

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Testimony

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Committee on Resources
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H.R. 4517 -- "The Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act"
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Mr. Chairman, my name is Daniel Beard. I am Senior Vice President for Public Policy of the National Audubon Society. I appreciate the opportunity to testify to the Subcommittee on H.R. 4517, the "Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act."

The National Audubon Society has nearly one million members and supporters throughout the Americas who are dedicated to the preservation and protection of birds, other wildlife and their habitat.

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to appear before you today in strong support of H.R. 4517, the "Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act." This legislation, plus H.R. 4302 introduced by Congressman Jim Greenwood, are major steps forward in our efforts to protect and enhance bird habitat in Latin America and the Caribbean. I want to compliment Chairman Young and Mr. Greenwood, for introducing these bills and giving this matter the important attention it deserves.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Habitat Enhancement Act of 1998 addresses the important need for protecting and enhancing populations of neotropical migratory birds, using effective and relatively inexpensive means.

Why is it important to protect neotropical migratory birds?

Birds are a beautiful and integral part of our natural heritage. Perhaps more than any other kinds of wildlife, birds are highly visible and thus easy for everyone to enjoy. They are a fundamental part of the web of natural life that surrounds us.

What is often goes unrecognized is that birds have also become fundamental components of many local economies. According to surveys completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than 63 million Americans watch and feed birds. More than 24 million Americans travel to watch birds. In 1991, bird watchers spent \$5.2 billion on goods and services related to bird feeding and watching. These expenditures generated nearly \$600 million in tax revenue for states and the federal government. Non-consumptive bird use supports almost 200,000 American jobs.

Why is this legislation a good way to protect neotropical migratory birds?

The neotropical migratory birds Americans enjoy watching and spending money to see live part of each year in Latin America or the Caribbean. If we want to protect these birds, we must protect their habitat here in the United States, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean. Protecting wintering habitat is a way of protecting our investment in wildlife conservation here in the United States.

We believe this is not only a good investment, but also an efficient one. By supporting proactive conservation measures such as those that would be covered by the bill, we can help avoid the costly process of helping endangered species recover.

This is also an efficient bill because it doesn't rely solely on taxpayer dollars. The bill would encourage leveraging federal dollars by helping to build partnerships with the business community, non-governmental organizations and foreign nations. The less restrictive matching fund requirements of this bill will give the Department of the Interior greater flexibility to choose appropriate projects.

As a leading bird conservation organization, the National Audubon Society looks forward to facilitating the partnership process by identifying need areas, sources of private funding, and local groups capable of managing and conserving bird habitat.

I do believe there are several areas where the legislation could be improved.

I urge the committee to make some judgement about the level of cost sharing for individual projects. H.R. 4302 limits the federal cost-share to 33 percent; H.R. 4517 leaves this matter to the Secretary.

I would suggest that specific language be added to the bill, or recommendations in the report language on this important matter.

I would urge the committee to consider adding language authorizing establishment of a neotropical migratory bird advisory committee. H.R. 4302 authorizes such a committee and we believe it could be an important focal point for raising the visibility of this issue among federal agencies and Latin American and Caribbean governments.

The bill should be amended to make it clear that a majority of the funds appropriated should be spent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Habitat in these areas is in dire need of restoration. Dollars spent in these areas will in many cases have greater impact because of the lower cost of land and labor.

Finally, it should be made clear that the word "person," as used in the bill includes non-governmental organizations. With their expertise and existing infrastructure, non-government organizations can and will play a key role in organizing and directing projects.

Mr. Chairman, we are pleased to support this important bird conservation legislation. We look forward to working with you and other committee members to enact it into law. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today; I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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