

“Climate Smart From Farm to Fork: Building an Affordable and Resilient Food Supply Chain”
House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
May 24, 2022

Written Testimony of Melinda Cep
Vice President, Natural Solutions & Working Lands, National Audubon Society

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairwoman Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee for convening this hearing.

I am honored to testify on behalf of the National Audubon Society, representing more than 1.8 million members together with the 45 million Americans who enjoy birdwatching.¹ We have over 460 affiliated chapters, 23 state and regional programs, and 41 sanctuaries and nature centers across the country. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss how we can mitigate climate change and support biodiversity on working lands while building a resilient supply chain.

I would like to start by telling you about a visit I made last year to one of our ranching partners in the Dakotas. Audubon was meeting with ranchers for our Conservation Ranching initiative, and one of them, the third generation to raise cattle on that land, told me he knew our conservation plan was working. He knew because his ninety-year-old father had told him that for the first time in forever, the front pasture sounded like it did when he was a boy because long-absent birds had returned.

I could explain our Bird Friendliness Index or bird survey results, but stories like that one from South Dakota demonstrate the impact of Audubon’s partnerships with farming, ranching, logging, and fishing families across America. These men and women know intuitively that birds are indicators of the health of the places they love, so just the way they track the amount of grass during a drought or the water level of their streams during the rainy season, they talk about bird songs as the sound of success. They know from experience what scientists have proven by experiment: that their livelihoods are inextricably intertwined with biodiversity and climate change.

Two years ago, when global experts on biodiversity and climate change came together for a first-of-its-kind workshop, they concluded that one of the “most important available actions” to simultaneously protect biodiversity and mitigate the effects of a changing climate is implementing sustainable agricultural and forestry practices at scale.² With these practices, we can increase carbon storage in farmland, grasslands, and forests; reduce greenhouse gas emissions; support wildlife habitat; and improve our capacity to adapt to climate change.³

¹U.S. Census Bureau. (2018, October). National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, & Wildlife-Associated Recreation, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/fhw-16-nat.html>

² IPBES. (2021, June 10). Tackling Biodiversity & Climate Crises Together and Their Combined Social Impacts [press release]. <https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2021-06/20210606%20Media%20Release%20EMBARGO%203pm%20CEST%2010%20June.pdf>

³ Portner, H., Scholes, R., Agard, J. 2021. IPBES-IPCC co-sponsored workshop report on biodiversity and climate change. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4782538

Through partnerships like the one I just told you about, Audubon connects landowners and managers with the technical and financial resources they need to implement conservation practices that promote biodiversity and fight climate change.

The people who farm, ranch, log, and fish in this country feel the effects of climate change every day. We hear from ranchers who are considering hay to supplement grazing; farmers who have seen a spring so wet they wonder when they can plant and a fall so wet they worry when they will have a harvest; fishermen who say that salinity changes are devastating their catches while rising sea levels threaten their family homesteads; and foresters who have watched storms like Hurricane Michael devastate timber stands.

Since fiscal year 2018, Congress has provided the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) \$15 billion for ad hoc disaster assistance to agricultural producers, on top of the federal crop insurance program and another \$2.6 billion through farm bill disaster programs.⁴ From 1980 to 2016, weather and climate disasters that entailed losses of over \$1 billion averaged 6.3 per year; but for the last five years, that average has nearly tripled, with an average of 17.8 weather or climate disasters topping \$1 billion every single year⁵. Think of the wildfires in California, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado; the hailstorms in Texas; the flooding in Louisiana; the hurricanes, tropical storms, and tornadoes in Florida, Alabama, and all around the Southeast; the derecho in the midwest; and, the droughts and heatwaves in the West. That's not the last five years, those were all last year, in 2021.

The escalation in weather and climate disasters has happened alongside the accelerating loss of biodiversity. North America today has only two-thirds of the wildlife it had in the 1970s, which is to say that in only a half century, we have lost one-third of all the wildlife that called this continent home. Wild bird populations in the United States and Canada have likewise plummeted by thirty percent in that same period.⁶ But the good news is that not every bird has suffered this fate: those species that communities and governments have committed to protecting through financial investments and legislative safeguards have rebounded, including waterfowl, game birds, and some raptors.

We at Audubon are honored to be part of saving these species, including through our innovative partnerships with landowners and managers to conserve and restore bird habitats. We recognize that different types of solutions and interventions are needed in different places, and we work to support durable conservation across communities and landscapes. I would like to tell you more about some of our success stories, which I believe demonstrate how compatible climate-smart agriculture is with biodiversity.

