to Conservation Careers efforts, in February of 2022.

This pilot event focused on ten “virtual” booths which included nine of our partners from federal to state agencies, universities, and non-profit organizations. With minimal promotion and effort, the event had over 160 registrations with an 82% attendance rate on the day of the event. Additionally, over 34 states were represented in attendance.

The event was open to the public in an effort to gauge interest in this type of event. The participants' education and experience levels ranged from high school to post-doctorate students and career professions. High school teachers logged on with classrooms to provide an educational experience for their students throughout the day.

Every year, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever hosts National Pheasant Fest and Quail Classic, which historically brings in over 30,000 attendees, as well as state, federal, and non-profit partners. Our vision for the future with Journey to Conservation Careers is to host a Natural Resources Conference for these students on the front end of Pheasant Fest and Quail Classic. With students arriving ahead of the show, they will have an opportunity to meet leaders and inspiring speakers, connect with like-minded students, and start building their own conservation community.

Closing Statement

I want to emphasize that the success of these programs and efforts would not be possible without the numerous partnerships that we have with the governmental and non-governmental entities, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state fish and wildlife agencies, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and other national, state, and local agencies and organizations.
We also need sound conservation policy, science, and adequate support to ensure that conservation programs are effectively implemented. We need to ensure that the next generation of conservation leaders have the education and experience to become champions of our natural resources.

Finally, we all know the importance of inspiring the next generation of conservation leaders and land stewards, and with the partnerships and resources we have developed, we can provide the tools and guidance necessary to help these students begin their journey with the right foot forward. Journey to Conservation Careers can deliver these resources and guidance, to meet students where they are at.

Thank you and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.