

Testimony of
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Regarding
Biodiversity Loss

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Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on one of the most pressing conservation challenges facing our nation, biodiversity loss. My name is Andy Treharne, and I serve as the Senior Director of External Affairs for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF). Established in 1989, CSF works with the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus (CSC), the largest, most active bipartisan caucus on Capitol Hill. The current Senate CSC Co-Chairs are Senators Martin Heinrich (NM) and Deb Fischer (NE) and Vice-Chairs are Senators Joe Manchin (WV) and Boozman (AR).

Before discussing modern day challenges and solutions for addressing biodiversity, it is important to take a moment to put things into historical perspective. The idea of conservation in America began with members of the hunting and fishing community who introduced game laws and developed programs to protect fish and wildlife resources - leading to the creation of state and federal fish and wildlife agencies. Over 80 years ago, the hunting community led the charge for the passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act), which redirected excise taxes on firearms and ammunition to a dedicated fund to be used specifically for conservation purposes. Further, revenue from sportsmen's licenses was also permanently linked to conservation, laying the foundation for what is now the unique American System of Conservation Funding, a "user pays - public benefits" program that is the financial backbone of the most successful conservation model in the world.

Through time, this System has expanded and now includes the fishing and boating communities - with the passage of the Federal Aid in Sportfish Restoration Act (also known as the Dingell-Johnson Act, and the subsequent Wallop-Breaux Amendment) as well as the archery community. The funds collected through these programs, totaling over \$1.09 billion for FY 2021, plus millions of dollars annually in license and permit fees, are the lifeblood of state fish and wildlife agencies – the primary managers of our nation's fish and wildlife resources. These critical conservation dollars fund a variety of efforts, including: enhancing fish and wildlife habitat and populations, recreational access to public and private lands, shooting ranges and boating access facilities, wetlands protection and its associated water filtration and flood retention functions, and improved soil and water conservation - all which benefit the American public. Put simply, sportsmen and women are the only outdoor recreation constituency that contributes meaningful financial investments when it comes to conserving fish, wildlife, and their associated habitats.

Conservation Funding:

Despite the unparalleled success of the "user pays – public benefits" system, America continues to experience challenges for biodiversity conservation. It is critical that we take steps to invest in 21st century funding mechanisms to meet the challenges before us today. Doing so will not only benefit the natural resources on which we all rely but will further cement the United States' position as a model for the rest of the world when it comes to conservation.

While much of the focus recently has been on declining biodiversity, the 2019 State of the Birds report noted that North American migratory waterfowl populations have increased by 56% since 1970, a clear sign of the highly successful conservation programs in place such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and Federal and State Duck Stamps. As the Committee is aware, NAWCA helps support the conservation efforts of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan by providing financial resources to carry out wetland conservation projects in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAWCA has completed more than 2,833 on-the-ground conservation projects while conserving more than 29.8 million acres in all 50 states, Canada, and Mexico. NAWCA requires that for every federal dollar contributed to the program, a non-federal source must equally match the federal contribution.

However, the program is often matched at a rate of \$3 of non-federal money for every \$1 of federal money, a sign that conservation groups, including sportsmen and women, are willing to have skin in the game, which makes this program one of the most cost-effective conservation programs our nation's fish and wildlife managers have in their toolboxes. The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation applauds the Committee for their work last Congress to ensure NAWCA was reauthorized through FY25 as part of the America's Conservation Enhancement (ACE) Act.

Yet forest birds and grassland birds lack a funding source such as NAWCA or duck stamps. Consequently, the State of the Birds report also notes that we have experienced roughly a 30% population decline in the same time frame as waterfowl populations have increased significantly. However, declines in biodiversity are not limited to bird populations.

In 2000, Congress created a new subaccount within the Pittman-Robertson Act known as the "Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP)." The WCRP is an unfunded subaccount that was created to support targeted and strategic state-based conservation programs. The creation of the WCRP required states to develop a federally approved "comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy", which subsequently became known as State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs). Despite the significant financial and human resources states invest in the creation of SWAPs, Congress only provides approximately 5% of the funding that is needed to address the conservation actions identified by these plans.

