



ASSOCIATION of
FISH & WILDLIFE
AGENCIES

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1100 First Street, NE, Suite 825
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: 202-838-3474
Fax: 202-350-9869
Email: info@fishwildlife.org

Testimony on S.2372, *The Recovering America's Wildlife Act*

Sara Parker Pauley – Director, Missouri Department of Conservation

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address your committee in support of S. 2372 – the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. For the record, my name is Sara Parker Pauley, Director for the Missouri Department of Conservation and past president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

I first want to thank my Senator Roy Blunt for co-sponsoring legislation with Senator Martin Heinrich. Their dedication to this country's fish, and wildlife is inspirational and much appreciated.

Mr. Chair, I sit before you today as an advocate for what we in Missouri hold dear. Whether you're fishing for smallmouth bass in the pristine Current River, observing waterfowl at a conservation area along the Missouri River, or watching the frost melt away while deer hunting in north Missouri, one thing is clear: Missourians have a passion for and commitment to the natural resources of our state.

In fact, Missourians are so dedicated to conservation, that in 1976 they were willing to tax themselves to guarantee they had healthy and abundant fish and wildlife, places to go outdoors to hike, fish, hunt, birdwatch, or just to know these forests and rivers would be there for their grandchildren. The measure includes a 1/8 percent Conservation Sales Tax – for every \$100 taxable dollars spent, 12.5 cents goes towards conservation with no sunset. We are blessed to have the support and trust of citizens, and we do not take this for granted as stewards of these precious resources and funds. The key to Missouri's conservation success has been the dedicated conservation funding that allows for the long-term conservation planning and implementation.

Take for example, our prairie restoration work in northwest Missouri. Over 99 percent of the original tallgrass prairie is gone in our state and many of the species that depend on diverse native grasslands are consequently imperiled. However, the Missouri Department of Conservation, landowners, and partners are working collaboratively to restore remnant prairies and reconstruct prairie to the best of our abilities. The same habitat work is occurring a few

miles over the state line in Iowa by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and partners. This voluntary and collaborative work in Iowa and Missouri is creating a landscape scale tallgrass prairie ecosystem. An ecosystem that is critical to a plethora of species, including pollinators, which in turn are so critical to sustaining agriculture in the region. However, these projects do not happen in one or two years. To restore and recreate a prairie ecosystem takes decades of active habitat management. Dedicated funding at the state level allows state fish and wildlife agencies and partners to develop landscape scale projects that help restore native habitat and the species that depend on them.

Another example is the Missouri Ozark Forest Ecosystem Project, which is a 100-year research project focused on upland forest responses to different management regimes including prescribe fire and timber harvest and the impact to songbirds, mammals, invertebrates, soils, and vegetation. Without the dedicated funding of the Conservation Sales Tax, it would not be possible to plan, implement and benefit from a 100-year research project.

And the last example of the importance of long-term dedicated funding is the restoration of Ozark and Eastern hellbenders. The hellbender is a giant aquatic salamander found in streams in the eastern United States. Since 1990, hellbenders that live in Ozark streams of Missouri have suffered greatly: their numbers have declined by more than 70% and both species are listed as endangered on the endangered species list. They are a great example of species that would benefit if the Recovering America's Wildlife Act is signed into law. In 2011, we partnered with the St. Louis Zoo to start a captive breeding program. Ten years later we are just now seeing some of the first Ozark hellbenders raised in captivity hatch the second generation of hellbenders. In fact, it takes 3 to 6 years to raise a hellbender to a size large enough that it can be successfully released into a Missouri stream. Without the dedicated funding, there would be no certainty the program would be funded long enough to ensure young hellbenders are raised to a large enough size to be released.

Simply put, Conservation success does not happen overnight. It requires long-term planning and dedicated funding which the Act will provide to state agencies -- agencies with a proven track record of restoring species like wild turkey, deer, elk, waterfowl, and many other species. While past efforts have placed a priority on game species, this Act focuses on restoring and managing native habitats to benefit all species while utilizing the same effective boots on the ground approach to accomplish the desired conservation outcomes.

