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Address Given by the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Steve Williams

US Fish and Wildlife Service

Washington, DC

Thank you, Rollie. It is an incredible honor and opportunity to address old friends and to offer my views from a national fish and wildlife management perspective.

First, I want to thank the Wildlife Management Institute for having made the North American the venue for professionals to discuss the issues facing our profession. I also would like to express my gratitude to both President George W. Bush and Interior Secretary Gale Norton for selecting me to serve as the 14th Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

For the last 22 years, both as a graduate student and state wildlife director, I have looked forward to attending the North American Conference. Having the opportunity to address this session as the Service Director never really entered my mind. This is truly an honor.

I have been on the job now for just two months, and I realize I still have much to learn. What I have seen so far has reinforced my previous ideas about what the Service and the wildlife management profession must do to prepare for the future. We must restore balance to our fish and wildlife conservation mission.

As the theme of this conference implies, it often pays to look back, before moving forward. Theodore Roosevelt was a legendary, national, conservation leader. Throughout his life, he embodied the spirit of the original conservationist. An avid outdoorsman, he enjoyed hunting and fishing. He recognized the detrimental impact of market hunting and the reckless attitudes that led to the disappearance of the great buffalo herds and to the extinction of the passenger pigeon.

In fact, it was the market hunting of water birds for plumage that led Roosevelt to one of his greatest tasks. Having learned about the slaughter of birds on Pelican Island, Roosevelt asked if there was any law to prevent him from declaring the place a Federal Bird Reservation. Being told there was not, he said, "Very well, then I so declare it." Before Roosevelt left office, he had

signed 51 executive orders establishing wildlife refuges in 17 states and territories. From his vision, the refuge system has grown to encompass 538 National Wildlife Refuges, more than 94 million acres of important wildlife habitats. These areas provide great opportunities for fishing, hunting, trapping, birdwatching and other outdoor recreation.

Roosevelt understood that there must be a balance between preservation and conservation. As a true conservationist, he realized that natural resources are a national asset that should be conserved—that is, used wisely. The resources that Roosevelt helped to conserve are the very resources that our society depends upon today to stimulate our national economy and to encourage future fish and wildlife conservation. Today, we celebrate Roosevelt's legacy of balance.

As we enter the 21st century, the wildlife management profession has its own balancing act to accomplish. Once, state and federal fish and wildlife agencies focused primarily on restoring and managing game species. Today, it must devote more time to nongame and endangered species. As our conservation mission has expanded, I fear we may have left some of our traditional constituencies behind. It is time to renew our partnership with America's sportsmen and women, those whose ethics and support have been the backbone of wildlife conservation for more than a century. Hunters and anglers deserve to be pivotal partners in fish and wildlife conservation.

As Director of the Service, it is my goal to restore the balance to fish and wildlife conservation. To achieve this goal, I am focusing on two important areas. The first is the need to repair the integrity and credibility of the wildlife profession's scientific reputation. The second is the need to strengthen partnerships, which includes improving the Service's relationship with the diverse wildlife conservation community, including states, industry, nongovernmental organizations, sportsmen and women, and private landowners.

Let us take the science issues first. When I accepted this job, I never imagined that it would be incumbent on me to defend the Service's scientific integrity. After all, the Service has a long and distinguished history of scientific accomplishment, from Rachel Carson and her research on the impacts of DDT to Olaus Murie and the establishment of the wilderness concept. The agency has an impressive record of scientific accomplishment. Yet, recent events have raised public concerns about the scientific credibility of the Service. These

public perceptions threaten fish and wildlife conservation efforts on a national scale.

All of us in the wildlife management profession are vulnerable to questioning. When the arcane details of wildlife population survey techniques become the fodder for editorials and Congressional hearings, it is sobering to realize how closely our profession is scrutinized. If we lose the public's trust, our ability to direct resource conservation will be undermined severely, and we will find it nearly impossible to be effective fish and wildlife stewards.

If the wildlife management profession is to be taken seriously, we must demand solid and legally defensible science. Our science must be impeccable. It must be beyond reproach. We must also bring balance to our decisions.

That balance comes from common sense, open communication and an understanding of those who are ultimately affected by our decisions. We must be careful not to win every battle, yet lose the war. Our focus must be long-term, big-picture conservation benefits.

