

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Committee on Resources

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Testimony of
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on the

Reauthorization of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (HR 5539)

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you the perspectives of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies on HR 5539 a bill to reauthorize the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). I am John Frampton, Director, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and a member of the AFWA Executive Committee. We sincerely appreciate the chance to share with you some of the many successes of this truly landmark and landscape-level conservation law, and we strongly support its reauthorization.

The Association, found in 1902, is a quasi-governmental organization of public agencies charged with the protection and management of North America's fish and wildlife resources. The Association, which government members include the fish and wildlife agencies of all fifty states, has been instrumental for nearly a century in promoting sound resource management and strengthening federal, state and provincial cooperation in this area.

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies strongly and enthusiastically supports HR 5539 for a number of reasons. Wetlands conservation is important to us all. As you know, while the rate of decline has slowed, the fact remains that we continue to lose wetlands in North America. Of the estimated original 221 million acres of wetlands, there are now 5.1 million acres of saltwater wetlands remaining and about 95.8 million acres of remaining freshwater wetlands. Many scientific studies have shown that coastal and inland wetlands are crucial to the health of our environment. The loss of wetlands impacts both human and conservation values: for example, water quality, water storage, flooding, erosion and fish and wildlife habitat. Wetlands provide habitat for a diversity of fish, wildlife and plant species, which in turn support numerous recreational and commercial activities. The value of wetlands for a wide variety of important reasons cannot be understated or underestimated.

Since its enactment in 1989, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act has been extraordinarily successful. It has contributed to the protection, restoration and enhancement of millions of acres of wetlands and adjacent (buffer) acres for the benefit of wetland dependent wildlife and the people who enjoy them.

The Association enthusiastically supports HR 5539, and the funding authorization level of \$75 million for each of fiscal years 2007 through 2012. We appreciate the support of Chairman Pombo and Representative Rahall for introducing HR 5539, and yourself for scheduling this reauthorization hearing. We truly believe that this is an excellent example of the application of an ecosystem or landscape perspective management approach to conservation of our natural resources.

Based on a cooperative, voluntary, non-regulatory approach NAWCA engages the federal government in partnerships which include local and state agencies, conservation groups, businesses, sporting groups, landowners, private citizens, ranchers, farmers and communities, to name a few. Within the United States, since 1989 over \$720 million in Act funds have been matched by over \$2.1 billion from partners. The return on the federal investment under this program has been remarkable as demonstrated by the fact that projects funded under NAWCA have been matched by over 3 to 1 by partner contributions. In the United States, over 700 projects have been funded, at least one in every state. This has provided significant economic benefits, often in rural communities, since migratory bird hunters and bird watchers generate almost \$21 billion per year in economic impact. This exemplary program offers outstanding returns on the Federal investment in wetlands ecosystem conservation. Since 1989 over 2,000 partners have been involved in Act supported projects in North America.

NAWCA funds were used as a consistent source of funds for creating and maintaining partnerships at the flyway scale, regional scale such as the South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative (SAMBI), and state and local scale such as the Great Bay Project in New Hampshire, projects in San Francisco Bay and the St. Lawrence Valley in New York. For example, in South Carolina NAWCA funds stimulated the formation of the ACE (an acronym for the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto Rivers) Basin Partnership. Under this grass-roots, voluntary, habitat conservation initiative, involving federal, state, corporate and private partners, almost 170,000 acres of coastal habitats have been permanently protected with over 70,000 of the

acres being donated, permanent conservation easements on private lands. Another \$1 million NAWCA grant in South Carolina resulted in protecting over 38,000 acres of mountain habitat under the Jocassee Gorges Project with partner contributions of over \$54 million. This area has the second highest annual rainfall of any area in the continental United States and consists of some of the most rare wetland habitats in North America.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), one of the important programs supported by NAWCA, is an effort to rebuild North American waterfowl populations by establishing population objectives and protecting key wetland habitat areas. As you are aware, the States were one of the original supporters of the NAWMP and subsequently NAWCA. Since migratory waterfowl are a shared international resource, federal, state, provincial and private organizations are cooperating internationally to fund and implement wetland conservation projects. Approximately 23 million acres of wetlands and associated habitats have been conserved in Canada, the United States and Mexico. The NAWMP has united different sectors, for example, forestry, agriculture and wildlife conservationists in an unprecedented degree of trust and cooperation.

Bringing together joint venture area wide conservation and management for the first time, the NAWMP has been used as a mode for other migratory bird and species plans such as those for shorebirds, waterbirds, Partners in Flight and other related conservation programs which are being formulated and delivered on a national and international level. The North American Bird Conservation Initiative, chaired by the Association, seeks to promote and deliver all bird conservation programs primarily through the joint venture system. As mandated by the Act, the NAWMP has been updated by the Plan partners for 2004 and its continued success depends in large part on the funding which NAWCA provides.

A number of wetland dependent species, including shorebirds, neotropical migrants, wading birds, fish and shellfish, reptiles, amphibians and threatened and endangered species have also benefited from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Progress has been made in wetland conservation under NAWCA but we must increase our efforts to ensure that adequate habitat is available for waterfowl and other important fish and wildlife species during the next drought cycle which may be upon us once more. All indicators are pointing in that direction: little water storage from the Fall, a warm Winter with little precipitation and a dry, warm Spring. NAWCA/NAWMP projects may be the only refuge for those species and could well ensure their survival during a period of drought.

In summary, wetland restoration, protection and conservation provides an important and diverse array of long-term environmental, social and economic benefits to the citizens of United States. Let us not lose the momentum we have now gained with our willing conservation partners.

The Association urges you to ensure the reauthorization of NAWCA at its current \$75 million level of funding authority. This would indicate continuing commitment to wetlands conservation and allow for potential growth in appropriations which have recently been increasing. Annual requests for NAWCA grants continue to exceed available funding. If funding is reduced for NAWCA it will impact negatively on a number of sectors including the economy and state fish and wildlife programs.

The Association also supports authorization for a period of five years. The original 1989 version of the Act and its subsequent reauthorizations have retained a 5-year time frame. An authorization period of 5 years would also be in keeping with updates to the NAWMP.

I also want to recognize and commend the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission and the North American Wetlands Conservation Council on job very well done. These bodies are charged with the responsibilities of ensuring that projects approved are consistent with the Act and that an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems are secured, restored and enhanced. By their very nature wetland ecosystems are dynamic and extremely diverse across landscapes. So, too, must be their management. The Act provides the necessary domestic and international flexibility to ensure that the most appropriate wetland ecosystem management options are available. To be overly prescriptive would minimize the Act's effectiveness.

Mr. Chairman, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act has been singularly successful in its contribution to wetlands conservation. There are few programs that can boast of their success like this one. It is a unique program, which is wholeheartedly endorsed by the state fish and wildlife agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives with you, and I would be happy to address any questions you might have.