

Testimony of Mathew J. Strickler
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Before the United States Senate
Environment and Public Works Committee
“Legislative Hearing on a Discussion Draft Bill, Endangered Species Act Amendments of 2018”

July 17, 2018

Good Morning Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on this draft legislation and the important topic of conserving the shared natural heritage of Virginians and all Americans.

My name is Matt Strickler, and I serve as Secretary of Natural Resources to Virginia Governor Ralph Northam.

I oversee the Commonwealth’s Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) and Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), which together lead our efforts to protect native Virginia wildlife and plants, including state and federally listed threatened and endangered species.

Virginia currently has 89 ESA listed species, ranging from a flying squirrel, to five varieties of sea turtles, to the Atlantic sturgeon – a fish that can reach 14 feet long and 800 pounds, and has been around since the time of the dinosaurs.

And we have strong, collaborative working relationships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Those relationships have led to some impressive accomplishments in conserving and recovering populations of imperiled species:

Collaboration among FWS, DGIF, the College of William and Mary, and other partners conserved critical bald eagle nesting areas in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and reduced the impacts of land disturbance, a key to the eagle recovery effort and ultimate delisting in 2007.

FWS, DGIF, and the Nature Conservancy have worked together to protect endangered red-cockaded woodpecker habitat in Southeast Virginia. Now the population is expanding on federal, state, and private lands.

And the restoration plan co-developed by the FWS and DGIF is bringing freshwater mussel species back from the brink of extinction in Southwest Virginia’s Clinch, Powell, and Holston rivers – one of the most biologically diverse areas on the North American continent.

We certainly have work left to do, but Governor Northam and I see species conservation and recovery as an opportunity, not a hurdle.

We believe that when our lands and waters are kept natural and clean enough to support a healthy and diverse ecology, they are better able to support a healthy and diverse economy. These places become more attractive for use by hunters, anglers, hikers, bikers, paddlers, and the like. And they become more desirable places to live, work, play, start a business, and raise a family.

Speaking to the draft bill before us today, I agree with the Chairman's assessment that we need to do more for threatened and endangered species than keep them on life support, but the most important thing we can do is commit greater resources to the vital task of recovery. I also agree that the Endangered Species Act (ESA) can be strengthened, and I respect the dialogue initiated by the WGA to explore potentially beneficial ideas. The discussion draft released by the Chairman, however, contains provisions that would hinder Virginia's ability to make the most of our partnerships with federal agencies by complicating proven and established species protection and recovery processes. The Commonwealth of Virginia cannot support the legislation in current form. More generally, I am also concerned that even well intentioned efforts to amend the ESA could open the door to provisions that would harm its essential purpose.

Some of the provisions suggested in this draft and in the Western Governors' Association report would do that; however, the primary reason many species are where they are is precisely because states – including Virginia – have not had the resources or the political will to do the job themselves. That's why the ESA is so important. It separates the complicated scientific and management questions of biodiversity conservation from local political pressures.

As a practical matter, I believe this bill would make working with adjacent states to recover shared species more difficult. As a philosophical matter, these resources do not belong to just Virginia, or Wyoming or any other single state. They belong to all Americans.

In the view of Virginia, the existing Act and regulations strike the appropriate balance of shared responsibility between state and federal agencies.

We have multiple opportunities to participate in and provide information to ESA decision-making, including recovery planning and implementation. And we offer information and recommendations on proposals to list species.

We know that FWS and NMFS are reviewing the scientific information we provide to them and using it when it is the best available.

It is our view that the best way to improve implementation of the ESA and to recover more species faster is for Congress to provide adequate funding for science and management of these resources and their habitat.

Federal agencies should absolutely be accountable for how those funds are spent, and should be required to document progress and results.

But we should not forget that the ESA as written has a 99 percent success rate at preventing the extinction of listed species, and that 90 percent of species with recovery plans are on track to meet their goals on schedule.

Moving forward, Virginia hopes to work with Congress to improve the Endangered Species Act and to secure the kind of funding for federal and state wildlife agencies that is necessary to speed recovery of ESA-listed species.

Thank you.