

Committee on Resources

Witness Statement

The Honorable Don Young, Chairman
United States House of Representatives Committee on Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Young:

Testimony RE: Federal Aid Programs Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Mr. Chairman, honorable committee members, and distinguished guests, thank you for this opportunity. My name is David K. Langford and I am testifying for myself, for the Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) and on behalf of Texas' wild things and wild places and the people who take care of them. We appreciate this opportunity to offer our thoughts on the expenditure of funds collected under the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson (PR-DJ) acts.

As you know, Texas has a huge vested interest in the fate of PR-DJ money. Due to the size of our population and land area we receive the largest allowable share of these funds, which have a tremendous impact on our conservation efforts. While we will leave it to the wisdom of Congress to define administrative costs, we believe that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should follow the law and make sure that the states receive every single dollar they are entitled to. And, although I have no direct knowledge of some of the testimony we've heard here regarding wasted dollars, I can tell you that the sportsmen and women of Texas will be extremely upset if it is determined that USFWS has diverted and/or inappropriately spent any part of the money that we Texans have gladly paid for conservation.

With that said, please let me begin by telling you something about our organization and our philosophy. The Texas Wildlife Association is a non-profit organization created in 1985 to further the conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat on private lands, which make up 97 percent of the land holdings in Texas. Our members, which number more than 5,000 and directly or indirectly control up to 40 million acres of wildlife habitat, are landowners, land managers, private and government-employed biologists and educators, hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts. All TWA members are bound by a respect for our natural resources and a commitment to active resource management, and we are absolutely dedicated to conserving wildlife and wildlife habitat. We believe if fate or fortune places you in a stewardship position for any natural resources, it is your duty to humankind to be the very best steward you can be.

In some states, it would be unusual for landowners, wildlife professionals and educators, and outdoor sportsmen to be part of the same organization, but in Texas it's not. The spirit of cooperation and dedication that contributes to TWA's success mirrors the strong working relationship that exists between these groups of people throughout our state. Perhaps this relationship developed because most of the state's wildlife habitat is in private hands and state wildlife professionals realize that working with landowners to manage wildlife and habitat is as much a privilege as it is a right. Or, perhaps it was because landowners realized that they could not manage wildlife as successfully without relevant research, information and technical

assistance from the state's wildlife professionals or maintain premium wildlife habitat without the access fees paid by sportsmen and women. Whatever the case, we've learned that wildlife benefits from concerted efforts not pitched battles, and we've learned that to successfully manage wildlife, egos and personal agendas must be set aside.

We've also learned that conservation problems are best solved by local folks at the local levels. While the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) can claim many successes, perhaps one of its greatest is the development of the technical guidance program, which provides landowners with an opportunity to work with a consulting biologist who lives in the same ecological region. Instead of dealing in broad generalizations, these individuals have the chance to study a piece of land, establish goals and hammer out a strategy that is good for the landowner and good for wildlife and habitat.

This approach has worked. In a typical year, TPWD's Wildlife Division personnel provide information and technical assistance to more than 10,000 land managers on more than 10 million acres of private land in Texas. In addition, at least 84 wildlife management association cooperatives have been formed to encourage cooperative management for wildlife on more than 3.3 million acres of private lands that are generally smaller tracts impacted by habitat fragmentation. This program enables conservation where it counts -- on the "Back Forty," not inside the Beltway.

It's important to note that the technical guidance approach to conservation stretches money a long way. The technical guidance biologists bring habitat management experience and ideas to the landowners who in turn implement the management practices using their own money. Although it has never been adequately quantified, there is a huge multiplier effect working here. And, there's definitely more bang for those PR-DJ bucks spent via the "extension approach" in Texas than by being misapplied at the federal level.

Plus, these habitat improvements are made on private lands. Land, that unlike federally owned land, is still on the local tax rolls contributing to the well-being of rural communities. Imagine! Local citizens paying their taxes, serving their volunteer fire departments, school districts and communities, while they personally fund and do the hands-on work of conservation.

In Texas, our state wildlife agency (TPWD) considers itself a partner in the conservation process, so it is disconcerting to encounter "environmental elitism" at the federal level. The elitism I'm referring to is not an obscure form of discrimination or an environmental justice issue, it is a pervasive attitude found throughout the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Action after action sends a clear message: "We, and only we, federals know what true conservation is. Hunters and fishermen are merely obstacles standing in the way of real habitat work."

This mindset is not only arrogant, it's just plain wrong. Of course, if federal agency personnel believe that they are the only ones qualified to make conservation decisions, it explains, but doesn't justify, why they look for excuses to keep PR-DJ money for federal activities instead of routing it to the states where it belongs.

Unfortunately, this viewpoint doesn't just affect the agency's accounting practices, it also leads federal wildlife officials to make decisions that don't make environmental sense. One case in point is the recent unilateral decision by USFWS Region 2 Director Nancy Kaufman to nix a biological control project proposed by USDA-APHIS aimed at managing the invasive tree Tamarix, also known as salt cedar. This exotic tree takes over riparian areas displacing native vegetation.

