

TESTIMONY OF MATT HOGAN, ACTING DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT
OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES RESOURCES
COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS, REGARDING S. 260, H.R. 2018, AND
THE PARTNERS FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM

September 23, 2005

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 260 and H.R. 2018, as well as the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners Program). I am Matt Hogan, Acting Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

The Service is the lead federal agency responsible for conserving and protecting the Nation's fish and wildlife resources. Throughout the United States, the Service strives to fulfill this responsibility to the American public through the establishment of innovative programs that implement the Secretary of the Interior's four C's initiative – conservation through communication, consultation, and cooperation.

In fulfilling this mission, the Service relies heavily on the protection and management of wildlife habitat. Because a vast majority of this habitat is in private ownership it is imperative that the Service look for opportunities to partner with private landowners to protect species and enhance their habitat while working cooperatively with the landowners to maintain their private property rights. To help achieve this goal, in 1987 the Service established the Partners Program under the broad authority of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act and the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956.

The Partners Program is a non-regulatory, voluntary habitat restoration program that provides technical and funding support to private landowners willing to engage in projects that enhance, restore, or protect wildlife habitat. The basis of the program is the recognition that many private landowners have a long-standing and strong natural resources stewardship ethic. Through the program, Service biologists work directly with these private landowners to plan and implement on-the-ground projects that enhance, restore, or protect wildlife habitat. In many cases, other partners are also included in these activities. The program successfully leverages federal resources against non-federal resources, working to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs for projects.

As we approach the Program's 20-year anniversary, we have much to celebrate. Some 35,000 agreements with landowners have resulted in the protection, restoration, and enhancement of nearly 2.5 million acres of important fish and wildlife habitat – an area approximately the size of the State of Delaware.

Of these acres, 722,500 are wetlands, providing essential habitat for hundreds of fish and wildlife species; 1.5 million are upland habitats, home to numerous wildlife species, including species at risk such as the Sage Grouse and Lesser Prairie Chicken; and nearly 6,000 acres are riparian lands and streams crucial to the well-being of fish such as the eastern brook trout or salmon on the West Coast. In addition, 120,607 acres have been treated for invasive species, such as tamarisk and nutria; and 194 barriers to fish passage have been removed.

This work is done by the 250 highly-trained Partners Program field staff located across the country. These dedicated fish and wildlife biologists serve as a bridge to ranchers, farmers, and other landowners, Tribal governments, and non-governmental organizations to form partnerships in the interest of cooperative conservation.

Due to its success in recruiting and engaging private landowners as partners, the Partners Program is becoming an important means to deliver on-the-ground projects that support other Service programs such as the Private Stewardship Grant Program and the Landowner Incentive Program which benefit threatened and endangered species. It also supports the National Wildlife Refuge System by working with adjacent landowners to create conservation buffers around refuge boundaries. In the near future, as the Service begins to implement the National Fish Habitat Initiative in cooperation with state fisheries agencies, the Partners Program will once again be called upon to use its experience in working with private landowners and its technical expertise to help implement on-the-ground projects. In addition, Partners biologists work closely with other federal agencies, most notably the Natural Resource Conservation Service, to introduce landowners to other federal programs such as those found in the Farm Bill.

The Administration evaluated the Partners Program for the FY 2004 budget through the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). The PART analysis found that the program was optimally designed to encourage habitat restoration and conservation on private lands and is achieving annual performance goals directed at benefiting fish and wildlife resources. The PART acknowledged the lack of specific authorization for the program, identified general authority for

the program, and consensus among the interested partners on the program's purpose.

Both S. 260 and H.R. 2018, named the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act, would codify the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Because of the tremendous success of the program in working with private landowners to conduct cost-effective habitat projects for the benefit of fish and wildlife resources in the United States, the Administration supports this legislation. We are pleased to note that both bills retain the present character and flexibility of the Partners Program, which is an important component of its continued success. The Service has discussed technical changes to S. 260 with Senate Committee staff, and minor technical corrections to that bill have been made. We would be pleased to work with this Committee to make those same technical changes to H.R. 2018.

In summary, the Service firmly supports the philosophy that by working together, the federal government and private landowners can achieve tremendous success in habitat conservation. In August 2004, President Bush signed an Executive Order on Cooperative Conservation asking all agencies to strengthen their efforts to work together with Tribes, states, local governments, and landowners to achieve conservation goals. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program exemplifies the Service's dedication to cooperative conservation and our commitment to work with private landowners to further the country's conservation goals while honoring individual rights. Many Partners Program projects achieve conservation goals alongside ongoing, productive economic activities. Through these efforts, the Service helps the Nation achieve and maintain healthy lands and waters, thriving communities, and dynamic economies.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement on S. 260, H.R. 2018, and the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the committee might have.