

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony of the Honorable John D. Dingell

Before the

House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

On H.R. 2821,

"The North American Wetlands Conservation Council Expansion Act of 1999"

September 23, 1999

Mr. Chairman, I recently introduced H.R. 2821, the "North American Wetlands Conservation Council Expansion Act of 1999." I want to thank you and your subcommittee staff for your generosity in granting a hearing on this legislation so quickly. I hope that H.R. 2821 might remain on a swift course so that the great benefits of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) will be fully employed to conserve more wildlife habitat.

This legislation would make a modest improvement to a conservation law that has successfully saved wetlands throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico during the past decade. The North American Wetlands Conservation Act was signed into law in 1989 in response to the finding that more than half of the original wetlands in the United States had been lost during the past two centuries. Congress recognized that protection of migratory birds and their habitats required long-term planning and coordination so that our treaty obligations to conserve these precious species would be met.

The purpose of NAWCA is to encourage partnerships among public and non-public interests to protect, enhance, restore and manage wetlands for migratory birds and other fish and wildlife in North America. NAWCA has been a tremendous success, funding 629 projects between 1991 and 1999, helping to restore, enhance or help approximately 34 million acres across our continent. Most impressive has been the ratio of partner-to-government contributions, which has been about \$2.50 for every public dollar invested.

A little more than one year ago I first learned of the Fish and Wildlife Service's desire to promote change in the NAWCA program when the agency announced its intent *not* to reappoint two non-governmental organizations that played key roles in making NAWCA a cornerstone of American conservation success. I was greatly concerned that any replacement of Council members under NAWCA should not serve as a disincentive to continued active participation in meeting the Act's goals.

I inquired of the Fish and Wildlife Service why it was attempting to replace existing Council members. The

Fish and Wildlife Service informed me that it sought to ensure more diversity on the Council. One organization chose to leave the Council, I was informed. The other chose to continue to seek reappointment. Recently my office received informal word from the Service that the reappointment of this organization, Ducks Unlimited, Inc., was completed; however no formal notice of the reappointment has been provided. I am hoping to receive written confirmation of this reappointment very shortly.

Early this year, I indicated to the Service and to stakeholders my intent to introduce legislation to expand the size of the Council. I found conceptual support for the idea, matched with uncertainty about the best course for future migratory bird conservation; specifically, finding a means to harmonize migratory bird management among the many types of species we seek to protect.

I believe that existing legislative proposals could provide a constructive way to protect and better manage as many birds as our resources allow. As you know, Mr. Chairman, this Committee reported favorably a bill earlier this year to provide better protection for neotropical bird species. While I understand that H.R. 39, the "Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act" still has some difficult issues in need of resolution, I hope that a consensus can be found to approve a bill which protects these birds while facilitating opportunities for the Service to streamline migratory bird management.

In the interim period, Mr. Chairman, I believe that the most effective means to diversify and expand the effectiveness of the Council is to provide the Secretary with new authority to appoint two additional Council members under Sec. 4(a)(1)(D) of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. These appointments would give the Service the ability to include additional charitable and non-profit organizations from among the many which actively participate in the development of NAWCA projects. I realize the timing of this legislation may seem a little unusual, so soon after the underlying Act was reauthorized. However, the need for Council expansion emerged late during the reauthorizing process.

I want to conclude by praising the hard work of the North American Wetlands Conservation Council, the staffs of its member organizations, and those staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who have devoted themselves to the fulfillment of NAWCA's goals. Congress reauthorized NAWCA last year because its success during the first decade was clearly evident, and because the need for wetlands conservation is even clearer today than it was a decade ago. I hope that H.R. 2821 will provide a non-controversial, easy-to-approve mechanism to accelerate the growth of this magnificent program. Thank you.

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