

TESTIMONY OF DAN ASHE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND WILDLIFE ON H.R. 2188, THE JOINT VENTURES BIRD HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT OF 2009; H.R. 3433, TO AMEND THE NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION ACT; H.R. 3537, THE JUNIOR DUCK STAMP CONSERVATION AND DESIGN PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2009; S. 1214, THE NATIONAL FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT; S. 1421, THE ASIAN CARP PREVENTION AND CONTROL ACT; S. 373, TO AMEND TITLE 18, U.S. CODE, TO INCLUDE CONSTRICTOR SNAKES OF THE SPECIES PYTHON GENERA AS AN INJURIOUS ANIMAL; S. 1519, THE NUTRIA ERADICATION AND CONTROL ACT OF 2009; S. 1965, THE FERAL SWINE ERADICATION AND CONTROL PILOT PROGRAM ACT OF 2009; AND H.R. 509, THE MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2009

December 3, 2009

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Crapo, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dan Ashe, Deputy Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). I appreciate the opportunity to testify today before the Subcommittee on a number of bills that address important and growing conservation issues before the Department of the Interior (Department) including landscape conservation, the spread of nonnative invasive species, and international wildlife conservation. This Congress, the Service has already testified on behalf of the Department on H.R. 2188, H.R. 3433, H.R. 3537, and H.R. 509, as well as H.R. 2565, a companion bill to S. 1214 before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife. The Department greatly appreciates the Subcommittee's leadership and support for the conservation of our Nation's wildlife.

Our natural landscapes are under significant pressure from a number of factors including climate change and invasive species. Invasive species are among the primary factors that have led to the decline of native fish and wildlife populations in the United States and one of the most significant natural resource management challenges facing the Service. More than 400 of the over 1,300 species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) are considered to be at risk primarily due to displacement, competition and predation by, invasive species.

Climate change is presenting new problems for fish and wildlife, including more frequent and intense droughts, accelerating sea level rise and coastal erosion, and the shifting of plant communities to higher elevations or northern latitudes. Climate change is also expected to impact our natural landscapes—including our major estuaries, prairies, lakes and rivers, forests, wetlands, and other natural communities—and exacerbate existing threats and introduce new challenges for sustaining vibrant, healthy ecosystems.

In order to address these issues, the Department is building a strong foundation for the science-based landscape and species conservation approaches we will need to develop to address and overcome these conservation challenges. A key part of our foundation is strong science

programs to investigate and work with partner agencies, academia, and stakeholders to conduct the monitoring and research needed to inform an adaptive management approach to fish and wildlife conservation. On September 14, 2009, Secretary Salazar issued a Secretarial Order on Climate Change. The Secretarial Order establishes a Climate Change Response Council to execute a coordinated effort among the Interior bureaus that will consider and analyze climate change impacts when conducting long-range planning, setting research priorities, and making decisions regarding resource use. It calls for up to eight Regional Climate Change Response Centers (RCCRCs) and a network of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) that will work together to provide scientific support for decision-making and to inform climate change adaptation response. The Order also calls for bureaus to implement a Carbon Storage Project which will examine the potential for geological and biological carbon sequestration on public lands, and a Carbon Footprint Project which will develop a greenhouse gas reduction program to lower our emissions and energy use.

Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released for public comment its draft Climate Change Strategic Plan and 5-Year Climate Change Action Plan. These documents will complement key strategies and actions under the Department of the Interior's overall framework, as well as in other federal agency plans, and state wildlife action plans. When finalized, the plans will help focus the Service's operational activities, partnerships and funding requests to address our climate change efforts.

As we continue to consider the immense challenges posed by human-driven changes in the climate system and other complex challenges including non-native species invasion, water scarcity, habitat loss and fragmentation, and disease, it is increasingly apparent that we must be able to envision and design conservation from large scales. And we cannot simply try to repeat and amplify past successes. The successes in nutria control, multinational species conservation, migratory bird Joint Ventures, and fish habitat partnerships are important, but they will not be sufficient. The climate change LCCs will build upon the joint venture model, housing partner-based scientific and technical capacities to support landscape-scale conservation. This is a crucial direction of change which will allow the Service to address great challenges like changing climate.

