TEXAS
PARKS &
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Official Comments submitted to Mr. Mike Johanns, Secretary of Agriculture
2007 Farm Bill Listening Session
Texas Tech University - Lubbock, Texas
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Good afternoon, Secretary Johanns and distinguished guests. My name is Gene Miller. I am a Technical Guidance Biologist in the Wildlife Division of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, stationed in Canyon, Texas, and have worked on regional farm program issues in our state during the last 16 years. Our department appreciates the invitation from Dr. Larry Butler to participate in this session as a Texas State Technical Committee Member, and for the chance to have a voice in how agricultural policy is shaped in the 2007 Farm Act. We are providing comments today related to how we think farm policy can best achieve conservation and environmental goals. We would associate ourselves with comments already developed by the 2007 Farm Bill Working Group within the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, in which our agency has membership. As such, we respectfully suggest that these key points be considered for inclusion in crafting the next Farm Act to secure wildlife benefits, as follows:

- Legislation should include language that **recognizes state fish and wildlife agencies** as **full** (100%) natural resource **partners** with USDA;

- Legislation should include language that insures **wildlife having co-equal priority** with soil and water in all phases of conservation program implementation;

- Legislation should include language to insure creation/continuation of **State Habitat Teams** to assist the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service with planning to incorporate wildlife needs in all programs. An example would be state and federal wildlife agencies helping to **develop a new EBI for reenrollment of CRP contracts** in ranking tiers when the extended contracts from 2007-2010 begin expiring;

- Legislation should include language that links USDA conservation program priorities with State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies (State Wildlife Grants) **to better serve landowners** who are trying to put conservation on the ground;

- Legislation should provide continued **program flexibility to deal with issues unique to individual states and regions**. Successful examples in Texas would be the use of EQIP Wildlife Emphasis Area funding to restore longleaf pine habitat in East Texas for the benefit of red-cockaded woodpeckers and bobwhite quail; and, use of the same source of funding for native prairie restoration in the southwestern Panhandle to benefit the Lesser prairie chickens and other grassland species;

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- Legislation should include language to **insure that programs funded in Title I do not conflict or counteract conservation programs funded in Title II**;

- Legislation should include language to **insure better integration of water conservation**, fisheries, and aquatic resource needs. Surface and underground water conservation is a top priority with the Parks and Wildlife Commission and our Executive Management Team within the Department. **Water conservation** is a key focus in our Land and Water Resources Conservation & Recreation Plan which serves as our guide for programs and operations, and which is updated regularly;

- Legislation should include language to provide for **better integration of fish and wildlife needs in forest resource management programs and practices**. An example in East Texas and the Southeast would be creation/continuation of an EBI for the Conservation Reserve Program to discourage pine/fescue monocultures that tend to reduce natural wildlife diversity;

- Legislation should include language to **reauthorize and fully fund "flagship" conservation programs** of the current Farm Act like the CRP, CCRP, EQIP, WHIP, WRP, GRP, FIP, and CSP; likewise, language should be included to fund an **increased number of technical professionals** within the Natural Resources Conservation Service for provision of conservation planning services to landowners;

- Legislation should include language to **define a mechanism for exceeding the current 25% county acreage cap in CRP** when critical conservation needs warrant an exemption. An example in northwest Texas would be counties in the southwestern and northeastern Panhandle where remnant Lesser prairie chicken populations exist that require reconnection of native prairie blocks for their continued existence;

- Legislation should include language to **retain and further strengthen the current policy of mid-contract management on CRP** to maximize wildlife benefits on enrolled lands;

- Legislation should include language to **decouple the current 25% county acreage cap requirement in CRP from eligibility to participate in Continuous CRP practices**. An example in northwest Texas would be increased opportunities for willing landowners to voluntarily enroll in key practices like CP-33 (Upland Habitat Buffers) and CP-23A (Playa Wetland Restoration), especially in intensively-agricultural areas;

- Legislation should include language to foster elements within the conservation title that encourage **voluntary public recreation access** (hunting fishing, and other outdoor activities as specified in the "Open Fields" Bill) on private lands by providing incentives to landowners on a **voluntary, optional basis**; and,

- Legislation should include language to continue the USDA philosophy of programs and practices that promote "whole farm conservation management" to help keep farmers and ranchers on the land.

On behalf of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, we greatly appreciate the chance to provide input in this forum, and look forward to continuation of the working relationship with all USDA agencies in Texas. Please contact us at any point in the process for more detailed input into this important conservation legislation and programs to follow.

Respectfully submitted,

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