

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony

STATEMENT OF
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Before the
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
United States House of Representatives

Concerning

WILDLIFE HABITAT

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss wildlife habitat and the National Forest System. I am accompanied today by Harv Forsgren, Director of Wildlife, Fish, and Rare Plants, by Dr. Robert Lewis, Deputy Chief for Research, who will speak about wildlife habitat research underway around the country and by Dr. Frank Thompson, who specializes in research of silviculture and ecology of the upland central hardwood forests of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

I will cover the responsibilities of the Forest Service for wildlife habitat, the broad range of habitats on National Forest lands, and the tools to manage those habitats.

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service is responsible for management of over 192 million acres of national forests and grasslands. The Forest Service natural resource agenda emphasizes protecting and restoring ecosystems to ensure healthy watersheds. Healthy forests and grasslands help ensure sustainable, diverse ecosystems that support robust and viable wildlife and fish populations. The agenda also emphasizes recreation, with activities associated with wildlife and fisheries such as hunting, fishing, and viewing being among the major components.

The Forest Service derives its authority to manage for wildlife and fish habitat from a number of statutes, - including the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960, the National Forest Management Act of 1976, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

BROAD RANGE OF HABITATS ON NATIONAL FOREST LANDS

The national forests and grasslands provide a diverse array of ecosystems and wildlife and fish habitat types. The national forests and grasslands provide: habitat for over 250 species of migratory songbirds; habitat for 80 percent of the nation's elk, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats; 28 million acres of habitat for wild turkey; and over 6 million acres of wetlands for waterfowl and wetland associated wildlife.

National forest ecosystems often represent the least fragmented and, in some cases, most abundant amount of a given habitat available. These lands are highly valued by the American people. With the intensive uses on other ownerships coupled with ever increasing expansion of urban environments into rural areas, the national forests and grasslands often represent the last remaining open space. National forests provide habitat that is critically important for diverse, viable, and robust populations of wildlife and fish, including many sensitive, threatened, and endangered species. The National Forest lands are also some of the best remaining accessible lands for wildlife and fish related recreation.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Forest Service wildlife and fisheries habitat management has a sound basis in science. Forest Service research efforts focus on habitat requirements and on protecting, restoring, and managing habitats in managed forest landscapes. A key aspect of Forest Service research is to support the management programs of the Forest Service by providing land managers with guidelines for integrating fish and wildlife habitat management with other forest management activities.

The wildlife and fisheries programs on national forests address general wildlife and fisheries habitat management, as well as threatened and endangered species management. Program objectives are to: protect, restore, and improve habitats of all native and desired non-native wildlife and fish; improve habitats and provide opportunities for consumptive and commercial uses including hunting, trapping, and fishing; and increase opportunities for viewing wildlife and fish, interpretation, and appreciation. The programs involve activities such as inventory, habitat management and improvement, assessments, land management planning and project planning, and monitoring.

It is the policy of the Forest Service to coordinate and work closely with state game and fish agencies to ensure that habitat management programs are coordinated with the state's responsibilities for management of the animals. The Forest Service also has a partnership and challenge cost-share program which engages the public and interest groups in active participation and management of wildlife habitat. In 1998 there were 2,532 partners engaged in 3,214 projects, leveraging \$15.2 million dollars into \$35 million dollars worth of habitat improvement projects benefiting wildlife, fish, rare plants, and people.

A considerable portion of the Forest Service's management program is focused upon neotropical migratory birds. The Forest Service manages one of the largest amounts of breeding bird habitat in the United States under one ownership. Most species of birds, including 250 species of neotropical migrants, utilize national forests and grasslands during some portion of their life.

Bird watching, wildlife photography and viewing, and other ecotourism activities are a rapidly expanding area of recreation. In 1996 national forests provided 53 million activity days for wildlife viewing enthusiasts. Furthermore, wildlife viewing on national forests as an activity is projected to increase by another 69 percent within the next 50 years.

The economic and recreation benefits from the Forest Service's wildlife management activities are impressive. National Forests provided an estimated 27.8 million activity days of hunting in 1996, with

estimated economic expenditures of \$2.1 billion dollars. In addition to hunting, an estimated 53 million activity days were spent for wildlife viewing, which had estimated economic expenditures of an additional \$2.1 billion dollars.

Land management programs, such as the timber sale program, are an important tool in the development, maintenance, and restoration of wildlife habitats. In recent years, our timber sale program has undergone profound changes. A decade ago 80 to 85 percent of our timber sales were designed to remove commercial sawlogs from forests and bring them to market. Today, more than 50 percent of all our timber sales are designed with primarily stewardship objectives in mind. For example, in 1988, nearly 40 percent of all National Forest timber sales were accomplished through clearcuts. Today only about 10 percent of our sales involve clearcutting. People want their forests to look like forests. They don't want to see mountainsides of big clearcuts or of red, bug-killed trees.