H.R. 2188, JOINT VENTURES FOR BIRD HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT OF 2009

H.R. 2188 would authorize the Service's participation in and support for Joint Ventures and codify the mechanisms currently in place to establish and support the Joint Ventures operating across the United States. The Department supports H.R. 2188.

The first Joint Ventures were formed to implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (Plan), agreed upon by the United States and Canadian governments in 1986. Mexico joined in 1994. The Plan is a continental approach to waterfowl conservation with a focus on regional implementation of habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement projects. In 1998, the Plan was amended to focus on waterfowl conservation that is guided by biologically-based planning that, when implemented, provides landscape-scale conditions needed to sustain waterfowl and to benefit other wetland-associated species.

After more than 23 years, the Plan is among the most successful collaborative conservation efforts in wildlife conservation history, and its success depends upon the strength of regional partnerships. Joint Ventures include federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local governments, businesses, conservation organizations, academia, and individual landowners and citizens. As of January 2009, Joint Ventures have guided the investment of more than \$4.5 billion to protect, restore, and/or enhance 15.7 million acres of waterfowl habitat and to conduct research and population management projects.

Joint Ventures are regional, self-directed partnerships that work to conserve migratory birds. The Service coordinates and oversees the national Joint Ventures Program, and we significantly support the role of Joint Ventures toward achieving healthy and sustainable populations of migratory birds. The Service approves Joint Venture management plans and provides funds and technical assistance to the Joint Ventures Management Boards and partners to administer the program.

In addition to their real and potential contribution to migratory bird conservation, Joint Ventures are well positioned to help address the impacts of climate change at the landscape scale. From mapping anticipated sea-level rise along the Pacific Coast to exploring reforestation and carbon sequestration projects on abandoned minelands in the Appalachian Mountains, Joint Ventures are using adaptive-management strategies to address anticipated effects of climate change on bird habitats. Joint Ventures are leaders in identifying and addressing the data gaps that will help land managers, private landowners, decision makers, and other partners understand how to respond to climate change.

The Service provides oversight for Joint Ventures and their migratory bird conservation approaches and use of federal funds, while allowing sufficient independence for each Joint Venture to mold its migratory bird conservation planning and activities to reflect the most up-to-date science and fluctuations of regional conditions over time. Throughout the 15 year history of the current Joint Ventures program, it has expanded to 21 Joint Ventures.

H.R. 3537, JUNIOR DUCK STAMP CONSERVATION AND DESIGN PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2009

The Federal Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program (Program) was authorized through the Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-340), which was enacted on October 6, 1994. The Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to carry out the Program, including conducting an annual art competition to create a stamp and licensing and marketing the stamp. The proceeds from these efforts are used to support conservation education programs, awards, and scholarships for Junior Duck Stamp Program participants.

In addition to the annual art contest for the design of the Stamp, the program features a science and art-based curriculum designed to help teach wetland and wildlife conservation principles, by pairing science and the arts for children from kindergarten through high school. The program's goal is to encourage students to become conservation stewards.

In 2009, nearly 28,000 students across the United States, including the District of Columbia and the territories, entered the contest, and thousands more participated in the curriculum. In the 18th

year of the Program, the 2009 national winning design of a wood duck -- entered by a 16-year-old student from Ohio -- is featured. In 2008, Junior Duck Stamp sales raised more than \$172,000 for awards, environmental education activities throughout the United States and its territories, and Junior Duck Stamp marketing materials.

H.R. 3537, reauthorizes the program, increases authorization for appropriations to \$500,000 per year, removes limitations on the use of funds for administrative expenses, and amends the Program's reporting requirements. The Department supports H.R. 3537 as it would enable the Service to more effectively implement the Junior Duck Stamp Program.

H.R. 3433, A BILL TO AMEND THE NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION ACT

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) is an internationally recognized conservation program that supports partnerships to conserve waterfowl and other wetland-associated migratory birds. Since 1990, thousands of partners have been involved in 1,946 NAWCA grant projects. More than \$1 billion in grants has leveraged more than \$2 billion in matching funds to affect approximately 25.5 million acres of wetlands and associated uplands across the continent.

