Prepared Statement of Sam D. Hamilton
Nominee to be
Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Introduction

Thank you, Madam Chair, Senator Inhofe, and members of the Committee. I am honored to be with you today as President Barack Obama's nominee for Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

With your indulgence, I would like to begin with a short, personal introduction that helps to explain how it is that I came to be here today.

Personal Background

I grew up in Starkville, Mississippi. My father was from a small Mississippi Delta town, and my mother, from a small town in north Alabama. They met and were married in Miami, Florida, during World War II as my father was recuperating from combat injuries sustained as a P-47 fighter pilot in Europe. My mother was a Red Cross nurse at the time.

After serving in the Air Force command during the Korean War and later moving around the country on active Air Force duty, my father assumed command of the Air Force ROTC program at Mississippi State University in 1960, and we settled in Starkville. It was there that he introduced me to the outdoors. At the age of five, I can recall catching my first fish with him on Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge just a few miles south of my hometown. A decade later, at the age of 15, I took the first step in a conservation career as a Youth Conservation Corps employee at the Refuge. I learned to band wood ducks and Canada geese, to build waterfowl pens, and to understand the importance of managing wildlife habitat. I have visited that Refuge and many others across the country since that time, and I have come to appreciate that they represent the finest collection of public lands and waters dedicated to fish and wildlife conservation in the world.

After high school, I attended Mississippi State University, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in biology. Later, while in graduate school studying fisheries, two events occurred that significantly and positively impacted my life for the long-term. The first was that I met and married Becky Arthur of Jackson, Mississippi. We have two wonderful sons together and now, a grandson, who serves as constant reminder to me of why conserving our nation's natural heritage is so vitally important.

Track Record and Experience

The second event was that I was hired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a Young Adult Conservation Corps employee in an Ecological Services field office. There, I hit the ground running as the lead for Service wetland activities along the Alabama and Mississippi coasts. After a decade of on-the-ground wildlife conservation work in three Service field offices, I transferred to Washington, D.C. I served on staff in the Fish and Wildlife Service's headquarters office, on extended details to the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee and the

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and as a special assistant in the Director's office. I was later selected to be the Fish and Wildlife Service's first state administrator in Austin, Texas to work with state and local governments and private landowners on statewide conservation issues. For the past 12 years, I have served as the Fish and Wildlife Service's Regional Director for the Southeast Region, which encompasses 10 southeastern states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and an amazing diversity of wildlife species and habitats.

Over the course of my 30-year career with the Fish and Wildlife Service, I have had the privilege of helping to provide leadership in some of America's toughest and most significant conservation challenges. I have overseen the Service's efforts on large-scale ecosystem restoration projects: in the Florida Everglades, our nation's fabled "River of Grass," whose waters sustain the more than 5 million people and the many thousands of plant and animal species in South Florida; and in coastal Louisiana, where I have represented the Secretary of the Interior on a multi-partner task force to vigorously conserve some of our nation's most fragile and valuable wetlands that are being lost at a staggering rate of 24 square miles per year.

Through the years, I have had responsibility for working with communities to find innovative solutions to a number of complex endangered species conservation efforts, such as the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan in Texas for eight Federally listed species; statewide conservation plans and private landowner "safe harbors" agreements throughout the Southeast for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker; and a formal stakeholder forum in Florida for resolving some of the most difficult challenges to recovery of the endangered West Indian manatee.

I have been a strong advocate for the National Wildlife Refuge System, supporting expansion of Refuges and additions of new Refuges as an essential step in maintaining America's wildlife and habitat diversity and abundance.

Through creation of the highly successful Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership, I have been a key contributor to the development of a National Fish Habitat Action Plan that will assess and address the state of the nation's fisheries and fish habitats through partnerships with Federal, State, and private entities. As you know, legislation related to this effort was introduced this summer in both houses of Congress.

I have assumed a leadership role in the partner-driven system of Joint Ventures to conserve migratory birds across the nation. I personally chair the Management Board of the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture, a private, State, and Federal partnership at work in 75 million acres that are of critical importance to both waterfowl and land birds in the Southeast.

As a member of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Directorate, I have worked hard to ensure that we maintain our scientific integrity and fulfill our responsibility to the American public by implementing cutting-edge approaches to strategically address the nation's most pressing conservation needs. In this regard, I recently have helped to develop the Fish and Wildlife Service's strategic plan for addressing the present and future impacts of a rapidly changing climate on the nation's fish and wildlife resources and their habitats. I have also provided leadership in implementing strategic landscape conservation as our operational paradigm to

ensure that we accomplish the right things, in the right places, at the right times based on sound science, good planning, monitoring of outcomes, and adaptive management.

As you well know, the Fish and Wildlife Service makes decisions every day that are important to America and the people. The actions we take to ensure the sustainability of our nation's fish and wildlife resources affect both public and private lands and impact the quality of life, the economic wellbeing, and the recreational and aesthetic enjoyment of our citizens. Our decisions and actions have both immediate and long-term implications: As public servants entrusted by the American people with stewardship responsibilities for America's wildlife resources, we act on behalf of both present and future generations.

