

Testimony of Nita C. Vail  
Executive Director  
California Rangeland Trust

Before the U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans

Concerning:  
H.R. 1428 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Reauthorization Act

April 26, 2005  
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Pombo, Subcommittee Chairman Gilcrest and members of the subcommittee, my name is Nita Vail and I serve as the Executive Director of the California Rangeland Trust. I want to thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of HR 1428 and a five year extension of the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's existing authorization. I would also like to thank Chairman Pombo for his long standing support of California agricultural producers and the private land stewardship they provide in our state.

California Rangeland Trust is a California non-profit corporation whose mission is: ***"To conserve the open space, natural habitat and stewardship provided by California's ranches."*** Our mission statement reflects our philosophy that California's rangelands offer both environmental and social benefits in addition to providing a permanent, private land production base for the \$1.6 billion beef cattle industry in our state. We are the only statewide land trust in California whose focus is solely to protect rangeland habitat and working ranches. National, state and local land trusts have turned to us to hold rangeland conservation easements because of our expertise and the trust we have developed with the landowner community. The California Rangeland Trust currently holds and monitors conservation easements on approximately 173,000 acres, something we are proud of after only six years in full operation. We have received applications from over 100 ranching families interested in securing conservation easements, representing 500,000 acres in California. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was instrumental in providing matching seed funds for our start-up in 1997. To date NFWF has awarded approximately \$420,000 in matching grants to the California Rangeland Trust to protect watersheds, riparian areas and rangeland conservation easements in California.

We are part of a significant and growing movement of landowner based, agriculturally-oriented land trusts that are demonstrating that agricultural productivity and biological diversity can exist in harmony. Many of these land trusts, have recently organized and formed a coalition under the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts, or PORT, to leverage their resources to more effectively advance the voluntary, incentive-based conservation of America's private ranchlands. Member organizations are national leaders in both the agricultural and land conservation fields, holding over 700 easement (716) on close to a million acres of land (952,097). Member organizations include California Rangeland Trust, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, Kansas Livestock Association Ranchland Trust, Montana Land Reliance, Oregon Rangeland Trust, Ranch Open Space of Nevada, and Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust. Our National Beef Cattlemen's Association and state cattlemen's associations also play auxiliary roles in this organization. Again, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was the first to provide support funding for this private land conservation organization, the \$15,000 matching grant being awarded last November, 2004.

Privately owned ranches have been identified as central to maintaining the long-term environmental integrity of both the public and the private land base due to their location along valleys and waterways that frequently serve as winter range, birthing sites, and migration corridors for wildlife. Nationally, 70% of threatened and endangered species spend some portion of their life on private land, 37% are completely dependent upon private land for their survival. In addition, grasslands make up the largest land cover on America's private lands. Nationally, there are over 524 million acres of private and 250 million acres of public grazing lands and around 903,000 livestock producers.

PORT's formation will increase the success of rangeland conservation efforts, now and in the future, through improving the diversity and effectiveness of legislation and programs, increasing knowledge and expertise available to ranchers and ranching land trusts, and assisting in the development of ranchland trusts in areas where they do not presently exist. The success of PORT and the efforts of its members in the ranching community may not have been achieved without the vision and support of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and I am here today to ask your support for reauthorization.

NFWF is unique among organizations that support conservation programs in that it recognizes the importance of funding the important aspects/activities necessary to undertake partnerships and landscape level conservation initiatives so important

to effective regional efforts. The majority of programs available in California are narrowly restricted to the purchase of conservation easements. While this support is important, the approach leaves most of us with very limited resources for activities such as planning and outreach that is so critical to the creation and implementation of landscape level conservation initiatives necessary to have the dramatic impact on preserving rural working landscapes that are at the soul of our nation's heritage. NFWF understands this and has provided critical support to the Rangeland Trust and other PORT members in achieving the success we have had with our landscape level programs.

California Rangeland Trust recognizes the importance of the funding NFWF provides in working with private landowners. Private lands are critical to our nation's environment and economy. It is not feasible or practical to protect fish and wildlife resources solely through regulation, acquisition or public management. With seventy percent of the land in this country owned privately, conservation will only work if this country's landowners are more completely engaged in the effort. The recent effort to conserve sage grouse through the work of local working groups and landowners is a model for future conservation efforts. We believe NWFS should continue their emphasis on funding private lands stewardship efforts to help meet our nations' conservation goals.

Again, we thank you for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to present views on behalf of the California Rangeland Trust. We hope that you will continue to support this unique and most effective organization by supporting reauthorization for NFWF.