H.R. 3433 amends NAWCA to allow up to 50 percent of the required "non-federal" match for projects in Canada to be composed of Canadian funds. Under current law, all such funds must be from U.S. sources, and Canadian funds contributed to NAWCA projects cannot be counted as part of the "non-federal" match. The Department supports H.R. 3433 and its proposed change to NAWCA as long as at least 50 percent of the "non-federal match" would still come from U.S. sources. The change in this historic conservation statute would better acknowledge the importance of the U.S. partnership with Canada and would be more consistent with the non-U.S. funding match that is already allowed for Mexican NAWCA projects.

NAWCA grants act as catalysts in bringing together partnerships to support wetland projects and leverage non-federal funding. Grants have brought together a group of diverse partners including conservation organizations; federal, state and local government agencies; private industry; and thousands of private landowners. Partners have carried out projects in all 50 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, 13 Canadian provinces and territories, and 32 Mexican states.

S. 1214, NATIONAL FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT

S. 1214 would codify the National Fish Habitat Action Plan (Action Plan) and offers a historic opportunity to reverse the declines in aquatic habitat and species across the nation. Recognizing that funds for conservation are limited, the Action Plan focuses financial and technical resources on the root causes of habitat declines in a way that no other program or initiative has been able to do. The Department supports S. 1214, with technical amendments.

Aquatic species are some of the most at risk organisms in the United States. Since 1900, 123 freshwater species have become extinct in North America. Hundreds of other fish, mollusks,

crayfish and amphibians are imperiled. Numerous studies point to the loss and degradation of aquatic habitat as the primary reason for the vulnerable condition of aquatic species.

S. 1214 would foster science, communication, and partnerships to unite diverse stakeholders and focus voluntary action on conserving priority habitats. The bill would provide mechanisms and incentives for government agencies and the private sector to work across boundaries of jurisdiction and land ownership to achieve common goals for conserving fish habitats.

The Action Plan places a priority on protecting intact and healthy aquatic systems, because protection is less costly and more successful than restoring aquatic systems after they have been degraded. In that regard, S. 1214 authorizes an important new tool for protecting aquatic systems, i.e. obtaining a real property interest in land or water, including water rights, where appropriate, to address strategic fish habitat priorities.

S. 1214 authorizes the National Fish Habitat Board and allows it to designate Fish Habitat Partnerships. The Fish Habitat Partnerships are the primary work units of the Action Plan. Since 2006, the National Fish Habitat Board has designated fourteen regional-scale Fish Habitat Partnerships to conduct scientific assessments and identify strategic priorities on behalf of diverse public and private partners. An additional seven partnerships are in development. All 50 states are engaged with one or more Fish Habitat Partnerships.

To date, the Fish Habitat Partnerships have made limited progress in biological planning and conservation design, supported by various grants and in-kind contributions. S. 1214 would establish the National Fish Habitat Conservation Partnership Office (Partnership Office) within the Service to support operational needs of Fish Habitat Partnerships. This core funding would leverage partner contributions to provide the support that is needed for effective biological planning and conservation design on a landscape scale. S. 1214 provides for the Partnership Office to be managed under an Interagency Operational Plan, an appropriate mechanism to establish and maintain a true partnership across federal agencies, and with states and Indian tribes, to effectively administer the Action Plan.

Finally, the Action Plan promotes science to assess and classify the nation's fish habitats and identify landscape-scale causes for declining fish populations. S. 1214 authorizes funds for technical and scientific assistance to enhance the field capacity of the Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to employ state-of-the-art science in developing projects, evaluating results, and measuring outcomes as changes in the condition of aquatic resources.

There remain a number of technical comments and recommended amendments to S. 1214 that the Service would like to work with the subcommittee on following the hearing.

S. 1421, ASIAN CARP PREVENTION AND CONTROL ACT

S. 1421 would list the bighead carp as an injurious species under the Lacey Act. Based on the native climate for these fish, bighead carp could eventually be found in many of the waters of the United States. The Department is greatly concerned about the impact of bighead carp on our

natural resources. Although the Department generally prefers the administrative process to run its course, we support S. 1421.

