

**Senate Environment and Public Works Committee  
Hearing on S.4589, the *Endangered Species Act Amendments of 2020*  
September 23, 2020**

**Testimony of  
Liesa Priddy  
Florida Cattlemen's Association and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association**

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

I am Liesa Priddy, a native Floridian and third generation cattle rancher. I have spent my life as a conservationist, managing and improving landscapes that provide valuable forage for my livestock and are also home to a wide variety of species, including those protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

I began my educational career at Georgia Southern University where I received a bachelors degree in finance. I also hold a bachelors degree in environmental studies, with a minor in biology, from Florida Gulf Coast University. I attended the Graduate School of Banking at Louisiana State University. Throughout my career, I have actively sought to develop solutions that address the environmental and economic needs of southwest Florida. This broad experience was valuable when I was appointed by then-Governor Rick Scott to serve a six-year term on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The Commission manages and regulates the state's fish and wildlife resources. I have also served on the Ave Maria Stewardship Community District Board since its inception in 2005. The District was the first community to be built in Collier County that combined the desire to address urban sprawl through the use of targeted development, and targeted conservation, in strategic areas.

I come to this Committee today to offer testimony that is representative of the varied hats I have worn throughout my career which give me a unique perspective on the ESA, and how to make species management and recovery efforts more successful. If your perception of a rancher is a cowboy with hat and boots, roping and riding, let me update your view. We're land and water managers, preservers of habitat and wildlife, business people, and animal husbandry practitioners, while also being producers of the highest quality beef in the world. Each of these roles provides a specific set of information that has been used to inform my approach to issues that are sometimes emotionally sensitive. Most of the emotional discussion of the ESA, especially when discussing changes to the Act, is based in fear. As a land manager and someone who has been involved in many successful conservation efforts, I can tell you that each of the hats I have worn provide me with expertise to engage with many different groups, with many different perspectives. I have worked with environmental groups, wildlife managers, ranchers, and government officials who all want the same thing: a good outcome and a brighter future for species – especially those that need additional protection to thrive.

That's why I'm here today: I believe the *Endangered Species Act Amendments of 2020* will improve conservation outcomes by empowering experts whose species conservation and management experience can be used more fully. Empowering experts at the local level to be

more intimately involved in species recovery planning will ultimately make desired recovery outcomes more timely and more successful.

The ESA is often described as a landmark, foundational conservation bill. I agree. The ESA was enacted to ensure that imperiled species nationwide could be identified, supported, and recovered. The original Act sets clear targets for how and when each of those steps should occur, and in some cases, the Act and its processes has been incredibly successful. Overtime, however, the needs of species and those implementing the ESA have changed.

Generally, the ESA has failed to keep pace with new technologies and conservation paradigms that have changed from the 1970s. Over the last 50 years, species and land managers have been forced to contend with urban sprawl that has changed the land mass available for species. This is something I am intimately familiar with in my role as an Ave Maria Stewardship Community District Board member. We grapple with how best to support human needs for housing and infrastructure with the needs of ecosystems and species. This balance is particularly important, given there are 133 species in Florida that are currently protected in some form under the ESA. Florida's species protections are intense and widespread; only 3 states have more ESA listings than Florida: Hawaii (502), California (280), and Alabama (143). Many more species are yet to be evaluated for listing according to the National Listing Workplan, so the additional layers of federal intervention only have the potential to grow.

With the ever-growing complexity of community development in the face of land management considerations, the need to incentivize voluntary conservation has never been more important. The *ESA Amendments Act* recognizes what ranchers and conservationists have requested for a long time: ranchers are stewards of the landscape and consistently seek improvements for the benefit of a variety of species, but when it comes to federal recognition, their efforts are often discarded or ignored. Section 302 of the bill before the Committee today recognizes ranchers' commitment to conservation, and recognizes that the time, money, and labor invested in voluntary conservation agreements should mean something when federal protections are being explored. Equally, the ESA should allow federal authorities to consider all factors, including voluntary conservation agreements, when making an ESA determination. ESA analysis should consider the full scope of information, the best available science, in order to make the most accurate determination about what the species actually needs. Omitting information about a conservation plan, or being unable to account for the benefits because the agreements don't have the same force and effect of law, is counterintuitive.