Philosophy and Priorities

This brings me to the matter of my conservation philosophy and my priorities, something you have the right to know as you consider my nomination. If I were to share with you the most important thing I have learned about natural resource conservation in the course of my Fish and Wildlife Service career, it would be this: No single entity, whether Federal, State, or private, can ensure the sustainability of our nation's fish and wildlife resources working independently. The conservation challenges of the 21st century can only be successfully addressed through collaboration among stakeholders, government and nongovernment, public and private. I have spent a career building collaborative partnerships that allow for the development of ideas and the creation of solutions that are beyond what any one entity, working on its own, could have achieved, or in some cases, even envisioned. I have been particularly conscientious in recognizing the essential role played by States in creating any comprehensive and successful conservation initiative.

This conservation philosophy does not in any way relieve the Fish and Wildlife Service of its national leadership role in fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation. Rather, it calls forth in us a leadership approach that inspires trust with stakeholders and gets outcomes that benefit both wildlife and people and are, thus, sustainable over time. With your support, under my leadership the Service will continue to pursue collaborative public/private partnerships that create both innovative approaches and incentives for conservation of species and habitats.

I also believe that our conservation work must be driven by sound science; and that the activities we undertake for species on the ground at individual project sites must strategically support achievement of our conservation goals at broader scales, such as landscapes, major eco-regions, or entire species' ranges. This science-driven, strategic, big-picture approach implies partnership and is particularly important because it takes into account the dimensions of the threats that now exist to the sustainability of our fish and wildlife resources. Among these threats are habitat fragmentation and, concomitantly, genetic isolation of wildlife populations and species; the spread of invasive species; the increasing demands on limited water supplies; unnatural wildfires; and the illegal trade in wildlife. All of these stressors impact biodiversity and pose tremendous challenges to sustaining healthy, vibrant ecosystems, particularly in regard to those species already recognized as endangered, threatened, or imperiled.

Added to these stressors is the overarching threat posed by climate change, which is already impacting wildlife and their supporting habitats across the nation. Climate change is the trans-

formational conservation challenge of our time, not only because of its direct effects, but also because of its influence on all the others stressors of our wildlife resources. Climate change is acting as the proverbial "fuel to the fire," accelerating the expansion of invasive species; rising sea levels along our 166 coastal refuges; altered hydrology in rivers and wetlands; and myriad observed changes to our fragile Arctic ecosystems, including diminished sea ice, coastal erosion, shrinking glaciers, and thawing permafrost. I believe the Service has an important role to play in supporting this Administration's efforts to address climate change. It is not an exaggeration to say, "As wildlife goes, so goes the nation."

Our challenge as a Service will be to translate climate change projections into reliable predictions of how wildlife populations and habitats will change in response. In applying our strategic approach to landscape conservation, the Service has embraced an adaptive resource management framework composed of biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, decision-based monitoring, and assumption-driven research, which together help to reduce uncertainties and allow for changes in direction as new information is gathered. We have already used this framework and a partnership approach in the Lower Mississippi Valley to strategically restore more than 80,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forests, much of it on National Wildlife Refuge System lands. This effort will sequester an estimated 33 million metric tons of carbon out of the atmosphere over the next 10 years. Sequestering carbon in vegetation, such as bottomland hardwood forests, restores or improves habitat and directly benefits fish and wildlife.

The success of this effort to mitigate the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and the need to help wildlife adapt to changing conditions wrought by climate change serve to highlight the importance of our National Wildlife Refuge System to the nation's environmental health. Created in 1903, the Refuge System is the world's most extensive network of public lands devoted to the conservation of wildlife habitat and wildlife species. Spanning almost 150 million acres, the 548 national wildlife refuges and 37 wetland management districts that comprise the Refuge System are home to some 700 species of birds, 220 mammals, and 280 threatened or endangered species. With your support, the Service must refocus its attention on strategically conserving the highest priority lands that provide connectivity for wildlife across the American landscape. We must use all of the available tools, including land acquisition, conservation easements, and partnership agreements, to ensure that wildlife will have a place to adapt in a climate-changed environment. If I am confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Salazar, in close collaboration with the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, to strengthen the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Right alongside that in importance is the need to address a continuing and alarming downward trend in our nation's fish species resulting from loss in the amount and quality of freshwater, estuarine, and marine habitats. America's fisheries have sustained our people since our earliest history; and today, a multi-billion-dollar industry in commercial and recreational fishing helps to support our economy. I am gratified that the U.S. Congress has introduced the National Fish Habitat Conservation Act as a means for directing new and existing resources toward the nation's fish and aquatic communities. The Act supports voluntary partnerships that I believe, based on my past experience with the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership, will have the capacity to successfully foster fish habitat conservation and provide benefits to the American people.

As vital as partnerships are, the 93rd Congress very wisely determined 36 years ago that not everything that needs doing to conserve America's wildlife will be accomplished voluntarily, at least not in the short run. In 1973, Congress passed by nearly unanimous vote the Endangered Species Act to protect those species in danger of extinction or threatening to become endangered. As you know, the Fish and Wildlife Service is, in large measure, the agency entrusted with administering the Act. I believe that as a country, we can take great pride in the fact that this visionary and far-reaching piece of legislation has been a success story and has unquestionably prevented the loss of species, such as the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon; and is helping us with the recovery of hundreds of others, such as the West Indian manatee and the Florida panther.