The Service, in collaboration with its partners, has assessed the spread and impacts of the bighead carp and other carp species and methods to prevent and control the proliferation of these species. The Service received a petition in 2002 from 25 members of Congress to list three species of Asian carps—the silver, large-scale silver, and bighead carp. We initiated rulemaking for those species soon thereafter and listed the silver, large-scale silver, and black carp as injurious under 50 CFR 16 in 2007. The bighead carp was not listed at that time despite the fact that the risk assessment for bighead carp, indicated that the probability of establishment in natural waterways in the United States is high; the economic and environmental consequences of establishment in the United States is medium to high; and the overall organism risk potential is high. In retrospect, the failure to list bighead carp was a mistake.

Last month, State of Illinois officials announced that DNA samples of the Asian carp recently were found between an Army Corps of Engineers barrier and Lake Michigan, although the fish had yet to be spotted in the area. Asian carp are voracious eaters of plankton and are known to overtake waterways and starve out fisheries important to both anglers and commercial fishers. As a result of the DNA finding, State of Illinois environmental officials dumped the toxic chemical rotenone into a nearly 6-mile stretch of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal Wednesday in hopes of keeping the bighead carp from entering the Great Lakes while an electrical barrier operated by the Corps is turned off for maintenance. The State took this drastic action because of fears that infiltration by the Asian carp could lead to the collapse of the Great Lakes sport and commercial fishing industry.

Under the Lacey Act, the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to regulate the importation and interstate transport of species determined to be injurious to humans, the interests of agriculture, horticulture or forestry, and the welfare and survival of wildlife resources of the United States. Species listed as injurious may not be imported or transported across state lines by any means without a permit issued by the Service. The Service considers a variety of factors when evaluating a species for listing as injurious, such as the species' survival capabilities, its ability to spread geographically, its impact on habitat and ecosystems, its impact on threatened and endangered species, its impact on human beings and resource-based industries, and resource managers' ability to control and eradicate the species.

If a species is found to be injurious, the Service publishes a proposed rule in the *Federal Register* to add the species to the list of injurious wildlife and requests public comment on the proposal. We evaluate public comments received and any additional data gathered, and either publish a final rule to add the species to the list or a notice explaining why the species will not be listed. This evaluation process and the timeframe under which we accomplish it varies based on the availability of data and the complexity of the analyses that may be required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Regulatory Flexibility Act, executive orders, and other mandates.

In September 2009, the Service received another petition from members of Congress urging us to list bighead carp. The Service has completed some of the steps required in our rulemaking processes for bighead carp, including a risk assessment, the Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, and an economic analysis, although not all have gone through public review. The Service will decide whether to initiate a proposed rule in 2010.

S. 373, A BILL TO AMEND TITLE 18, U.S. CODE, TO INCLUDE CONSTRICTOR SNAKES OF THE SPECIES PYTHON GENERA AS AN INJURIOUS ANIMAL

S. 373 would amend Title 18 Section 42, U.S. Code, to include constrictor snakes of the *Python* genus as an injurious animal. The Department appreciates Senator Nelson bringing attention to this important conservation issue. While the Department generally prefers the administrative process to run its course, we support S. 373, and recommend amending the legislation, in light of a USGS risk assessment published in October, to include the nine species of large constrictor snakes that were evaluated by the risk assessment. The nine species that were assessed include the Burmese python, northern African python, southern African python, reticulated python, green anaconda, yellow anaconda, Beni or Bolivian anaconda, DeSchauensee's anaconda, and boa constrictor.

The threat posed by the Burmese python and other large constrictor snakes is evident. Thousands of Burmese pythons are now breeding in the Everglades, and threaten many imperiled species and other wildlife. In addition other species of large snakes are or may be breeding in the Everglades including the Boa Constrictors and Northern African Pythons. Given the value of the Everglades, its biological diversity and the threat of invasive species, the Department is committed to addressing this threat and restoring the ecosystem.

