

**Testimony of John Schmidt, PARTNERSCAPES Board Director for West Virginia before the Senate
Committee on Environment and Public Works, May 19, 2021 at 10:00 AM**

Dear Members and staff of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today regarding the benefits of partnerships for enhancing and restoring fish and wildlife biodiversity and ecosystem resiliency. Specifically, I'd like to speak on the benefits of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) program and the great work it has done nationwide to keep private landowner working on their land and benefiting a multitude of native species. I've included three handouts today to provide further information.

I am privileged to represent West Virginia on the PARTNERSCAPES Board of Directors. PARTNERSCAPES is a national organization that connects private landowners with partner organizations to improve conservation efforts. The organization is led by landowners who want to conserve and sustain the land for their families and communities, as well the natural resources and wildlife that inhabit their respective landscapes. What we hear time and time again is that more government programs need to be like the Partners program. Partnerships are effective in bringing landowners and agencies together for a common purpose. When each party has "skin in the game" joint projects are more successful. No different with Partners projects

Initially, the Partners program got off to a slow start in West Virginia as it mainly offered technical assistance and funding for wetland restoration and most of our farmers preferred their previously drained wetlands to stay that way so they could raise crops. As you likely know the Mountain State has a limited amount of relatively level farm land. We picked up speed, acres, and miles of habitat when we started offering technical assistance and funding to build fences and off-stream livestock water sources to preclude livestock from streams and riparian areas. These restored habitats lead to cleaner, healthier streams and fish and wildlife for the taxpayers and improved grazing management for the landowner. A real win-win!

The Partners program's two primary goals have been to recover listed species and to enhance the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge system. In the past ten years or so this very flexible program has broadened its scope to also work to preclude the need to list species.

Fast-forward to 2021 to my own experience with the program. My wife and I are fortunate to own working forestland in Randolph County, WV. We purchased the land in 2018 and manage it for a multitude of plant and animal species. The majority of the forest supports a healthy stand of mature oak, maple, and tulip poplar. Unfortunately, we have ten acres of young forest that suffers from an understory dominated by non-native invasive shrubs like autumn olive, bush honeysuckle, Japanese barberry, and multi-flora rose. These invasives have crowded out/prevented the recruitment of native saplings and lead to poor forest health and biodiversity in that ten acres.

What to do? Well of course I called my former colleagues and FWS and USDA to see if their programs could assist me in me with eliminating the threat to forest health from the invasives. While we were meeting on site the agency folks also pointed out the benefit of enhancing pollinator habitat by creating a one-acre plot of wildflowers and other forbs. This addition will also benefit a multitude of game and non-game species and improve species diversity.

Accomplishments

In the past 20 years the West Virginia Field Office Partners program has restored the following:

Upland Acres restored or enhanced-**29,733**

Wetland Acres restored or enhanced- **733**

Stream miles restored or enhanced- **138**

Stream miles reopened to fish passage- **491**

What's next:

To date, the West Virginia Partners fence construction crews has completed over 2 million feet of livestock exclusion fencing. The demand remains strong and should continue into the future.

Demand for instream restoration to restore fish and aquatic organism passage remains high.

Not only will this increase population resilience in the face of a changing climate it will prevent stream bank erosion which adversely affects water quality and exacerbates flooding.

Several low head dams in West Virginia are utilized in conjunction with water intakes for Municipal water sources. Many of these systems now need costly repair and key components are difficult to replace. This aging infrastructure creates an imminent risk to communities across the state. New technology exists for water intake structures that are more reliable and boost capacity without the need for expensive and dangerous dams. Removing the Hartland Dam in Clarksburg, for example, would create savings for the Clarksburg Water Board and its rate payers, **promote a healthy and diverse natural flowing ecosystem**, and expand local business opportunities by restoring safe access for river recreation.

Seventy-five percent of fish and wildlife species depend on private land for their survival. With 2.2 million square miles of land in private ownership, conserving and enhancing habitat for migratory birds, endangered species, and other Federal Trust Species, as well as natural infrastructure, is only possible through partnerships with private landowners. The Partners program is a model for bringing private landowners and government agencies and funding together to solve our shared concerns.

Additional information

The Partners program started in 1987 primarily as a wetland restoration program. It was very successful restoring waterfowl populations but its success was limited by relatively low funding. Recognizing this, the USDA lured away some great USFWS folks to help them start their Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) and other wetland conservation programs. Since then the two agencies have collaborated (USDA funding and FWS-Partners expertise) to restore millions of acres of habitat nationwide.