After years of painstaking study, USDA-APHIS was prepared to release the *Diorhabda elongata* leaf beetle, which eats salt cedar and nothing else, in southwest Texas, New Mexico and several other western states where the exotic invader has degraded important riparian zones. Salt cedar has also adversely affected habitat management for game species already being supported by federal aid such as waterfowl, sandhill cranes, wild turkeys, desert bighorns and pronghorn antelope.

Despite salt cedar's negative impacts on the aforementioned species, Ms. Kaufman reportedly stopped the beetle's release because the endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher was found nesting in salt cedar. Ironically, this is the very plant USFWS blames for degrading the riparian zones where the flycatcher normally nests. Closer examination showed that the salt cedar was not providing preferred habitat for the flycatcher, but that the bird was simply seeking a structure on which to build its nest. So, in USFWS's mentality, one should ruin wetlands and riparian areas -- and harm game species currently receiving PR-DJ money -- in order to protect structure not really needed by a rare species.

Another example is the agency's reluctance to fund research projects centering on game species, despite the fact that in Texas, game species are the primary reason that wildlife habitat is conserved. A director of one of the state's prominent wildlife research facilities said, "With the exception of some waterfowl work, we're much more likely to be granted funds if we're conducting research on piping plovers, ocelots or some other rare species. In fact, we don't even bother submitting proposals for game species research because it won't be considered." Granted, these funding requests are not linked directly to PR-DJ funds, but I offer this as a further illustration of the agency's current guiding philosophy.

A third example was the recently proposed "baiting rules," so onerous and restrictive that they would have made illegal "baiters" out of ethical hunters who inadvertently knocked down naturally growing waterfowl food items as they traveled to the blind by boat or marsh buggy, or even waded to place their decoys. Further, USFWS fought bitterly to keep the principle of "strict liability" intact, which made criminals out of honest hunters and their children who had absolutely no way of knowing what might be occurring three ranches away. Though these rules were ultimately corrected due to public outcry, such actions call into question USFWS's commitment to hunters and anglers and the game species their hard-earned money supports. Frankly, it appears that USFWS prefers to ignore game species and direct its attention to endangered species.

And while TWA shares the agency's concern for rare species, we private land managers must challenge the federal biologists' ill-conceived notion that rare species will suffer if game species thrive. Our experience has demonstrated just the opposite. When managers conserve and manage habitat for game species their efforts provide a home for rare species as well. Essentially, all wildlife need the same things -- food, water, a safe place to raise their young and land that is not covered by asphalt, shopping malls or subdivisions.

I've spent a lot of time discussing philosophical issues this morning, but in closing I would like to tackle one more question. What could Texas do with more money if USFWS stopped wasting so much? Here are just a few ideas.

First, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department could conduct more research to provide the answers to tough wildlife conservation questions now and in the future. This year there were 26 new research proposals considered. There was funding available for eight. Even the number of research proposals coming from field biologists was limited by available funds because the personnel were forced to prioritize ideas on the probability of obtaining competitive funding. The four regional directors and program directors currently have a list of almost 100 research topics that are unfunded.

And this is just one example that doesn't even include the research needs of institutions like the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, and universities like Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Stephen F. Austin and others in Texas that have fisheries and wildlife departments. Their proposals can't even be considered by TPWD because the agency doesn't have enough money to conduct its own projects, much less provide grants to others.

Second, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department could expand its technical guidance activities by hiring more biologists to conduct outreach, field days and tours promoting habitat management that benefits all species, and coming up with more innovative public-private partnerships. Right now, the program's impact is limited by a shortage of people. According to one regional director, "The department has more requests for assistance and information than we have manpower." And, as we discussed earlier, technical guidance work is an outstanding way to leverage funds because it is a public-private partnership. TPWD supplies the expertise and private land stewards do and pay for the work. Funds spent in this way go much further, work harder and make a bigger difference for wildlife.

Third, there's hardly anything hunters' and fishermen's dollars could be used for that would be more effective than education. Any increase in available PR-DJ funds would be wisely spent by TPWD to underwrite conservation education and hunter education programs. These programs not only provide for an informed citizenry, but also assure a steady stream of PR-DJ money into the future.

Finally, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department could create a landowner incentive program directed at game species. This could be a program to assist landowners in tackling habitat improvements that otherwise might not be economically possible. A good example might be helping a West Texas landowner create a watering system to benefit bighorn sheep. Since supplemental water is used by all wildlife, projects of this type are often vitally important to conserving rarer types of game and non-game species but are beyond the economic scope of many willing landowners.

As you can see, any additional money sent to Texas would be put to good use. We Texans are committed to helping tomorrow's wildlife...today ... and with additional funding we could continue to help far into the future.

I began my comments with a statement about how concerned we are that USFWS may have unwisely used our money. Please let me close by saying that this whole questionable matter is best exemplified by some of the sworn testimony here today. The community of citizens I represent are irate to learn that, in the upside-down and backwards world of USFWS -- it's OK to take hunters' and anglers' money and give it to animal "rights" radicals.

Please let me thank you again for giving me the opportunity to present this testimony on behalf of the landowners, sportsmen and women, and wildlife professionals in Texas who care about, effectively implement and pay for real conservation.

Respectfully submitted,

David K. Langford
Executive Vice President

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