

STATEMENT OF DR. ALAN WENTZ
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BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS

CONCERNING:

H.R. 5539, THE NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2006
JUNE 29, 2006

Ducks Unlimited (DU) is pleased to testify before the Resources Committee on the fourth reauthorization of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). Since enactment, NAWCA has played an invaluable role in wetlands conservation in North America by helping to stimulate local partnerships aimed exclusively at habitat conservation for wetland-dependent species. NAWCA continues to be an extraordinarily popular program among all who are involved. We commend Congress for their foresight in creating NAWCA in 1989 and repeatedly taking action to ensure the long-term success of this important program.

I am the Senior Group Manager for Conservation Programs of Ducks Unlimited, a non-profit wetlands conservation organization with affiliates in Canada and Mexico. In my role at DU, I am responsible for the planning and implementation of conservation operations in the United States and coordination of national/international conservation programs. I have represented DU on the North American Wetlands Conservation Council (NAWCC) since 1996. When NAWCA was enacted in 1989, I was the Assistant Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and was appointed as a charter member of the NAWCC representing the state agencies of the Central Flyway.

Since enactment, NAWCA has accomplished demonstrable success in all 50 states, Canada and Mexico. The creation of the program nearly 17 years ago was a bipartisan effort and NAWCA has consistently attracted strong support in Congress. In recent years, Representatives John Dingell and Curt Weldon have been joined by more than 200 Members of the House in favor of increased funding for NAWCA. The co-signers of their letter include many members of the Resources Committee.

In the Senate, there has also been recognition of success and bipartisan support for NAWCA. Earlier this year, Senators Mike Crapo and Blanche Lincoln circulated a letter in support of NAWCA funding that was signed by 65 Senators. This level of interest and enthusiasm in Congress is a testament to NAWCA's unique ability to foster public-private partnerships in a cost-effective and results-oriented manner.

NAWCA has also enjoyed consistent support from the Executive Branch. On Earth Day 2004, President Bush announced a new wetland initiative and goal to achieve an overall increase in wetlands each year in the United States. NAWCA was identified as a key program to accomplish the Administration's goal to restore, improve or protect 3 million acres of wetlands over a five-year period. Reauthorization and increased funding of NAWCA is critical to achieve that goal and to ensure the health of high quality wetlands in the United States.

Historically, the lower 48 states of the United States have lost approximately 53% of their original wetlands. The state of California has lost a staggering 91% of its original wetlands and Maryland wetland loss is 73%. While NAWCA is helping to slow this trend of wetland loss, the United States continues to lose more than 80,000 acres of wetlands each year and faces increased threats from changing land use patterns.

NAWCA facilitates efforts by resource managers and multi-sector partners to use a variety of strategies to restore and enhance degraded habitat along with protecting the quality habitat that remains. The habitat work that is completed on both public and private lands improves recreational opportunities and often provides additional economic benefits for landowners and their communities. Wildlife-related recreation generates over \$100 billion of economic output each year. In many cases, this economic activity is vital to the incomes of rural Americans.

The restoration and protection of wetlands and associated habitats made possible by NAWCA has many benefits for both people and wildlife. Scientific studies overwhelmingly prove that wetlands act as filters, cleaning water and recharging groundwater supplies. Wetlands also trap and hold flood waters, lessening the damage from floods and hurricanes. Nearly a year ago we witnessed the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Since then the public has become more aware of the value of coastal wetlands in reducing the storm surge from hurricanes. Scientists indicate that as a general rule, one mile of coastal marsh can reduce a storm surge by one foot.

Hurricane Rita struck southwestern Louisiana where NAWCA projects to restore coastal wetlands were already underway. While some marsh management infrastructure was damaged, the terraces constructed in interior marshes were not

significantly impacted. In fact, the terraces appear to have had some unanticipated beneficial effects by trapping displaced marsh vegetation. It is likely that this organic debris may increase marsh elevations and allow establishment of emergent vegetation, aiding in the marsh building process. Thankfully, NAWCA is working and we anticipate an important role for the program in the ongoing efforts to re-construct and protect marshes along the Gulf Coast.

NAWCA is successfully implementing the habitat objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) and other national and international conservation plans for wetland-associated migratory birds. Regional Joint Ventures, established to support the NAWMP, play a substantial role by fostering partnership to successfully implement NAWCA projects. DU is an active member of most of the Joint Ventures. It would be difficult to fulfill our collective habitat goals without the critical support provided by NAWCA.

With the help of NAWCA partnerships, more than 1,500 on-the-ground, voluntary conservation projects have been delivered in North America with multiple benefits wetlands, wildlife and people. The success of NAWCA is exemplified by the growing list of project partners, which is now above 3,000. The multi-sector list includes all 50 state fish and wildlife agencies, hundreds of private landowners, a diversity of conservation organizations, corporations, tribes, and local governments.

In addition to being one of the federal government's most effective conservation programs, NAWCA is a model of fiscal responsibility as it provides an excellent return on a relatively modest federal investment. The law requires every federal dollar put into the program to be matched by at least \$1 in non-federal money. On average, partner match has been \$3 for every \$1 in federal money. The partner investment in NAWCA totals more than \$2 billion during the life of the program. In FY 2005, a total of 84 projects were approved for the United States, Canada and Mexico. The federal NAWCA dollars were more than quadrupled by partners at the local level.

Undeniably, the benefits of NAWCA extend well beyond waterfowl. Wetlands provide a home for more than 900 wildlife species at some time during the year and approximately 6% are waterfowl. As intended by Congress, the criteria for NAWCA projects include waterfowl as well as other wetland-associated migratory birds and threatened and endangered species. Under this guidance, NAWCA projects are proven to benefit a diverse array of species, including fish.

As an example, a NAWCA project recently approved for the state of California will benefit numerous waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds that use the area for fall and spring migration and breeding habitat. Riparian habitat protection and improvements will benefit neotropical migratory songbirds that use the area for nesting and foraging. A broad range of benefits for wildlife and fish species is typical of most NAWCA projects.

NAWCA serves as a vital tool for cooperative efforts to address landscape-level habitat challenges in vital areas for waterfowl, including the Prairie Pothole Region of the Great Plains, the Lower Mississippi River Valley, Chesapeake Bay, Gulf Coast and the Great Lakes, to name a few. NAWCA has made a significant impact in coastal communities, but the value and importance of NAWCA to inland areas is also remarkable.

The Missouri Coteau in North and South Dakota is a unique and very diverse landscape containing some of the most numerous and productive wetland communities in the world. These prairie pothole wetlands are intricately linked with the surrounding native prairie to provide important nesting, brood-rearing and foraging habitats for a wide array of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, grassland songbirds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. This is the heart of North America's "Duck Factory". With the help of NAWCA, ranchers and other landowners are able to voluntarily protect these essential habitats in perpetuity for future generations, while maintaining their ranching livelihood. The demand for this non-regulatory approach to wetlands and grasslands conservation in the Dakotas far exceeds available funds on an annual basis.

NAWCA has also played a key role in permanently protecting wetlands within working forest landscapes of New England. Vast tracts of privately-owned, forested wetlands have been protected, providing habitat conservation, sustainable forestry, and public recreational access.

What began as a small funding mechanism to accelerate implementation of NAWMP in the early 1990's has grown into a highly successful program with widespread success and support. NAWCA has stimulated hundreds of conservation partnerships that would likely not exist otherwise. The result is millions of acres of habitat conserved that provide a myriad of benefits for wetlands, wildlife, and the public. We support the legislation and urge the Committee to reauthorize NAWCA for an additional five years and with annual appropriations of up to \$75 million. Thank you.