The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

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Statement of Robyn Miller
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Committee on Environment and Public Works
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of The Nature Conservancy I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on collaborative solutions for wildlife and habitat management.

I am Robyn Miller, Conservation Manager for The Nature Conservancy in North Idaho. My comments today will draw from my experience serving on the Steering Committee for the Clearwater Basin Collaborative, which has brought together community, timber industry and conservation leaders. Our shared goal is to conserve and restore the ecological and economic health of a four million-acre watershed in north central Idaho. Senator Crapo has played a key role in convening and fostering this dialogue.

My testimony will focus on three areas:

- Examples of our experience participating in collaborative partnerships for wildlife conservation in Idaho and Montana;
- Critical elements of successful local wildlife conservation partnerships; and
- Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) that support local collaborative efforts, such as Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, with examples of projects in Maine, Maryland, Vermont and Washington.

The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is an international, nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of biological diversity. Our mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Our on-the-ground conservation work is carried out in all fifty states and in 35 other countries and is supported by approximately one million individual members. Our conservation work is guided by science.

The Value of Local Solutions for Wildlife Conservation

The Nature Conservancy's experience conducting biological surveys across the continental United States has documented the overlap between rural landscapes where people live and work and priority areas important to wildlife. Even in a state like Idaho, which has large tracts of public lands, private working lands—ranches, farms and forests—offer disproportionate value for wildlife.

In these landscapes the fate of wildlife and the fate of rural families and communities are intertwined. Successful wildlife conservation on private working lands depends on our ability to accomplish two critical objectives. First, lands that currently support key wildlife populations should remain in ranching, farming and forestry uses and not be converted to other uses that leave little room for wildlife. Second, we need to provide incentives to landowners willing to implement land management practices that meet the needs of wildlife. This may be as simple as building wildlife friendly fences that do not cut off animal migration corridors or as complex as prescribed burning in landscapes that are adapted to natural fire. In other words, effective conservation must find ways to address the needs of both the human and natural communities. Collaborative processes accomplish just that.

Examples of Collaborative Partnerships for Wildlife and Habitat Management

<u>Clearwater Basin Collaborative, Idaho</u>

The Clearwater River in north central Idaho flows west from the Bitterroot Mountains along the Idaho-Montana border, and joins the Snake River at Lewiston, Idaho. The Clearwater Basin is one of the most biologically rich and diverse drainages in the Columbia Basin supporting more than 19 native species of fish and 340 terrestrial wildlife species.

In October 1805, the Lewis and Clark Expedition descended the Clearwater River in dugout canoes, putting in at "Canoe Camp," five miles downstream from Orofino, Idaho. Today, the same rugged mountains and rivers that Lewis and Clark witnessed continue to support diverse native wildlife, world-class fisheries, and the local economies. However, management of this habitat has long been contentious among government agencies, conservation groups, timber companies, and local communities creating an environment where few interests feel they are achieving their goals. This divisive and litigious atmosphere is putting the health and viability of both our communities and forests at risk.

In 2008, Senator Mike Crapo (ID) convened the local Clearwater Basin Collaborative (CBC) to address the wildlife and natural resource needs of this spectacular landscape. For the past eighteen months, nearly 25 individuals representing local government, the Nez Perce Tribe, timber industry, recreation, conservation organizations, and economic development have come together looking for broad-based solutions that preserve the rural economies, and restore healthy forest ecosystems for fish and wildlife.

While the Clearwater Basin Collaborative aims to address a broad range of interests, the long term viability of the Basin's fish and wildlife are central to its vision. For example, the legendary elk herds of the Clearwater Basin have been in steep decline over the past two decades. All members of the CBC agree that using tools such as prescribed fire and timber management to protect and restore elk habitat are vitally important to the future of this culturally important species. Likewise, the salmon, steelhead, and native trout of the Clearwater Basin hold great value for the Nez Perce Tribe and all the communities in the Basin.

Within the next year, the Clearwater Basin Collaborative will come forward with a blueprint that will seek to sustain the local timber industry, protect intact forests, and implement landscape-scale restoration activities to enhance fish and wildlife habitat.

Owyhee Initiative, Idaho

Owyhee County covers five million acres in the corner of southwestern Idaho and is one of the largest intact expanses of sagebrush habitat remaining in the United States. Home to the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes and generations of ranching families, it sustains important populations of sage grouse, redband trout, bighorn sheep, mountain lions and mule deer. Owyhee County has also been at the center of increasingly sharp conflicts over wildlife habitat, public lands grazing, and motorized recreation.

