

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony of

Rob Keck

Executive Vice President and

CEO of the National Wild Turkey Federation

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to present to the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans support for the Teaming with Wildlife Initiative.

First, let me introduce myself. I am Rob Keck, Executive Vice President and CEO of the National Wild Turkey Federation. I love the outdoors. I hunt, fish, canoe, bird watch and am an active member and past board member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. The organization I represent was founded in 1973. By our first years end, we had 1,300 members. Today it is made up of 140,000 members in all 50 states and 8 foreign countries. Correspondingly, in 1970, the wild turkey population in this country was 1,250,000 and hunting seasons were open in 31 states. Today that number has increased four-fold and includes 49 states. This diverse group is dedicated to the conservation of the American Wild Turkey and works hand in hand with professional state and federal agencies to further the cause, not only of the wild turkey, but for conservation of our other wildlife in this country. With our partners, we have spent over 55 million dollars on over 4,000 projects for the wild turkey. Our diverse membership ranges from blue collar workers to CEO's of Fortune 500 companies. Their common bond is the wild turkey, one of the conservation success stories of this century.

The wild turkey was on the brink of extinction at the turn of the century, but now numbers 4.2 million birds which allows for spring hunting seasons in every state, but Alaska which has no turkeys. Those 2 million of us who love the sport, generate over \$750 million annually to support the economy of the small communities of this country by buying groceries, staying in motels and supporting landowners through paying of trespass fees. This purchasing power also contributes to the clothing and accessories industry for products which hunters purchase (calls, clothing, blinds, etc) to pursue their sport. In this case, as with many other similar circumstances, good conservation translates into good business!

None of this or the comeback of the white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, and black bear and other species would have been possible without the foresight of early conservationists and the Congressional leaders in the 1930's. When the Pittman-Robertson Act was passed in 1937, it opened the door to the management of habitat and ultimately the comeback of our nations valuable wildlife resources. The self-imposed excise tax on arms and ammunition purchased by sportsmen and their license dollars have provided the necessary billions of dollars of funds to begin buying and improving habitat, hiring biologists and law enforcement professionals, and is the largest single reason we have been able to bring back a number of species to healthy numbers.

In 1950, the Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux (D-J/W-B) Act did for fisheries what P-R had done for wildlife. In both of these efforts, hunters and anglers joined businesses to establish legislation mandating a user fee to restore populations of once critically low fish and wildlife species, conserve millions of acres of habitat and provide countless hours of enjoyment on the nation's land and waterways. There is no question that today we would not have wild turkey hunting seasons in 49 states without P-R, nor the fishing resources of this nation without D-J/W-B monies.

Sportsmen and women know the value of a long-standing commitment to conservation and have continually demonstrated their **financial** commitment to this goal! We believe that it is time now for all Americans who enjoy our fish and wildlife resources to financially contribute to their conservation, as hunters and anglers have done for decades.

This broader coalition of outdoor enthusiasts advocate a proposal to expand on this proven approach to address the broader challenges of today and raise \$350 million desperately needed annually for state fish and wildlife diversity programs to complement existing Federal Grant-in-aid and license dollars. Teaming With Wildlife will take P-R and

D-J/W-B a step further by putting a dedicated user fee on a variety of items used by outdoors enthusiasts. Hikers, canoeists, nature photographers and birdwatchers would be able to pay their fair share to contribute to fish, wildlife, recreational and educational projects when they purchase certain outdoor products, just as hunters and anglers have done with guns, ammunition and fishing tackle since 1937 and 1950.

The initiative is being spearheaded by the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and, as of today, they have endorsements of over 1,000 groups and companies including all 50 state fish and wildlife agencies, private non-profit conservation organizations like us and companies like Bass Pro Shop.

