

TESTIMONY OF STEVE GUERTIN, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, REGARDING H.R. 910, THE “SIKES ACT REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2013” BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS

March 21, 2013

Good morning Chairman Fleming, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Steve Guertin, Deputy Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department’s statement on H.R. 910, the Sikes Act Reauthorization Act which would reauthorize the Sikes Act through fiscal year 2019. The Fish and Wildlife Service appreciates your interest in conserving fish and wildlife resources on military installations, and the Subcommittee’s leadership in reauthorizing this important legislation. The administration supports H.R. 910, with one important amendment that would extend the timeframe for review of Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans from a period of every five years to ten years. My testimony will also address the Fish and Wildlife Service’s role in the implementation of the Disabled Veterans Sportsmen Act.

Sikes Act History

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the States have long recognized the importance and value of conserving fish and wildlife resources on military lands. Prior to the enactment of the Sikes Act in 1960, the Fish and Wildlife Service worked with DoD on fisheries management programs to develop recreational fishing opportunities on DoD installations. Passage of the Sikes Act formalized these cooperative efforts and, most importantly, gave Congressional recognition to the significant potential for fish and wildlife management and recreation on DoD lands. Subsequent amendments have expanded the authority of the Sikes Act to include improving fish and wildlife habitats, protecting threatened and endangered species, providing for invasive species management on military installations, and developing multi-use natural resource management plans.

The Sikes Act Improvement Act of 1997 broadened the scope of DoD natural resources programs. It integrated natural resources programs with operations and training, embraced the tenets of conservation biology, invited public review, and strengthened funding for conservation activities on military lands. Underlying this commitment to conserve natural resources is the concurrent commitment that the military mission cannot be compromised. The Sikes Act Improvement Act required the development and implementation of Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans (INRMPs) for relevant installations by November 18, 2001. The Act emphasizes that the plans are to be prepared in cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the State fish and wildlife agencies and anticipated a collaborative process with full involvement of natural resource agencies. INRMPs also provide for public access to installations for enjoyment of natural resources, and when practicable DoD seeks public comments on these plans.

Over the decades, the Sikes Act has proven to be a conservation success story, playing an important role to ensure that fish, wildlife, and other natural resources on military installations are conserved in ways that are compatible with the missions of these installations.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's Role and Responsibility under the Sikes Act

When implementing its responsibilities under the Sikes Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service focuses on: (1) evaluating the impacts of installation mission and activities on fish and wildlife; (2) ensuring that habitat important to fish and wildlife is taken into consideration in the development of INRMPs; and (3) identifying opportunities to enhance fish and wildlife resources for public benefits while accomplishing the missions of military installations. Several statutes guide our involvement in conservation planning, including the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's work on INRMPs is conducted primarily at the field and regional office levels. Ideally, the Fish and Wildlife Service becomes involved in the INRMP process when a draft INRMP is sent to a field office by a military installation for review and comment. Ultimately, a plan is agreed to by the Fish and Wildlife Service after the regional office reviews and the Regional Director concurs with the elements of the plan that address conservation, protection, and management of fish and wildlife resources.

Cooperation and coordination between the Fish and Wildlife Service and States on INRMPs continue beyond agency review and approval of a plan. INRMPs are reviewed by military installations on a yearly basis and our feedback is requested during annual reviews concerning the ongoing implementation and effectiveness of the plans. Additionally, every five years INRMPs go through a formal review and re-approval process that involves a public comment period and coordination with the Fish and Wildlife Service and State fish and wildlife agencies. The Service has also been receiving INRMPs from state-owned National Guard installations, and to date, is not aware of any difficulties implementing those plans on the installations.

Success and Benefits of the Sikes Act and INRMPs

DoD manages approximately 30 million acres of land on its major military installations in the United States, of which 19 million acres are dedicated to fish and wildlife conservation. Limits on access due to security and safety concerns have sheltered many of these lands from development and other adverse impacts. Military lands contain rare and unique plant and animal species and native habitats such as old-growth forests, tall-grass prairies, and vernal pool wetlands. Over 400 threatened and endangered species live on DoD-managed lands. These lands and the species they support are an essential component of our Nation's biodiversity. Recognizing this, the Fish and Wildlife Service has worked extensively with the State fish and wildlife agencies and military installations to develop plans that will effectively conserve fish and wildlife resources and promote compatible outdoor recreation, while ensuring military preparedness and continued stewardship of the land.

The technical expertise of Service employees combined with State fish and wildlife agencies' expertise and responsibilities for resident species and DoD's knowledge of training requirements and their installation's natural resources, creates valuable opportunities for cooperative management of substantial natural resources. Two illustrative examples follow.

Working in partnership, the Fish and Wildlife Service and Eglin Air Force Base (AFB), located in Okaloosa, Florida, have accomplished a significant number of recovery efforts for the threatened Okaloosa darter. In 2010, the Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the darter as threatened, thanks to the resource management on Eglin AFB, which worked to reduce the threats to the darter. In 2009, Eglin's natural resource managers estimated that 98 percent of the erosion occurring in darter watersheds had been eliminated. In addition, a crucial project outlined in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Okaloosa Darter Recovery Plan, the Mill Creek stream restoration project, is finished. The Mill Creek project is located on the Eglin Golf Course. During initial construction of the golf course, the stream was substantially altered by culverts and other man-made impoundments. With the help of partners, such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and students from the Young Women's Leadership School of Harlem NYC, approximately 2,500 feet of Mill Creek were restored. As a result, darters were found swimming in the stream within weeks of the project's completion.