Currently, we are partnered with a group of other landowners in our county in seeking a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). HCPs are outlined under the ESA to "provide for partnerships with non-federal parties to conserve the ecosystems upon which listed species depend". Not only are these voluntary conservation efforts the result of concerted effort by many groups, they provide predictability and certainty that all expectations are clear and that everyone is on the same page. The last thing ranchers want is more regulation and red tape, and they should get credit for the good work they do, even while acknowledging that they engage in these efforts primarily for the benefit of the resource, not the credit or recognition they receive (Section 303).

ESA enactment has also failed to keep pace with the drastic increase in states' capacity to engage in conservation. Several years ago, this Committee held a series of hearings about this very subject, and heard that over time, states have expanded state wildlife management and research capacity, and have developed robust regulations of their own. According to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, states spend more than \$5 billion each year on species conservation activities. Collectively, states' budgets for species management dwarf federal budgets for ESA implementation, so it follows logically that leveraging states' capacity for conservation is key to the success of ESA recovery efforts.

Having served as a Florida Fish and Wildlife commissioner, I can attest to states' expertise firsthand. States have primacy over wildlife management and successfully manage hundreds of thousands of wildlife species within their borders, including some that are ultimately listed for protection under the ESA. Under current ESA implementation, a listing decision is often perceived to be a referendum on states' management, which I believe actively ignores the gaps in ESA implementation. In Florida, the State has developed a set of specific and comprehensive management plans to support their desire to have consistent management of species long before a species needs to be protected under the ESA. Currently, the ESA is not allowed to consider those practices or voluntary conservation agreements when making listing determinations, as I previously addressed. Further, federal authorities are often unable to access the expertise and resources of the states after a listing decision. This bill addresses both of those gaps, affording states the opportunity to lead species recovery teams as addressed in Section 203. States, even after a listing determination, are the frontline, boots-on-the-ground experts on species management.

Florida is certainly an example: without the financial and programmatic support from the State, the recovery progress of the manatee and panther would not have achieved what it has. Cooperation and productive collaboration are key to ensuring species management and protections are cohesively applied across a landscape, no matter whether it is private, state, or federal land. Additionally, states have more support than ever before from partner groups across these land management jurisdictions, and those collective resources should be leveraged for the best outcome of the species. This bill would allow states to leverage those partnerships in a much more immediate and lasting way, as conservation partnerships can and do persist long after a species is listed – or delisted – under the Act.

Ultimately, the ESA has failed to keep pace with the way the American people view the Act. Since its inception, the Act has marked many notable successes: recovery of the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and American alligator. These species met all ESA objectives: identification, recovery, and delisting. The Act was always intended to identify an imperiled species, concentrate resources to improve population numbers, and return a species to state management when the population had recovered. Over time, those objectives have been skewed by fear that because the species declined once, it will do so again. The ESA has accounted for that fear in the 5-year post-delisting monitoring period and the state management plan that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must approve before a species is delisted. As a result of that fear, we have seen an explosion in listing petitions and legal challenges to delisting efforts that have subverted the intent of the Act and allowed ESA protections to become perpetual, rather than short-term emergency measures.

This bill addresses that fear and takes an honest look at how current implementation is meeting the objectives of the Act. By codifying the [National Listing Work Plan](#) in Section 501, the bill empowers federal authorities to spend appropriations where they are most needed and most likely to be successful. Further, the bill supports the right and responsibility of the state and federal authorities to demonstrate conservation success in the period immediately following a delisting activity by seeking to prevent an emotional, fear-charged judicial challenge to the delisting rule. As a rancher and former wildlife commissioner, I know that it takes time to demonstrate success in natural resources management. The authors of the ESA envisioned a transition back to state management as a key portion of the ESA recovery process, and the law should respect that statutory direction.

Often, the ESA hangs heavy over private landowners and federal lands users alike – but it doesn't have to. There is a way to better integrate the Act into existing management frameworks and incentivize voluntary conservation for species nationwide, and the *ESA Amendments Act of 2020* is a significant step in the right direction. Every legislative effort to amend portions of the ESA is measured against the high bar set by specific recovery efforts that have enshrined the Act in the hearts and minds of all Americans, but I believe your bill supports the Act and helps to transition ESA recovery efforts into the next era of species conservation.

Thank you, Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee for inviting me here today to share my experience. Your invitation is a testament to your recognition that state leadership and state expertise is integral as we move into the future.