

**Testimony in support of Extension Conservation Initiative
Presented to State Board of Agricultural Research & Education
By Ryan Taylor, Ducks Unlimited director of public policy
Dec. 13, 2023**

Good morning, my name is Ryan Taylor. I'm from Towner and Bismarck and I'm the director of public policy for Ducks Unlimited in North and South Dakota, and Montana. I'm here to testify in support of an important conservation Extension proposal presented to you today by Kevin Sedivec and others. Ducks Unlimited, as a national organization, started in 1937 during the Dust Bowl, by a small group of sportsmen with a mission of habitat conservation. The mission continues today with a membership of 644,000 sportsmen and women and dedicated conservationists. North Dakota has 4,232 of those members, as well as the regional office, in Bismarck, that headquarters DU's work in a seven state Great Plains region.

Most importantly, DU is proud to work with North Dakota's farmers, ranchers and private landowners in this habitat rich landscape of the Prairie Pothole Region to find win/win collaborations with the potential to improve their bottom line while fulfilling our habitat mission. We're proud of the hundreds of producers we've worked with to develop stock water sources, build fences for rotational grazing, plant cover crops, and conserve wetlands and grasslands on working ag lands where waterfowl, wildlife and family farmers all thrive. We've also had recent collaborations with this land grant university, learning together about advances in cattle grazing through things like virtual fence technology, and talking about future opportunities in natural resource management careers with undergraduate and graduate students in the NDSU School of Natural Resource Sciences.

Conservation has always been important to a state like North Dakota and its 45 million acres of mostly farm and ranch land. At the fore of conservation are our farmers and ranchers, and I'm proud to count myself and my family in that demographic. The only way we've been able to keep the Taylor Ranch in McHenry County intact and productive since the ranch's first homestead was filed in 1903 has been with what we call stewardship, a term that is biblical but also agronomic and ecological. Like many producers, we've built and modified conservation goals and improved outcomes on the ranch with partners like USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, our local Soil Conservation District, ND Game and Fish, US Fish and Wildlife, ND Natural Resources Conservation Trust, Ducks Unlimited, ND Department of Trust Lands, and, while, as a rancher, I've worked with individual NDSU departments like entomology in studying pollinators and flowering plants on our place, the work with NDSU Extension on the wildlife and conservation aspects of our beef producing cattle ranch has been limited. I think that constitutes a void in North Dakota's agricultural and natural resource landscape that, if filled, as this proposal sketches out, will help ensure agricultural, ecological and community success in our state for generations to come. SBARE would join our producers as good stewards of what's been given to us to care for.

While part of my support for this proposal comes from personal experience, I can also say that my professional experience and that of our staff at Ducks Unlimited gives us tangible reasons to be very supportive of this idea. DU's experience shows a great need for this kind of knowledge and support out in the countryside. We see it across kitchen tables and at the driveway level. We've also seen that it has

value in the marketplace. Here's an example to support that notion of conservation value in the marketplace.

One of the more exciting and fun tasks I've had at DU has been helping bring together a partnership between Ducks Unlimited and Certified Angus Beef. CAB, the world's largest and most successful beef brand, first approached us because they were hearing from their customers a growing interest in environmental stewardship and animal care. As Mark McCully, CEO of the American Angus Association, said in the Angus Beef Bulletin, Feb. 2023, "To go with that (taste, eating satisfaction), I predict additional assurances around animal care and environmental stewardship are going to grow in their influence on price and market access. The winners will be those who can combine all these demand drivers."

When we first met with Certified Angus Beef, we talked about work we'd done with some of their Angus Association members like Justin and Nathan Spickler, at Glenfield, ND. DU helped cost share fencing, water tanks powered by solar panels, cover crop seeding for grazing and soil health. Positive conservation practices put in with the help of the ND Outdoor Heritage Fund in pursuit of our habitat mission, but also realizing that what's good for the grass is good for the cows is good for the ducks. Or, as Bruce Cobb, executive vp of production for CAB, says, "Healthy ecosystems come along as a byproduct of raising the best tasting beef." And it's a pretty valuable byproduct for all of us. After several meetings, including some out here on the ND prairie, CAB and DU formalized an ongoing collaboration at the Angus Convention in Fort Worth and launched the Working Grasslands Conservation Initiative. It's an initiative that can go to the CAB marketplace with the validation and quantification of a conservation partner like Ducks Unlimited. When CAB tells customers their producers are improving the environment because ranchers like Justin and Nathan Spickler in Glenfield, and Joe Mongeon in Rolette, and their families, are protecting vital grassland ecosystems, they can show it with words and pictures and data with DU agronomists and biologists. That's how conservation helps provide a win in the food marketplace. It's hopeful and exciting.

Likewise, we believe this proposal for SBARE is hopeful and exciting. There's a lot going on in the conservation space, and Extension can and should play a part in it, in both research and outreach to the furthest corners and the longest dirt driveways in North Dakota. To borrow one more quote from our CAB friend and partner, Bruce Cobb, taken from the Drover's Journal in July, 2022, "If you have a cattle operation, you have vets, nutritionists, risk managers, bankers and tax accountants. Why not have somebody to help you understand the health of your land?" I think that speaks to this proposal. Four positions that can help people understand the health of their land, and the livestock and crops and wildlife and families that depend on that land being healthy tomorrow and for generations to come.

I'm happy to take any questions you might have, or answer them at your leisure if you care to drop me a line at rtaylor@ducks.org or call me at 701-537-3632. Thank you.