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Testimony on HR 1960, The North American Wetlands Conservation Extension Act
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Thank you Mr. Chairman

And thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in support of HR 1960.

My name is Robert Ellis

I am currently deputy director in the Bureau of Wildlife Resources with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and have been with the agency for 20 years. In that time, I have served as assistant wildlife division director and wildlife division director. Among my responsibilities has been the coordination of the agency's migratory waterfowl and habitat programs. Prior to my employment with Virginia I was with the Florida Game and Fish Commission in the Everglades region for 10 years.

I also serve as Virginia's representative on the Atlantic Flyway Council and as a board member on the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture Management Board and Sea Duck Joint Venture Management Board. I was recently appointed as the Atlantic Flyway Council's representative on the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) committee.

Twenty-six years ago, the waterfowl management community began implementing a visionary initiative to conserve continental waterfowl populations and habitat – the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP or plan). This scientific approach to waterfowl habitat restoration and protection created a new, partnership-based model for conservation through programs such as Joint Ventures that has been broadly acclaimed and widely emulated. In the intervening years, NAWMP partners have conserved and restored 15.7 million acres of wetlands, grasslands and other key habitats for ducks, geese and swans shared by Canada, the United States and Mexico. Many waterfowl populations are now substantially larger than they were 26 years ago.

But new threats to waterfowl and their habitats stand to undermine NAWMP successes. Unprecedented new challenges that create competition for land, water and funding must be addressed. Conservation programs must become more adaptable, efficient and relevant to a society that is increasingly disconnected from the natural world.

Passage of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) by the U.S. Congress in 1989 created a vital funding source and a mechanism for leveraging public and private matching funds for wetland conservation in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

NAWCA was intended specifically as a funding mechanism for the NAWMP's wetland conservation programs. The most significant advances in habitat conservation under the NAWMP can be traced to the NAWCA and the financial support it provided and leveraged.

NAWCA conserves North America's waterfowl, fish and wildlife resources while producing a variety of environmental and economic benefits. Its success is driven by partnerships involving federal, state and local governments; nonprofit organizations like Ducks Unlimited; and community groups. Every federal dollar provided by NAWCA must be matched by at least one dollar from non-federal sources. Because the program is so effective, NAWCA funds are usually tripled or quadrupled on the local level. More than \$1 billion in federal grants has been allocated for NAWCA projects – a figure that has leveraged an additional \$3 billion from matching and non-matching funds. Since its inception, more than 1,600 NAWCA projects have contributed to the conservation of more than 25 million acres of habitat across North America.

NAWCA projects provide vital support for the economic activity that the hunting, fishing, tourism, and outdoor recreation sectors generate some \$821 billion dollars each year in the US. Spending on outdoor sports supports 6.4 million jobs and \$99 billion in federal and state tax revenues each year. Outdoor recreation sales (gear and trips combined) of \$325 billion per year are nearly twice as large as annual returns from pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing, and are larger than both legal services (\$253 billion) and power generation and supply (\$283 billion). NAWCA expenditures are estimated to provide 7,500 jobs each year, and generate \$200 million in worker earnings.

More than 4,500 partners have been engaged in NAWCA projects, leveraging \$3.44 billion in non-federal funds, more than \$3.20 for every federal dollar invested. The program is totally voluntary, and typically involves a dynamic combination of private landowners, state and federal agencies, non-profit groups, municipalities, and private companies, who join forces to do conservation work in everyone's interest.

NAWCA expands recreational opportunities for people. The abundance of wildlife including many species of waterfowl, migratory birds, fish, and mammals supported by wetlands translates into multi-billion dollar activities for Americans who enjoy hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and photography.

NAWCA benefits hundreds of wildlife species. NAWCA helps fulfill the mission of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan by providing migratory birds with essential habitat. NAWCA projects also benefit other fish and wildlife, including rare, threatened, and endangered species that are dependent on wetlands ecosystems.

Conserving and restoring wetlands increases water quantity and quality. Wetlands store water and recharge aquifers, thus securing future water supplies. Plants and soils in wetlands play a significant role in purifying water, removing high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus, and in some cases, removing toxic chemicals before entering the groundwater supply.

In Virginia, over \$24.2 million in NAWCA funding has leveraged \$55.7 million in matching funds for 35 projects, which have protected, restored, or enhanced more than 103,368 acres of wetland and associated habitats. These efforts have provided important breeding, wintering and migration sites for many wetland-associated bird species in Virginia, and provide habitat for a whole host of other wildlife including reptiles, amphibians, mammals, fish and invertebrates.