Now in their second iteration, SWAPs serve as a road map to address each state's unique conservation needs. State fish and wildlife agencies have collectively identified more than 12,000 species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are in desperate need of attention and conservation funding. According to a 2018 collaborative report by the National Wildlife Federation, the American Fisheries Society, and the Wildlife Society, more than 150 U.S. species are already extinct and "another 500 are 'missing in action' and may also be extinct".

Fortunately, there is a solution to funding SWAPs known as the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, which will provide state fish and wildlife agencies the ability to fully implement their unfunded SWAPs. Providing much-needed funding to state fish and wildlife agencies through Recovering America's Wildlife Act would mark a historic step toward addressing biodiversity loss and ultimately reducing uncertainty for a variety of stakeholders before more costly legal and regulatory measures are necessary.

CSF continues to support state fish and wildlife agencies as the entity best equipped to make science-based wildlife management decisions given their professional training and intimate knowledge of each states' diverse ecosystems and encourages the Committee to support efforts to fund State Wildlife Action Plans to proactively address biodiversity loss.

Addressing Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Fragmentation:

While there has long been a general understanding and acceptance of the components that wildlife professionals consider when discussing wildlife habitat, considerations for the space and arrangement of these components are receiving increased attention from policy makers. These considerations are critical to ensure that management efforts, including ecosystem restoration efforts at the landscape-scale, successfully contribute to the conservation of declining species. As land use changes disrupt historic landscapes and limit the movement of enough individuals within a species population, many of these species' ability to migrate to habitat conditions capable of meeting their resource needs or providing access to mates necessary for maintaining genetic diversity becomes impaired. This is especially true for migratory species who, due to life history characteristics, are required to traverse great distances to meet their seasonal demands.

Whether related to travel barriers or ecological deserts that separate pockets of suitable habitat, one issue the Committee has long recognized is the importance of addressing habitat connectivity to conserve fish and wildlife. CSF applauds the Committee for its bipartisan work last Congress in the development of the America's Transportation Infrastructure Act (ATIA), and specifically Section 1125 to help fund wildlife crossings with the goal of reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions while simultaneously enhancing habitat connectivity.

It is widely believed that current estimates for wildlife-vehicle collisions – 300,000 annually – are severely underreported as the U.S. Department of Transportation estimates there are one to two million collisions annually between vehicles and large animals. In 2018, approximately 200 Americans died from collisions with wildlife, and it is estimated the costs associated with wildlife-vehicle collisions is \$8 billion annually. Wildlife crossing present a strategic opportunity to reduce threats to human safety associated with wildlife-vehicle collisions while restoring and enhancing habitat connectivity.

CSF greatly appreciated the thoughtful, bipartisan negotiations to include Section 1125 in ATIA to ensure that wildlife habitat connectivity projects would be eligible for funding through existing transportation programs.

In addition to wildlife crossings, CSF also strongly supports collaborative and voluntary efforts to enhance the ecological integrity of wildlife corridors. Thanks to technological advances in fish and wildlife tracking and global positioning systems, researchers have been able to better document and understand the importance of migration patterns for fish and wildlife. With this growing understanding, we are increasingly aware that many iconic fish and wildlife species – including many important game species – have been and continue to be negatively impacted by a variety of factors. This includes changes in the quality and availability of habitat and – particularly for migratory species – obstructions and movement barriers further contribute to habitat fragmentation. For many of these species, the effects of climate change, which have included changes to water levels, growing and dormant seasons, intensified and altered weather patterns, and more, continue to exacerbate these issues by further reducing habitat availability for both terrestrial and aquatic species. CSF recognizes that emerging science reinforces previous findings that migratory fish and wildlife populations have specific requirements that assist in the successful transition from one area to another. Additionally, CSF recognizes that anthropogenic modifications have altered communities and, in some cases, led to unintended consequences that have limited the successful navigation of migration pathways.