In June 2006, the Service received a request from the South Florida Water Management District to list Burmese pythons as an injurious species under the Lacey Act. At the time the petition was submitted, no scientific information had been compiled on Burmese pythons that would enable a rigorous assessment of risk and potential impacts to the Everglades and other ecosystems. As a result, in 2007 the Service partnered with the National Park Service to jointly provide funds to USGS towards completion of a risk assessment of nine non-native boa, anaconda, and python species considered invasive or potentially invasive in the United States. USGS finalized the risk assessment on October 13, 2009. The assessment considered what effects these species could have on the ecology of the United States if they became established in the wild.

Of the nine large constrictor snakes that were assessed, five were shown to pose a high risk to the health of the ecosystem, including the Burmese python, northern African python, southern African python, yellow anaconda, and boa constrictor. The remaining four large constrictors—the reticulated python, green anaconda, Beni or Bolivian anaconda, and Deschauensee's anaconda—were shown to pose a medium risk. None of the large constrictors that were assessed was classified as low risk. As compared to many other vertebrates, giant constrictors pose a relatively high risk as potential invasive species, especially in terms of risk to stability of native ecosystems.

While a few of the very largest species have been known to attack humans in their native range, such attacks appear to be rare. Most of these species are difficult to detect in the field,

complicating efforts to identify the range of populations or deplete populations through visual searching and removal of individuals. While the Department of the Interior, U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and the State of Florida entities have conducted limited research on control tools, there are currently no such tools available that would appear adequate for eradication of an established population of giant snakes once they have spread over a large area.

In addition to the recent USGS risk assessment the Service published a Notice of Inquiry in the *Federal Register* on January 31, 2008, to solicit biological, economic, or other data related to the potential of adding large constrictor snakes to the list of injurious wildlife. During the public comment period, which closed on April 30, 2008, the Service received 1,528 responses.

The Service is using the information provided by the public and the USGS risk assessment in our ongoing evaluation of adding large constrictor snakes under the Lacey Act. The Service is now completing an economic analysis of a potential Lacey Act rulemaking, which is a requirement under the Regulatory Flexibility Act and Executive Orders 12866 and 13272. In addition, we are drafting documentation required under NEPA. The Service expects to complete our internal review and determine the appropriate Lacey Act role by early 2010. Should a Proposed Rule be issued, the publication would be followed by a public comment period and a final decision most likely within one year thereafter. Given the importance of this issue, the Service is working diligently to thoroughly and expeditiously complete the required reviews.

S. 373 includes the entire *Python* genus and the Service notes that some of the species in the genus are not considered large constrictors and may not pose a threat. The nine large constrictor snakes evaluated in the recently finalized USGS risk assessment will be the focus of the Service's internal assessment under the Lacey Act, and we recommend the legislation be amended to include the nine species of large constrictor snakes that USGS evaluated in its risk assessment.

S. 1519, THE NUTRIA ERADICATION AND CONTROL ACT OF 2009

S. 1519 extends the successful nutria eradication and control programs in Maryland and Louisiana to Delaware, Virginia, Washington, and Oregon and authorizes the program through fiscal year 2014. The Department supports S. 1519 and would like to thank Senator Cardin for sponsoring the legislation.

Nutria, an invasive, aquatic rodent, was brought to the United States to bolster the fur trade in the early 20th Century. By the early 1990's, the Chesapeake Bay/Delmarva Peninsula population was estimated to exceed 150,000 animals. Nutria eat aquatic plants, such as the Olney three-square, saltmarsh hay, and smooth cordgrass in marshes of the Delmarva Peninsula, and they burrow through contiguous marsh, causing significant erosion. Nutria damage to marshes exacerbates the damaging impacts of ongoing land subsidence and sea level rise. Maryland and Louisiana were first to attempt systematic eradication and control of nutria.