In 2001, the Owyhee County Commission had the courage and vision to break this pattern of conflict and litigation. The County convened a group of ranchers, Tribal leaders, recreationists and conservationists with the ambitious goal of developing a plan to sustain "a flourishing community of human, plant and animal life." Senator Crapo has advised and championed the Owyhee Initiative from its outset and continues to play a key role as we move toward implementing that vision.

The Owyhee Initiative achieved a remarkable victory in March, 2009 with the passage of the Owyhee Public Land Management Subtitle of the federal Omnibus Lands Act. The Act created Idaho's first wilderness and wild and scenic river in nearly thirty years. Just as significant, the Act establishes innovative approaches for managing off-road vehicles, protecting cultural resources important to the Tribes, and providing greater science capacity to inform land management decisions. These outcomes would not have been possible without a collaborative approach.

The benefits of collaboration extend well beyond shaping federal land legislation. The relationships formed through the collaborative have led us to work together for on-the-ground actions to help wildlife in Owyhee County. The Nature Conservancy, Owyhee County and local landowners have used funding provided through the USFWS and the Idaho Office of Species Conservation to complete sage grouse habitat enhancement projects. We are also cooperating on controlling the expansion of juniper and the spread of invasive weeds – two key threats to sage grouse in Owyhee County.

Blackfoot Challenge, Montana

The Blackfoot Valley is a 1.5 million acre watershed in western Montana. The Blackfoot River is a 132 mile long free-flowing, clear and cold river that provides crucial habitat for native trout. The Blackfoot Valley is at the southern end of the “Crown of the Continent” – one of the wildest, most diverse and intact ecosystems of the world – found at the narrow waist of the Rocky Mountains where Alberta, British Columbia, and Montana meet. In the early 1890s, conservationist and Glacier National Park advocate George Bird Grinnell dubbed this transboundary region the "Crown of the Continent," highlighting the region's geographical importance as the headwaters of the continent, spilling cold, clean waters to the Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, and Hudson Bay.

The Blackfoot Valley provides important habitat for grizzly bears, wolves, Canada lynx, wolverines, and a myriad of other species found in the high density of prairie pothole wetland complexes which support a number of rare and endemic wetland dependent plant species. The Blackfoot Valley provides crucial wildlife connectivity to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Bitterroot, Salmon, Selway Wilderness Complex. The Crown of the Continent and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem are among the few intact ecosystems in the lower 48 United States. To illustrate this point in the Blackfoot, Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition would be able to encounter today all the species and communities that were present on his journey east through the Blackfoot Valley in 1806.

Conservation efforts in the Blackfoot Valley are successful because of the longstanding tradition of collaboration among landowners, public land management agencies, conservation organizations, businesses and other stakeholders. The Blackfoot Challenge is a landowner-based group that coordinates management of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. It is organized locally and known nationally as a model for preserving the rural character and natural beauty of a watershed. Although its charter dates to 1993, Blackfoot landowners have played an instrumental stewardship role since the late 1970s—bringing conservation easement legislation, walk-in hunting areas and recreation corridor management to Montana. USFWS work in the Blackfoot Valley, under the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, was an important catalyst and cost-share partner for improving fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. Today, the Blackfoot Challenge partnership has grown to more than 100 private landowners and representatives from 27 state, federal and non-governmental organizations -- including TNC as a founding member. Educational workshops and tours throughout the year to encourage local involvement and ownership in resolving resource problems in the watershed.

Since its founding in 1993, the Blackfoot Challenge has worked to protect 89,000 acres of private lands under conservation easements, restored 38 miles of streams and 62 miles of riparian habitat on 39 tributaries of the Blackfoot, improved the conditions of 2,600 acres of wetlands and 2,300 acres of native grasslands, and removed barriers to fish passage on 460 miles of streams.

All of this was accomplished through a diverse, community-based partnership.

