



Statement of the American Farm Bureau Federation

**To the United States Senate Committee on
Environment and Public Works**

Hearing on:

“Consider the testimony of state officials and other stakeholders regarding successful state work to conserve, recover, and manage wildlife, in partnership with federal agencies, landowners and stakeholders.”

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**Presented By:
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On behalf of the American Farm Bureau Federation**

Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, and Members of the Committee, my name is Mike McCormick and I am the President of the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation. I am pleased to be here today to offer testimony on several issues of importance to farmers and ranchers across the country.

On behalf of the nearly six million Farm Bureau member families across the United States, I commend you for your leadership in providing oversight of successful state work to conserve, recover and manage wildlife in partnership with federal agencies, landowners and stakeholders. We appreciate the committee's desire to understand how farmers and ranchers partner with the state and federal governments to promote stewardship and wildlife conservation on private agricultural lands. Such a review is timely and, in our judgment, will permit policymakers to gain a greater appreciation for the conservation ethic of our members and how agricultural producers seek to identify solutions in addition to their efforts to produce food, feed, fiber and fuel.

I would like to devote my time today to discussing several examples of species recovery and positive conservation goals due to effective partnerships between private landowners and state wildlife agencies.

Longleaf Pine

Longleaf pine forest once encompassed more than 90 million acres across the Southeast. Over the past two centuries longleaf pine habitat has been reduced to less 5 percent of its original range due to conversion to other forest types and development. There are more than 30 species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, dusky gopher frog and black pine snake, listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened or endangered that depend on longleaf pine for their habitat. In 2005, America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative (ALRI) was formed to support restoration efforts across public and private lands.¹ ALRI estimates that approximately 80 percent of the restoration efforts will have to occur on private lands within 17 Significant Geographic Areas (SGA). SGAs are large tracts of existing longleaf pine that are anchored by public lands such as military installations, national forest, state forest or heritage reserves.

As a member of ALRI, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works with agricultural producers and conservation partners to restore longleaf forest through its Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI), launched in 2010. The LLPI operates in nine states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia) providing technical and financial assistance to restore or improve existing longleaf habitat. Financial assistance comes from a variety of Farm Bill programs including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Regional

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https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/initiatives/?cid=nrcsdev11_023913

Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). NRCS' goal is to restore or protect 400,000 acres by the end of fiscal 2018. Both NRCS and the landowner invest in the implementation of conservation and restoration practices that seek to maximize a balance between environmental benefit and economic return.

The Mississippi Bee Stewardship Program

A great example of local and state communities coming together to address an issue, as opposed to imposing broad federal regulations, is a stewardship program that the Mississippi Farm Bureau[®] Federation and the Mississippi Department of Agriculture & Commerce developed to protect managed pollinators. The Mississippi Bee Stewardship Program is the result of a series of collective discussions held among stakeholder groups in the state to discuss ways of fostering a better working dialogue among the state's row crop farmers and beekeepers, all in the spirit of conservation, coexistence and cooperation to protect pollinators through voluntary efforts. Farm Bureau brought all local stakeholders to the table in early conversations. Deliberations ultimately led to the development of a set of standards or general operating suggestions targeting the state's beekeepers, farmers and other pesticide applicators. The founding partners in this effort are the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, the Mississippi State University Extension Service, the Mississippi Beekeepers Association, the Mississippi Agricultural Aviation Association, the Mississippi Agricultural Consultants Association and the Mississippi Agricultural Industry Council. While these efforts are primarily tailored to the relationship between farmers and beekeepers, we feel the standards they developed will benefit native pollinators as well.