For example: in the fall of 2001, the department was privileged to receive a \$1 million NAWCA grant to accomplish habitat protection and restoration goals in the southern rivers watershed in the cities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. Through this grant (Whitehurst marsh acquisition, phase ii), our agency was able to acquire 250 acres of land adjacent to our existing Princess Anne Wildlife Management Area in the City of Virginia Beach. This site consisted of forested wetlands, emergent Back Bay wetlands, and prior converted cropland adjacent to Back Bay. Since acquisition, we have restored the cropland back to emergent wetland habitat. The site receives heavy waterfowl use throughout the fall and spring migrations and provides critical wintering habitat for black ducks, pintails, teal, mallards and many other species. Many thousands of shore and wading birds also congregate on the area throughout the course of the year. The site also provides significant recreational opportunities for bird and wildlife watching, and for hunting during the waterfowl seasons.

The grant also assisted in the protection of stumpy lake in the City of Virginia Beach. This site provides a needed habitat corridor for waterfowl and neo-tropical migrants coming from the Delmarva peninsula and passing through the populated portions of Virginia Beach to the more sparsely populated areas of the southern part of the city and into Back Bay.

Finally, we utilized a portion of these NAWCA funds from the grant to restore hydrology to more than 2000 acres of forested wetland habitat on the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in the City of Chesapeake. The grant funded construction of a weir and bulkhead, allowing managers to hold needed water in the swamp during dryer periods.

Another example of the success of NAWCA in Virginia is the southern tip ecological partnership and NAWCA grants totaling nearly \$4 million awarded to The Nature Conservancy (TNC) for the protection, restoration and enhancement of habitats on the eastern shore of Virginia. VDGIF has worked with TNC and other partners involved in these grants in the restoration of habitats on both private and public lands for migrating and wintering birds. These grants bring together a diverse partnership of governmental, non-governmental, and local organizations, as well as private individuals with similar convictions to meet habitat goals and protect native wildlife.

Projects completed by these grants include protecting private lands with conservation easements, adding lands to Virginia's public land holdings for access and protection, restoring habitats on private and public lands, and managing lands for increased habitat benefits. When completed these grants will protect and restore over 7,000 acres of habitat on the eastern shore of Virginia.

Virginia is currently a partner in 9 multi-state NAWCA projects either completed or underway. These projects have conserved a total of 77,509 acres of wildlife habitat. NAWCA funding of over \$7.9 million stimulated partner contributions of over \$25.9 million.

Examples of success in these projects are found in grants awarded to Ducks Unlimited and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (Chesapeake Bay initiatives i-iii). The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has been an active partner in these grants. These projects seek to improve wildlife habitat and water quality in the Chesapeake Bay. The partners have and will restore wetlands, upland buffers and riparian areas as well as protect restored wetlands and riparian buffers in perpetuity through conservation easements and projects on public lands.

A landscape conservation approach has been used to restore habitat in the bay's headwaters and lower reaches, improving on-site and downstream water quality to expedite recovery of the bay's ecosystem, especially its submerged aquatic vegetation (sav). Such vegetation is the foundation of the bay's ecosystem, providing important food resources for migrating and resident waterfowl and other water birds and nursery habitat for fish and shellfish, absorbing excess nutrients from runoff, and protecting shorelines from erosion. Work has included restoring wetland hydrology on previously converted wetlands, farmed wetlands/pastures, and degraded tidal wetlands; restoring upland habitat; and restoring riparian areas.

In restoring the bay's ecosystem, these projects will contribute to a cleaner environment, healthier wetlands, and improved water quality, all of which will enhance the quality of life for residents.

In closing, I want to reiterate the importance of NAWCA funding to the mission of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and Virginia as a whole. As we continue to find new and innovative solutions to manage fish and wildlife populations, sustain the habitats that support these species, and provide recreational opportunities to Virginians and visitors to enjoy these natural resources, it is clear to us that the availability of NAWCA funds and the ability of that program to leverage significant non-federal funding is paramount to success. The partnerships that have been established to achieve this level of conservation effort are significant and have allowed all involved in conservation to realize these important conservation and restoration goals, while sharing the financial burden that none of us could have borne alone.

Also on behalf of the Atlantic Flyway Council representing 17 states and 6 Canadian provinces that manage migratory birds and their habitats in eastern North America I want to express their strong support for H.R. 1960. I have included letters recently signed by the council's chairman Dan Forster to the House and Senate committee chairs and ranking members requesting their support for H.R. 1960 at a funding level of \$39.4 million for 2013.

Thank you Congressman Fleming and members of the sub-committee for your time.