

Testimony of

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Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry**

Voluntary Conservation: Utilizing Innovation and Technology

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Lujan Grisham, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry and to provide testimony regarding the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF's) agriculture partnerships in the Delaware River watershed and elsewhere across the country.

INTRODUCTION TO NFWF

NFWF was established by Congress in 1984 to catalyze public-private investments to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Since our creation, NFWF has become one of the world's largest conservation grant-makers. We work with both the public and private sectors to protect and restore our nation's fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats.

NFWF supports conservation efforts in all 50 states and U.S. territories. Our projects are rigorously evaluated and awarded to some of the nation's largest conservation organizations, as well as some of the smallest. We neither advocate nor litigate. Instead, NFWF specializes in bringing all parties to the table – individuals, government agencies, tribes, nonprofit organizations, and corporations. Together, we protect and restore imperiled species, promote healthy oceans and estuaries, improve working landscapes for wildlife, advance sustainable fisheries, and conserve water for wildlife and people. NFWF currently works with 15 federal partners and more than 45 corporate and foundation partners.

In fiscal year 2015, NFWF funded nearly 900 conservation projects across the nation. The Foundation awarded \$87.6 million in federal funds, \$449,000 in other public funds, and \$38.0 million in private contributions, leveraged by \$119.7 million in grantee match.

Since its inception, NFWF has funded nearly 15,500 conservation projects, awarded \$955 million in federal funds, \$857 million in non-federal funds, and leveraged \$1.7 billion in grantee match for a total conservation investment of \$3.5 billion.

Today, I would like to share with you some of NFWF's long history of working with farmers, ranchers, and foresters. We have supported targeted outreach and technical assistance to farmers to accelerate the pace of conservation, leveraged Farm Bill funding with private investment, demonstrated on-farm benefits of conservation, and achieved targeted species-specific and water quality outcomes. In total, NFWF has leveraged more than \$61.2 million of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funds into over \$228 million in on-the-ground conservation.

ENHANCING VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION IN THE DELAWARE RIVER WATERSHED

Delaware River Watershed Initiative

Three years ago, the William Penn Foundation (WPF) of Philadelphia formed a partnership with NFWF, the Academy of Natural Sciences (ANS) of Drexel University, and the Open Space Institute (OSI) to design and help implement an innovative voluntary initiative to improve water quality and habitat health across the Delaware River Watershed.

The Delaware River has a 13,500 square-mile watershed that crosses four state borders and provides drinking water for 15 million people, including the cities of Trenton, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and half the population of New York City. At 330 miles, it also is the longest undammed river east of the Mississippi, providing vital habitat for fish and wildlife and unparalleled recreation opportunities for the 8 million plus people who live and play in the watershed. But, like many watersheds across our country, communities here are also grappling with water quality challenges in the face of growing pressures from development and other stressors.

Launched in 2014 with an initial three-year investment of \$35 million from the William Penn Foundation, the subsequently-named "Delaware River Watershed Initiative" (DRWI) carefully targeted and prioritized eight sub-watersheds for restoration and conservation investment. These were selected based on an assessment of the severity of current and potential threats to water quality, as well as the on-the-ground potential of local organizations to do something about it. These focused sub-watersheds are to serve as on-the-ground laboratories in which restoration and conservation will be strategically implemented, leveraged, and monitored.

Seven of the eight priority sub-watersheds are dominated by private forests and farmland, and local partners—with support and assistance from NFWF, WPF, ANS, and OSI—have collaboratively developed and driven strategies to accelerate adoption of restoration and conservation practices that improve and protect water quality. Chief among the strategies for most of these sub-watersheds is an emphasis on expanded voluntary forest management and farm conservation practices in concert with NRCS.

Agriculture in the Delaware Watershed

There is substantial diversity among private landowners in the region, often presenting a challenge to one-size-fits-all conservation planning. Farms tend to be small and ownership is complex. For example in New Jersey, food and agriculture is the third largest industry, but the average farm size is only 80 acres. Much of the farmed land in the region is leased, which necessitates engaging both farmers and landowners in discussions about conservation. Plain Sect

farmers, who are less likely to participate in government cost-share programs, predominate in areas of southeastern Pennsylvania. In addition, there are a number of small operators involved in producing and supplying locally grown foods for direct marketing.

