

Testimony of  
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Before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands of the  
House Committee on Natural Resources

Regarding the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (HR 4647) and the  
Modernizing Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act (HR 2591)

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Good afternoon Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, and members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands. I am Bob Ziehmer, the Senior Director of Conservation for Bass Pro Shops. Previously, I was the Director of the Missouri Department of Conservation where I worked alongside trained fish and wildlife professionals who are highly devoted to the conservation, restoration, and management of our nation's fish and wildlife and the habitats on which they depend for the benefit of all current and future citizens. Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to testify before you today on the "Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act of 2017" (HR 2591) and the "Recovering America's Wildlife Act" (HR 4647). The first will help stabilize one of the critical existing cornerstones of state fish and wildlife agencies' conservation and management efforts and the second provides an opportunity to build upon our wildlife conservation success and secure the future of America's rich diversity of fish and wildlife across our great nation.

I am very fortunate to work for a company that measures our investment by our long-term impact on conservation. Bass Pro Shops is North America's premier outdoor recreation and conservation company. Founded in 1972, when avid young angler Johnny Morris began selling tackle out of his father's liquor store in Springfield, Missouri, today the company provides customers with unmatched offerings spanning premier destination retail, outdoor equipment manufacturing, world-class resort destinations and more. In 2017, Bass Pro Shops acquired Cabela's to create a "best-of-the-best" experience with superior products, dynamic locations and outstanding customer service. Under the visionary conservation leadership of Johnny Morris, Bass Pro Shops is made up of individuals who are dedicated to inspiring people, especially youth and families, to enjoy, love and conserve the great outdoors. Bass Pro Shops' giving over the course of many decades has positioned us as the outdoor industry's conservation leader. The company is known as a national leader in protecting habitat and connecting families to the outdoors and has been named by Forbes as "one of America's Most Reputable Companies" and "one of America's Best Employers."

*Modernizing Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act, HR 2591*

At the beginning of my testimony I first referenced the “Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow’s Needs Act of 2017,” (HR 2591). I am very pleased to say that this bill neither seeks a new source of federal funding nor imparts a federal mandate of any kind. Rather, this bill simply gives state fish and wildlife agencies (state agencies) the flexibility they need to address today’s priority problems using existing funds from the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Fund.

Since 1937, sportsmen and women have been the driving force for conservation funding in the United States. Over \$10 billion have been collected through the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Fund (P-R) from hunters and recreational shooters, and awarded to state agencies to fund wildlife conservation, habitat acquisition and management, public access, hunter education and safety, and shooting ranges affiliated with hunter safety programs. This funding program has unquestionably served as the lifeblood for wildlife conservation in this nation for more than 80 years. In spite of P-R’s magnanimous success, the allowable uses for funding under this program must be updated to accommodate modern challenges unimaginable in 1937, if we are to adequately secure our hunting and recreational shooting future.

For the past several decades, the number of licensed hunters across the United States (U.S.) has been on a steady and precipitous decline. More recently, the preliminary results of the 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) indicate that hunting has declined by 16 percent since 2011. This equates to a reduction of 2.2 million hunters over the 5-year period. Previously, over the period from 1980 to 2011, a decline of 3.7 million hunters occurred. These numbers indicate that there are now approximately 11.5 million active hunters in the United States. Additionally, the average age of Americans purchasing hunting licenses is steadily rising thus further detailing the lack of recruitment and retention.

This recent accelerated decline is alarming and should be viewed as a wakeup call to not only state agencies, industry, and conservation groups, but sportsmen and women everywhere. Outdoor recreation remains a huge contributor to our nation’s economy, and according to a report by the Outdoor Industry Association, expenditures by hunters and other outdoor recreation participants in 2017 topped \$887 billion. While there are many contributing factors to the participation decline noted above, urbanization and suburbanization are chief among them. These overarching impacts on our human population have made it more difficult for the public to participate in hunting and recreational target shooting as public access, time, and available resources are all strained.

The “Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow’s Needs Act of 2017” will provide state and territorial wildlife agencies the tools needed to recruit, retain, and reactivate (R3) hunters and recreational shooters by clarifying that one of the purposes of the P-R is to extend

financial and technical assistance to state agencies for the promotion of hunting and recreational target shooting. This will ensure that funding for wildlife conservation will keep pace with the demands of our growing and changing national population.

This legislation specifically seeks to define “hunter recruitment” and “recreational shooter recruitment” activities and projects and makes it clear that funds under section 4(b), 4(c) and 10 may be used for hunter recruitment and recreational shooter recruitment. Currently, the Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Safety Trust Fund, which is a similar statute supporting the fishing and boating constituency from related user-based taxes, allows state agencies to use those funds for recruitment as well as education, outreach and promotion of fishing programs to the public. These expanded uses of excise tax funds generated from fishing and boating have helped to stimulate an 8% growth in participation during the same 5-year period when hunting participation declined significantly. Our belief is that these expanded uses in P-R funding would have similar positive impacts for hunting and recreational shooting participation, helping to stabilize the funding cornerstone that state agencies depend on for successful wildlife conservation and management.

