

TESTIMONY OF SPENCER WALLER

**REPRESENTING THE VIEWS OF:
DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.**

BEFORE THE:

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS**

**CONCERNING:
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DELMARVA CONSERVATION CORRIDOR
OF THE 2002 FARM BILL**

**June 14, 2004
SALISBURY, MD**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, my name is Spencer Waller. I am the Regional Biologist for Ducks Unlimited, Inc.'s (DU) Great Lakes/Atlantic Region, located in our field office on Kent Island, MD. I am a professional biologist with training in wetland and waterfowl ecology. I have been with DU since 1997, working on the Delmarva Peninsula to restore and enhance wetlands and riparian corridors. I have worked with federal, state and private landowners, utilizing a host of programs to ensure effective conservation of our land and water resources for the betterment of wildlife and water quality. Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 by concerned and farsighted sportsmen and conservationists. It has grown from a handful of people to an organization of over 1,000,000 supporters who now make up the largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization in the world. DU has conserved over 11 million acres of wildlife habitat in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. We pride ourselves on our cooperative work with private landowners on agricultural lands to assist them in meeting their economic and production goals while providing high quality habitat for the wildlife that depend on their land for survival.

Over the past two decades, conservation programs of the Farm Bill have played an integral role in the economic vitality and general well-being of this nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters. In addition, they have improved conservation on private lands by enhancing and protecting wildlife habitat, water quality, and soil quality. The increased role and importance of conservation in agriculture and its role in private lands stewardship has led to consensus and partnerships among government and private interests including commodity groups, individual producers, livestock organizations, and the wildlife conservation community.

Voluntary, incentive-based conservation provisions included in the Farm Bill have provided the framework for "win-win" solutions on the farm and across the rural and urban landscapes. Congress recognized the success of, and demand for, these conservation programs when it passed the 2002 Farm Bill with an 80 percent increase above the baseline for the conservation title.

In addition to the traditional programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and the Environmental Quality Incentives (EQIP), Congress added new programs such as the Delmarva Conservation Corridor program. This program has the potential to provide a conservation program for the ecologically and economically important lands on the Delmarva.

The Delmarva Peninsula

The Delmarva Peninsula has a long history of being critical to our nation's waterfowl and wildlife resources. The famed Chesapeake Bay and Eastern Shore are synonymous with great waterfowl hunting, and during the early years of our nation, the region and its citizens provided a growing country with wildfowl, fish and shellfish. A new American folk art of decoy carving got its establishment along the eastern shore, and even today the premier decoy carving museum

is right here in Salisbury. However, our growing nation did not have a legacy of caring for its lands and waters, and the Chesapeake Bay watershed was severely impacted by sedimentation, excess nutrients, wetland drainage, ditching, over-harvesting of natural resources, and human development. After the great canvasback, redhead and scaup flocks declined due to bay pollution, Canada geese populations grew in the region due to the increase in agricultural activities. Once again the Delmarva became famous, this time for its unparalleled Canada goose hunting. But in recent times the Canada goose populations have declined due to factors on their Canadian breeding grounds.

Today, the Delmarva continues to be the largest contiguous tract of rural land in the east, but it is changing fast. Despite development pressure, the Delmarva is still considered a waterfowl and wildlife treasure but one that is in serious need of rehabilitation. To date, more than 50 percent of wetlands on the Delmarva have been lost. Many streams and drainage ditches remain without buffers, dumping nutrients and sediment directly into the Chesapeake Bay. Housing development is putting pressure on agriculture and the land and water resources of the peninsula. Many sub-watersheds on the Delmarva are listed as impaired waters, especially those associated with intense agriculture.

DU has played a prominent role in conserving Delmarva wetlands, riparian corridors and adjacent uplands since about 1984. Prior to that time, DU directed all its resources to the duck breeding grounds in Canada. In 1997, DU established an even stronger field presence when we opened up our Great Lakes/Atlantic Regional Office to serve the northeastern quarter of the country. Since 1997, DU has employed several biologists and engineers to do what DU does best – put habitat conservation on the ground. In fact, the Chesapeake Bay watershed is a high priority conservation area in DU's International Conservation Plan. As a non-profit habitat conservation organization, we focus our efforts implementing conservation programs on farms of private landowners, and on the lands of our state and federal partners.

Our mission is landscape directed habitat conservation, so that the laws and programs developed in Washington, D.C and Annapolis, Maryland actually get implemented on the ground. To date, we have completed hundreds of projects on the Delmarva, including approximately 8,500 acres of wetlands, 4,500 acres of uplands and 9,730 acres along riparian corridors (Figure 1). However, there is so much more to do. DU works in conjunction with many partners to make these projects a reality. The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and the Farm Bill are the two primary federal programs we utilize in conjunction with our own program, the Habitat Stewardship Program, to provide habitat conservation benefits on private land in the Delmarva. In addition, the states of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware have private land programs, as does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through their Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The great thing about working together with partners is that all of these funds can be leveraged to create a greater outreach to the landowners and producers of our peninsula who desire to have productive working farms that are environmentally sound.

