

RECOVERING AMERICA'S WILDLIFE ACT: AN UPDATE

By Melissa J. Panella

The grinning child with her first harvested turkey, the angler with the biggest catch of his life, the longtime birder with a new state record in her sight – people of all walks of life value abundant wildlife for varied reasons. Plants and animals and the habitats they depend upon offer us bountiful enjoyment and recreational opportunities, in addition to playing vital roles in ecosystems. New research shows that time spent outdoors even improves our overall health and well-being.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission works diligently to conserve the state's natural legacy, but this charge can be daunting. The number of people and financial resources to take on the workload often pales in comparison to the demands brought on by habitat loss, disease, invasive species and other threats to wildlife. Nebraska is not alone. States across the country share in the mission to conserve all native wildlife, but often with not enough resources to do so.

Wildlife professionals and others who care about this issue have long been exploring ways to fund the recovery of declining populations of native plants and animals and keep common species common. Traditional wildlife funding sources such as hunting and fishing licenses are an important contributor to conservation, but not all species of greatest conservation need are eligible to use those funds.

The most recent and promising effort to date for a funding solution comes in the form of Recovering America's Wildlife Act, introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives on July 12, 2019, under leadership by Congressman Jeff Fortenberry (R) of Nebraska and Congresswoman Debbie Dingell (D) of Michigan. This bipartisan legislation has created a path that will lead to increased resources for state wildlife agencies and their partnering organizations to help prevent the need to add species to endangered or threatened lists, and to increase populations of the most at-risk wildlife. A new title to the legislation is dedicated to supporting conservation strategies on tribal lands and territories as well.

In Nebraska, Recovering America's Wildlife Act would enhance our grasslands, combat invasive species, restore wetlands, maintain water quality and improve our woodlands.

We could begin catching up on much needed inventory, monitoring and research of wildlife populations. More environmental education programs will be offered. There would be additional outdoor recreation opportunities available.

Current estimates indicate that Nebraska would receive approximately \$16.5 million in federal funds if the Act is passed. The funds to make this possible would come from existing sources, including fees from energy and mineral development on federal lands and waters. This money can be strategically applied to conservation, while being shared with private landowners and others willing to conserve land and water to benefit wildlife.

Nebraska has a track record of success with the Natural Legacy Project, where willing landowners have received cost-shares to enhance over 50,000 acres every year to benefit wildlife by finding common ground since 2005. The Act would result in grants for universities, nonprofit organizations and community

groups to put the responsibility of conservation directly in the hands of the highly capable people who live, study, work and undertake recreation in Nebraska's biologically unique landscapes. This support will help the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project meet its full potential.

Many outdoor enthusiasts, hunters, anglers, scientists and businesses are supporting the Recovering America's Wildlife Act as a way to get in front of the conservation challenges at hand. More than 1,000 scientists and hundreds of businesses around the country have signed a letter of support. Over 160 members of Congress have been called to action by their constituents and have signed as co-sponsors on this bipartisan legislation. The House Natural Resources Committee recently voted 26-6 in favor of advancing the legislation. The list of supporters is growing. Nebraskans have the chance to be part of the solution to conserve the full array of fish and wildlife today and for future generations.

To learn more, visit ournatureusa.com.

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