HR 2591 also would expand the Multistate Conservation Grant Program (Section 11) by providing for an additional \$5 million per year, specifically from archery related excise tax collections, to be used for nationally and regionally specific communication and outreach related to hunter and recreational shooter programs that will encourage collaboration and drive innovation. Currently, the \$3 million allocated to this program is inadequate to meet the large and growing demand for state agencies’ multistate and national wildlife conservation priorities as well as exceptional recruitment, retention and reactivation projects, especially when these activities represent only one of a handful of national priorities competing for these dollars.

HR 2591 allows state agencies to acquire lands and develop public target ranges in strategic support of meeting the needs of hunters and recreational shooters in their respective states, and eliminates the required nexus of building target ranges only as part of a hunter education program. Currently, Section 4(c) and Section 10 funds are not always sufficient to meet the state agency’s need to fund both land acquisition and development costs associated with target range constructions. HR 2591 would allow state agencies to use Section 4(b) funds for target ranges. Currently, Section 4(b) funds cannot be used for range construction or maintenance. HR 2591 will clarify that the construction, operation, and maintenance of public target ranges under the Basic Hunter Education funding is not restricted to target ranges that include hunter safety programs, as the regulations now specify.

In keeping with the original intent of the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, to dedicate the majority of the funds to wildlife management and habitat conservation, the use of funds for hunter and recreational shooter recruitment, retention, and reactivation under the proposed legislation is capped at no more than 25% on a 5-year average but do not require the

expenditure of any funds for this activity. As currently practiced, all decisions regarding the use of the funds remain at the discretion of the state fish and wildlife agency directors.

In closing, I would also like to acknowledge the vital leadership of Representative Austin Scott (GA) in championing this legislation. HR 2591 will preserve the current user pay-public benefit funding of wildlife conservation for generations to come without overlaying a federal mandate or any increase in user fees or taxes. This legislation simply provides the authority for existing funds to be used on programs that will help ensure participation in hunting and recreational shooting, thus securing the funding base for state-led wildlife conservation long into the future. Please join me, our state agencies, industry partners, conservation organizations and concerned sportsmen and women everywhere in supporting passage of HR 2591.

*Recovering America's Wildlife Act, HR 4647*

Our nation's fish and wildlife are among its most valuable resources, along with clean air, water, healthy forests and agricultural lands that support all of us. Our quality of life, outdoor recreational pursuits and prosperity are tied to the health and sustainability of these treasures. They occur not by accident but through the investments, sacrifices, and sound management practices of individual citizens, local communities, and public servants of our natural resources. Our nation's natural resources, including our rich and diverse fish and wildlife, represent the health and wealth of the country and its people.

While we have many fish and wildlife conservation success stories to tell, there is still much to do. In fact, today, we are facing an historic fish and wildlife challenge that could alter future Americans' opportunities to benefit from these resources. Scientists estimate that one-third of wildlife species in the United States are at risk of becoming threatened or endangered unless we pursue proactive, collaborative efforts to accelerate their recovery. The dramatic decline of so many species of diverse wildlife and the habitats they depend on has an adverse effect on fundamental life benefits provided by nature such as water purification and aquifer recharge, flood abatement, pollination, recreation and food and fiber production that are essential to human health. These species declines threaten Americans' quality of life, as well as our national economy and create costly regulatory uncertainty for businesses, industries, and communities further impacting jobs and the health and economic well-being of our communities.

In 2014, prompted by the growing threats to our natural resources, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies convened a Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources, which was co-chaired by Governor Dave Freudenthal (WY) and Bass Pro Shops founder and CEO John L. Morris and included executives from major corporations and leadership from the nation's leading non-governmental conservation organizations. I was honored to serve on this panel that validated the serious need for a more complete funding model that enables state agencies to more fully deliver conservation actions for *all* fish and wildlife. The Wildlife Restoration Program and the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Safety Trust Fund

are essential and successful in providing reliable and dedicated funding to state agencies for the conservation and management of species that are hunted and fished, respectively, and are responsible for the recovery of these species, some of which were on the brink of extinction. There is no concomitant, dedicated funding source to state agencies for the conservation and management of the full array of species, many of which are trending toward needing a safety net to assist in their stabilization and recovery. State agencies need a dedicated funding source commensurate with their broad conservation missions to restore, conserve, and manage these at-risk species that comprise the lists of species of greatest conservation need compiled by state agencies. We need an innovative funding solution to address a nation-wide fish and wildlife conservation crisis that has the potential to impact all aspects of our American traditions, our economy and our quality of life.

