

Endangered Species Act Congressional Working Group Forum on
“Reviewing 40 Years of the Endangered Species Act and
Seeking Improvement for People and Species”

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Madam Chair, members of the Working Group, my name is Ross Melinchuk. I am the Deputy Executive Director for Natural Resources at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the state agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife resources in Texas. Texas is second only to California in its biodiversity, with over 5,000 species of plants, 1,200 species of vertebrates, and an estimated 30,000 species of invertebrates. Currently, there are 103 species listed as federally threatened or endangered in Texas. Over the next several years, this number could increase by almost 80% if all the species under consideration for listing by the Fish and Wildlife Service were to be listed.

Texas is a big state with nearly 168 million acres of land, over 95% of which is privately owned. Private landowners in Texas provide habitat for thousands of species, while at the same time leading the nation in the production of cattle, cotton, hay, and other agricultural commodities. Texas is also the nation's leader in oil, gas and wind energy production. As you might expect with such diverse resources and a robust economy, Texas is a popular place to live. Over 25 million people live in Texas, a number that is expected to grow to 32 million by 2050. It is critical that we strike a balance between the needs of our growing population and the needs of our fish and wildlife, now and for the foreseeable future.

We believe state fish and wildlife agencies are best suited to do this. TPWD understands the needs and desires of Texas landowners; our biologists and game wardens work with them daily to accomplish our mutual goals. We have nearly 8,000 wildlife management plans in place on 30 million acres of privately-owned land throughout Texas. To be successful, we must develop wildlife conservation programs that are embraced by landowners and which if implemented in a timely

and effective manner, will preclude the need to list species. Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) and other prelisting tools are an effective way to accomplish this and should be a primary focus for limited Fish and Wildlife Service resources. In the Texas Panhandle, we currently have over 500,000 acres of land voluntarily enrolled in CCAA's for the lesser prairie chicken in an effort to keep this species from being listed.

But we can be even more proactive. Comprehensive wildlife action plans have been developed in all 50 states and provide the blueprint for conserving species of greatest conservation need **before** federal involvement becomes necessary. The State Wildlife Grant program currently provides funding to implement these action plans, but it is limited and uncertain. Securing adequate funding is a challenge these days, but we are certain that it costs far less to keep a species off the endangered list, and under state management authority, than it does to contend with a listed species.

Experience has shown that Texas landowners will do the right thing if their natural heritage is threatened, provided they are not saddled with financial or regulatory burdens by doing so. Amending the Endangered Species Act to streamline and expand voluntary, incentive-based agreements at the state level would be a first step in meeting the conservation challenges of the future. Providing state fish and wildlife agencies with an avenue for a more active and collaborative role with the Fish and Wildlife Service in the ESA process, from prelisting to recovery, may help reduce the number of species listed, improve recovery results, and facilitate more locally-led, science-based conservation actions on the ground.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.