The Mississippi Honey Bee Stewardship Program includes three pillars:

1. Communication: "Know Your Farmer: Know Your Beekeeper" encourages farmers and beekeepers to foster a strong and open line of communication. Knowing when and where bees will be placed on the farm and knowing when and where pesticide applications will be made is vital to the cooperative coexistence of commercial agriculture and bees. A key component of the communication strategy is the development and utilization of the "bee aware" flag system. The "bee aware" flag is a nonverbal communication tool placed in the vicinity of beehives in a location visible for pesticide applicators, reminding them to use extreme caution in the area.
2. Cooperative Standards: Extension service apiculturists, Extension entomologists, row crop producers and members of the beekeeping community developed a set of cooperative standards for farmer-beekeeper partners. These standards include, but are not limited to, hive identification, hive locations, orientation of hives in relation to the field, placement of the "bee aware" flag, timing of pesticide applications, wind speed and direction of pesticide applications, and notification protocols of pesticide application.

3. **Habitat Restoration:** The establishment and restoration of bee habitat is another major priority for the program. Extension specialists developed appropriate seed mixtures that will provide bee forage for extended periods. The cooperative partners have worked diligently with the USDA-NRCS to promote bee habitat restoration priorities within their set of programs, such as CSP. CSP incentivizes land owners to plant and maintain pollinator habitat and restoration on their property.

This process was such a success that it was adopted by several other states and is included in the President's Pollinator Partnership Action Plan. Much of the success can be attributed to the fact that the Environmental Protection Agency supported the effort but allowed local partnerships to develop and implement the plans.

Florida Landowner Assistance Program

One very successful program in Florida is the Landowner Assistance Program (LAP). Housed within the Office of Conservation Planning Services at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC), the LAP has a history of cooperative working partnerships with private landowners and managers. The program assists with measures to conserve wildlife and habitat, while keeping land productive for many agricultural and recreational uses. Specifically, this program works with landowners to preserve habitat to protect such species as white-tailed deer, black bear, wild turkey, bobcat, panther, gopher tortoise, kite and caracara. The FFWCC² also works closely with NRCS to get funding assistance for landowners who participate in the program.

The Lee family has 103 acres in Columbia County, Florida, and has worked with FFWCC on their property with great success in conserving for wildlife, specifically black bear, wild turkey and bobcat. The Register family also shares a strong land stewardship ethic. They have a 1,200-acre ranch owned by the Genevieve Family Trust and Troy Register in Suwannee County, Florida. Cooperation with FFWCC in the LAP and the Florida Forest Service's developing prescribed burning and rotational mowing of pine stands have helped preserve and protect such species as wild turkey, white-tailed deer, gopher tortoise, Sherman's fox squirrel and common species like cottontail rabbit and numerous songbirds.

Lykes Bros. Inc.,³ owns and operates 575,000 acres in Florida and Texas for cattle farming, forestry, hunting and land and water resources. They have partnered with the South Florida Water Management in their dispersed water management program to provide storage and water quality treatment on approximately 20,000 acres of their farming operation in south Florida before water is released into Lake Okeechobee. These facilities provide habitat for various wetland-wading birds such as the lemming, great blue heron and white pelicans. Habitat around

² <http://myfwc.com/conservation/special-initiatives/lap/>

³ <http://www.lykes.com>

these areas provides home to the burrowing owl, panther, gopher tortoise, black bear, white-tailed deer, caracara and the migratory swallow-tail kite.

Kentucky - Black Vulture Depredation

Another great example of landowners working hand-in-hand with federal and state partners is in the state of Kentucky. Black vulture depredation was recognized as an issue in Kentucky around 2004 when cattlemen began noticing a new type of vulture that many referred to as a Mexican crow because it was smaller than the turkey vulture. This bird was having a devastating impact on cattle farms. When newborn calves were birthed, these vultures would attack the calf and would typically result in a death loss.

The Kentucky Farm Bureau adopted policy years later and began working with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife to see what could be done. It was determined that Kentucky Fish and Wildlife had no jurisdiction because black vultures were federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, dating to the early 1900s. This gave jurisdiction to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). When Farm Bureau began working with USFWS, initial conversations did not result in major relief. But once Kentucky stakeholders had direct engagement with the former Director of USFWS to share information from multiple states and allow the director to see the issue first-hand, agency officials understood the extent of the damage and hardships the vultures were having on cattle farmers.

