

STATEMENT OF ROB MCKIM
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Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate this opportunity to offer testimony in support of H.R. 4315, a bill to amend the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act and Wetland Loan Act. My name is Rob McKim and I am Vice President of The Nature Conservancy's Central U.S. Conservation Region.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of biological diversity. Our mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Our on-the-ground conservation work is carried out in all 50 states and in 31 foreign countries and is supported by approximately one million individual members. We have helped conserve nearly 15 million acres of land in the United States and Canada and more than 102 million acres with local partner organizations globally.

The Conservancy owns and manages approximately 1,400 preserves throughout the U.S. —the largest private system of nature sanctuaries in the world. We recognize, however, that our mission cannot be achieved by core protected areas alone. Therefore, our projects increasingly seek to accommodate compatible human uses, and especially in the developing world, to address sustained human well-being.

My comments in support of the "Wetlands Loan Act" are focused in four areas:

- Our support for funding to be guided by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan;
- The great need for federal leadership for migratory bird conservation;
- The biological and economic importance of wetland and grassland complexes to the U.S.; and
- Strong public and landowner support for national efforts to conserve wetland and grassland habitats.

First, funding for migratory bird conservation must continue to be guided by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and Joint Ventures, with a focus on breeding habitat.

We commend the leaders and co-authors of H.R. 4315 who have proposed a dramatic funding increase for the conservation of migratory bird habitat, to be guided by the goals and objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (Plan). The Plan's unique combination of biology, landscape conservation and partnerships creates an international action plan implemented at a regional level through Joint Ventures which provide a "road map" for conserving migratory birds under one framework. The Conservancy is proud to be a primary partner in Joint Venture habitat initiatives across the U.S.

The Plan is considered to be one of the most successful conservation initiatives in the world.

Research directed by the Plan has found that 50% of all continental migratory waterfowl production comes from breeding habitat in the Prairie Pothole region of the Northern Great Plains. Therefore, my region is now the top priority for breeding habitat conservation. In addition, public conservation of prairie pothole lands has been more cost-effective here than other places in the U.S. However, the window of opportunity is closing fast.

Secondly, migratory bird conservation requires federal leadership and benefits multiple species.

The seasonal ebb and flow of migrating birds is one of the most complex and compelling experiences in the natural world. As they travel across mountains, deserts and oceans throughout the northern hemisphere they link countries, peoples and ecosystems. In the Central U.S., the fall migration of birds is the singular migratory event in North & South America.

A strategy to conserve breeding, wintering and stopover habitats requires extraordinary public and private cooperation. Strong federal leadership is required to foster partnerships among the nations, states, tribes and organizations woven together by the migratory flight paths.

In addition, migratory birds are the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine," indicators of healthy ecosystems. Their decline reflects the widespread loss and fragmentation of habitat throughout North and South America, and protecting their habitat also benefits an array of plants and wildlife.

Third, American wetland and grasslands are some of the most productive ecosystems on earth for people and wildlife.

Although concerted efforts have been made to stop wetland loss, our native grasslands continue to be considered the most imperiled habitat on Earth. Without immediate action, recent studies show the U.S. could lose half of the grasslands which surround and support the rich diversity of wildlife dependent upon wetlands in the Northern Plains in the next 30 years.

Temperate grasslands are the breadbaskets of the world, producing the bulk of the world's grain. Because of their fertile ground for crop production, native grasslands have been more extensively converted than any other terrestrial habitat type on Earth. Unfortunately, native grasslands have also received the least protection. The western half of the Great Plains, represents one of the last relatively intact temperate grasslands on Earth and one of three places where conservation and restoration can be achieved according to the World Conservation Union.

Among the most significant conservation areas of the Great Plains is the Prairie Pothole region. This unique area hosts one of the richest wetland systems in the world, consisting of extensive grasslands and millions of depressional wetlands. In addition to producing half of the continent's waterfowl, it also provides critical habitat for migrating and breeding shorebirds, marsh birds and grassland birds. 40% of all North American bird species breed in the grasslands and wetlands of the Great Plains.

