

# South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

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Robert H. Boyles, Jr.

**Director**

Emily C. Cope

Deputy Director for

**Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries**

## **Testimony on S 2194, Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2021**

Emily C. Cope – Deputy Director, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address your committee in support of S. 2194 –the Coastal Habitat Conservation Act. For the record, my name is Emily Cope, and I am a Deputy Director for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

First, I want to thank my Senator Lindsey Graham for co-sponsoring this legislation with Senator Cardin. The support and dedication that both of you have shown to this country's natural resources has resulted in wide-sweeping impacts and is greatly appreciated.

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources is supportive of your efforts to authorize the Secretary of the Interior and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to work with willing partners to further the purpose and implementation of the Coastal Program. Habitat loss due to development pressure, natural disasters, and climate change continues to threaten our coastal ecosystems and communities. This in turn jeopardizes the health of our fish and wildlife species as well as local economies.

South Carolina, along with many other coastal states, has implemented numerous habitat enhancement, research, and survey projects utilizing Coastal Program funding. Specifically in South Carolina, we have focused on threatened and endangered species as well as species of concern including black rail, loggerhead sea turtles, shorebirds, and waterbirds. These projects simply would not have been possible without Coastal Program funding.

In addition, because the Coastal Program implements the National Coastal Wetland Conservation program I want to more specifically elaborate on those efforts. On the land acquisition side, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) has secured over \$9.5 million of funding through the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Program and protected 52,320 acres on 11 different properties. These areas are not only managed by the SCDNR to enhance coastal resources but are also open for public recreation opportunities. This \$9.5 million investment was leveraged by approximately \$77.8 million in other state, private, and federal funds as well as in-kind contributions. These projects involved numerous partners including but not limited to Ducks Unlimited, local land trusts, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US Forest Service (USFS), and other US Fish and Wildlife Service programs.

Most recently, South Carolina has also utilized an additional \$2 million of funding from the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Program to restore and enhance the hydrological function of 3,578 acres of managed wetlands on two SCDNR properties. This funding was leveraged with approximately \$1 million of state funding. Ducks Unlimited has been a significant partner in these two projects and has provided numerous hours of project oversight, engineering and design, and technical expertise. Key

activities included the addition of water control structures and the restoration of canals, embankments, and berms on these historically and ecologically important wetlands.

Through these acquisition and restoration efforts, we have protected and enhanced critical wetland habitat for not only migrating waterfowl but also other wetland-dependent bird species, herpetofauna, and native plants of which many are species of concern and are priorities for conservation efforts. In addition, these areas provide valuable ecological filtering services from landscape runoff, namely pollutants and silt, which would have entered our rivers, estuaries, and ocean thereby decreasing water quality. These impoundments also buffer the mainland from storm surges and exceptionally high tides which are becoming more common each year.

I hope these examples help to give you a clear picture of not only the direct impacts of the Coastal Program but also the volume of leverage and partnerships generated by such. South Carolina is known for the beauty and quality of its coastal resources. These resources provide our citizens a sense of place, support our local communities, enhance the quality of life for our residents and are a key reason that people from across the United States come to visit our state. By solidifying the future of the Coastal Program, we can ensure that South Carolina continues to set the bar high for coastal resource conservation. Again, on behalf of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, I sincerely want to thank you for your support of this program and your commitment to ensuring its future with this important legislation.