

PREPARED STATEMENT OF REBECCA WODDER  
NOMINEE FOR  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

Thank you, Chairman Boxer, Senator Inhofe, and Members of the Committee. I am deeply honored to be here with you today as President Obama's nominee for Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.

I am joined here today by my husband, James Van Erden, and one of our two daughters, Jayme. Our younger daughter, Jennifer, cannot be here because she is teaching English in a remote village in Panama, as a Peace Corps volunteer. I am deeply grateful for their love and support.

**Background**

I would like to begin with a short, personal introduction that helps to explain my background and why I am here today. I'm from a Midwest farming family, born and raised in Nebraska. My parents grew up during the Depression and my mother's family lost their farm. They fought plagues of grasshoppers and the Dust Bowl, planting windbreaks and hauling water to keep the trees alive.

Hardships had eased a bit by the time I was born in the early 50's, but I learned the value of hard work early on and never took any good fortune for granted. I spent the weekends and summers of my youth on my grandparents' farms, helping with chores and developing my love of barnyards, farm animals and endless fields of corn. Those windbreaks planted during the Dust Bowl were some of my favorite places to hide in the hot Nebraska summers.

My father enlisted in the Army at the start of World War II. When he came back from the war, he finished his education on the GI Bill and became a teacher. He taught at every level from a one-room schoolhouse on the prairie to the University of Nebraska. My mother also taught school. Public service and education were very important values in my family, and I have spent most of my career working for public interest conservation organizations.

My lifelong commitment to conservation was awakened by an experience in the spring of 1970. As a senior in high school, my chemistry teacher tapped me to organize activities for something new called Earth Day. Inspired and eager to play a role in cleaning up polluted rivers, I went on to get two undergraduate degrees from the University of Kansas, in Biology and Environmental Studies; and two Master of Science degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in Landscape Architecture and Water Resources Management.

While studying at Wisconsin, I designed and led the first visitor study of the Lower St. Croix Scenic River. I spent an entire summer exploring the river, talking to power boaters and paddlers, anglers and campers about their recreational experiences and how to minimize conflicts with other users. A lasting memory from that time is discovering a cache of sepia-toned, turn-of-the-century photographs of the St. Croix. On both sides of the river, as far as the eye could see, the land was completely cutover, a moonscape, and the river itself was choked with logs. It was that kind of devastation that inspired 19<sup>th</sup> century conservationists. What hit me, though, was the resilience of nature and how far the river corridor had come in restoring itself, thanks to those who had the foresight to protect it.

The next turning point came while working as a research assistant to a University of Wisconsin professor who was writing a book on the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. I was sent to Washington, D.C. to interview Senator Gaylord Nelson for the book, and was offered a job as his Legislative Aide on Environment and Energy. This was a great place to start a conservation career in national public policy. My years as a staffer to Senator Nelson taught me many things, among them, that conservation is not a partisan issue, that conservationists should reach out and engage all Americans, and that we must commit to this effort for the long haul. He liked to point out that “economy” and “ecology” have the same Greek root, *ecos*, which means “house” and that taking care of the planet is essential to both a strong economy and healthy ecosystems.

After the 1980 elections, I went to work for The Wilderness Society. I directed the Alaska program for three years and spent time in many parts of the state, including a memorable three week canoe trip on the Kobuk River which runs along the south flank of the Brooks Range. My time in Alaska imprinted me with a love of wilderness and wildlife, and gave me a much fuller appreciation for the majesty of America’s natural resources.

When I was recruited to be President and CEO of American Rivers, in 1995, I saw an opportunity to connect people to nature. Every community in America can trace its’ story to a river. We explored, settled and built America by river. Rivers are relevant to things every American cares about – clean drinking water, health and safety, prosperity, and a high quality of life. Most important, rivers are resilient and with a little help, like the St. Croix, they can recover and be valuable assets, the centerpiece of a vibrant community. Senegalese poet and naturalist, Baba Dioum, says, “In the end, we will protect only what we love.” It seemed to me that rivers are a perfect medium for Americans to discover their love of the great outdoors.

### **Collaborative and Constructive Problem-solving**

To be asked by President Obama and Secretary Salazar to oversee the conservation of this Nation’s wildlife, natural and cultural resources, and parks and refuges is the greatest honor of my long career. If confirmed by the Senate to the position of Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, I will approach my responsibilities with deep humility and a commitment to

work collaboratively with you, the fine staff of the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service, and with the many stakeholders who are affected by the Services' programs.