CSF supports locally driven and supported migration corridor conservation efforts, such as those facilitated by efforts like Department of the Interior Secretarial Order No. 3362, which is designed to improve habitat quality in western big-game winter range and migration corridors. The agency actions that have occurred since issuance of this order are significant because they provide state fish and wildlife agencies with support for research needs as well as new and ongoing work to deliver on-the-ground habitat conservation services for species that fall under their respective jurisdictions. The resulting cooperation between state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry and private landowners is now delivering measurable results that will have lasting impacts. With Congress's growing interest in developing solutions to wildlife corridor challenges, CSF encourages the Committee to build upon the success of SO 3362 by considering wildlife corridor conservation policies that acknowledge and respect the rights of private property owners and consider the needs and unique expertise of state wildlife agencies, two important factors fundamental to the success of SO 3362 thus far.

The issue of habitat fragmentation is not limited to wildlife, but also has tremendous impacts on fish and other aquatic organisms. Fragmentation of river habitats through dams and poorly designed culverts is one of the primary threats to aquatic species in the United States. Movement of fish in rivers and streams

is vital to their well-being. Fish move to reproduce, feed, and in search of habitat as seasons change. For example, eastern brook trout migrate from larger, more open waters in the winter months to smaller, heavily shaded streams that provide a thermal refuge in the warmer summer months.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) states “Fish passage is the ability of fish or other aquatic species to move throughout an aquatic system among all habitats necessary to complete their life cycle.”. CSF encourages increased funding for the U.S. Forest Service Aquatic Organism Passage Program, NOAA’s Habitat Restoration Grants, and relevant to the Committee, the USFWS National Fish Passage Program. The ACE Act Congressionally authorized the National Fish Habitat Conservation Through Partnerships (NFHP) program, which has twenty established partnerships across the country working to conserve and restore fish habitat and connectivity. The Pacific Lamprey Conservation Initiative, Eastern Brook Trout Joint Ventures, Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership and the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership are all examples of program partnerships that include fish passage connectivity and barrier removal as part of their overall mission.

Collaborative Conservation:

The previously mentioned recommendations and solutions have common elements that lead to collaboration: first, they acknowledge the contributions of sportsmen and women. Second, they encourage voluntary collaboration and partnerships. Third, they respect private landowners, and finally, they recognize the authority of state fish and wildlife agencies as the primary managers of fish and wildlife species.

CSF views efforts to conserve large-scale landscapes, such as the Administration’s “America the Beautiful” report, as both a challenge and an opportunity. We believe such efforts are positive in that they are creating dialogue, and potential policy, that is mobilizing different segments of the conservation and environmental movements to think critically about priorities, the tools we have at our disposal, and how we prioritize where and how to use limited resources. However, we are also concerned that large-scale conservation efforts have the potential to focus on landscapes that have minimal value to increasing biodiversity to meet certain arbitrary goals as not all habitats are created equal. Given that many of our most significant biodiversity and species conservation opportunities are on privately owned lands, we believe there are opportunities to better incentivize landowners to participate in voluntary programs such as those authorized and funded through the Farm Bill’s conservation title, Joint Ventures, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, among others.

Specific to the “America the Beautiful” report, while many questions remain unanswered, CSF appreciates the Administration’s willingness to engage sportsmen and women through the Hunt Fish 30x30 coalition, and we are appreciative that several recommendations made by our community were included. CSF believes it is important to point out this is simply a broad report, but we are pleased with many of the distinctions made in the report such as the difference between “conservation” and “preservation”. While this report is consistent with many of the recommendations identified by CSF, many questions remain regarding the efforts and programs that will count toward a 30% objective and establishing a baseline to determine which existing land and waters are already conserved.

CSF thanks the Committee for recognizing and supporting the value of collaborative conservation to make positive gains in the face of our nation’s biodiversity conservation challenges. CSF thanks the Committee, including Chair Carper and Ranking Member Capito, for working to pass and subsequently enact the ACE Act last Congress. In addition to the NAWCA and NFHP provisions contained in the ACE

Act, the legislation included a number of critically important partnership programs to facilitate biodiversity conservation such as reauthorizing the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation as well as the Chesapeake Bay Program and the Chesapeake WILD program.