Many of the species the Act protects are not so charismatic and cuddly—the endangered fat pocketbook mussel of the Upper Mississippi River Basin, for example, is a creature best described by its name. When one considers, however, that an estimated 43 percent of our 300 species of freshwater mussels in North America are in danger of extinction and that these animals are sentinels of what is happening to our freshwater habitats, an underlying reason that the Act is important becomes clear: It causes us to look not only at the plight of the imperiled species themselves but also at the underlying stressors that are leading to endangerment. These stressors have implications for species further up the food chain, including us humans.

Through the years, the Endangered Species Act has had its detractors, and I believe the Service has responded in highly creative ways to remedy legitimate criticisms, with such initiatives as our "Safe Harbors" program that provides protections to landowners who agree to voluntarily protect species on their lands. In keeping with my broader conservation philosophy, if I am confirmed I will continue to put great emphasis on the Act's partner-oriented programs and activities, such as Partners for Wildlife, the Coastal Program, consultation with Federal agencies, technical assistance to landowners, habitat conservation planning, and the Section 6 grants program. Over the long-term, I am convinced the best conservation results will be achieved by using the carrot as well as the stick.

Concerning migratory birds, I believe we should continue to strongly support and to expand our Joint Ventures and other partnership conservation initiatives. We now have incontrovertible evidence that many species of America's birds are in serious trouble, but that efforts to conserve them can produce significant results. This is documented in the recently released *"The State of the Birds, United States of America 2009,"* a report based on 40 years of data analyzed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, state government wildlife agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. The report states that while the United States is home to more than 800 species of native birds inhabiting terrestrial, coastal, and ocean habitats, nearly one-third of these species are Federally listed as endangered or threatened or are species of conservation concern. Hawaiian birds and ocean birds are most at risk, and bird populations in grassland and arid-land habitats show the most rapid decline over the past four decades. In contrast to this, populations of wetland species, wintering coastal birds, and hunted waterfowl have increased over the past 40 years, with 39 species of hunted waterfowl increasing their numbers by more than 100 percent. These improvements are directly attributable to our strong focus on wetlands conservation and management during this period, particularly the overwhelming success of a continental waterfowl management plan that involved the restoration

and management of more than 30 million acres of wetlands by the United States, Canada and Mexico. This has program has taught us that bird populations show amazing resilience and ability to recover when the health of their habitat is sustained or restored.

Contributing to these conservation successes is the Service's Law Enforcement program, whose efforts I am committed to strengthening. Our Office of Law Enforcement investigates wildlife crimes, helps Americans understand and obey wildlife protections laws, works in partnership with international, State, and Tribal counterparts to conserve wildlife resources, and regulates wildlife trade. I am particularly concerned with bolstering those activities aimed at combating the illegal import/export trade in our nation's, and the world's, rarest wildlife species. The Office's wildlife inspectors are the nation's front-line defense against the illegal wildlife trade, a criminal enterprise that threatens species worldwide. These professionals are stationed at our major international airports, ocean ports, and border crossings to monitor an annual trade worth more than $1 billion. They stop illegal shipments, intercept smuggled wildlife and wildlife products, and help the United States fulfill its commitment to global wildlife conservation.

In terms of those programs that support our biological and wildlife management efforts, I believe that nothing ranks higher in importance than improving our information resources technology capability. In times of tight budgets and smaller staffs, technology is a key to enabling the Service to do more with less. The use of Geographic Information Systems, for example, is transforming the way in which our field personnel are capturing, analyzing, and managing habitat data; they are able to do in hours what otherwise would have taken months to accomplish. Our investment in making this and other technological tools more widely available will have both immediate and long-term payoffs.

Conclusion

I know that while a Director's vision is important, what is equally important is the caliber of people available to execute that vision. The confidence with which I accept this nomination to be the next Director is based on my humble recognition that the true strength of the organization rests not in me and my leadership abilities but rather in the exceptional people who comprise the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. From the biologists to the office assistants, from the wildlife managers to the information technology specialists, Service employees are the most skilled, the most knowledgeable, and the most committed public servants any organization could hope for. I know this from 30 years of firsthand experience. Their passion to conserve, enhance, and protect the fish and wildlife resources of this nation inspires me every day, and it would be the greatest honor of my life to be their Director.

I am extraordinarily grateful that President Obama and Secretary Salazar have asked me to serve as Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service in this new Administration. If confirmed, I can assure you that I will take on this challenge with seriousness of purpose and total dedication to the task at hand. I will commit to working in a spirit of collaboration with you, State and Federal agencies, and all key stakeholders in pursuing what I know to be our mutual interests in securing the health and wellbeing of our nation's fish and wildlife resources and their habitats for the benefit of the American people.

I’m honored at the opportunity to stand before you to answer any questions you may have concerning my readiness and willingness to lead what I believe to be the finest organization of conservation professionals in the world.