In 2005, state environmental and natural resource officials from across the southeast partnered with the Department of Defense and other federal agencies to form the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS). The region covered by SERPPAS includes the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. The conversion of land into developed communities has resulted in the loss of agricultural land, important wildlife habitats, working landscapes such as farms, forests, and fisheries, and increased encroachment on military installations. The SERPPAS group has been considering ways to use the INRMP process in the Southeast to preclude potential listings under the Endangered Species Act as well as expanding incentives for voluntary conservation actions.

Improving Sikes Act Coordination

To improve coordination between and among Sikes Act partners, the Fish and Wildlife Service has developed numerous memoranda of understanding with military installations around the country as well as agreements with branches of the military. Most recently, under the authorities of the Sikes Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service has worked with the U.S. Air Force to establish an Air Force Liaison position. As a result, a knowledgeable Service employee will be placed at the Air Force Civil Engineer Center in San Antonio, Texas. This individual will facilitate improved coordination between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Air Force resulting in improved fish and wildlife conservation on over 90 installations nationwide. Reimbursable and cooperative agreements with military installations and partnerships with branches of the military, such as the Liaison position with the Air Force, allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to provide better customer service and improved coordination with DoD on these important plans.

H.R. 910

As introduced, H.R. 910 would reauthorize the Sikes Act for fiscal years 2015 through 2019. We note that the requirement in current law to revisit an installation's INRMP every five years represents a substantial and likely unnecessary planning burden on the military services and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Similar comprehensive land management plans required of other agencies do not require so short of a time line. For example, Comprehensive Conservation Plans for National Wildlife Refuges need to be revisited only every 10 years. As such, the Fish and Wildlife Service suggests modifying the requirement in the Sikes Act to reevaluate INRMPs from five years to 10 years to facilitate implementation and bring this requirement in line with similar requirements associated with other comprehensive land management plans.

The Fish and Wildlife Service believes that the Sikes Act provides an important process for affording meaningful conservation benefits to fish and wildlife on military lands. The current authorization for the Department of the Interior to carry out provisions of the Sikes Act through fiscal year 2014 is \$3 million. The Service believes the current authorization levels in H.R. 910 are sufficient.

Implementation of Disabled Veterans Sportsmen Act

The Fish and Wildlife Service strongly supports providing accessible outdoor recreation opportunities to our Nation's wounded veterans. The Disabled Veterans Sportsmen Act applies to military lands, and although we are not responsible for its implementation, the Fish and Wildlife Service does coordinate with our Sikes Act partners in DoD to incorporate activities that fall under this amendment to the Sikes Act during the development of INRMPs.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with many different partners, has offered special opportunities at a number of national wildlife refuges. The National Wildlife Refuge System has 97 refuges with Universal Access Hunts. Universal Access Hunts have provided, among other benefits: hunting areas and blinds reserved and available for hunters with disabilities; access to trails; wheelchair accessible hunting areas; special permits to allow hunting from refuge roads; special hunts held for hunters with disabilities; and other special arrangements. For example, Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge has hosted the National Wild Turkey Federation's Wheelin' Sportsmen for a one-day waterfowl hunt event. The event was created for wheelchair-bound hunters. It is free of charge, and many of the best waterfowl guides in the area volunteer each year to make the hunt a success.

For thirteen years, Horicon National Wildlife Refuge has participated in a special gun hunt for deer hunters with disabilities. Nine days in early October are set aside by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for an extra opportunity for hunters with disabilities to be able to harvest a deer when the weather is warmer. The Refuge has an 880-acre area with 10 blinds. The hunters are not restricted to the blind; they can set up their own portable blind or hunt from their vehicle. This past year, 20 hunters with disabilities participated in the hunt, harvesting one doe and one nine-point buck.

Military Conservation Partner Award

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service values our many partnerships with the military and

appreciates the role of military lands in conserving the nature of America. To recognize the hard work that our nation's military installations do for conservation, the Fish and Wildlife Service created the Military Conservation Partner Award. This annual award acknowledges a military installation whose efforts represent significant conservation accomplishments often achieved in partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service and other conservation agencies.

The 2013 winner of the Military Conservation Partner Award is Naval Base Coronado (NBC). NBC is comprised of eight units that encompass 60,000 acres of land and water in southern California. This installation provides unique training facilities for the Navy's elite SEAL teams while actively working to conserve the federally-listed California least tern and the Western snowy plover, among many other rare and endangered species. Natural resources employees have taken a landscape-scale approach to conservation, which has produced quantifiable accomplishments while supporting the operational requirements of the base.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate the opportunity to share with the subcommittee this information on the significant opportunities provided under the authority of the Sikes Act. Again, we appreciate and support your efforts to reauthorize the Sikes Act, and look forward to working with you and our partners to identify and enact any amendments that would improve this important law.