In early discussions with USFWS, the agency suggested that Farm Bureau run a campaign to educate producers on calving techniques to reduce the possibility of depredation (calving indoors or near inhabited areas, removing afterbirth from birthing areas on a regular basis, using sound cannons to discourage roosting near calving areas and trapping and relocating vultures). Most of these practices and recommendations were uncommon and very difficult to achieve.

Eventually, USFWS encouraged the Kentucky Farm Bureau to submit an application for a depredation permit. At the time, producers were losing \$250,000-\$300,000 in baby calves (annual livestock losses continued in that range and included more mature cattle being lost along with hogs, sheep, lambs and even poultry) across Kentucky, according to losses reported to the University of Kentucky Extension Service.

All state and federal agencies supported the Farm Bureau application with a Form 37 report to USFWS, and Kentucky Farm Bureau was awarded its first depredation permit that would allow issuance of Livestock Protection Permits to livestock producers who were experiencing depredation. The permits only could apply to livestock producers, even though there were additional problems with damage to buildings, vehicles and boats in various areas of Kentucky. Farm Bureau agreed to open the permits to all producers rather than limit them to Kentucky Farm Bureau members.

In 2013, the Kentucky Farm Bureau quickly issued its allotment of allocations and had to apply for an amended permit, with the support of USDA Wildlife Services. Today, Farm Bureau is

issuing up to 1,300 takes, with sub-permits issued in 88 of Kentucky's 120 counties. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife also supports the Farm Bureau effort and routinely recommends the program to producers who contact them about trying to reduce black vulture problems. Farm Bureau works with the University of Kentucky Extension Service on non-lethal measures such as artificial effigies to dissuade black vultures from congregating in areas. Farm Bureau routinely refers non-livestock property owners to USDA Wildlife Services for assistance and has experienced great cooperation between multiple agencies.

While the program has achieved successes, it would be much easier if there was a nationwide depredation order issued by USFWS and the state wildlife agencies were allowed more flexibility in regard to federal jurisdiction in situations like these. There should also be a process to allow producers to protect property (livestock, buildings, equipment, etc.) when they witness depredation occurring without first having to take the time to apply, and wait, to receive a depredation permit.

Federal, State, & Local Cooperation

One key ingredient that has been vital to the success in the examples I just highlighted is the positive, working relationships that exist between stakeholder groups and all federal and state agencies in those respective states. One thing possibly unique about the Southeast region is how all stakeholder groups and government agencies work together toward common goals. Additionally, the success of many of these programs would not be possible without the support of land-grant universities, which provide a vital service to the agriculture communities and landowners in their respective states.

American Alligator

Mississippi also has additional success stories in several species that I'd like to feature next.

The American alligator has existed in the Southeast for thousands of years, according to fossil records. However, due to over-harvest and lack of conservation regulations, alligators became endangered in the early- to mid-1900s. In 1967, USFWS placed the American alligator on the Endangered Species List throughout its entire southeastern U.S. range. Following its listing, stiff penalties curtailed illegal alligator harvest, and populations recovered more quickly than anticipated. In 1987, the status of the American alligator was changed to threatened due to similarity of appearance, which allows wildlife officials to identify alligator parts from other endangered crocodylians entering commercial trade. Shortly thereafter, people in alligator markets began experimenting with alligator farming, and commercial alligator farms were successfully created in Louisiana and Florida, with state and federal regulatory oversight. Today, after years of research and regulated monitoring, alligators are commercially raised from an egg to marketable sizes. Alligator farming in Louisiana has a multi-million-dollar economic impact annually.

