

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH SATROM
DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.

ALSO REPRESENTING THE VIEWS OF:

ASSOCIATION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES
CAMPFIRE CLUB OF AMERICA
DELTA WATERFOWL FOUNDATION
IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA
ORION – THE HUNTER’S INSTITUTE
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SAFARI CLUB INTERNATIONAL
TEXAS WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION
THEODORE ROOSEVELT CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS

CONCERNING THE EMERGENCY WETLANDS LOAN ACT (H.R. 4315)

SEPTEMBER 21, 2006

Ducks Unlimited (DU) is pleased to testify before the House Resources Committee regarding the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act, which would amend the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act and Wetlands Loan Act. Our testimony also represents the views of a coalition of other sportsmen-conservation organizations who share an interest in wildlife habitat conservation. The Emergency Wetlands Loan Act is an important proposal that would help to increase habitat conservation efforts at a critical time in the Northern Great Plains and throughout the United States.

We commend Congressman Kennedy, Congressman Thompson and the nearly 100 co-sponsors for their foresight in authoring and promoting this very timely bipartisan legislation. Last March, our organization was pleased that the National Governor’s Association endorsed a bipartisan resolution proposed by Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco supporting the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act.

There is widespread, diverse support for the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act. My goal today is to provide you with information to increase your understanding of conservation work in the Prairie Pothole Region and the importance of the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act in meeting urgent needs for protecting critical wetland and grassland habitats of importance to our nation.

I am the Director of Public Policy for the Great Plains Region of Ducks Unlimited, a non-profit wetlands conservation organization with affiliates in Canada and Mexico. In my role at DU, I am responsible for public policy work related to federal, state and local governments in the eight states of the Northern Great Plains; North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. The Prairie Pothole Region (see attached Map #1 – Prairie Pothole Region) of the Northern Great Plains represents the “best of the best” waterfowl nesting habitat on the continent. Migratory waterfowl, shorebirds and songbirds produced in this region pass through every state in the continental U.S. where the birds are harvested, viewed and enjoyed by millions of people each year.

As you know, modern conservation is a complex undertaking involving numerous considerations; among the very highest priority in all of this are foresighted, effective, responsive, and adequately funded public policy initiatives at the federal level. The Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act (Duck Stamp Act), the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), a conservation friendly Farm Bill, and other federal programs play a major role in the success of our efforts to conserve our natural resources. We believe that the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act will complement these other public-private efforts and play a key role in helping to front-load the protection of our most valuable wetlands and associated habitats for future generations.

DU is committed to working with private landowners, the federal government and numerous private and public partners to succeed in cost-effective conservation of our nation’s natural heritage including the wetland and associated uplands that waterfowl and other wildlife rely on during their life cycle. We believe that our nation can and must succeed in these efforts and we commend this Congress and this Administration on their work in improving conservation programs throughout the country.

The Emergency Wetlands Loan Act, modeled after the 1961 Wetlands Loan Act, would authorize a \$400 million dollar advance in Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (Duck Stamp) revenue over ten years. The repayment of the loan is explicitly tied to an incremental increase in the annual price of a federal Duck Stamp. We believe this is a prudent approach because the current cost of the Duck Stamp lags far behind the rate of inflation and land prices have increased exponentially since the price of the stamp was last increased in 1992.

Duck Stamp funds are a primary tool, in concert with NAWCA funds, in meeting the pressing needs for effective conservation of these precious, threatened natural assets. Despite work to protect the wetlands and grasslands of the Prairie Pothole Region and other critical wildlife habitats in other parts of the country, the reality is that the threats to these habitats are greater than ever.

Historically, the lower 48 states of the United States have lost over half of their original wetlands. In my home state of North Dakota, we have lost 49 percent of our wetlands. The states of Minnesota and California have lost a staggering 53 percent and 91 percent of their original wetlands, respectively. Overall, the United States continues to lose more than 80,000 acres of wetlands each year and faces increased threats from changing land use patterns across much of the nation.

The loss of native prairie grasslands is equally if not more dramatic and significant. In Minnesota, more than 99 percent of the Tallgrass Prairie habitat has been lost. When this old-growth native prairie is converted the cropland and the embedded wetlands are at much higher risk of being drained or degraded by cultivation. Critical grassland and wetland habitat remains largely intact in the Missouri Coteau (see attached Map #2 – Missouri Coteau) physiographic region in central South Dakota and central and northwestern North Dakota.

DU has been studying grassland loss using satellite imagery in this area on a sample of over 60,000 tracts of grassland (see attached Map #3 – Grassland Study Areas). In this sample, we estimate an average loss of up to 1.5 percent of the Missouri Coteau's grasslands each year and a loss of 143,760 acres of native prairie during the period 1984-2003. Over 3.9 million acres of grassland remain in this region, but are currently at risk to conversion. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that this conversion of grassland has increased most significantly in the past five years (see attached Table #1 – Grassland Loss Rates).

Since 1999, Ducks Unlimited has been working in a long-term partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on a *Grasslands for Tomorrow* conservation initiative to permanently protect two million acres of grassland and wetlands on the Missouri Coteau landscape of the Prairie Pothole Region. More than 90 percent of these two million acres will be protected with permanent easements and remain in private hands and grassland-based agriculture. The Missouri Coteau has a proud, 100 to 125-year ranching and farming history where cattle and wildlife are compatible components of a rural lifestyle.

Duck Stamp dollars have played a key role in wetland and grassland conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States. A recent Continental Assessment Report by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) Committee recognized the increased threats to wetlands and grasslands in the Prairie Pothole Region and recommends that even more Duck Stamp funds be allocated to this critical area.

This is consistent with language in the proposed legislation that specifically requires that the funds be used in accordance with the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and should assist private landowners in their efforts to achieve long-term land use objectives in ways that enhance conservation of wetlands and wildlife habitat.

As a part of the *Grasslands for Tomorrow* initiative, Duck Stamp funds, NAWCA and private dollars are utilized to purchase grassland and wetland easements from ranchers and farmers who want to see their land remain in grassland-based agriculture. Since 1999, in addition to millions of dollars of private funding from DU and other partners, more than \$64 million in Duck Stamp funding and \$17 million in NAWCA funding has been utilized to purchase easements in the Prairie Pothole Region within the states of Montana, North and South Dakota. However, 1.4 million acres of high priority "at risk" wetlands and 10.4 million acres of high priority grasslands are still in need of protection.

While the accomplishments of this program and the acres protected may seem impressive, current funding is seriously inadequate and more than 500 landowners in North and South Dakota await the opportunity to protect their lands for waterfowl and other wildlife. These farmers and ranchers are offering 227,000 acres of land to be placed under easements at an estimated cost of \$60 million based on 2006 land prices. As mentioned, land prices in the Dakotas, the Prairie Pothole Region, and across the country are increasing dramatically (see attached Table #2 – Land Prices). As land prices increase, the values of easements, which tend to be 25-40 percent of the fair market value of the land, also increase.

In conclusion, we believe that the renewal of the Emergency Wetlands Loan Act is a timely approach to help to increase the

rate of protection of critical wetland habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife and will ultimately save dollars for the American taxpayer. Even at the present rate of protection through the Duck Stamp program and other complimentary efforts, there continues to be a net loss of habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife and increased resources are needed. We must act now to ensure these essential habitats for wildlife are not lost forever.

DU appreciates the opportunity to provide this statement and we would be pleased to answer questions.