Teaming With Wildlife dollars would be administered through the existing Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Acts collection framework and distributed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the state fish and wildlife agencies. This would eliminate the need for any new bureaucracy and allow individual states to use funds for priority conservation, recreation and education projects in their states. Funds provided through Teaming With Wildlife will complement existing funds. The user fee would never exceed five percent of the manufacturer's cost on a product, which would add about 30 cents to a \$10 field guide or \$2.50 to a pair of \$100 binoculars. With public input, each state fish and wildlife agency will undertake local projects to respond to the following needs:

Conservation--Conserve a diverse array of fish and wildlife and their habitats, with an emphasis on preventing species from becoming endangered. Learn about their needs and take action to prevent declines. Over 90% of the fish and wildlife species in this country are neither game , sport fish or listed threatened and endangered species. As a consequence, these species have not received the same type of necessary conservation attention which has led to the overall good health of game and sport fish, nor which is necessary because species are threatened and endangered. Teaming With Wildlife would provide funds to the states:

- Conserve habitat for fish and wildlife, from songbirds to minnows and oak forests to marshes.
- Find out which animals are in trouble by taking inventories and tracking populations.
- Bring back native species, like Hawaiian geese and swift fox, to their original ranges.

Recreation--Enhancing the outdoor recreational experience.

- Provide appropriate access for hikers, paddlers, photographers, bird- watchers, mountain bikers and other outdoors enthusiasts through trails, viewing blinds, observation towers and protection and enhancement of lands and the water base.
- Facilitate participation through recreation information, guidebooks and how-to-clinics.
- Provide a nationwide network of fish and wildlife viewing areas.
- Publish and distribute backyard habitat guides for wildlife enthusiasts wishing to do something wild outside their homes.

Education--Foster a responsible stewardship ethic through conservation education efforts.

- Interpret the natural work along roads, trails, wildlife viewing areas, picnic and area campgrounds.
- Establish and maintain nature centers.
- Offer wildlife and outdoor recreation and education programs, activity guides and curricula for schools and community groups. As you are aware, Mr. Chairman, the future of conservation is in the hands of our children.
- Provide advice to interested landowners on how to enhance their lands for wildlife and outdoor recreation, from suburban backyards to large ranches.

For all of these reasons, the National Wild Turkey Federation supports the Teaming With Wildlife Initiative. In January, I had the opportunity to attend the Shooting Hunting & Outdoor Trade Show commonly known as the SHOT Show in Dallas, Texas. As I walked the isles and marveled at the over 1,400 vendors representing **30 billion dollars in sales that resulted at the show**, from gun and ammunition companies to camping, cooking, optical, and boating manufacturers, I wondered how many realize they wouldn't have an industry without hunters generating 3 million dollars a day or 4 billion dollars since 1937, through P-R and W-B to conserve the habitat and the fish and wildlife that lures Americans to the out-of-doors.

It is time we take the conservation of our fish and wildlife resources to the next level. It has been good for the industry in the past and it will help the industry expand into the future. The user fee, administered by the state fish and wildlife agencies within existing framework, will assure that more can be done to maximize our opportunities to conserve and enhance habitat and wildlife and to educate our public to the value to our natural resource heritage and our future. As we enhance our wildlife and fish resources, it will only, as we have every reason to believe, **improve** our economy and the industry that supports it. If the future mirrors the past sales will increase accordingly.

In summary, the National Wild Turkey Federation and I wholeheartedly support the Teaming With Wildlife Initiative. Quite frankly, we cannot afford to let this opportunity slip by. Our state fish and wildlife resource agencies are in dire straights to secure funding to carry out these important programs that the general public expects and what we as responsible stewards feel obligated to pass on to future generations. This is the only way to accomplish the objective. It is fair to the public, the industry and ultimately the fish and wildlife of this country. It's the right thing to do at the right time.

The legacy we leave for those who follow us is a rich heritage of natural resources. Help us make 1996 another milestone year as was 1937 and 1950 as we assure our children's children a bright future in the out-of-doors. Anything less is not acceptable.

Thank you for allowing me to comment, and I will be glad to address any specific questions to my remarks. National Wild Turkey Federation, P. O. Box 530, 770 Augusta Road, Edgefield, SC 29824.

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