Nutria are found in all three Delmarva Peninsula states—Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. Because of its tremendous capacity to reproduce, it is important that nutria be removed from the Peninsula in order to protect the entire Chesapeake Bay Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge

Complex and other Refuges on the Peninsula, as well as hundreds of thousand wetlands acres on state and private lands. To that end, the Chesapeake Bay nutria eradication program is managed by the Service in close partnership with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, USGS, USDA, APHIS Wildlife Services, the University of Maryland, and hundreds of private landowners bordering Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and congressional support. The goal of the project is to eradicate nutria from the Peninsula by 2014. To date, the cooperative science and management approach in Maryland has resulted in the extirpation of nutria from about 150,000 acres of the approximate 400,000 acres infested with nutria on the Peninsula, and nutria have been extirpated from the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The project's success lies, at least in part, in its enduring and diverse partnership and its ability to adapt its techniques as new data informs the project's efforts. The partners have worked together to undertake the science needed to identify the precise damage nutria causes to the marsh as well as its biology and population dynamics. This information has been used to develop and fine tune methods to eradicate nutria from the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The team coordinated with Louisiana to improve efforts in both states.

To evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the program and to inform similar efforts, the Service has invited an independent assessment, which was conducted in September by three world-wide authorities on nuisance mammal eradication and control. A report and recommendations are expected in January 2010.

Partners in Louisiana, Oregon, and Washington use lessons learned in Maryland and their own research and techniques to understand and control nutria populations to minimize the damage done to their marsh habitats. Four national wildlife refuges located in Southeast Louisiana (Big Branch Marsh, Bayou Sauvage, Delta, and Mandalay NWRs) are experiencing moderate to severe marsh habitat damage caused by nutria as is Gulf Islands National Seashore (a unit of the National Park Service). In the Northwest, partners are working to understand the growing nutria population there and its impacts, which differ somewhat from those in the East. For example, one of the most significant forms of damage attributed to nutria in the region appears to be the destruction of water control structures and associated erosion caused by nutria burrowing.

The Department is committed to completing the Chesapeake Bay nutria eradication project, and supporting nutria eradication across the country where nutria are harming native fish and wildlife habitats.

S. 1965, FERAL SWINE ERADICATION AND CONTROL PILOT PROGRAM ACT OF 2009

S. 1965 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to provide financial assistance to the State of Louisiana for a pilot program to develop measures to eradicate or control feral swine and to assess and restore wetlands damaged by feral swine. The Department supports S.1965 and would like to thank Senator Landrieu for sponsoring the legislation.

Feral swine are invasive animals first introduced in the continental United States during the 1500s by European sailors. Large numbers of feral swine exist on federal lands, including national wildlife refuges and national parks, as a result of illegal releases and high reproductive rates. They are known to be the most prolific large mammal in North America. With adequate

nutrition, breeding occurs throughout the year. Females often breed at less than a year old and can produce two litters in a year with an average of four to eight piglets per litter. Large predators of swine, such as wolves and mountain lions, have been extirpated from most of the area where feral swine range, leaving few natural controls. Feral swine can spread more than 30 diseases and 37 parasites, including swine brucellosis and pseudorabies, which can have devastating effects on livestock and wildlife.

Feral swine compete directly with many native animals such as deer, squirrels, ducks, turkeys, and bears for food and destroy habitat for many other wildlife species. They are omnivorous and their diet includes wildlife, such as, ground nesting birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Feral swine dig for food (rooting) and create wallows, thereby destroying vegetation and ruining water holes used by other wildlife. Rooting activities in marsh and other wetland habitats leads to increased erosion, displacement of native wildlife, loss of habitat value and quality, and destruction of sensitive vegetation. Damage is often severe and in some cases may be nearly irreversible. Rooting activities in forested habitats impact forest regeneration and vegetation structure and may lead to increases in invasive plants, including Chinese tallow tree and cogon grass. Severe rooting and damage has occurred on hurricane protection levees and other water control structures.

Feral swine are found on National Wildlife Refuges (refuges) and in units of the National Park System throughout the Southeast from coastal marsh habitats to the Appalachian Mountains. Many of these public lands implement some form of swine control programs on an annual basis either through bureau employees or contractors. In Southeast Louisiana, several refuges allow trapping by permitted individuals and take by sport hunters. More than 300 feral swine are removed each year; however, this is not enough to control or prevent an increase in swine populations on the refuges. This can in part be attributed to the presence of feral swine beyond refuge boundaries in areas such as agricultural production lands where they damage crops such as soybeans, watermelon, and other row crops.

