

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, as you know, we are faced with the significant challenge of conserving our remaining wetlands. More than 50 percent of our nation's wetlands have been lost, and in some states, my friends here today from California can testify to this, the loss is as high as 90 percent. In my home state of Minnesota, more than 10,000 wetland acres have been lost just in the past decade.

Needless to say, this situation requires the immediate attention of Congress. That is why I want to extend my appreciation to the Chairman for allowing me to testify on an issue important to so many sportsmen and conservationists.

While there are some current conservation programs, such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), which have had recent success stories, few programs, if any, have provided more proven benefits over a longer period of time and have a greater future potential than the federal Duck Stamp program.

As many of you know, the federal Duck Stamp program is a user funded initiative that is largely paid for by sportsmen and women. However, because the number of hunters in the U.S. has remained relatively static, while the price of land has risen dramatically, it has become increasingly difficult to acquire the necessary lands as funding from NAWCA and the Duck Stamp program have not kept up with inflation or need.

For example, since 1991, the price of land in Pope County, Minnesota has increased nearly fourfold, resulting in the number of acres purchased for wetland conservation declining by almost 50 percent. We have heard similar stories all across Minnesota and the rest of the country. This is a situation that we cannot allow to continue if we want future generations to be able to enjoy the great outdoors.

As a result, with the recommendation of several of the groups appearing here today, I, along with my good friend Congressman Mike Thompson, introduced H.R. 4315, the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act. Our bipartisan bill would build on the current federal Duck Stamp program by reauthorizing the Wetlands Loan Act at \$400 million over the next 10 years, doubling the amount available to the Migratory Bird Trust Fund to a total of \$800 million.

By dedicating these needed funds to the migratory bird program, the bill maintains its commitment to landowner rights in three ways. First, it focuses on easements which remain the property of the original landowner who agrees not to drain, burn, or fill the wetland. Second, it only targets counties deemed eligible within a state and third, it allows landowners, and not the government, to determine where resources are best used.

The Wetlands Loan Act also includes an incremental increase in the price of the Duck Stamp that is explicitly tied to the repayment of the loans advanced to the Migratory Bird Trust Fund. This would be the first increase to the Duck Stamp price since 1991 – the longest period without a price increase in the stamp's 71-year history.

As you can see, our bill is a fiscally responsible approach that is built around landowner rights, flexibility and a targeted focus on waterfowl habitat conservation. That is why the Wetlands Loan Act has won the support of nearly 30 sportsmen and conservation organizations and 96 of our colleagues, including both the Chairman and Ranking Member along with my friend, Mr. Kind, who unfortunately resides on the wrong side of the Mississippi.

It is my hope that with the strong bipartisan support that the Wetlands Loan Act has today, we will continue to make progress on moving this legislation through Congress.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. Conserving our wetlands and wildlife habitat is a top priority in my state of Minnesota and throughout the country. Proven approaches such as those in the Wetlands Loan Act will go a long way toward addressing the wetlands challenges facing our country.

I look forward to answering any questions you or the Subcommittee members may have.