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July 13, 2022

The Honorable Abigail Spanberger, Chair
Subcommittee on Conservation & Forestry
15 Independence Avenue SE, Room 1010
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Doug LaMalfa, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Conservation & Forestry
15 Independence Avenue SE, Room 1010
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairperson Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry, it is my honor to be here today to provide testimony on the important Farm Bill programs that do so much for natural resources conservation on our nation's private and public lands.

I am Becky Humphries, CEO of the National Wild Turkey Federation, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting heritage. Next year, we will be celebrating our 50th Anniversary, and I'm very proud to say that through our work with Farm Bill Conservation and Forestry programs and partnerships with state fish and wildlife agencies, federal land management agencies, and private landowners, we have helped to conserve or enhance more than 20 million acres since we started collecting those data in 1985. Each year, we help to conserve or enhance hundreds of thousands of acres for the benefit of the wild turkey, its habitat, and all of the other wildlife and plant species that benefit from well managed forestlands, grasslands, and streamside habitat.

The National Wild Turkey Federation's mission is as crucial today as it was when the organization was founded in 1973. Sadly, we're losing 6,000 acres of habitat every day. What we do on the land in the coming decades will be instrumental in strengthening climate and wildfire resilience in our nation's forests and other upland ecosystems, ensuring clean water for our communities, providing access for outdoor enthusiasts, including hunters, while enhancing habitat for wild turkeys and countless other species.

Hunters are essential to the funding of conservation, but now we're at the point where less than 10 percent of the American population hunts, so the funding source is going away. This committee's work and the significant Conservation and Forestry Title efforts of the Farm Bill are helping the NWTF to continue to apply conservation to working lands. The NWTF is leading a collaborative effort to solve the problem through our Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt. initiative, our America's Big Six of Wildlife Conservation work on over 80 vital watersheds and 738 million acres throughout the country, our Waterways for Wildlife initiative in the drought-prone Great Plains and American West, and the contributions of our dynamic and passionate volunteer base in 49 states. We spend our volunteers' money and taxpayers' money wisely by leveraging each dollar at least 3:1 but often at much higher levels. As an example, this year's Waterways for Wildlife Initiative projects leveraged NWTF funding at a rate of 19:1 to conserve 77 critical stream miles in eight states. **FOR EVERY DOLLAR RAISED BY THE NWTF, 90 CENTS GOES TO MISSION DELIVERY.**



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Since 1985, NWTF volunteers and partners raised and spent more than \$488 million toward our mission. We recognize that accomplishing conservation delivery at a scale necessary to keep food on our tables, our water clean, our forests and grasslands healthy, and vibrant rural communities can only occur with public, private, and nonprofit partners working together across land-ownership boundaries with a common, landscape-scale vision for success.

Private land holdings make up more than 60% of the approximately 2.3 billion acres of land mass in the United States. In the Eastern United States, private lands far exceed public lands and, therefore, are crucial to the success of landscape-scale conservation objectives. These objectives need to include federal, state, and local work to ensure healthy water, wildlife, and the places where wildlife and people live and recreate, including, forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and water courses. In the West, the reverse is true, with public landholdings making up 50% or more of the land in many states. Delivering conservation on private lands — in partnership with private landowners — is fundamental to the success of landscape-scale, cross-boundary habitat, forestry, and climate-driven conservation efforts, including the USDA's recently announced 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

The Farm Bill brings the private landowner to the table. This includes generational family farmers and forest owners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), commercial operations, and American families. Farm Bill programs provide the structure by which these conservation objectives are met by providing private landowners incentives for voluntary land stewardship. Additionally, USDA's delivery of technical assistance to private landowners to implement conservation programs on the landscape is crucial.

The NWTF is an invested participant in, and implementer of, a number of Farm Bill programs. These programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). NWTF also partners with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), through shared positions, to provide technical assistance at the NRCS State Office level. And through a national partnership, we assist with workforce capacity in NRCS offices across the country.

The NWTF and NRCS are working together to help improve forest ecosystem health and resiliency on private lands and manage the forestry-related workload derived from the Farm Bill. As part of the National Forestry Initiative agreement, the NWTF is positioned to help improve forest health and climate resilience on an estimated 350,000 acres of private land throughout the country by providing experienced forestry professionals to bolster NRCS staff in 24 states over a five-year period. To date, NFI has affected over 280,000 acres. Through our work, we see first-hand both the successes of these programs and needed improvements. Today, we offer our insights to improve this influential legislation.