To restore Mississippi's wild alligator population after it was placed on the Endangered Species List, the Mississippi Game and Fish Commission relied heavily upon the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. During 1970 – 1978, approximately 4,000 alligators were captured from Louisiana and transported to Mississippi. The Mississippi Game and Fish Commission's relocation efforts, combined with federal regulations protecting alligators, allowed the alligator population in Mississippi to rebound. In some cases, alligators rebounded beyond expectations into areas where they were not common prior to being listed as endangered. Because of this conservation success, alligator populations are abundant across the Southeast, and alligator hunting is allowed in many states. In 2018, Mississippi completed its 14th alligator hunting season.⁴

Louisiana Black Bear

The Louisiana black bear was listed as a threatened subspecies in January 1992 primarily because of modification and reduction of its habitat, reduced quality of remaining habitat due to fragmentation, and threat of future habitat conversion and human-related mortality. However, after 24 years of dedicated recovery efforts by private landowners, farmers, state and federal agencies, universities and non-governmental organizations, the Louisiana black bear was removed from the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in 2016. Additionally, voluntary landowner-incentive-based habitat restoration programs and environmental regulations not only stopped the net loss of forested lands in the Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley, they have resulted in significant habitat gains. The conservation success story of the Louisiana black bear would not have been possible if it were not for private landowners and farmers. Louisiana farmers worked voluntarily with U.S. Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to restore more than 485,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forests in priority areas for conservation.^{5 6 7}

White-tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer is arguably the most important game species in North America. However, during 1800 – 1850, white-tailed deer were extirpated from much of their range, including many states east of the Mississippi River. Market hunting and unregulated harvest that caused this species' great decline were not effectively stopped until after 1900. Pittman-Robertson Act funds allowed restoration efforts led by state wildlife agencies in the mid-1900s. For example, much of Mississippi was restocked with white-tailed deer from 1950 to 1970. Most source deer came from remaining pockets of deer throughout the state. Due to strict protection of antlerless deer

⁴ *Alligators in Mississippi: Then and Now* www.mdwfp.com/alligator

⁵ *U.S. Department of the Interior Press Release (March 2016): The Teddy Bear is Back*

⁶ *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Delists Louisiana Black Bear Due to Recovery*

⁷ *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Questions and Answers: Louisiana Black Bear Removal from the Lists of Threatened and Endangered Species Due To Recovery*

and partnerships among private landowners, farmers, state agencies and federal agencies, Mississippi's new white-tailed deer herds grew rapidly. By the 1990s, deer were abundant and an antlerless harvest was needed to control deer herds across the state.

Today, Mississippi has one of the most abundant deer populations in the U.S. Landowners, farmers and ranchers across the Southeast work voluntarily with their respective state wildlife agencies annually to collect biological data and ensure this important wildlife species continues to thrive.^{8 9}

Wild Turkey

Long heralded as one of conservation's greatest successes, the wild turkey was saved from extinction by the dedicated efforts of state wildlife agencies, conservation groups, landowners and hunters. During the early 1900s, due to neglect for conservation, turkeys were hunted into near-extinction. Lack of game laws left turkey populations exposed to year-round hunting both by locals and market hunters. To make matters worse, many forests were in poor condition because of early over-harvest and misuse of timber resources. During the first five decades of the 20th century, many forests were void of wild turkeys.

To solve this problem in Mississippi, the Mississippi Game and Fish Commission trapped wild turkeys from the few locations in which they remained and relocated them across the state into suitable habitat. By the 1980s, Mississippi had one of the largest turkey flocks in the nation and was regarded as a top turkey hunting destination. Today, the return of the wild turkey to Mississippi and much of the rest of the southeastern U.S. is considered one of wildlife conservation's greatest success stories. This success would not have been possible without state government and stakeholder actions.^{10 11}

Conclusion

The American Farm Bureau Federation appreciates the committee's commitment to promoting successful examples of conservation and wildlife recovery achieved through partnerships with private landowners and state and federal agencies. The continued commitment to stewardship and conservation by American farmers and ranchers cannot be overstated. We look forward to continuing to work with you in advancing the shared conservation goals that I have highlighted today.

⁸ *Mississippi Outdoors: Mississippi's Changing Deer Herd (September 2017, www.mdwfp.com).*

⁹ *Ecology and Management of Large Mammals. Demarais and Krausman. 2000.*

¹⁰ *Mississippi's Comprehensive Wild Turkey Management Plan*

¹¹ www.mdwfp.com/turkey