To accomplish this goal, the Panel recommended a sweeping initiative to dedicate \$1.3 billion annually, an average of \$26 million per state, to the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program, an existing subaccount under the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program, for state agencies to effectively implement State Wildlife Action Plans,. Congress requires each state and U.S. territory to develop a State Wildlife Action Plan – a proactive, comprehensive conservation strategy which examines species’ health and recommends actions to conserve wildlife and vital habitat before they become more rare and in need of additional protections. These plans are unique to each state and are developed with participation from the public. Congress has provided a helping hand for these efforts by funding development of State Wildlife Action Plans through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program. We are grateful for this recognition of the value of state-based conservation, but we are only able to scratch the surface with this level of support and without additional resources to reverse the growing list of species declines and possible listings it is a growing federal and fiscal burden on state agencies and our communities.

The panel has since expanded into the Alliance for America’s Fish and Wildlife (Alliance), representing members from the outdoor recreation retail and manufacturing sector, the energy and automotive industries, private landowners, educational institutions, sportsmen’s and other, conservation organizations, and state agencies. United by a shared vision and a common purpose, the unprecedented Alliance stands ready to work with Congress to enact and implement this unique solution to the nation’s fish and wildlife crisis.

On behalf of Bass Pro Shops and the rest of the Alliance, I would like to thank Representatives Jeff Fortenberry (NE) and Debbie Dingell (MI) for understanding the gravity of our growing wildlife crisis and for introducing the bipartisan, legislative solution to make a meaningful investment in this important, state-led conservation work – the “*Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*,” (HR 4647). This legacy legislation is an opportunity to provide a proactive solution that leverages public/private partnerships and brings stakeholders together to reduce potentially costly regulatory burdens and uncertainties, and provide economic benefits to our citizens and businesses. Additionally, this legislation is complementary to existing natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation programs and proposes to redirect \$1.3 billion in existing

energy and mineral revenues generated from onshore and offshore federal lands and waters to invest in the health and management of habitats and landscapes upon which our citizens and all of our fish and wildlife depend.

The “*Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*” would provide critical resources to state agencies to sustainably lead proactive, voluntary, incentive-based conservation efforts that have proven effective in stabilizing wildlife populations to preclude the need to federally list species. As an observation, the state agencies have shown that addressing the life needs and habitat requirements of declining species across their range before they reach the point where additional protections may be needed, is the more prudent, economically and biologically sound approach to managing species trending toward listing. It would also enable the state agencies to work with private landowners to implement voluntary conservation and management actions without requiring public access. Funds provided to the state agencies through this legislation would be leveraged with non-federal match, creating opportunities for successful partnerships, and apportioned to each state based 50% on its proportion of land area and 50% on its proportion of people. Territories would also receive funding from the program.

In addition to providing critical resources to proactively manage all fish and wildlife species, the “*Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*” also provides state agencies with the ability to communicate and work with the public through wildlife conservation education efforts. The Act allows the state agencies to create and implement wildlife conservation education programs and projects, including public outreach intended to foster natural resource stewardship, and work with the public, industries and communities to develop local wildlife conservation solutions. Further, the legislation advances wildlife-associated recreation projects by allowing state agencies to use up to 10% of a state’s apportionment to meet the growing demand for outdoor activities associated with fish and wildlife including but not limited to hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography; wildlife viewing areas, blinds, and platforms; water trails and access; and trails, trail heads and access for such projects. Having a place to go to recreate outdoors is one of the leading challenges to outdoor recreational participation. Outdoor recreation is a part of our great natural heritage—our identity as Americans, and we want to make certain that this natural heritage exists in the same or better condition for future Americans by nurturing a conservation ethic and investing in our natural resources.

We know this is a substantial commitment and investment, but rest assured that the state agencies and their conservation partners are committed to conserving the full array of America’s fish and wildlife, and excited to report their conservation outcomes and progress to their citizens and Congress. Investing in the “*Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*” will provide economic returns to state, local and federal governments in the form of decreased tax payer expenditures associated with species listings and associated regulations, increased opportunity for wildlife-dependent recreation, growth in the outdoor recreation economy, and increases in associated jobs.

Recent surveys document high citizen interest in conservation of our natural resources across the country. From a poll conducted earlier this year entitled “Conservation in the West” by Public Opinion Strategies and Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz and Associates, 74% of westerners identify themselves as an outdoor recreation enthusiast, and this transcends party lines—75% of republicans, 72% of democrats, and 76% of independent respondents. Additionally, 76% of western voters consider themselves a conservationist, and 7 in 10 voters polled say that outdoor recreation is very important to the economy in their state.