DU supports the Delmarva Conservation Corridor, and the effort to establish a network of land, both public and private throughout the peninsula, linked for the purpose of keeping agricultural economically viable, maintaining the strong rural character of the region, and maintaining the peninsula's waterfowl habitat base. The program has a lot of potential to coordinate and expand

conservation opportunities within the 2002 Farm Bill to ensure the Delmarva is preserved and protected. DU is supportive of this particular program because as noted above, the Chesapeake Bay is ranked as a high priority in the “DU International Conservation Plan.”

Important first steps have been taken by all three states in establishing a lead person and steering committees, which have been busy developing plans. The stage is now set to make the Delmarva Conservation Corridor a reality on the landscape.

However, hurdles remain, and some are very large. Funding for CRP, CREP, WRP and WHIP are not keeping up with landowner demand. But even a bigger hurdle is that many landowners need 100 percent cost share on practices in order for them to participate. I believe this is because of the tight margins of the farm economy. It’s a common factor I face every day as I work with private landowners who desire to be environmentally responsible with their working lands. We need to work together to ensure that farmers are compensated for making these wise environmental decisions, thus ensuring that they are not hurt economically. Funding through the Delmarva Conservation Corridor program needs to be structured so that the conservation practices are an attractive alternative and provide economic benefit.

Another potential hurdle is having enough qualified people actively engaged in applying conservation on the landscape. Currently, manpower is keeping up with demand, but if there is an increase in program dollars, we will need to have more qualified personnel working with private landowners to implement conservation practices. Full technical assistance (TA) should be made available for program implementation. That increase in TA should not come at the expense of either acreage reductions or cuts to other important conservation programs. We support language in the current Senate budget resolution calling for these funds to be made available through the Commodity Credit Corporation. During the 26th general CRP signup it became apparent that additional resources should be made available to Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency and private sector organizations to assist applicants during the signup process.

Also, program practice flexibility should be maximized to increase producer participation. For example, the CP-23 wetland restoration practice has been vital to restoring both the small wetlands and adjacent grasslands necessary for waterfowl and other wildlife. Currently, CP-23 eligibility is restricted to 100-year floodplains only with additional limitations related to eligibility for associated upland enrollment. This restriction effectively removes opportunities for wetlands restoration over large regions of the country. We recommend CP-23 requirements be restored allowing enrollment of depressional wetlands outside of 100-year floodplains with sufficient associated uplands (6:1). This will maximize wildlife production from CP-23s and assist farmers and landowners with areas that are problematic for farming operations.

The Delmarva Conservation Corridor program has the potential to provide great benefits to citizens and landowners in this important region. Taxpayers will benefit from cleaner air and improved water quality, because conservation practices remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and reduce soil erosion and nutrient runoff into our waterways. Sportsmen and wildlife watchers will enjoy recovering wildlife populations across the peninsula generating millions of dollars and jobs for rural economies. Additionally, increasing wildlife populations

are helping to diversify income sources for farmers who are responding to strong demand for fee hunting opportunities by operating hunting-related businesses.

SUMMARY

The Delmarva Conservation Corridor Program can be another critical tool in our toolbox for the long-term conservation of soil, water, and wildlife habitat that also ensure a sound financial base for agriculture.

The majority of the wetlands, grasslands, and bottomland forests that originally existed in the Delmarva Peninsula have been lost. Many species of grassland and wetland wildlife continue to decline, our famed Chesapeake Bay and its many streams and rivers continue to fall below water quality standards, and carbon and organic matter continues to be depleted from agriculture soils as a result of cultivation. Development pressures continue to erode prime farmland and place further burdens on our land, water and wildlife resources. Most of the peninsula's watersheds are negatively impaired.

The funding and available acreage for conservation title programs continues to fall woefully short of demand. Producers and rural communities want more of these programs. Farmers and ranchers desire a much higher level of conservation program funding and acreage availability than what is currently provided. This higher level of funding will allow them to restore their marginal lands to more sustainable uses, diversify their economic base, and improve environmental conditions on land under their stewardship. Simply put, we are not meeting their demand for assistance with their conservation efforts. This Subcommittee will play a vital role in ensuring that the conservation needs of Delmarva's agricultural producers and the Chesapeake Bay watershed are met while balancing the needs for sustainable agricultural production. In developing the funding structure, we encourage the use of innovation and creativity to ensure farmers receive viable economic incentives for enrolling land in conservation practices.

It is our view that full implementation of this program can provide necessary conservation of soil, water, and wildlife resources, while protecting and enhancing our nation's farmers' and ranchers' ability to produce abundant and safe food supplies. In order for the full benefits of these programs to be realized, funding levels must allow producers access to the program levels authorized by Congress in 2002.

Last December and again in April, President Bush met with Ducks Unlimited President John Tomke and other conservation leaders. He spoke of his strong support for wildlife conservation and of our groups' collective efforts at maintaining and enhancing America's wildlife heritage. The President voiced support for voluntary incentive-based programs such as the Conservation title of the Farm Bill and NAWCA. He echoed that support during his Earth Day speech on April 22. We have numerous success stories from across this nation that document the proven success of CRP, WRP, CREP, and WHIP, and we hope to soon have new success stories about programs like the Delmarva Conservation Corridor. We offer our assistance not only in helping to deliver these programs to the peninsula's farmers and ranchers, but also to this Subcommittee in your continuing efforts to craft legislation and policies that will build upon our success stories.