Invasive Species:

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines invasive species as “animals, plants or other organisms that are introduced into places outside their natural range, negatively impacting native biodiversity, ecosystem services or human well-being.” Through the increased movement of goods and services around the world, the introduction of invasive species has created significant conservation challenges in many regions. The United States has been no exception, with high profile species like silver and bighead carp, feral swine, and emerald ash borer threatening native ecosystems, food security, and the forest products industry. These are but a few of the invasive species that currently threaten the health and vitality of our nation’s natural communities.

While state and federal fish and wildlife management agencies have invested considerable resources toward the eradication, or at least preventing the spread, of invasive species it is clear that additional focus is needed. Recent examples such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers partnership with the state of Illinois to prevent the movement of Asian carp into the Great Lakes and the 2018 Farm Bill’s inclusion of \$75 million over 5 years toward the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (FSCP) recognize the challenges we face. While these investments represent invaluable investments toward prevention and eradication efforts, meeting this challenge on a broader scale will require collaboration and partnership from government leaders, local, state and federal agencies, and private landowners. This is especially true with increased transportation of consumer products and the potential for the movement of goods to introduce species to new areas, and the still emerging effects of factors like climate change are understood.

It should be noted that not all non-native, introduced species are considered invasive. In fact, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service highlights a report by Pimentel (2004) estimating that there are approximately 50,000 non-native species in the U.S., of which only 43,000 are considered to be invasive. For example, popular game birds such as the Ring-necked Pheasant and Chukar were originally introduced from their native ranges in Asia. Likewise, several economically and recreationally important fish species, including striped bass and rainbow trout, have been intentionally introduced throughout much of the United States. However, these species have naturalized within their new environments to become an environmentally functional and economically viable part of those communities. While these success stories should be recognized and celebrated, their presence should not be used to distract from the important conservation challenge that invasive species continue to pose for our nation’s diverse ecosystems.

Climate Change:

CSF maintains that there are pragmatic solutions that can help address and mitigate that effects of climate change by committing to many of the programs and practices that the sportsmen’s community has supported for decades. Some examples can be found in the aforementioned programs included in this testimony. This includes NAWCA which, through its reliance on local, regional, and even international partnerships, can serve as a model for the conservation of other critically important ecosystems, including grasslands and forest ecosystems that can contribute directly and significantly to carbon sequestration and storage efforts. Further, the value of last year’s investment in NAWCA will continue to be realized as changing weather patterns cause our continent’s wetland ecosystems to become all the more important for waterfowl breeding habitat, water quality, flood mitigation, soil health, and several other ecosystem functions that benefit people, fish, and wildlife.

Similarly, the impacts of a changing climate on both terrestrial and aquatic species heightens the importance of investments in habitat connectivity to address the challenges associated with fragmentation. Within terrestrial communities, particularly those in mountainous regions, increasing temperatures are forcing species to move to higher altitudes and latitudes. Without opportunities for these species to migrate to areas that better suit their needs, such as those recommended for inclusion in the pending infrastructure package, it is only a matter of time before they can no longer move up the mountain. The challenges in aquatic, particularly marine, ecosystems are much the same. Increasing water temperature, rising sea levels and the loss of coastal habitat, and hypoxic zones combine into a myriad of conservation challenges that threaten ecologically, culturally, and economically important fisheries and marine communities. Fortunately, many of the programs and partnerships mentioned herein can assist as conservationists seek to mitigate these threats.

Summary:

In summary, CSF thanks the Committee for holding a hearing on this important issue and for the opportunity to testify. As the nation's original conservationists, sportsmen and women are acutely aware and concerned about declining biodiversity. Increasing efforts to address biodiversity loss is not only beneficial for fish, wildlife, and plants, but it is also good for the American economy, especially for rural communities that have been particularly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. CSF encourages the continued support of existing programs as well as support for new programs such as the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. Thank you.