Unfortunately, the essential role that our natural resources play in American’s quality of life and economic prosperity is all too often overlooked. These resources are the lifeblood of many communities and continue as important job and revenue generators at state and national levels. For example, as referenced earlier from the same 2017 Outdoor Industry Association report, every year Americans spend more on outdoor recreation (\$887 billion) than they do on pharmaceuticals and fuel, combined (\$770 billion). More Americans are employed by outdoor recreation jobs than those in education, computer technology, insurance and finance, and construction. The outdoor recreation economy generates \$124.5 billion in local, state and federal tax revenues each year. Spending on hunting alone supports more American jobs (195,000) than the combined workforces of Apple and Microsoft (130,000). Access to high quality recreation opportunities drives our economy and continues to be a quality-of-life index criterion, and a key decision point for choosing a location for many of our most productive American industries and contributors to our GDP. As I can attest from my perspective as a leader in this industry, all of these economic benefits would not exist without healthy fish and wildlife and the habitats they depend on for survival, just as we do. The “*Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*” recognizes and builds a path forward for this synergy to continue to sustain our high quality of life and our economic prosperity together into the future.

The state agencies have a track record of successful species restoration and conservation. Over the last few decades by stretching limited funding, state agencies have built considerable expertise in response to the growing need to address at-risk and imperiled species. I offer two examples for your consideration – one from California and the other from the Southeastern United States.

First, the Tule elk was once a species of greatest conservation need. Native only to California, the Tule elk is the smallest of all the elk species in North America. Due to unregulated hunting and loss of natural habitat, they were driven nearly to extinction by the turn of the twentieth century. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) created its Elk Management Program in order to maintain healthy elk herds, re-establish elk in suitable historic ranges, provide public educational and recreational opportunities involving elk, and to alleviate conflicts involving elk on private property. Through this program, CDFW personnel have safely captured and relocated more than 1,200 elk since 1975 using a variety of techniques.

California's state Tule elk population has increased from three herds totaling 500 elk in 1970, to 21 herds with about 3,800 elk today. Such an increase demonstrates the program's success and the state's native elk species will continue to recover with continued proactive measures and investments in their conservation.

Second, following the 2010 filing of the so called "mega-petition" and others that covered 404 aquatic species in the southeast, state agencies comprising the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) developed the Southeast At-Risk Species (SEARS) program in partnership with the FWS Southeast Regional Office. The purpose of this program is to cooperate and coordinate among the state agencies to address the conservation needs of the at-risk species proposed for listing. The outcomes of this collaboration have been remarkable: 98 species do not require protection of the federal ESA because of existing conservation actions, updated surveys, and reevaluation of threats to their survival; five species have been downlisted from endangered to threatened; four species have been delisted; and five species were listed as threatened instead of endangered because of the overall efforts. State agencies worked across state boundaries and cooperatively with the FWS utilizing state and federal funds together with state agency relationships and expertise.

The bottom line is state agencies are effective at leveraging partnerships, relationships, expertise, capacity and funding to conserve fish and wildlife. We now have the opportunity to make additional investments to proactively apply proven conservation practices that will prevent the need to pursue other regulatory approaches to wildlife conservation on a much broader scale. State agencies are on the ground, in the communities, and on the front lines of these challenges. State agencies have prioritized building relationships with local communities, landowners and other stakeholders to nurture trust and work to better serve the fish and wildlife management needs of their constituents.

Although there have been great strides in conservation made for important species, without much needed funding provided in this legislation, state agencies won't be able to stay ahead of the pressures that keep pushing our fish and wildlife further toward becoming endangered. Today, strong bipartisan support is needed to advance this legislation that builds upon these conservation successes to ensure the future of our diverse fish and wildlife is secure, to expand wildlife-associated recreation, and provide opportunities to engage and educate Americans and local communities on important fish and wildlife conservation issues. This will be our legacy, our gift to our grandchildren and their children, to leave for them the opportunities that we have had to enjoy and benefit from our natural resources, and value them for all that they provide for us.

The fish and wildlife resources of our country are ably managed by state fish and wildlife agencies in partnership with federal agencies and non-governmental partners. These two bills, that I have the privilege of testifying on, provide enhancements or improvements to visionary legislation dating back to 1937, that will enable state agencies to shore up its base, if you will,



through new and concerted outreach and marketing in support of recruitment, retention, and reactivation of hunters, and the second bill offers the hope of new funding, new capacity for managing the full suite of fish and wildlife species, and their habitats, in keeping with the public trust doctrine under which fish and wildlife are a resource managed by state agencies in trust for the public and future generations. These two bills are the perfect package to secure the future of fish and wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation, and complementary education.

In closing, Bass Pro Shops pledges to work with Members of Congress to implement these solutions to our growing fish and wildlife conservation challenges. We would ask that you enact these two pieces of important legislation which are critical to the long-term sustainability of our nation's fish and wildlife. This is the opportunity to facilitate the continuation of the significant stewardship provided by America's sportsmen and women, and the health and well-being of every American for generations to come.