At Sabine National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Louisiana, a pilot project was conducted in 2007 in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services for feral swine removal using methods such as traps, snares, and night shooting. A total of 223 swine were removed during the year at a cost of more than \$33,000.

The feral swine population on Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge in central Louisiana is at an epidemic level with an estimated one swine per four acres of habitat. Roughly 30 to 50 percent of grain crops planted on the refuge to support waterfowl populations are destroyed by feral swine.

An aggressive and sustained effort utilizing multiple techniques is needed to control feral swine populations on national wildlife refuges and parks in order to protect native wildlife and their habitats. Integral to this effort is the work of the USDA's National Wildlife Research Center to develop new control techniques for feral swine such as immunocontraceptives and more effective baits. The Department remains committed to this effort and looks forward to working with the State of Louisiana to ensure that the most highly impacted lands, including federal lands, are included in such a pilot project.

H.R. 509, THE MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2009

The Department would also like to express its support for H.R. 509, the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2009, which addresses some of the most urgent conservation issues regarding marine turtles. The Department has a long history of proactive programs addressing international wildlife species conservation. Our experience has shown that relatively modest sums, if judiciously applied to well-designed and implemented projects, can leverage considerable resources and, just as importantly, the interest of communities, governments, and the world. Working with our international partners, we see clear signs of the effectiveness of our combined efforts.

Marine turtles disperse and migrate throughout the world's oceans, and as a result, they are important indicators of coastal and marine environmental health on local, regional and global scales. Less than 60 years ago, marine turtles were abundant and widespread nesting on beaches was common. Today however, six of the seven marine turtle species—the Kemp's ridley, the Olive ridley, the Loggerhead, the Leatherback, the Hawksbill, and the Green turtle—are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Threats facing marine turtles continue to include overexploitation of eggs and turtles, trade in turtle parts, bycatch mortality, and loss of habitat.

Under the Marine Turtle Conservation Act, for fiscal years 2005 through 2009, the Service funded 113 conservation grants and approximately \$3.9 million in funds appropriated leveraged roughly \$5.9 million in matching and in-kind contributions from partner organizations to support the conservation of marine turtles. These grants enable the Service to support projects such as intensified nesting beach conservation in Mexico, Costa Rica, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.

Implementation of the Marine Turtle Conservation Act is based on the pattern established in the previous Multinational Species Conservation Act initiatives. Through the Act, the Service has implemented a streamlined process that allows for timely approval of projects and quick action in emergency situations. Each project funded is a cooperative effort with foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, or private sector entities. No in-country project is approved unless it has the full support of in-country government officials and has been identified as a project that will address the country's conservation priorities. H.R. 509 would enable the Service to continue in its role as a provider of dedicated funding for comprehensive, global coordination and collaboration in developing countries where resources and capacity for marine turtle conservation are limited.

The Department would like to recommend that the Subcommittee consider that in lieu of a twenty percent set-aside for domestic marine turtle conservation, the legislation direct these funds to protecting freshwater turtles and tortoises. While marine turtle conservation continues to be a critical conservation need, we also recognize that freshwater turtles and tortoises are severely imperiled. Among the more than 300 species of freshwater turtles worldwide, twenty-five percent are facing imminent peril or extinction in the next decade. By focusing on these species and their habitats, it is likely that ecologically critical areas of the planet will be

considered and managed more adequately. We welcome the opportunity to continue our cooperation and work with other countries and partners to conserve the world's magnificent turtles, particularly in light of the challenges climate change may pose.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Crapo, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on this legislation. The Department recognizes the significant threats to our landscapes and wildlife as a result of invasive species and climate change. We are committed to strengthening our capacity to effectively address these threats. We greatly appreciate the Subcommittee's efforts to assist our efforts through the authorities and resources provided in the bills being considered today. The Department thanks you for your continued leadership and interest in the conservation of our fish and wildlife resources. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.