THE NEED TO ENHANCE THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LANDS. All wildlife conservation is based on the premise that wildlife will thrive if vital habitat is available in sufficient quantity and quality. Most of the U.S. offers good prospects for habitat: Of our nearly 2.5 billion acres, about 75 percent is either held in trust by the federal government for conservation or lies outside metropolitan areas. The keys to quality habitat are the shared-use policies governing public land. The American people have access to the most extensive network of public lands in the world. Our national forests, national wildlife refuges, public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, and national parks provide vital habitat and outstanding recreational opportunities. These lands are essential to perpetuating hunting, angling, and other traditional outdoor activities. However, nearly one-third of the nation’s lands held in trust by federal agencies are facing serious problems. Controversies over how the lands should be used and managed have, ironically, hamstrung the agencies in their job of caring for the lands. Conflicting direction, either by organic acts or as a result of changes in Congress and the White House, and routine conflicts in the courts have paralyzed land management or reduced agencies to haphazard programs. Worsened by declining federal funding, federal ineffectiveness is leaving habitat quality unfulfilled and is polarizing recreation and development opportunities.

Sportsmen and sportswomen are committed to making this public land estate work for people and wildlife. We need it to sustain wildlife, provide access for hunting and other recreation, retain ecosystem services for our citizens, and allow careful, science-informed development that helps sustain the country’s economy. These were the original purposes for setting these lands aside and it is time that 21st Century conservationists write policies that work today just as our conservation leaders did beginning in the 1870s. We are heavily invested in sustaining the public lands. To revive the American conservation legacy of these lands, the U.S. must:

Renew the Focus of Federal Agencies on Results. Public land...
policy has gotten lost in the process. The important and necessary tasks of environmental analysis and public involvement have bogged down, precluding instead of supporting, conservation results on the ground. U.S. Forest Service budgets are largely consumed by the cost of fighting large fires, taking money away from conservation results on the ground. Recent improvements such as the Stewardship End-Results Contracting authority and the Good Neighbor Policy (both in use by the Forest Service) need to be extended to other agencies. Environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act should more often be used to clear categories of projects known to pose no significant harm through the use of Categorical Exclusions as promulgated in CEQ regulation and guidance. Environmental analysis should allow for reasonable short-term risks such as science-based timber harvesting that reduce long-term risks like catastrophic fires. To pay for fighting larger fires, proposals considered by the 114th Congress to utilize disaster funding accounts should be enacted, leaving agency funding in place for conservation projects.

Promote Collaboration over Conflict. The process of “collaboration” involves citizens working directly with each other on public land management plans and projects. The idea is taking hold in forest management and needs to be extended to projects involving recreation access and development. The 2009 Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and the 2014 Farm Bill both moved collaboration to a more influential role in land management. In 2015, the House passed the Resilient Federal Forests Act, and the Senate has introduced a variety of forest health bills which endorse a stronger role for collaboration. These concepts are applicable to all public land management. In the next four years, we must enact refined legal language that places collaborative agreements on par with lawsuits in determining the direction of public land conservation. This would be a good start in transferring public land management and wildlife conservation from the courts back to professional wildlife biologists and public land managers.

Examine Environmental Litigation. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to active and productive public land policy is litigation. What began as a truly American idea that citizens could use to exercise oversight in keeping agencies honest has become an outlet for private interest groups to use the courts to satisfy their agendas with respect to public land management. The result is routine environmental lawsuits seeking to stop legitimate agency decisions in order to achieve the litigant’s preferred opinion, usually by exploiting procedural technicalities, which agencies then try to remedy, further slowing progress. To remedy this problem, we support full disclosure of lawsuits, why they are filed, and the resulting reimbursement for costs as proposed in the 114th Congress as the Open Book on Equal Access to Justice Act. Disclosure of basic facts will reveal how much of this problem is agency error, litigants pushing a special interest, or flawed laws making lawsuits inevitable. Other bills in the 114th Congress have introduced the idea of binding arbitration, which should be explored so that no case goes to court that can be resolved by collaboration.