



**TESTIMONY OF D.A. (DON) YOUNG
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
DUCKS UNLIMITED**

BEFORE THE:

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

CONCERNING:

**THE PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE ACT
(H.R. 2018 and S. 260)**

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Don Young. I am the Executive Vice President of Ducks Unlimited (DU). Ducks Unlimited is a non-profit international wetlands conservation organization. In my role as the staff leader for Ducks Unlimited, I manage our organization and its staff and provide leadership to our volunteers and members in all 50 states. Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 by concerned and farsighted sportsmen 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.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners), administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), is an important component in the suite of voluntary, incentive-based federal programs designed to restore wildlife habitat on private lands. Since 1987, the Partners program has made it possible for thousands of private landowners to restore wetlands, uplands, and riparian areas on their property, providing important habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife species. This has been accomplished through direct cost-share assistance and technical advice from the Service and conservation partners, including DU. We are actively involved with the Partners program in most states. DU's biologists, engineers and other scientific experts span the country and are well positioned to continue to assist the Service to achieve the program's desired outcomes.

Many of the habitat objectives of the Partners program and DU are closely aligned. The mission of DU is to conserve, restore and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. Virtually all of DU's conservation work is accomplished in cooperation with a variety of partners, including state and federal agencies, private corporations and foundations. But by far, our most important partners are farmers, ranchers and other private landowners. It would be impossible to meet the objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and DU's International Conservation Plan without the cooperation of private landowners and incentive-based programs like the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

We strongly support the Partners program as an important, voluntary, non-regulatory tool for private landowners to improve wildlife habitat. The agreements landowners sign are relatively simple and result in the accomplishment of mutually beneficial wildlife conservation goals of the Service, the landowner, and the associated partners typically involved in most projects. The habitat work that is completed improves recreational opportunities and often provides additional economic benefits for landowners and their communities. Because patterns of land ownership and use continue to change and affect the ability of the land to support wildlife and provide other important benefits to society, it is imperative to provide opportunities for private landowners to conserve their land in a cost-effective manner for future generations.

The on-the-ground focus of the Partners program and its emphasis on native habitat restoration is extremely important. It would be beneficial if the legislation highlighted the significance of actions to restore, enhance and manage native habitats. Many states have lost 50% or more of their original wetlands, and nearly 75% of all remaining wetlands are privately owned. Native grasslands continue to be lost at an alarming rate, particularly in the northern Great Plains of the U.S. To address habitat loss, DU has partnered with the Service on a variety of initiatives to restore native habitats throughout the country - beyond the Great Plains, we are actively working

on the prairie wetlands of Texas, bottomland hardwoods and coastal prairies of Mississippi and Louisiana, oak savannahs of Wisconsin, river valleys of Colorado, and marshlands of California, to name a few. These wetland conservation projects benefit wildlife habitat, but also mitigate the effects of floods, reduce erosion, and recharge groundwater. We will elaborate on a few of these examples later in the testimony.

To succeed in addressing federal trust responsibilities, active cooperation between owners and managers of public and private lands is necessary. We applaud the Service's focus on private lands through the Partners program and its catalyzing effect on other public-private efforts to conserve wildlife habitat. The financial and technical assistance made available through the program is integral to DU's efforts to improve habitat for waterfowl, and assistance through Partners facilitates landowner involvement in other federal conservation programs, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Wetland Reserve Program. DU strongly supports the program's national policy objective to work with USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency to implement conservation programs on private lands.

Another strong point of the Partners program is its emphasis on restoring habitat on private lands adjacent to National Wildlife Refuges (NWR). DU supports this approach, as it produces the most meaningful long-term benefits on broader landscapes for breeding, migrating and wintering waterfowl, other migratory birds, and other wildlife. To that end, if other factors are equal, strongest consideration should be given to projects that effectively link habitat on private lands to habitat on federal and state-owned lands as this helps achieve the critical mass needed to have meaningful ecological impact. This helps achieve NWR goals and meet other state, regional and national conservation objectives.

DU is supportive of the Service's efforts to develop a strategic plan for the Partners program. More clearly defined national and regional, landscape-oriented habitat goals will help to guide program implementation and facilitate other public-private efforts to conserve wildlife habitat. We fully support the Service's goal to sharpen its focus on scientifically-supported, collaboratively-established areas to deliver its financial and technical assistance. This approach will strengthen partnerships with DU and other organizations at the local level, facilitate ongoing habitat initiatives, and maximize benefits for wildlife. Most of the waterfowl Joint Venture partnerships are far along in their development of science-based, landscape-oriented habitat conservation plans to address broad, federal trust responsibilities, and provide an excellent foundation upon which to build a strategic plan for the Partners program.

