



North Dakota State Board of Agriculture Research and Education
Support Testimony - Proposed Extension Reclamation, Conservation, and Wildlife
Management Program

North Dakota Game and Fish Department
Greg Link, Conservation and Communications Division Chief
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Madam Chair Lovas and members of the State Board of Agriculture Research and Education, my name is Greg Link. I serve as the Chief of the Conservation and Communications Division for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (Department). I am providing testimony on behalf of the Department in support of the proposed Extension Reclamation, Conservation, and Wildlife Management Program

The mission of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is to protect, conserve and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitat for sustained public use. Therefore, it's only fitting the Department would whole-heartedly support a proposed NDSU Extension effort to enhance, wildlife habitat, conservation of natural areas, recreation opportunities, reclamation on lands impacted by energy development, and collaborative partnerships with other conservation and natural resource management agencies.

In a state that is comprised of 94% private land, the Department has always recognized and acknowledged that if we are to forward our mission in any way, we must meet the true land managers, our state's ag producers and ranchers, where they are with programs and practices which benefit their operational goals and help them stay viable and prosperous. The Department has also understood that we cannot carry out this mission alone; we knew we needed to develop and maintain partnerships to accomplish this enormous task. For those reasons, the Department has promoted and matched up with USDA programs along with creating and providing its own landowner assistance programs, such as grass and tree planting support, dating back into the 1950's. In the early 1980's, our state's legislative assembly enacted separate statutory provisions designating that money generated from the purchase of a Habitat License by hunters, as well as dollars accrued from interest from our agency's account balance, be used exclusively for assisting landowners and partners with habitat development and conservation practices on private land. These private land efforts ramped up even more in the 1990's, when the Department established a separate management arm within the agency, known as the Private Land Initiative or PLI, with its associated private land biologists' sole job focused on working with our state's private landowners.

With this overall task in mind, the Department has always sought out and collaborated with like-minded partners, programs, and pathways. Amongst programs and efforts of fellow state and federal agencies, Soil Conservation Districts, wildlife clubs, private wildlife and conservation groups, and our universities, NDSU's Extension Program has been a both a vital and valued partner. We see the Extension Program as a trusted advisor, stepping-out the latest regenerative research findings, and an experienced mentor, providing practical insight for tackling the challenges or maximizing opportunities which producers and ranchers face on a daily basis.

And yet, through all these years and all these efforts, when we take a close look at the metrics, it appears the conservation needle continues to move in the wrong direction. The decline of North Dakota's native systems impacts not only those dependent species, but also people, communities, lifestyles, future generations, heritage and quality of life. Water, soil, energy and food are all intertwined in the fate of these natural systems. And long-standing trends are raising the alarm about the fate of all those components.

- The Western meadowlark is declining 1.3% per year in North Dakota
- 53% population loss in grassland birds since 1970 (about 720 million birds)
- 72% of the native prairie has been converted to other uses
- The number of U.S. cattle ranches is declining 1% per year
- 1 out of 4 bumble bees are at risk of extinction within 50 years
- 60% of the nearly 5 million wetland acres in North Dakota have been converted or lost

In response to these and other alarming environmental trends, the Department and other concerned agencies and groups have committed to “up their game” by forming a collaborative coalition know as the Meadowlark Initiative. Coalition partners, such as the NDSU Extension program, have combined their expertise to:

- Support ranching industry and promote regenerative grazing
- Rejuvenate existing prairie health and reconstruct new native grassland for increase biodiversity
- Work to minimize and offset development impacts to native grasslands
- Promote awareness of essential quality life and societal benefits of native grasslands
- Expand native prairie associated science and education and resources.

The proposed Extension Reclamation, Conservation and Wildlife Management Program and its new Extension Specialist positions are in high demand and would be a welcomed addition to the Department and joint coalition efforts of sustaining and restoring our native habitats by providing the additional technical assistance and mentoring to private landowners. For these reasons, the Department strongly supports this proposal.

Thank you, Madam Chair and Board Members, for your time and consideration of this testimony.