The NWTF strongly supports Title II – Conservation and Title VIII – Forestry programs, as specified in the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334) and would like to see reauthorization of these programs to achieve desired landscape-level objectives. We encourage this subcommittee and Congress as a whole to consider these specific Farm Bill recommendations for improvement:

- **Actively promote prescribed burning as a valuable habitat and forest management tool.** Prescribed burning is not the only tool in the toolbox, but when applicable, it is often the most efficient and cost-effective technique for reducing hazardous fuel loads, removing unwanted vegetation, and promoting beneficial wildlife habitat in the forest understory. Low intensity, slow moving prescribed burns conserve our grasslands and forests by reducing fuel loads and removing ladder fuels. They greatly reducing the overall risk of large-scale, costly, and catastrophic wildfires, both in terms of suppression, recovery and restoration of the impacted landscapes. Prescribed fire is also the tool of choice for the routine maintenance of previously treated landscapes. The visual from the *Wall Street Journal* that is attached to this testimony shows the geographic areas with the greatest wildfire threat. It should also be labeled as the areas with the least prescribed fire management. The upcoming Farm Bill is a perfect opportunity to promote these benefits as well as reduce barriers to implementing prescribed burning on the landscape. Barriers include securing and maintaining the social license, or acceptance from the public, by increasing the comfort level of surrounding landowners and local permitting officials, properly training landowners in the application of fire and smoke management, and allaying fears of liability if a fire jumps a line and causes unintended property damage. In addition, cost and availability of prescribed burning equipment necessary to complete safe, controlled burns is sometimes a barrier, especially in underserved communities.
- **Actively promote technical assistance programs and training opportunities for private landowners and partners such as the NWTF.** Attaining landscape-level conservation objectives requires active engagement across the boundaries of public and private forestlands. Non-industrial landholders are more likely to participate if they know technical assistance and training opportunities are available. We have found that where affiliated partner staff from NGOs, such as NWTF, supplement NRCS local staff, landowner participation tends to increase as a result of additional technical assistance capacity. History has taught us that well-managed forests start with informed, committed forest owners. Technical assistance programs not only help to educate landowners they also create expectations with timelines for management activities. Management is not a one-and-done proposition, but rather a continued commitment, which is more likely with consistent and easily accessible technical assistance and training.
- **Reauthorize the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and maintain CRP acreage at current authorized levels, including CRP forestry acreage.** CRP protects highly erodible and marginal agricultural lands from being put back into production. Retaining current mid-contract management requirements and ensuring compliance maximize ecosystem benefits of CRP acreage. And as carbon credits and ecosystem service assets become more prevalent, it is of growing importance to provide clarification on the eligibility of benefits for the CRP program.

- **Reauthorize the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** and refocus a portion of the funding to allow more participation in this highly demanded but severely underfunded program, including CRP. This action would also help maintain existing cover, whether grassland or forestland, on lands with expiring CRP contracts that are transitioning to working lands. It would support infrastructure to encourage grazing, including fencing and water developments. We encourage Congress to maintain the current allocation caps for wildlife habitat activities and require the non-expended apportionment be re-distributed to areas where funding does not meet current demand. This would ensure wildlife habitat practices, including forestry practices, remain the focus of those funds.
- **Reauthorize and enhance the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP)** and allow landowners enrolled in VPA-HIP to participate in other cost-share programs, including USDA Farm Bill conservation programs.
- **The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) has been an extremely beneficial conservation tool; however, administration of this program is difficult.** Moving forward, the NWTF recommends the program be reauthorized, but with the ability to recover all costs — direct and indirect, including outreach activities — associated with the implementation of RCPP projects and with the addition of a more streamlined administration process. Mandated recordkeeping and other accounting processes for the continued collection and cataloging of metrics are onerous to the administering partner, and these processes should be consistent with other Title II programs.

During our 40-year partnership with the USDA Forest Service, the NWTF has become the single largest organization involved in Stewardship Agreements across the agency. The Stewardship Authority under which we work was permanently authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and is the largest vehicle through which the NWTF delivers its mission on the ground. Work accomplished as a result of the agreements includes: ecosystem restoration/rehabilitation; sustainable forest management; watershed enhancement; wildlife benefits, such as Threatened and Endangered species habitat improvement; wildland urban interface (WUI) protection; fuels reduction; and recreation.

Through our critical partnership with the Forest Service, the NWTF has approximately 50 stewardship agreements ongoing across the National Forests and Grasslands in every Forest Service Region of the country, with more than 100 completed to date. To put this partnership into perspective, in 2019, the NWTF was ranked No. 4 nationally on the list of federal, commercial timber purchasers by timber volume sold from National Forest System lands, and we regularly rank in the top 10. The resulting sales of this timber go directly back into these lands for the betterment of habitat and wildlife, water quality, climate and fire resilience, and recreational access. With this vast history of successful implementation of the Stewardship Authority, the NWTF makes these recommendations:



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- **Extend permanent Stewardship Authority to all federal land-holding departments and agencies.** The two agencies with permanent stewardship authority are the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Granting authority to the National Parks Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Defense including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and all other federal land-holding agencies gives these agencies greater flexibility to better address climate, wildfire, wildlife, and recreational needs. Granting stewardship authority to these agencies could benefit more than an additional 180 million acres of federally-owned lands. The NWTF has MOUs with the Department of Defense through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and military installations in a number of states — Fort Polk, Fort Riley and Letterkenny Army Depot, among others — but stewardship would expand those opportunities to treat critical acreage and infrastructure.
- **Authorize long-term, 20-year Stewardship contracts at a national scale.** Forests are not annual crops, and they require longer-term maintenance options to achieve a resilient, healthy condition. Twenty-year contracts provide a number of benefits. It would allow for extended periods of uninterrupted forest treatments that provide sustainable assurances of timber volume for contractors, partners, and agency staff. It also would reduce the need and time requirements for re-application and review processes and the ramp-up/ramp-down periods associated with these interruptions. Just as importantly, 20-year contracts will benefit rural economies, including those currently underserved, through more stable employment opportunities and confidence for small business owners to invest in long-term infrastructure, such as forestry equipment, mills, and staff. This stability in our forest management infrastructure is greatly needed and will be bolstered through longer contract periods.

None of the impactful conservation work we have accomplished together with the U.S. Forest Service, the NRCS and other partners could occur without the authorities and incentive programs established in the Farm Bill. The Conservation and Forestry Titles are crucial to the NWTF's mission delivery. This is why we actively engage in Farm Bill stakeholder coalitions, like the Forest in the Farm Bill Coalition, members of which you are hearing from today. While coordination with partners and other stakeholders is still underway, it is important for us to provide these high-level recommendations on behalf of our 200,000 members.

Before I close, I would like to express a final but significant concern. The NWTF is fully supportive of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act and the great protections they afford Threatened and Endangered Species and our vulnerable natural resources. There has been a long, but growing trend, however, by certain groups to use litigation as a way to halt critical forestland and grassland management work. While we recognize the importance of the individual's right to challenge government actions through the legal process, abuse of the system is tying up agency and partner resources and time that could be better used updating outdated forest plans and working to ensure our National Forests and grasslands are healthy and resilient to climate change, fire, and disease.



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A number of recent examples exist where ESA and NEPA have been used to stall work that is long overdue and vital to the health and security of National Forests and the communities surrounding them. Court actions initiating redundant, time consuming, and expensive consultation requirements come at the tax payers' and environment's expense, and are often counter to the actual management needs on the ground.

Congress should address vulnerabilities in the Equal Access to Justice Act that has long been the source of public dollars used to fund court challenges by groups opposed to federal land management, even when the management activities are deemed scientifically appropriate and for the greater good. Additionally, ESA challenges shouldn't halt entire forest plans but be addressed at the local, project level, where impacted species and habitats are relevant. One proposed fix for this would be to clarify that cooperatively developed, reviewed, and approved forest plans are not ongoing federal actions, while leaving the individual project plans open for evaluation and update as new information becomes available.

We urge Congress to find a balance between what is already supported in federal law and beneficial for the landscape against the right of individuals and groups to recoup their legal challenges against government action, so that the positive impacts and authorities granted by Congress can be realized.

In closing, the National Wild Turkey Federation is committed to be a partner to this subcommittee and other committees as Congress works to develop the next Farm Bill. We stand ready to assist by hosting field days and participating in dialog on this critical legislation. America needs a strong Farm Bill for the future of our nation's food, water, and wildlife.

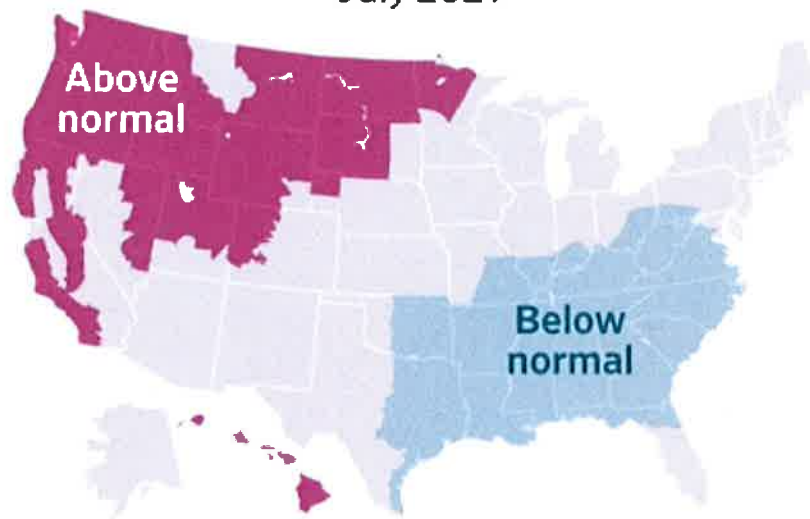
Thank you for your tremendous work and support, and we look forward to working with you in the months ahead.

Potential for Significant Wildfires Is Above Normal for Growing Share of U.S.

Widespread drought is fueling an early ramp-up of wildfire season, with more than half of the U.S. wildland firefighting resources already committed.

Potential for significant wildland fires

July 2021



Note: Outlook issued July 1
Source: Predictive Services

Image Source: The Wall Street Journal