

STATEMENT OF DEBBIE STRAUGHN, PRINCIPAL, GROVE VALLEY
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, EDMOND OKLAHOMA

Good morning Chairman Cardin and Ranking Member Crapo and Chairwoman Boxer and Ranking Member Inhofe and members of the committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing and share with you my involvement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

I am the principal at Grove Valley Elementary School, in the Deer Creek School district, located in Edmond, Oklahoma. I first became involved with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in 2002 while serving as an elementary principal at Deer Creek Elementary School. As a leader of our school, I was looking for a program to involve all children in hands-on learning opportunities while working with the environment. It was very important to me, to be able to add environmental studies for our students. We began by forming a task force with teachers, parents, and students. This task force visited outdoor classrooms throughout the state of Oklahoma. We came back from these visits with a vision of what we wanted our outdoor habitat to look like. Plans were created. I contacted contractors to build our wetland, and frog pond. We quickly learned that we were being taken advantage of and that the job was not being completed correctly. Out of desperation I began making phone calls throughout the state of Oklahoma. It was at this point that we contacted Terry Dupree and Jontie Aldrich with the Oklahoma Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. They were able to provide us assistance and training with our outdoor classroom. Resources, contacts, and a new design were given to us so our dream of an effective outdoor classroom could come true. The outdoor habitat became a reality because of their guidance.

I feel it is very important for our children to be involved in an outdoor classroom because it gives them an opportunity to be outside and learn about their environment. The outdoor classroom provides an ideal structured learning for the children and promotes ideal wildlife habitat. The teachers, students, and parents take ownership in their outdoor classroom. Every child at Deer Creek Elementary was involved in the outdoor habitat. For example, the kindergarten students constructed a bird sanctuary, the first grade students developed a flower garden, second grade a butterfly garden in the shape of a butterfly, third grade a vegetable garden, fourth grade a flower garden in the shape of Oklahoma, and fifth grade built a bird blind and a frog pond. We also built a gazebo, with help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Students utilized the gazebo for hands-on science experiments. They also helped us design wetlands, walkways with animal tracks, and artificial nesting structures for wildlife. This outdoor habitat gave children an interactive learning environment. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service nominated us for the U.S. Department of Interior Pride in America Award. I was honored to accept the award in Washington D.C. several years ago for my school.

I am now the principal of a new elementary school, Grove Valley Elementary. I am in the process once again of building a new outdoor classroom. I am fortunate as there is a natural wetland on the site. Tinker Air Force Base is providing my school with a large grant. We plan to come up with a new design, and improve the outdoor habitat.

Enhancements to the wetland began several months ago. We will be adding trails, bridges, and walkways to the area too. 100% of the children at Grove Valley will be involved in designing their own areas to care for and nurture. We hope to have all of this completed by June. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is once again helping us with this new habitat. Jontie Aldrich has visited the site and given us advice. They plan to work with us as the project is being completed and offer assistance as needed. The Oklahoma County Conservation district is also working as a partner with Tinker Air Force Base and our school. This outdoor classroom is going to be shared with the community neighborhood. We even plan to have fishing opportunities.

As you can see I am passionate about teaching children about the environment. Approximately 2% of our school children in the U.S. have an opportunity to work in an outdoor classroom compared to the early 1900's where almost every child had an opportunity to work the land or understand wildlife. I am dedicated to teaching children about the environment. I want to thank all of the Senators that support the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, especially Senator Inhofe, who championed the Partners Program into law. I want to represent all children and schools in the United States, so they too can experience outdoor classrooms and hands-on learning opportunities with our environment. Children are our future and environmental studies for them are disappearing or unavailable. Please continue supporting Partners for Wildlife programs so that children everywhere can continue to explore and understand their environment. This is "one" government program that truly benefits all.

Thank you.