The conservation challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century loom large, alongside many other key issues affecting the wellbeing of Americans. I believe solutions to our conservation challenges can also contribute to a sound economy and a healthy, safe and thriving future for our Nation. I have seen this in action in many places across America. In Harmony Junction, Pennsylvania, the removal of an old dam to restore fish and wildlife habitat also solved serious flooding problems and created a recreational resource that supports the community's economy and quality of life.

In presenting my qualifications to you, I would like to highlight five key attributes that I bring to this assignment:

First, I am an experienced chief executive officer, having successfully led American Rivers for 16 years of substantial growth and accomplishment.

Second, I have 20 years of training and experience in developing and implementing strategic plans. When obstacles are many and resources few, having a good strategy is an absolute necessity.

Third, I am a good listener and am open and interested in different points of view.

Fourth, I am a collaborative, constructive and patient problem-solver.

I have led many effective public outreach and involvement efforts, including serving for several years as Conservation Chair for the National Council of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial and partnering with federal, state, local, and tribal governments, as well as grassroots organizations and corporations to engage the public in this coast-to-coast commemoration.

Among many river restoration projects that were undertaken during my tenure, one that reflects these characteristics is a creative approach to improving conditions on the Penobscot River in Maine. A collaborative effort between a power company, tribal, state and federal governments, angler organizations and conservation groups succeeded in maintaining all of the hydropower generating capacity in the project area, while removing two dams to open nearly 1,000 miles of historic river habitat for endangered Atlantic salmon.

The experience I would bring to this position includes three decades working with federal policies and programs related to natural resource management, fish and wildlife protection, and land and water conservation. As President of the nation's pre-eminent river conservation organization, I have had the privilege of working with hundreds of grassroots groups, local, state, federal and tribal governments, and many different sectors of business and industry, to develop solutions to complex problems with multiple stakeholders. During my tenure, American Rivers played a significant role in adding more than 100 rivers to National Wild and Scenic River System; restoring thousands of miles of rivers; demonstrating natural or nature-mimicking

infrastructure solutions to water quality and supply problems in dozens of cities across America; and working with partners to find consensus solutions to conflicts between fish, water, and energy needs in the Pacific Northwest.

Having spent 30 years in the public interest sector, I share with each of you a deep commitment to public service and, if confirmed, I will approach my responsibilities with humility and dedication. I will aim for balanced solutions that take the needs of all stakeholders into account. I believe that the best way to achieve lasting conservation solutions is through a collaborative process and I look forward to promoting the many vehicles for partnership that have been developed to implement the Endangered Species Act and other key laws and Congressional mandates. I will reach out proactively, especially to those whose livelihoods are at stake, and listen carefully to their concerns and ideas. I will ask my colleagues for robust analyses of all alternatives and aim for clear policy guidance based on the best science. And, I will commit to fully transparent decision-making.

Most fundamentally, I believe that conservation is a widely-held American value, grounded in two quintessentially American principles – being a good steward and being a good neighbor. The Nebraska farmers I knew growing up worked hard to protect their soil and water year after year, so that their sons and daughters could make a good living. And, when a neighbor needed help, everyone pitched in.

These principles are part of President Obama's 21<sup>st</sup> century conservation initiative, *America's Great Outdoors*. Built on a strong bi-partisan foundation that goes back 100 years to the conservation legacy of President Theodore Roosevelt, the fact that more than 10,000 Americans took time to participate in more than 50 listening sessions across the nation last summer suggests a strong base of interest to build on today. Many compelling goals were raised and discussed at these public events and they provide a unique opportunity for conservation progress that deeply interests me, should I be confirmed.

For example, the idea of empowering communities to connect with America's great outdoors through their rivers and other waterways is a goal that is near and dear to my heart. I have seen this work first hand in places like Columbia, South Carolina, where the Congaree River Blueway connects an urban community to Congaree National Park and underserved youth to the outdoors.

I am also eager to learn about and contribute to the idea of catalyzing large-scale land conservation partnership projects through economic incentives and technical assistance. Large landscapes offer opportunity to improve both the productivity and environmental performance of industries that provide food, energy, and material goods and the natural systems that provide clean air and water, productive soils, flood protection and natural beauty that sustains our spirit.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I would be greatly honored to serve as the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. I feel a strong connection to the American landscape and a deep responsibility to future generations of Americans. I believe wholeheartedly in the missions of the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Should I be confirmed by the Senate, I will do my best to provide the leadership, secure the resources, engage the stakeholders, and together with the dedicated men and women of these two Services, make measurable progress against the great conservation challenges of our time.