⁴ Congressional Research Service. (2022, May 9). *Farm Bill Primer: Disaster Assistance*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12101>

⁵ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/>

⁶ Rosenberg, K., Dokter, A., Blatcher, P. (2019). Decline of the North American Avifauna. *Science*, 366 (6461), 120-124. DOI: [10.1126/science.aaw1313](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw1313)

Take the sharp-tailed grouse, a charismatic bird with brown, gold, white, and black plumage. Its habitat is threatened by the disappearance of America’s grasslands. When those lands are converted from long-rooted, native grasses to anything else, we lose more than one-third of the carbon stored in the soil as well as habitat for grassland wildlife. To date, we have lost more than sixty percent of this unique landscape and more than half of its bird population.⁷⁸ But in places like California, Colorado, North Dakota, Oregon, and Texas, Audubon supports keeping ranchers on the ranch through our conservation ranching initiative. Through this program, Audubon works with ranchers to develop conservation plans, certify the ranch as bird friendly, and support those value added products in the marketplace through an Audubon certification seal. Why would a wildlife organization develop and operate a program that puts a bird friendly land seal on packages of beef and bison products? Because this pioneering, market-based program supports the voluntary conservation and restoration of grasslands—which in turn supports grassland birds, climate mitigation, water quantity, and water quality. It is because of this program that a ninety-year-old rancher heard the sounds of his childhood again when the sharp-tailed grouse, upland sandpipers, and other birds returned to his ranch. We have seen an increase in both bird abundance and functional diversity of birds on certified ranches.⁹

In a different landscape, eastern forests, Audubon works with certified foresters and landowners to voluntarily integrate bird-friendly management. Our work shows that landowners can earn an income from private timberland, maintain the landscape, and support wildlife—including birds like the prothonotary warbler, nicknamed the “swamp candle” because of its brilliant colors, which breeds nearly exclusively in wet bottomland hardwood forests. Active forest management that preserves the swamp candle’s habitat also helps create a more resilient landscape, as these forests soak up flood water, improve water quality, sequester carbon, and contribute to the surrounding rural economies. Audubon is protecting other warblers through similar forest management partnerships and programs, so if you are looking for maple syrup to pour on your pancakes this weekend, look for our “produced in bird friendly habitats” seal, another one of our important market-based programs, connecting maple producers with consumers.

Similarly, out in California, we work with dairy farmers and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to support the imperiled tricolored blackbird. This fascinating species is the last remaining large-scale, land-based colonial nesting bird. They nest in large colonies, sometimes as many as one hundred thousand nests before their numbers plummeted. Adapting to the disappearance of their natural habitat, the tricolored blackbird now nests in forage fields at dairy farms in California’s Central Valley. Audubon works with dairy farmers to provide technical and financial assistance for their operations, so they can continue to deliver safe, affordable dairy products to the American people.

⁷ National Audubon Society. (2019). North American Grasslands and Birds Report. https://nas-national-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/audubon_north_american_grasslands_birds_report-final.pdf

⁸ Rosenberg, K., Dokter, A., Blancher, P. (2019). Decline of the North American Avifauna. *Science*, 366 (6461), 120-124. [DOI: 10.1126/science.aaw1313](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw1313)

⁹ National Audubon Society. (2021, March 16). *Bird Friendliness Index Shows Audubon Conservation Ranching is Bringing Grassland Birds Back*. <https://www.audubon.org/news/bird-friendliness-index-shows-audubon-conservation-ranching-bringing-grassland>

The tricolored blackbird, the swamp candle, the sprague's pipit: these are just a few of the incredible species we are working to save while promoting climate mitigation and sustainable agriculture and forestry. Audubon believes that durable conservation must be, and can be, beneficial for all, including the dairy farmer, the rancher, and the private landowners across the country. We see the conservation, forestry, research, and extension policies and programs authorized in the farm bill as an important part of supporting such durable conservation. We rely on a mix of federal funds—including USDA programs like Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); and the Fish and Wildlife Service — state funds, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, and private funding.

But there is significantly more producer and owner interest in these programs than they have the capacity to deliver. For example, the most recent data from USDA shows that 46 percent of valid applications for EQIP went unfunded, which means producers submitted \$1.1 billion of voluntary conservation proposals above and beyond what the program could deliver in a single year.¹⁰ In testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture earlier this year, Dr. Joe Outlaw of the Agricultural and Food Policy Center at Texas A&M University noted that “USDA conservation programs (CRP, CSP, and EQIP) that have incentivized a broad array of conservation practices have worked well in the past. They have just been underfunded.”¹¹ Based on what we hear from our partners, Audubon believes that we can and should expand these federal programs while also promoting the carbon and ecosystem marketplace, private sector investments, and innovative nonprofit partnerships like the ones I have described today.

Such work is only part of what is needed to stem the tide of climate change and biodiversity loss. We must also achieve net-zero emissions and invest in natural infrastructure.

For example, in Louisiana, the state has partnered with federal agencies to protect the Mississippi River, which much of America relies on as a superhighway for food and commercial goods and which countless other species rely on, too. Diversion projects, like the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion and the River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp Project, make the wetlands more resilient, serve as storm surge protection for communities along the Mississippi, and provide crucial habitat for species like the bald eagle. And, in Florida the state has invested in climate resilience efforts, including restoration of the Everglades.

Audubon’s work across the country points to the same conclusion: we do not face a zero sum scenario. Protecting the bald eagle or the swamp candle or the actual swamp does not threaten our supply chain, but can strengthen it. And far from resisting our conservation programs, our partners on ranches, rivers, farms, and forests across the country have an even greater appetite for these programs than we can presently meet. If we can scale up these programs to meet their demand we can work together to improve climate, biodiversity, and water outcomes while simultaneously creating a resilient food supply chain and helping our rural and coastal communities thrive. Thank you.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2023 USDA Explanatory Notes – Natural Resources Conservation Service. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/29-2023-NRCS.pdf>

¹¹ Outlaw, J. (2022, March 16). *Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture*. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AG/AG00/20220316/114494/HHRG-117-AG00-Wstate-OutlawJ-20220316.pdf>