Agriculture acreage is mostly in a corn/soybean rotation with wheat; however, there is some striking variation among producers across the watershed. As the Garden State moniker would suggest, vegetable farming is common in eastern and southern New Jersey, along with perennial crops like blueberries and peaches, sod, and nursery production. In Pennsylvania, tobacco production continues to be a significant cash crop. Livestock operations are spread throughout the region and consist mainly of small- and medium-sized dairies. Poultry houses are becoming more numerous in northern Berks County, and the surrounding area includes a sizeable number of equine operations. Mushroom production is a unique feature of the agricultural economy in Chester County, where more than half of the mushrooms produced in the United States are raised.

The upper portion of the watershed is largely private forest and is the source of much of the watershed's exceptionally clean water. The majority of family forest owners are near or past retirement age, and these tracts are especially vulnerable to degradation, fragmentation, and development. In addition, many larger forest tracts are owned by hunting and fishing clubs or organizations that host summer camps. There are high rates of seasonal use and absentee landownership.

As the partners of the DRWI began to develop and implement collaborative strategies to address these challenges, the launch of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was a remarkably timely opportunity tailor-made to deliver a conservation program with a complimentary focus on water quality. Additionally, it was one that was particularly responsive to the aforementioned varied landscape and landowner characteristics throughout the region, as well as the local priorities and strategies specific to each priority sub-watershed.

Delaware Watershed Working Lands Conservation Partnership

In late 2014, NFWF, in partnership with American Farmland Trust and a dozen other partners, was awarded a five-year, \$13 million RCPP from NRCS for the *Delaware Watershed Working Lands Conservation and Protection Partnership*. Of particular importance, the Partnership is leveraging \$17.6 million in cash and in-kind resources from partners, including significant match from the William Penn Foundation's investment in the DRWI.

Additional collaborators and supporters of the RCPP include: Cape Atlantic Conservation District; Berks County Conservation District; Chester County Conservation District; North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D); Stroud Water Research Center; Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed; Natural Lands Trust; The Land Conservancy; Partnership for the Delaware Estuary; Berks County Conservancy; New Jersey Water Association; Pinchot Institute for Conservation; Brandywine Conservancy; Wallkill River Watershed Management Group; Catskill Forest Association; Delaware Highlands Conservancy; Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; New York State Department of Environmental Conservation; New Jersey Forest Service; and the American Mushroom Institute.

This RCPP project is designed to address water quality as the primary resource concern in the Delaware Watershed. Secondly, the project will prioritize efforts to reduce forest fragmentation and habitat degradation in the headwaters, and protect water quantity in the lower reaches of the basin, which is a growing concern as aquifers experience overdrafts from irrigation.

The partnership is guided by a comprehensive approach to voluntary agricultural and forestland conservation at the sub-watershed scale, drawing on the assessment and targeting performed to establish the DRWI. In areas dominated by farmland, the partnership builds on the NRCS models for minimizing pollution at the source, and maximizing nature's ability to slow and filter polluted runoff (including "Avoid, Control, Trap" and the "Four Rs" nutrient management concept). Farmers can reduce polluted runoff through practices to minimize excess fertilizer and pesticide use, control erosion from exposed soils and barnyards, and treat nutrients by restoring wetlands and forested streamside buffers.

In forested areas, the partnership assists landowners in developing and implementing forest management practices that improve forest health and resilience, while protecting water resources.

Broadly, the partnership aims to improve the delivery of technical assistance to landowners by growing the capacity of traditional agriculture organizations such as conservation districts, while also working with a large network of community-based non-profits to improve how they work with the agricultural community to deliver voluntary conservation.

For example, the partnership is supporting new technical assistance staff in three conservation districts in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, as well as at the North Jersey RC&D. These positions will specifically reduce the bottleneck in implementing cost-shared conservation by focusing on whole farm conservation planning and practice design. This support has been especially well-received in New Jersey, where conservation districts are largely focused on erosion and sediment control programs and have limited (and often overloaded) staff devoted to agriculture.