While most states do not benefit from a state level dedicated funding source like Missouri, I can assure you that they all have similar conservation success stories of their own. In West Virginia for instance, I would highlight the Cerulean warbler. A small and beautiful neotropical migrant songbird that attracts birdwatchers from across the country. Despite the global population decline reported for this species, West Virginia still hosts more than 35% of the world's breeding population for the Cerulean warbler. By working to implement appropriate timber harvest strategies, they are creating and restoring habitat for this iconic bird species and

providing economic benefits associated with the state's timber industry. Unfortunately, the to-do list far exceeds the available funding.

Despite our dedicated funding and success in Missouri, we have over 680 species of conservation concern meaning populations are already rare or are in decline. Through the development of State Fish and Wildlife Action Plans, we know that there are over 12,000 species of greatest conservation need, which means they are species that are of low population, declining, rare, or facing threats and in need of conservation attention in this country. These plans serve as a blueprint for conserving our nation's fish and wildlife and preventing endangered species from being listed. Of great concern is that current funding levels only support an estimated 5% of the actions outlined in the Plans and the challenges are greater today than ever before. Ninety-five percent of the work is not getting done, because funding does not exist. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act is the 21st century funding model we need now that will direct critical funding to state fish and wildlife agencies to implement their science-driven wildlife action plans.

It is important to note, these plans must be approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a condition of receiving funding through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program. The Act would use the same accountability standards currently used for the that program, which is already arguably the most accountable federal conservation grant program in existence, and this Act actually adds a 6th level of accountability. Under this Act each state agency is required to provide a work plan and budget for implementing its wildlife action plan to the Service, the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, and the House Committee on Natural Resources over the next 3 years. We have prepared a detailed description of the six levels of accountability that we will submit along with written testimony for the record. Finally, in terms of matching the federal dollars available to the states and tribes under this Act, the Association, along with our Federal partners has prepared a detailed report that describes the numerous and innovative non-federal match opportunities available, which we are happy to submit for the record.

The rapid decline of so many species of wildlife and the habitats they depend on certainly threatens our outdoor recreation economy, which contributes \$689 billion to our national economy annually, creates 4.3 million direct jobs and accounts for 1.8 of the U.S. GDP, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis in their 2020 report. But more importantly the decline of wildlife species threatens our quality of life as humans. We are all interconnected because people, wildlife, and the environment are integrated at our very core. Aldo Leopold, considered the father of conservation, understood this connectedness when he said, "Conservation viewed in its entirety, is the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between people and the land." It is critical that we come up with a solution together that matches the scope of the challenge.

To conclude, it was in 1937 that President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Pittman-Robertson Act which has been the monumental funding model for the restoration and improvement of wildlife habitat and wildlife management research that has spanned the last 8 decades. Prior to the creation of the Pittman–Robertson Act, many game species were near the point of extinction from overhunting and habitat loss, but because of state led efforts and dedicated funding through the Pittman-Robertson Act, state fish and wildlife agencies were able to restore many of those game species. And, just as the need was great in 1937 for many of our game species, today we still have an alarming conservation crisis in front of us with thousands of species that are in trouble. More than 12,000 species across the United States are in decline because of greater threats from invasive species, disease, habitat loss and other emerging threats. The Recovering America’s Wildlife Act can be the 2021 epic conservation game changer that the landmark Pittman-Robertson Act was in 1937.

Henry David Thoreau noted that the meeting of two eternities, the past and future is precisely the present moment. Eight-four years from now, will our grandchildren be heralding our vision and leadership in conservation in this present moment, like we talk about those who championed the cause of 1937? Sometimes history repeats in positive ways, and I certainly hope and believe that will be the case with the passage of the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act. Thank you for your time today.

The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies represents North America’s fish and wildlife agencies to advance sound, science-based management and conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public interest. The Association represents its state agency members on Capitol Hill and before the Administration to advance favorable fish and wildlife conservation policy and funding and works to ensure that all entities work collaboratively on the most important issues. The Association also provides member agencies with coordination services on cross-cutting as well as species-based programs that range from birds, fish habitat and energy development to climate change, wildlife action plans, conservation education, leadership training and international relations. Working together, the Association’s member agencies are ensuring that North American fish and wildlife management has a clear and collective voice.