Elements of Successful Wildlife Conservation Partnerships

Each of these conservation stories share common elements which are key to their success:

- Local people with strong ties to the land who have looked beyond their differences to gain trust, share ideas, listen and develop the best possible outcomes.
- Members of a collaborative process commit to common goals. This requires difficult compromise. This effort is worthwhile because the end result will reflect better outcomes than any one group or individual could accomplish on their own.
- For collaboration to be effective, it must reflect improved management of natural resources and on-the-ground conservation. Sound collaboration finds practical solutions that reflect local conditions as well as governing law.
- Collaboration is rightly thought to be of a <u>place</u> – where people developing resource solutions live and work. The collective knowledge represented in a collaborative covers ranching and forestry, community needs, conservation biology and recreation, where migratory birds congregate and where hunters access forests, what ranchers need for their cattle and what forest companies need to stay viable.

Collaboration is frequently humbling. Often, organizations and individuals focus on one specific set of issues. Despite the best of intentions, a conservation organization may not be aware of the economic and social concerns of communities that depend on forest harvest. The industry may not know about stream conditions needed to protect a fish population. The collaborative process helps the participants move beyond their own parochial views and truly comprehend the perspectives and knowledge of partners who share the landscape. The result can, and should, be conservation that takes a broad view, that sees humans as an integral part of the landscape, and that provides more widely accepted and hence stronger protection for fish and wildlife.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Programs that Support Collaboration

Local representatives of the USFWS are key members of many wildlife collaborative efforts throughout the nation. Congress has provided the Service with a range of tools and programs that can foster local collaborative solutions for wildlife habitat protection. We would like to highlight two programs of the USFWS that we believe provide key assistance to partnerships: Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program.

<u>Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program</u> (16 U.S.C. 3741)

Since 1987, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program has exemplified cooperative conservation as an innovative, voluntary partnership program that helps private landowners restore wetland and other important fish and wildlife habitat with financial and technical assistance. The

program is non-regulatory, voluntary, citizen and community-based stewardship efforts for fish and wildlife conservation. It is based on the premise that fish and wildlife conservation is a responsibility shared by citizens and government.

Example - Delmarva Bay, Maryland:

The Nature Conservancy in Maryland has a significant wetland restoration partnership that includes the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The Nontidal Wetlands & Waterways Division of the Maryland Department of the Environment is also providing significant funding and support. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service provide project design and oversight services. The Natural Resources Conservation Service also provided funding through a Wetland Reserve Program easement.

The Nature Conservancy has restored more than two dozen seasonal wetlands and one large "Delmarva bay" on 330 acres of former farm fields in Caroline County at our Jackson Lane Preserve. Researchers have documented more than 50 species of dragonflies and damselflies on the site, more than 70 bird species and almost 30 species of amphibians and reptiles.

The Jackson Lane Preserve is a 300-acre forested natural area that protects almost a dozen "Delmarva bays," seasonally flooded depressional wetlands also known as coastal plain ponds. Once found in abundance across a large area of the Central Delmarva Peninsula, Delmarva bays are thought to have originated as wind-blown features at the end of the last ice age. The hydrology and chemistry of Delmarva bays is intricately and dynamically linked to local groundwater systems.

Example - Lake Champlain and Connecticut River Valley, Vermont:

The Nature Conservancy in Vermont is working to protect and restore critical waterways in the Lake Champlain and Connecticut River valleys in part through collaboration that focuses on restoring river banks on agricultural land. Farmers benefit from grants for developing alternative watering systems for livestock, fencing cattle out of streams, planting trees to stabilize the banks, and improve stream crossings. This, in turn, enhances riparian and in-stream habitat, helps to lower stream temperatures for aquatic species, improves water quality (which is a particularly high priority in the Lake Champlain basin), and reduces the threat from exotic invasive plant species such as Japanese knotweed that disrupt the delicate balance of life. Japanese knotweed, one of the worst river bank invaders in Vermont, is shunned by native insect life and ignored by deer and beaver. Even its root system fails to anchor the soil of the river bank. Fish and turtles who search for insects in its silent shade leave hungry, and during each successive rainstorm nutrient rich soil from the floodplain is washed away downstream.

Funding contributions for these restoration efforts, facilitated by the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, include The Nature Conservancy, the Lake Champlain Basin Program, the

Lake Champlain Committee, the State of Vermont, US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and local watershed groups.