We would be remiss if we didn't note that we have worked with numerous offices of both the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. While we don't always agree on solutions to issues, in our view this type of partnership is critical to maximizing program implementation for resource benefits and we acknowledge and thank our colleagues in these agencies for their willingness to listen and work with us.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Delmarva Conservation Corridor Program. DU believes that this important conservation program has the potential to provide long-term wildlife and water quality benefits to once again make the Delmarva Peninsula a world-class environment, while at the same time ensuring agricultural sustainability. The long-term health of this region and its citizens depends upon merging agriculture, development and conservation together in the decision-making process. That process has begun, and now we await funding so that we can deliver these conservation practices to the landowners. With this Subcommittee's help, hopefully the funds will be appropriated to implement conservation for our wonderful Delmarva Peninsula.

Thank you once again for this opportunity. Please do not hesitate to call upon us for any reason regarding these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

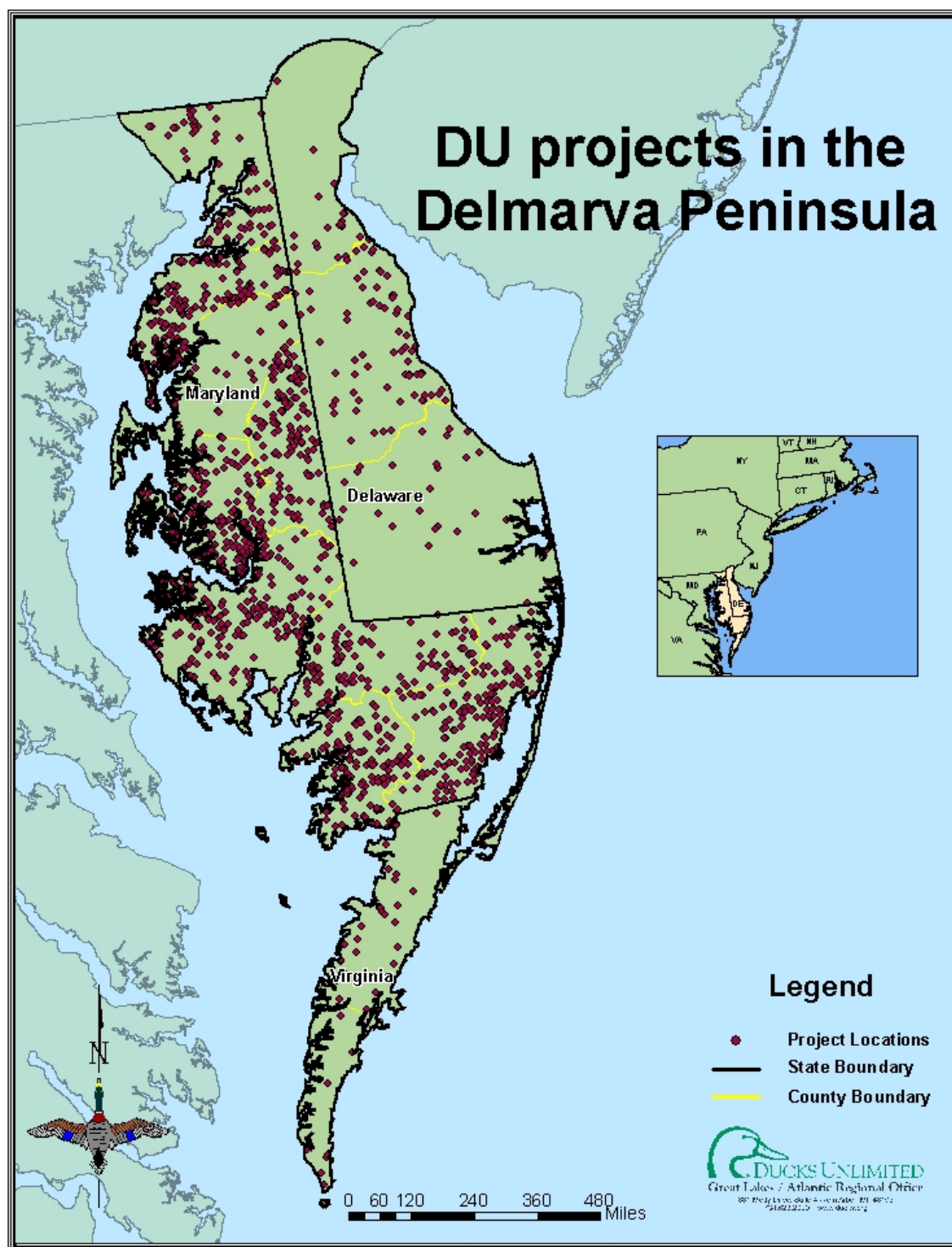


FIGURE 1. Depiction of Ducks Unlimited projects on the Delmarva Peninsula.