Expansion of cropland in the Prairie Pothole region is threatening to rip apart the tapestry of grassland and wetlands. The effects of on-going conversion are directly connected to the decline of grassland dependent birds, which are experiencing the widest and steepest decline of any taxonomic group in North America. Additionally, wetland health and function are diminished as fragile soils are eroded and deposit sediment, pesticides, and herbicides into the closed depressions.

There is time to make a difference. The Prairie Pothole region and much of the western Great Plains supports a strong component of our nation's cattle herd. Sustainable cattle ranching and wildlife conservation have been shown to go hand in glove, yielding benefits to producers and wildlife. Native grasslands have many natural advantages over other plants because their plant matter is primarily stored underground as roots. Native grasses thrive on being trampled, grazed and burned. In addition, native grasses are highly adaptable, tolerating extremes of soil and climate. Native grasslands also provide critical carbon sequestration.

Fourth, we need a dramatic increase in public funding for conservation now before the window of opportunity closes for the Prairie Pothole lands.

Land prices and rental rates are both escalating at an alarming rate, yet land conservation in the Northern Plains is still cost-effective for American taxpayers. However, Plains land prices may escalate at unprecedented rates with anticipated needs for ethanol and energy production.

As energy prices climb to 80 dollars per barrel there is an expectation that millions of additional acres will be planted to corn or perhaps switchgrass for ethanol production. Over the next three years contracts will expire on more than 20 million acres of land now enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and we are hearing that a large portion of that CRP land may be put back into production for the energy market. So, we may look back on this moment as a critical time when we had a chance to take a leap forward in protecting waterfowl habitat before the energy market swept across the landscape of the Northern prairies.

Lastly, public support for national efforts to conserve wetland habitats has remained strong for decades.

Many livestock producers are interested in conserving their grasslands and wetlands. In North and South Dakota, the Fish and Wildlife Service has recorded interest by nearly 500 landowners to sell conservation easements on nearly 300,000 acres. Based on our staff's experience, we believe the demand is also high in Minnesota and Montana. The good news is that the cost of land conservation in the Great Plains is the lowest of any region in the country, with land values often averaging less than one-third to one-half of those to the east or west.

Public opinion surveys have repeatedly documented that an overwhelming majority of the public places a very high priority on water and wetland issues. A recent national survey in the U.S. found that the number of citizens who believed there were too few wetlands was 15 times greater than the number who thought there were too many.

Wetland conservation also benefits the growing need to provide public recreational access. Lands acquired with Migratory Bird Funds become part of America's wildlife refuge system and will open for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation of our natural heritage.

In closing, I was born on the Atlantic Coast near the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The Eastern Shore is a narrow finger of land that separates the Chesapeake Bay from the Atlantic Ocean. It is home to the longest expanse of remaining coastal wilderness on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Situated at the lower end of the Delmarva Peninsula, the Eastern Shore is one of the most important migratory bird stopover sites on Earth.

It was there along the rocky sand beaches that my love for birds grew and evolved. I now live in the Great Plains, having raised my family in Minnesota.

The annual spring and fall bird migrations serve as some of nature's most remarkable events. As a hunter and conservationist, these migrations represent my favorite time of year. Each year I make a point of viewing these natural wonders – whether it be the sandhill cranes, the trumpeter swans or the blue-winged teal. I am concerned we may not pass on the legacy of experiencing these magnificent migrations to future generations without immediate acceleration of funding to conserve threatened American wetlands and grasslands.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer The Nature Conservancy's support for the Emergency Wetland Loan Act and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

HR 4315 increases funding for migratory bird conservation via Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps, commonly known as "Duck Stamps." Two land acquisition programs are financed from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. The first purchases major areas for migratory birds under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Lands acquired through this program are considered and approved by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission. The second program acquires small natural wetlands and associated uplands located mainly in the Prairie Pothole region of the upper Midwest. These lands, known as Waterfowl Production Areas, are acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act and do not require approval from the Commission.

"No net loss of wetlands" policies.

A recent study commissioned by the Conservancy found that grassland conversion in the Dakotas was about 2% per year, which unchecked will result in a loss of half of the remaining grasslands in the next 30 years.

International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, or IUCN

Of the 435 bird species that breed in US, 330 breed on the Great Plains.