**Written Testimony of:**

**Mr. Paul Johansen**
**Chief, Wildlife Resources Section, West Virginia Division of Natural Resources**
**President, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**

**Representing the West Virginia Division of Natural Resource**

**Oversight Hearing before the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries**
**Committee on Natural Resources**
**United States House of Representatives**
**January 13, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Paul Johansen, and I am a Certified Wildlife Biologist with more than 40 years of service to the citizens in West Virginia. Currently, I serve as Chief of the Wildlife Resources Section of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, where I am responsible for administering the statewide wildlife and fisheries management program. I am also the current President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA). AFWA is the voice of state fish and wildlife agencies; all 50 states are members as well as Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia. These agencies exercise primary statutory authority for management of fish and wildlife as public trust resources within their borders, including on federal lands and waters.

**Outdoor Access and the Economy**

Hunters, anglers, and outdoor recreationists are foundational to the American System of Conservation Funding and the "user pays – public benefits" model that enables state agencies to fulfill their responsibility as stewards of healthy habitats and abundant wildlife populations. America's $1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy, which accounts for more than 2% of our gross domestic product, relies on users and the excise taxes paid by equipment manufacturers to maintain its strength. Investing in conservation creates millions of well paid, full-time jobs restoring natural resources and bolstering community resilience while protecting our valuable natural infrastructure. Last year, states received over $1 billion in Pittman-Robertson (P-R) and Dingell-Johnson (D-J) funds, every dollar of which goes toward managing fish and wildlife, ensuring healthy habitats, improving education, outreach, and safety programs, and increasing opportunities for public access.

As you are likely aware, P-R and D-J funds come from federal excise taxes on hunting, shooting, and fishing equipment, plus taxes on motorboat fuel, benefiting state wildlife and fisheries agencies for conservation, research, and access. Specifically, P-R funds come from taxes on firearms, ammo, and archery gear, while D-J funds originate from taxes on fishing tackle, boats, and small engine fuel. Hence, the user pays and the public, and our fish and wildlife benefit.

In addition to funding, providing the recreating public with access to land and water is a critical component of the equation. To that end, State fish and wildlife agencies are working hard to expand these access opportunities. A shining example comes from Wyoming, where the Game and Fish Department's Access Program has opened 3.14 million acres of public access areas. Many of these acres are accessible thanks to partnerships with private owners and land trades with other agencies, creatively overcoming the "checkerboard" pattern of land ownership that complicates access. Wyoming reports that hunting demand remains high despite challenges like mule deer declines, with hunters shifting interest to other game such as mountain lions and black bears. On the fishing side, interest is booming: Wyoming saw a record 210 anglers complete the "Cutt-Slam" in 2025, each catching all four native cutthroat trout subspecies in their native waters.

In Oregon, the state recently acquired more than 16,000+ acres to complete the Minam River Wildlife Area in Union and Wallowa Counties. The Wildlife Area creates public access to the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area and the Wallowa Whitman National Forest making the entire Minam River publicly accessible for hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, USFS Forest Legacy Program, USFWS Wildlife Restoration Program and many of Oregon's hunting and outdoor recreation groups all raised money to purchase land for the wildlife area. With this acquisition, an area larger than Yellowstone National Park is all in public ownership and open for recreation (ODFW, Oregon Parks and Rec Dept, BLM, and USFS ownership). Anglers can enjoy trout and mountain whitefish fishing, hunters can target deer and elk, and hikers can follow the Minam River Trail to the Eagle Cap Wilderness. In addition, Oregon has spent the last 25+ years working to recover Oregon Coast Coho salmon. Over the last three years, they achieved populations robust enough to support incredibly popular fall recreational fishing. The success of investments in habitat conservation, research and monitoring and forest practices have resulted in a population rebound that has benefited recreational anglers who took home more than 40,000 wild coho salmon from the Oregon Coast this year.

And, in my home state of West Virginia, we initiated an elk restoration program in 2015. This management effort had two primary objectives. First, through the capture and translocation of elk from Kentucky and Arizona, we successfully returned this majestic animal to the mountains of southern West Virginia. Second, we wanted to ensure that these elk were reestablished into suitable habitats that were publicly accessible for wildlife-associated recreation. Working closely with coal mining and timber companies, we were able to secure more than 54,000 acres of publicly accessible land as an essential component of our elk restoration effort. While we are still several years away from opening an elk hunting season in West Virginia, these lands offer outstanding white-tailed deer, black bear and wild turkey hunting opportunities for our sportsmen and women.

These examples underscore a key point: when we invest in conservation and maintain access, wildlife populations thrive and public participation grows, creating a virtuous cycle of funding and stewardship.

Such success stories show how thoughtful investments in access pay dividends for wildlife and people alike.

**The Value of the State and Federal Partnership**

Effective conservation requires close coordination across landownerships, inducing local, state, and federal partners - as well as private landowners. States bring on-the-ground knowledge of local ecosystems and social conditions that federal agencies simply cannot match across every corner of the country. When decisions are made closest to the resource and informed by local science, they tend to be more practical and accepted by the public. For example, state biologists can set hunting seasons and bag limits tailored to the population status of deer herds in specific regions of the state or adjust fishing regulations in a particular river to respond to a drought. The flexibility and responsiveness of state management is key to why North America's wildlife has thrived. Our state professionals are on the ground every day working with landowners, hunters, and anglers. Any successful national strategy to improve hunting and fishing access must empower and partner with state authorities. As this Subcommittee is aware, hesitation towards federal management, especially with communities in the West, can be overcome by state agencies because they are directly accountable to the citizens they serve and can adapt to local conditions.

