

Below is the opening statement of Senator Pete Ricketts (R-Neb.) as delivered.

"I first want to recognize that Nebraska is currently experiencing wildfires that are the largest that we've had since statehood. The fires have impacted more than 750,000 acres of land in my state, and that roughly equivalates to [...] one percent, approaching two percent of our total state land area.

"I want to extend my gratitude and the appreciation of the entire state for our brave first responders. We have firefighters from across Nebraska. We have federal firefighters. We have the National Guard. We have neighbors from Iowa who are helping out. I appreciate everyone who is helping out with trying to control this fire.

"I certainly want to pray for all those who are impacted by these terrible wildfires. And we will continue to ensure that these impacted communities know that we are there to support them and get them resources to be able to help them recover.

"As wildfires spread throughout the U.S., rebuilding communities is a big part of the aftermath. I am concerned that the Endangered Species Act, as well as other environmental laws, can hinder the recovery after a natural disaster.

"The Endangered Species Act, enacted in 1973, was written to conserve, protect, and ultimately recover endangered species. However, after more than 50 years, the actual recovery metrics for species raises concerns about whether the law is achieving its goal.

"Since the ESA was enacted, 57 of the more than 1,700 listed species have been delisted. That means roughly three percent of the species ever listed as endangered or threatened have recovered. And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reported that only four percent of the listed species are improving. A three or four percent success rate does not sound very good to me.

"The agency projected 300 species to recover by now, yet only 57 have met that benchmark. These numbers are concerning and raise concerns about whether the ESA is effectively delivering to recover species.

"The ultimate goal of the law is to recover species to the point that federal protections are no longer needed. Yet the available data suggests the current framework is not consistently achieving that outcome. In many cases, the process has also created uncertainty that can delay or complicate infrastructure projects without creating significant recovery outcomes.

"In Nebraska, the listed species that we focus on include the pallid sturgeon, whooping crane, piping plover, the least tern, and the American burying beetle. Detecting, protecting, and recovering these species requires state-led conservation efforts, and Nebraska is a great example of successfully implementing programs to do so.

"When I was Governor of Nebraska, I led the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. This program is considered a major success story for its collaborative basin-wide effort between Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming, and the Department of Interior to recover listed species in the river. It has successfully increased species populations, particularly the whooping crane, to historically high levels. However, this species still has not recovered.

"Overall, Nebraska's experience shows that conservation goals are most successful when implementation is collaborative, science-based, transparent, and predictable for all stakeholders involved. While all states represented on this

Committee may have some local success stories, there is lots of work that needs to be done to improve the implementation of the ESA.

"First, the focus should remain on recovery. The purpose of the ESA is not simply to list species, but to recover them to the point where federal protections are no longer needed.

"Efforts have been made to improve clarity in ESA implementation. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during this Administration took steps to provide additional regulatory clarity by rescinding the blanket rule and providing clearer definitions of habitat.

"Another critical issue is transparency and accountability from the Fish & Wildlife Service. In Nebraska, state agencies collect data that is used alongside federal information to inform listing and recovery decisions. State experts often have the 'boots on the ground' and a direct understanding of local species and habitats.

"Improving coordination, communication, and transparency among federal agencies, states, and other stakeholders should be a central part of ESA's implementation moving forward. Programs like the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program demonstrate that collaborative conservation can work, but similar models have not been consistently applied elsewhere.

"Ultimately, the ESA has not consistently achieved its intended goal of recovering species and removing them from federal protection. And Congress needs to be at the forefront of these discussions and improve the law that has created more regulatory uncertainty than tangible success.

"I look forward to a discussion with our witnesses on the Endangered Species Act and what opportunities, challenges, and policy recommendations are needed to better support species recovery."

# # #