**RECOMMENDATION**

**INCENTIVIZE WILDLIFE AND HABITAT CONSERVATION AND ENCOURAGE ACCESS FOR HUNTING ON AMERICA’S PRIVATE CROPLANDS, GRASSLANDS, WETLANDS, AND FORESTS**

1. Fully fund and implement conservation programs in the 2014 Farm Bill and encourage landowner participation in CRP, ACEP and other programs.

**THE ROLE OF PRIVATE LANDOWNERS.** Private lands support wildlife in many areas, as well as the croplands, grazing lands, and forests which comprise over 60 percent of the rural lands in the U.S. In the eastern half of the country, private lands comprise the majority of the wetland, grassland and forest habitats.

Landowners rightfully decide how to use their land either at their discretion or out of economic necessity. That is why the core of private land conservation policy focuses on incentives. Policies that promote healthy markets for sustainably managed crops, wood products, and livestock can also help sustain habitat. Along with regulatory programs, voluntary, incentive-based programs can provide important tools for habitat conservation on private lands. Cost-share programs can incentivize initial landowner enrollment and assist with program implementation costs. Incentive-based programs can also identify and target options for both voluntary acquisitions and permanent easements. These are important “tools in the toolbox” of a comprehensive suite of habitat conservation programs and policies for private lands.

**Farm Bill Conservation Programs.** The Farm Bill provides the bulk of conservation incentives on agricultural lands. Most of these programs supply rental or easement payments, cost-share for restoration or enhancement, or technical assistance to landowners to promote habitat management for fish and wildlife. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has been recognized for 30 years as one of USDA’s most successful conservation programs, benefiting farmers and ranchers, wildlife and the environment by providing wildlife habitat, land-based income, and opportunities for access by hunters. The CRP should be enhanced to ensure that vegetation planted and managed on it provides wildlife habitat values as well as soil erosion, water quality and carbon sequestration benefits. Since 2008, the Voluntary Public Access - Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP) has opened 3 million acres of private land to public hunting and improved wildlife habitat quality on lands enrolled in public access programs.

Easement programs, such as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) which includes the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE) and the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE), especially the Grassland of Special Significance, and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), provide significant benefits to both wetland and upland wildlife, including federal trust species. We support efforts to fully fund

**PRIVATE LANDS**

support wildlife in many areas, as well as the croplands, grazing lands, and forests which comprise over

**OVER 60%**

of the rural lands in the U.S.
2. Ensure that vegetation planted on CRP, and for other conservation programs, is beneficial to wildlife as well as for soil conservation, water quality and carbon sequestration.

3. Reauthorize the Farm Bill in 2018, sustaining incentive-based programs and policies for fish and wildlife conservation, including an increase to the VPA-HIP program funding which incentivizes access for hunting and fishing, on private lands.

4. Protect and enhance wetlands and streams while striving for no net loss of wetlands.

5. Initiate regional water management approaches utilizing state water planning efforts in order to appropriately manage water use for fish, wildlife, food security, cities and communities.

6. Increase and streamline quantity and functional quality mitigation banking to expand habitat conservation, improve water quality, and increase hunting and fishing access.

7. Incentivize private land forestry and grassland habitat conservation through cost-share programs and tax policies that will keep forest and grassland under active management.

These important programs, but strongly encourage that funding between ALE and WRE follow historic allocations of legacy programs. We support the flexibility provided at the state level to fund projects based on resource needs and prioritization through ranking. It is important that both ACEP and HFRP are maintained as a priority in future farm bills.

Working lands programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and others enable soil, water, and wildlife conservation to be integrated with agricultural production. Easement programs promote long-term stewardship. The Working Lands for Wildlife program is helping to restore declining species including sage grouse, lesser prairie chicken, and bobwhite quail while providing landowners who invest in conservation with regulatory certainty with respect to their activities. Other voluntary programs such as swampbuster, sodbuster, sodsaver, and conservation compliance encourage landowners to plan conservation of wetlands, native prairies and other habitats, and complement the incentive programs. We support efforts to fully fund these important conservation programs and ensure that they are maintained as priorities in future Farm Bills.

Other Conservation Assistance Programs. Clear, overarching wetland policies should achieve no net loss of wetlands and associated uplands while enhancing and protecting the nation's remaining wetlands and streams. Incentive and cost-share programs for wetlands restoration, management, and protection contained in the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), state grants, and Farm Bill programs are critical to sustained conservation in North America. In particular, NAWCA and state grants should be fully reauthorized and funded to improve habitat for wetland wildlife and ensure clean water and flood protection for people.

A comprehensive assessment of regional water supply issues that impact people, wildlife and agriculture should be a joint priority of state governments with the cooperation of the federal government. These efforts should provide additional protection for our nation's drinking water, food, and wildlife resources during drought. Mitigation banks that replace both the quantity and functional quality of lost habitat, and species conservation banks should be enlarged and streamlined to expand “no net loss” of habitat, with specific incentives for increased hunting and fishing access. The arduous bureaucracy associated with establishing mitigation banks should also be reduced.

The Use of Taxes as Incentives for Conservation. About 60 percent of forest land in the U.S. is in private ownership. These private forests, when actively managed, offer a multitude of public environmental benefits, from quality fish and wildlife habitat to carbon sequestration and improved water quality. It is important that we keep these private forest lands and grasslands in wildlife habitat and provide incentives to landowners who actively manage their lands for conservation. Congress should recognize the importance of existing tax policies and preserve tax code sections that conserve and protect public benefits of forests, grasslands, and other wildlife habitats. We welcome recent Congressional enactment giving permanent status to tax incentives for landowners who dedicate conservation easements on their property. Tax policies to recover listed threatened and endangered species should be developed.