We urge our federal partners to work hand-in-hand with states to maximize access opportunities. Many federal land access challenges can only be solved through collaboration. In some cases, large areas can be unlocked through the transfer of small federal parcels to state ownership, especially where state agencies are already effectively managing those lands or have infrastructure on them. While transferring federal lands is a sensitive topic, evaluating on a case-by-case basis can be worthwhile, especially for lands where state management could improve public access and resource stewardship. Any such proposals should of course be approached carefully and collaboratively, with significant weight given to local perspectives.

The most successful conservation initiatives are collaborative, leveraging the strengths of at all levels of government. We appreciate this Subcommittee's attention to ensuring federal agencies work in concert with state agencies, not at cross purposes. Lately, there have been encouraging signs of improved state-federal collaboration. I want to commend the new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service leadership – Director Brian Nesvik and his team – for exemplifying this collaborative spirit. Upon taking office, Director Nesvik actively solicited input from AFWA and regional associations of state fish and wildlife agencies on shared conservation priorities. He also issued a Director's Order requiring that a comprehensive review of the National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery System include outreach to state fish and wildlife agencies as a critical part of the review.

Whether crafting refuge policies, planning endangered species recoveries, or regulating hunting access on federal lands, early and meaningful state input leads to better outcomes. Of course, collaboration is a two-way street and state agencies are eager to share our expertise to support federal initiatives. We

appreciate Congress's support in fostering robust state-federal partnerships, and we encourage continued oversight to ensure federal agencies formally consult and coordinate with states on all matters relating to fish and wildlife management.

One area where state leadership is especially crucial is in managing wildlife once federal protections (such as Endangered Species Act listings) are no longer necessary. I want to emphasize that delisting a recovered species is a conservation success story. When a species recovers, returning it to state management not only is required by law, but it allows those who know the resource best to take the reins. We urge the federal government to trust state conservation professionals to continue thriving wildlife recoveries post-delisting. We also appreciate the interest of this Subcommittee in overseeing those processes, to ensure that unwarranted delays or politics do not stand in the way of sound science and successful conservation outcomes.

Additionally, on the topic of lead ammunition, I would like to highlight our collaborative experience in my home state on the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Last summer, state, federal and NGOs came together to hold a workshop to educate hunters and shooters on non-lead alternatives. This voluntary approach demonstrated how the Government can collectively work together to help hunters make informed decisions regarding their ammunition choices without the need to regulate.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to the Chair and Ranking Member for their invitation to provide this testimony. In addition, I appreciate the attention this Subcommittee is giving to hunting and fishing access. Access is the linchpin that connects all elements of the North American conservation model. It links the user contributions of hunters and anglers to the sustainable management of wildlife. If hunters and anglers cannot get out on the land or water, then we lose participants, we lose funding, and ultimately we could lose the public support that wildlife conservation relies upon. We cannot let that happen. Instead, we should build on what is working and address remaining barriers to access through partnership.

To summarize, I offer a few core recommendations that emerge from the state fish and wildlife agencies' perspective:

- Keep public lands open and accessible to hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting by default Adopt an "open unless closed" management approach on federal land, and use targeted, science-based justifications for any necessary restrictions – always in coordination with state fish and wildlife agencies.
- Strengthen federal-state collaboration at all levels. Involve state wildlife managers early in land-use planning, access projects, and regulatory proposals. Strive to harmonize regulations (such as seasons and bag limits) with state rules and regulations to reduce confusion and conflict. Leverage states' on-the-ground capacity to implement access improvements.

- Remove bureaucratic hurdles to access**.** Streamline processes for land exchanges and rights-of-way that could unlock landlocked public lands. Empower states to help identify priority areas and facilitate deals with a more agile process that could open thousands of acres now off-limits due to checkerboard ownership. Examine whether certain isolated federal parcels would be better managed by state or local entities, and if so, pursue voluntary transfer or cooperative management agreements.
- Support state-led conservation funding**.** Ensure federal programs (existing and new) direct resources to state agencies for access and habitat projects. Continue to uphold the successful formula of user-pay, state-led programs by protecting the integrity of Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds and delivering those funds efficiently to states. Where new federal funding initiatives arise (for example, to improve public access or infrastructure), consider block grants or matching programs that give states flexibility to address their highest needs.
- Recognize voluntary and incentive-driven successes. Encourage approaches that enlist hunters, anglers, and private landowners as partners – from voluntary lead reduction programs to cooperative access agreements – rather than relying solely on top-down mandates. Often, the carrot proves more effective than the stick in achieving conservation outcomes while keeping people engaged. Federal agencies can support these efforts by providing technical assistance, funding pilot projects, and sharing best practices across states.

By implementing these recommendations, Congress and federal agencies will empower states to do what they do best: manage wildlife and provide opportunities for the public to enjoy our natural resources. This state-federal team approach is the surest way to expand access for hunting and fishing in a manner that is sustainable and broadly supported.

I want to express gratitude to this Subcommittee and the full House Natural Resources Committee for your work on several fronts that support our shared conservation goals. This Congress, you advanced a number of bipartisan bills critical to the continued success of conservation in this country, including the *Wetlands Conservation and Access Improvement Act of 2025* and *the Sport Fish Restoration, Recreational Boating Safety, and Wildlife Restoration Act of 2025*. We especially appreciate the Committee's focus on hunting and fishing access and participation, as evidenced by this hearing. By shining a spotlight on access, you are helping ensure the future of our sporting traditions and the continued funding for conservation that comes with them.

In closing, ensuring ample access for hunters and anglers and upholding the authority of state wildlife management are two of the most powerful tools we have to sustain conservation into the future. State fish and wildlife agencies are committed to expanding opportunities for all Americans to enjoy our natural resources, guided by science and in collaboration with our federal partners.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.