In states where focus areas have been established, positive results are being realized. DU is a partner within two Texas focus areas, where the goal is to reverse the decline in wetlands and associated habitats, including a 46-county area in the east referred to as the West Gulf Coastal Plain (East Texas Wetlands Project) and a 28-county area in the south along the Gulf Coast (Texas Prairie Wetlands Project). The Gulf Coastal Prairie and coastal marshes are priority areas for DU because of their importance to wintering waterfowl. In many cases, wetlands along the Texas Gulf Coast that were once drained are now unmanaged. These areas have access to water and existing infrastructure associated with rice production, making them ideal candidates for converting back into shallow-water, seasonal wetlands, which provide quality habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. In conjunction with the Partners program, DU, the Natural

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have provided financial and technical assistance to hundreds of landowners within the two Texas focus areas. Interest among private landowners continues to grow and suggests the potential for a long and successful future for the Texas program.

DU is involved with the implementation of the program within two Colorado focus areas. We have had a productive relationship with the Partners program in the state since its inception in 1990, with our shared focus primarily in the San Luis Valley and South Platte River Corridor. Colorado has rich and diverse wetlands that provide a critical corridor for breeding, migrating and wintering waterfowl and habitat for many other waterbirds. Between 30,000-60,000 ducks pass through the San Luis Valley depending on spring wetland conditions, and the entire Rocky Mountain population of greater sandhill cranes funnels through the Valley each fall and spring. But, Colorado's increasing demand for limited water threatens the long-term sustainability of habitat in the San Luis Valley and South Platte River Corridor. The Partners program offers voluntary options to landowners to help maintain and improve the quality and quantity of the land and water resources that inspire people to live in or visit the state. To date, our partnership has benefited over 20,000 acres of wetlands on nearly 400 sites in Colorado. These projects benefit waterfowl, improve water supply, and enhance recreational opportunities. It is clear that the Partners program has proven itself as a valuable tool in mobilizing interest in conservation among private landowners in Colorado.

DU is also working closely with the Service and the Partners program in California, where the technical assistance aspect of the program plays a critical role in assisting landowners in complying with federal regulations. Without this technical support, many landowners may deem it too burdensome to undertake habitat restoration projects, especially when impacts to endangered species may occur. Recently, DU worked with the Service, NRCS and a private landowner to restore 320 acres of flood-prone agricultural ground to wetlands and riparian habitat. The property is near the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and contributed directly to the conservation goals of the NWR, Partners program, and DU. Waterfowl, shorebirds, neotropical birds, giant garter snakes (listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act), and other plant and animal species benefit from this project.

On the east coast, the Partners program has accomplished success in several bays and estuaries that are important to waterfowl and other migratory birds. Projects in the Delaware Bay and Barnegat Bay areas of New Jersey provide significant benefits to waterfowl, particularly black ducks, as well as millions of shorebirds. Focus has also been directed toward the watersheds surrounding the five NWR's in the state to provide corridors and habitat links between NWR's, private lands, and state conservation lands. Another important component of the New Jersey program is the improvement of degraded wetlands by helping to control invasive plants, such as common reed (phragmites) and purple loosestrife, and restoration of native salt marsh vegetation. The Partners program contributes significantly to the Delaware Bay Initiative, a joint partnership effort between DU, the states of New Jersey and Delaware, and the Service.

Finally, in Maryland, the Partners program plays a critical role in improving and maintaining the health of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. The region is one of the most significant migration and wintering areas for black ducks, mallards, canvasbacks and Canada geese in the Atlantic

Flyway. Wetland loss has led to steep declines in water quality and bay grasses, with 70-80 percent declines in waterfowl populations. To address the problem, the Partners program, DU, USDA, Environmental Protection Agency, state agencies and others are focusing their efforts on controlling nutrient runoff from agricultural lands as part of DU's Chesapeake Bay Initiative. Restoration of wetlands, riparian forest buffers and grasslands are some of the tools being used to improve habitat in the Bay's watershed.

In conclusion, partnerships are the key to long-term habitat conservation and a lot has been accomplished through the Partners program. A strong and well-funded program will help to meet the President's goal of an overall increase in wetlands and complement other public-private efforts to restore and protect wildlife habitat in the United States. The bulk of increased funding should be directed toward on-the-ground habitat restoration projects, including the existing backlog of landowners' projects, using existing delivery infrastructure and the assistance of partners to the fullest extent possible. Every effort should be made to maximize the portion of program funds that are spent on technical and financial assistance for on-the-ground habitat conservation. DU has a positive relationship with the Service and the program, and we look forward to building upon our shared success in the future. DU stands ready to help with program delivery to fulfill the demand for the program nation wide.