National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program (The Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection and Restoration Act of 1990 (16 U.S.C. 3951-3956 (Supp. 1991)

The goal of the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program is to conserve important coastal wetland ecosystems nationwide. This competitive grant program provides support to collaborative partnerships focused on the acquisition, restoration, and enhancement of coastal wetland habitats in order to maintain water quality and protect valuable fish and wildlife habitat. Coastal States which border the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico, Pacific and Great Lakes are eligible. The only exception is the State of Louisiana, which has its own coastal wetlands program under the Act. States receiving funds include California, Florida, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Example - Puget Sound, Washington:

A recent grant in Washington State to Whatcom County and The Nature Conservancy exemplifies national benefits from a local project. The Nature Conservancy and Whatcom County will purchase a 146 acre parcel that includes 4,200 feet of natural shoreline and 94 acres of wetlands. An adjacent 130-acre parcel was recently purchased by the County and Whatcom Land Trust and provides match for the grant requirement. The two properties together will create a new County pedestrian-oriented park and natural area rivaling the best existing shoreline parks in all of Puget Sound at Lily Point -- situated on the southeast corner of Point Roberts, Washington and bordered by Canada to the north. Lily Point's strategic location, its relatively large and undeveloped natural shoreline, and its combination of mature Pacific Northwest maritime forests, riparian vegetation, eroding cliffs and ecologically rich tidelands give this project regional and international significance. The Fraser River Delta, of which it is a part, is one of the most important migratory shorebird and waterfowl areas on the West Coast of North America. Archaeologists date the earliest human occupation of this area at 9,000 years ago. A Spanish explorer reported “an incredible quantity of rich salmon and numerous Indians” at Lily Point in 1791. This site was added to the National Register of Historical Places in 1994 as a site of National Cultural, Traditional and Spiritual Significance.

Example - Kennebec Estuary and Gulf of Maine:

Many who live on the shores of the Gulf of Maine appreciate its biological wealth and bounty. Coastal watersheds like the Gulf of Maine provide concentrated habitat for endangered species, waterbirds, and diadromous fish -- and it's in coastal watersheds that increasing human population and development pressures continue to intensify. Habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation, wetland and associated upland loss, overharvesting, oil spills, pollution and other cumulative effects of development threaten the natural resource values of the Gulf of Maine watershed. Cold oxygen-laden waters subject to constant movement, mixing and upwelling

create a nutrient-laden Gulf of Maine marine environment -- historically, one of the world's most productive continental shelf communities. Coastal wetlands also purify water and help provide a defense against rising sea levels.

The Kennebec Estuary in Maine is an excellent example of how large partnerships effectively integrate USFWS partner grants for habitat restoration. The Kennebec Estuary (mid-coast Maine), is one of the largest freshwater tidal estuaries on the East Coast north of the Chesapeake Bay and is comprised of Merrymeeting Bay and the Lower Kennebec River. The project area harbors one of the nation's largest intact systems of saltwater, freshwater, and brackish tidal marshes and provides critical breeding, migrating and wintering habitat for several endangered and threatened species, shorebirds, waterfowl, wading birds, and diadromous fish.

In 2008, the Maine Wetlands Protection Coalition submitted a successful $1 million Large North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant to permanently protect wetland and upland buffer habitat in the Kennebec Estuary. The USFWS Gulf of Maine Coastal Program plays an active role in the Maine Wetlands Protection Coalition, participating in strategic decisions, identifying high value wildlife habitat for protection through GIS habitat analyses, and maintaining a database to track the progress of land protection. Gulf of Maine Coastal Program also wrote the biological components of the grant proposal, edited the financial components of the proposal, and created the habitat maps that accompanied the proposal. The proposal complemented previous land protection initiatives in the Merrymeeting Bay and Lower Kennebec region (including five previous NAWCA grants, three Coastal Wetland Grants and a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant) to expand and link existing conservation lands. The federal grant was matched with $3,215,000 from private partners (like The Nature Conservancy) and as a result over 2,000 acres are being protected. Just last month, the partnership was also awarded a new Coastal Wetlands grant.

Conclusion

America’s wildlife and their habitats face unprecedented threats from forces as diverse as invasive species, climate change, and habitat fragmentation. The scope of these threats calls upon federal wildlife managers to develop new solutions that are equal to the challenge.

The Nature Conservancy believes that collaborative approaches that harness the energies of local partners can play an important role in these solutions. True collaboration is not easy or quick. But, the examples discussed above demonstrate that collaboration is essential in developing strategies that are adapted to local conditions, gain broad community support, and ultimately produce more sustainable and effective outcomes for our fish and wildlife.