Private matching funds are being used to provide training and funding to local land trusts and watershed organizations so that they can continue to build the pipeline of projects and hone their outreach skills. These organizations often have strong landowner relationships but lack knowledge and understanding about how landowners can access cost-share funding and which conservation practices are most cost-effective at achieving water quality outcomes and on-farm benefits for any given farm. Armed with training and assessment tools, these organizations are key allies in accelerating the pace of conservation.

A key element of the RCPP design that will be critical to its success is that the partnership is able to establish criteria used to rank and prioritize the allocation of cost-share funding. For the Delaware RCPP, projects are given priority if they occur in one of the DRWI priority sub-watersheds and will improve water quality. The partnerships also are able to give greater priority to projects addressing the greatest local needs. For example, in Pennsylvania, the local partnership has prioritized livestock operations that are within 100-200 feet of a stream or wetland. And in southern New Jersey, they have prioritized irrigation projects that conserve water and projects that improve groundwater recharge for the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer.

The partnership is enhanced with dedicated and flexible implementation funding from the WPF and other sources to incentivize participation by producers. The use of private funding provides streamlined access to implementation funding for some practices and encourages participation by some landowners who prefer not to use government funding. Private funds also are being used to test innovative incentives like conservation vouchers, bonus payments, and higher rates of cost-share in exchange for implementing the highest priority practices. We have found early on that the blend of this targeted, private investment with the RCPP is driving conservation to the places it is needed most and can have the greatest impact.

In only its first few months, the project is on its way toward its initial five-year goals to work with 1,100 landowners, to implement conservation on at least 16,750 acres, and to improve management of 20,000 acres of working forests.

Indeed, the *Delaware Watershed Working Lands Conservation Partnership* has the potential to dramatically accelerate conservation, and to build a stronger, more capable, network among the agricultural communities and local non-profits in the region.

OTHER SUCCESSFUL NFWF AGRICULTURE PARTNERSHIPS

NFWF has dozens of examples of programs across the country that leverage public and private funding to accelerate the pace of voluntary conservation on working lands. For example:

Monarch Butterfly Conservation Fund

In 2015, NFWF formed a public-private partnership to restore monarch butterfly habitat. Over the past 20 years, the North American monarch population has plunged from 1 billion to less than 60 million, due mostly to loss of critical habitat. The partnership, which includes the Fish and Wildlife Service, NRCS, several state Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Texas Farm Bureau, and Monsanto, is establishing critical monarch habitat in nine central states by enrolling private landowners in the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. In its first year, the Monarch Butterfly Conservation Fund awarded \$3.8 million to 23 projects that will restore over 50,000 acres of monarch habitat on working lands. NFWF has just been awarded a new \$5.6 million Monarch RCPP that will expand the program and spread the focus.

Money, Water, and Wildlife in Kentucky's Tobacco Country

NFWF is partnering with Kentucky NRCS and Altria to help transition tobacco growers to continuous no-till. Kentucky has been a leader in adoption of conservation tillage practices that improve soil health, reduce polluted runoff, and reduce fuel and labor costs associated with tilling; however, tobacco growers have been late to adopt no-till because of technological barriers. This partnership has supported technical assistance positions in two conservation districts, and also used private funding to purchase equipment that can be rented out to farmers who are not ready to make the significant capital investment in a practice that is unproven on their farm. In addition to providing vital private funding, Altria is able to use its relationship as a tobacco buyer to initiate conversations with otherwise uninterested landowners.

Gulf Coast Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative

In the days following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, NFWF and NRCS worked with farmers, ranchers, foresters, and private landowners across the Gulf states to create over 500,000 acres of wetland habitat for migrating waterfowl. Because of this initiative, millions of migrating birds had access to non-oiled or threatened habitat. This valuable partnership continues with rice growers and other farmers in the Gulf region. NRCS and NFWF have established a goal to partner on \$100 million worth of projects over the next five years.

CONCLUSION

Again, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share just a few of the innovative conservation efforts of NFWF partners and grantees. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.