



Conserving California's waterfowl, wetlands, and waterfowling heritage.

Testimony of

Mark Hennelly
Deputy Director, Government Affairs
California Waterfowl Association

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S. 260 and H.R. 2018
Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

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**California
Waterfowl
Association**

4630 Northgate Blvd.
Suite 150
Sacramento, CA 95834

TEL: (916) 648-1406
FAX: (916) 648-1665

Good morning. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Mark Hennelly and I am Deputy Director of Government Affairs for the California Waterfowl Association (CWA). On behalf of our Association's 20,000 members, and waterfowl enthusiasts throughout the Pacific Flyway, I would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide input on S. 260 and H.R. 2018, legislative measures which would statutorily establish the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) Program.

Founded in 1945, CWA is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of California's waterfowl, wetlands and our outdoor heritage. CWA effectively pursues this mission through waterfowl research, habitat projects, education and outreach programs and government affairs activities.

Let me begin by saying that voluntary, incentive-based habitat restoration and enhancement efforts on private land, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Partners Program, are critical to effective and efficient wildlife conservation efforts in California. This is not to say that our Association necessarily opposes fee-title acquisition of land. In some instances, outright public ownership of habitat may be necessary to ensure the most effective, long-term protection of certain species, for example, or to provide affordable and accessible wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for the public, such as hunting and fishing. However, generally speaking, we believe that cooperative partnerships should always be the option of first resort; and, that federal policy should focus resource dollars mostly on private lands through a non-regulatory, voluntary approach that provides much needed flexibility and technical assistance for landowners. The Partners Program well fits this approach.

Why is this approach to wildlife conservation more desirable than others? In California, the majority of our most critical wildlife habitat is found on private lands. In fact, 70% of our remaining wetland habitat, which has declined by some 90% from its original acreage, is operated as privately-owned duck clubs. These private lands not only provide key wintering and breeding habitat for waterfowl, but benefit many non-game species as well, many of which are threatened or endangered. Agricultural lands, chiefly flooded rice and corn, also provide surrogate wetland habitat that provides resting and foraging areas for a host of waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species. Because this important acreage is in private ownership, California waterfowl conservation efforts rely heavily on programs which offer private landowners the fiscal and technical assistance necessary to manage their lands in a manner which maximizes their wildlife values. By providing such assistance, the Partners Program has played a significant role in protecting and enhancing our diminishing waterfowl habitats.

By maintaining land in private ownership and thus on the local tax rolls, programs like Partners also do much to support cash-poor rural counties (where waterfowl habitat restoration projects are typically undertaken) that depend heavily upon such revenues.

It should also be noted that many state resource agencies simply do not have the necessary funding to purchase, actively restore and then enhance and maintain new public lands on annual basis. In California, for instance, our state Department of Fish and Game can barely maintain the lands it currently owns because of ongoing budgetary constraints, declining revenues, limited personnel and other factors. In the case of

California's managed wetlands which are critical to our resident and migratory waterfowl populations, these habitats must be artificially irrigated and intensely managed throughout the year to maintain wildlife values. Without such active manipulation, habitat quality degrades significantly. Unfortunately, these ongoing maintenance activities, which are related to water conveyance, mosquito abatement, noxious weeds, etc., can also significantly raise costs. Yet, under voluntary programs like Partners, private landowners pay for these activities—not the government and the taxpayer.

Similarly, increased regulation preferred by many environmental groups may create more problems than it solves. Some landowners, in an effort to avoid any State and Federal Endangered Species Act regulations or other restrictions on the future development of their land, do everything in their power to minimize any wildlife habitat on their property. Other landowners who truly want to restore the wildlife values of their land but also keep it as a working landscape for farming or ranching purposes, for instance, fear economic disruption or even the eventual loss of their way of life because of possible environmental regulations.

It is also important to note that rigid programs that do not take into account landowner needs and preferences more often than not fail to secure enough landowner interest. Its worth reiterating that many rural landowners rely on their property as a substantial source of income, if not their entire livelihood. While certain program standards and minimum requirements are necessary to ensure meaningful wildlife benefits, programs must also be flexible enough to take into account individual landowner needs, such as offering both longer and shorter-term contracts. In this vein, we appreciate the general nature of S. 260 and H.R. 2018 and would urge the least amount of statutory language which ties the hands of the Service or puts additional limitations on landowner contracts.

That said, CWA would like to offer the following suggestions which we believe will improve the language of S. 260 and H.R. 2018:

1. The term “habitat enhancement” should specifically include the activity of periodic discing of managed wetland habitat. An essential tool of managed marshes, discing not only helps to remove dead or non-native vegetation which inevitably invades a managed marsh over time, but encourages the germination and growth of moist soil plant species, such as watergrass, swamp timothy and smartweed, that are preferred as food by waterfowl and other wildlife. The cost of discing is not an insignificant one to many private landowners, and allowing agreements to cover it would serve as an additional incentive for some landowners to participate in the program.
2. The current \$25,000 administrative limit per landowner per year should be raised to \$50,000. The price of many types of habitat restoration projects has increased substantially in recent years. For example, back when the Partners Program was established in California, it cost approximately \$200 per acre to restore a managed wetland. That cost now approaches \$500 per acre. In addition, please note that the scope of the Partners Program has expanded over the years to include additional species and habitats, such as endangered species and fish, whose restoration needs are considerably more expensive than waterfowl and wetlands, for example. Finally, rising land values in

California and other urban states necessitate greater financial incentives to keep landowners participating in the program.

3. Private lands already under permanent or long-term (25 years or more) conservation easements should receive priority funding. This will help ensure long-term protection of Partners projects, especially in heavily populated, rapidly growing states like California where urban development increasingly threatens critical wildlife habitat. Although it is our understanding that the Partners Program does provide some preference for landowners who are willing to enter into agreements longer than the minimum 10 year period, it does not, to our knowledge, formally rank projects higher where landowners have existing conservation agreements with other public or private entities.

4. Funding levels (\$75 million/year) contained in each bill should, at a minimum, be maintained, if not increased. Although the proposed levels represent a significant increase in annual funding from 2005, it is important to again note that the scope of the Partners Program has also increased over time. For instance, up until 1992, in California 100% of the projects funded under the program were wetland-oriented. By 2004, the percentage of wetland projects had fallen to less than 47%, with riparian, instream, upland and other projects making up the balance. As also mentioned previously, the cost of restoration work has increased significantly, while the number of landowners seeking to participate in the program has similarly increased.

Again, please know that the Partners Program works very well in California. From 1990-2004, the program restored and enhanced 94,515 acres of wildlife habitat, including over 80,000 acres of wetlands alone. The response from private landowners has been overwhelming positive, with the number of participating landowners increasing significantly over the last 8 years. In fact, landowner interest has consistently out-paced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's delivery capability. In many states, including California, there has been a constant backlog of willing landowners—even though the Service does little to advertise the program.

In addition to its substantial on-the-ground accomplishments, the Partners Program has played another important role. In a period of general mistrust of the government by the private sector, it has continued to promote strong working relationships between landowners, the Service, cooperating federal, state and local agencies, the agricultural industry and conservation groups—all of whom have joined forces to consolidate their technical expertise and leverage program funds. Again, maintaining and reinforcing such a non-regulatory, cooperative approach within the private landowner community is an essential component of our overall wetland conservation efforts, and fundamental to achieving the important waterfowl goals of the federal North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

The California Waterfowl Association appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony today. We believe that voluntary, incentive-based approaches like the Partners Program that focus on cooperative efforts with private landowners and other interests are the future of wildlife conservation efforts in California and throughout the United States. Thank you for your time and consideration.