Much public attention has focused on the 70 percent decline in timber sale levels over the past decade. And while the quantity of timber has been reduced, the quality of the objectives of the sale has improved so that timber sales are more focused on ecological objectives. We are continually learning that timber harvest often can be used as an effective tool to help accomplish multiple objectives, habitat improvement, and watershed restoration.

Last week, in fact, I was in Oregon with Governor Kitzhaber announcing a collaborative proposal to restore over 500,000 acres of National Forest land in eastern Oregon. I outlined a series of principles - consistent with the principles developed by the Western Governors for environmental management in the West known as Enlibra. I would like to share these principles with you:

- * First, we must ensure that all the interests - environmentalists, loggers, hunters, and so on - are at the table helping us to formulate options.
- * Second, we must involve our sister agencies and the states -- we all bring so much expertise to the table and we must work together.
- * Third, we should proceed with humility and patience. It took many years for forested landscapes to become out of balance -- we can not, nor should we try, to restore them overnight.
- * Fourth, we should avoid controversial areas in planning these projects. The idea is to build trust and confidence in the public land agencies. These projects are tests, pilots that we can learn from and improve.
- * Fifth, the focus should be on watershed health and restoration -- to be certain, wood fiber and jobs will follow from many of these efforts but only as a function of restoring the health, diversity, or productivity of the land. The opportunity to demonstrate how timber harvest can help to accomplish other multiple use objectives is tremendous.
- * Sixth, we should target the preponderance of our efforts in places with the greatest restoration potential in communities of the greatest need.
- * Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must monitor the results of our restoration diligently to ensure that our treatments have had the desired effect in terms of promoting land health.

Abiding by these principles will help ensure that our best efforts are spent on the ground in the woods - not

in the courtroom.

Another potential solution to deal with addressing forest stewardship needs, including wildlife habitat improvement needs, is the new forest ecosystem restoration and improvement line item of \$15 million dollars proposed in the fiscal year 2000 budget. This would enable the Forest Service to implement treatments with multiple objectives, including wildlife habitat needs, in areas where there is no commercial timber harvest product available to help pay for the millions of acres in need of treatment where these investments are needed. Prescribed fire is a tool used in many areas, either to create early seral stages such as burning in chaparral in the southwest, or to maintain or restore habitat conditions, such as the understory burning in the southeast to help the red-cockaded woodpecker. Other activities include water developments, riparian and stream restoration, wetland restoration, vegetation planting, and fencing. Sometimes, the best management prescription for an area is simply to leave it alone.

Several years ago, the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois addressed forest fragmentation and habitat needs for birds requiring closed forest canopy as well as those requiring open habitat and early seral stage vegetation. Forest personnel worked with the State of Illinois and researchers to determine which areas on the forest would best meet the need of neotropical migrant birds, many of which require closed forest canopy. These areas were then designated during planning as Forest Interior Management Units, with standards and guidelines to give priority to neotropical bird habitat needs. Other areas were then designated to meet the need of birds such as ruffed grouse, which need early seral stage vegetation. Organizations such as the Ruffed Grouse Society and the Illinois Department of Conservation worked with the Forest Service to identify areas. Additionally, an area of bottomland forest known as oakwood bottoms was identified as a critical link in the North American Waterfowl Plan. The Fish and Wildlife Service, along with the Illinois Department of Conservation and organizations such as Duck Unlimited, have all been instrumental in providing assistance.

CHALLENGES

Restoring the health of the land is a primary challenge faced by the agency. A number of factors have contributed to current conditions, including fuel accumulations, species composition, and ecosystem structure changes that have occurred over the past 100 years due to fire suppression policies, various land management programs, and increasing demands on the limited resource base that exists. New information and research are telling us that certain activities and conditions need to change if we are to have healthy ecosystems that can provide a dependable supply of goods and services to the American public, including robust populations of wildlife and fish.

The restoration project in eastern Oregon that I mentioned earlier will implement activities such as prescribed burning, commercial and precommercial thinning, riparian area planting and stream rehabilitation, maintenance, closure, and obliteration of roads, and noxious weed treatment and prevention methods. While not all of the site-specific projects have been identified yet, the Forest Service will work closely with the State, the Eastside Forest Advisory Panel, and the John Day/Snake Resource Advisory Council to assess and prioritize additional actions for the demonstration area. This approach will provide us with an opportunity to prioritize and focus our actions and improving watershed conditions and wildlife and fish habitat in a holistic approach.

SUMMARY

The Forest Service has an enormous responsibility in managing our nation's resources for the many varied

uses and needs of the American people. Clearly, managing the forests and grasslands with a goal for healthy, functioning ecosystems is a top priority, which in turn will provide for important habitat for wildlife and fish. Managing for healthy, diverse ecosystems that produce clean water and quality habitat is one of our primary goals, and we look forward to working with this subcommittee on achieving this goal.

This concludes my statement, and I can answer any questions you or members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

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