That brings me to the topic of partnerships. The Service values all of its partnerships, but it cannot deny that the relationship with the state agencies has been strained. As Director, I am committed to see the Service strengthen its ties with the states. Having spent 16 years working for state fish and wildlife agencies, I have a deep appreciation and respect for the scientific expertise and local perspective that state employees bring to the table. Those abilities must be called upon as the Service addresses its science issues. The states can help by adding their expertise, providing peer review, engaging the public when management alternatives are devised and being partners in the decision-making process.

There are many other areas where the Service and the states can work more closely as well. I know many of you have excellent, innovative programs to engage our constituents and improve conservation.

As Service Director, I want to learn from your programs and help promote them. The Bush Administration is committed to strengthening federal-state partnerships. I am happy to announce that, under the new State Wildlife Grants program, the Service is making 80 million dollars in federal grants available to state wildlife programs. Last week, you should have received the implementation guidelines for this new program. These cost-share grants should help to build on existing programs and develop plans for protecting and restoring species with the greatest need.

Additional sources of funding are on their way. Soon, expect to see proposals in the Federal Register for the implementation of the Landowner Incentive Program and the Private Stewardship Grants. These two competitive programs total 50 million dollars to encourage private landowners to undertake wildlife conservation activities on their own property.

An even bigger partnership initiative is included in the President's 2003 budget request. I refer to Secretary Norton's \$100 million Cooperative Conservation Initiative. This initiative provides resources for landowners, land-user groups, environmental organizations, communities, federal, state, and local governments, and businesses to undertake innovative land conservation projects on local, state and federal lands.

These programs can strengthen the relationship between the states and the Service. With this new funding, we can work more closely to address several major wildlife management issues.

The first of these is the problem of overabundant wildlife, including snow geese, cormorants and resident Canada geese. In these instances, the Service provides states with greater flexibility to manage these issues.

On the other hand, we need to do more to address the decline of many bird populations. Soon, the Service will release an updated list of birds of conservation concern. My hope is that this list, and all bird conservation plans, will rally efforts across the country to save birds that have suffered habitat and population losses. Species included on the list will be given priority for funding research, monitoring and management. Through the combined efforts of agencies, organizations and individuals, we can return species to their natural abundance and keep them off the endangered species list.

Of course, when we talk about restoring balance, the Endangered Species Act invariably comes up. The Service has made progress by working with the some of the states and local groups to develop conservation agreements to prevent the need to list a species. I am determined to finalize the policy on evaluating conservation efforts. The policy will define criteria that the Service will use to measure the effectiveness of conservation agreements and measures. It is intended to strengthen state involvement in the process. Other efforts to improve the Endangered Species Act are being contemplated from a regulatory and administrative perspective.

We must restore balance in fisheries as well. As many of you know, the Service's Fisheries Program is seeking to define its priorities. Over the past two

years, the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council has helped the Service to address issues facing the Fisheries Program. The Council, a broad-based coalition that includes state agencies, industry, conservation organizations, academia and tourism interests, has formed a steering committee to look at the needs of our Fisheries Program.

In a report, entitled *A Partnership Agenda for Fisheries Conservation*, the committee recommends that the Fisheries Program be solidly funded, backed by sound science and grounded in dynamic partnerships with stakeholders. Further, it encourages the Fisheries Program to take a leadership role to stem the tide of habitat degradation that threatens fisheries and aquatic species across the country. The Service concurs with these recommendations and plans to work with the steering committee and the Council to develop implementation and communication plans. I look forward to meeting the challenges as the Service strengthens and revitalizes its Fisheries Program.

Lastly, I would like to close with an invitation. We hope you will join us in 2003 for the centennial celebration of the National Wildlife Refuge System. I already have described how Theodore Roosevelt established the first wildlife refuge on Pelican Island. True to Roosevelt's concept of balanced conservation, the wildlife refuge idea serves not to preserve wildlife sanctuaries, but rather to conserve wildlife habitat. Today, we have 538 national wildlife refuges, with at least one in every state. Yet, the National Wildlife Refuge System remains one of America's best kept secrets. With the Refuge Centennial, we plan to change that. I encourage you to join us to make the strongest possible impact on this grand occasion.

There are many opportunities for the Service, the states and other partners to work more closely together. In all we do, we should keep in mind trust, mutual respect and Roosevelt's legacy of balance. To move forward, we must stay true to our roots. Sound science and solid partnerships have been and continue to be the key to our nation's wildlife conservation success. I want to thank you for listening and for sharing in this success.