

**TESTIMONY OF TOM HEMKER  
IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME  
BEFORE THE HOUSE AGRICULTURAL COMMITTEE  
MAY 27, 1995**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Tom Hemker and I am the Program Manager for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's Upland Game and Private Land Habitat Program. Thank-you for allowing me to testify today on the 1995 Federal Farm Bill and how it can affect Idaho's fish and wildlife.

Your actions as a committee will have a profound impact on Idaho's fish and wildlife. Even in Idaho, which includes the largest wilderness areas in the continental United States, the vast majority of wildlife species use land affected by agriculture during at least some part of the year. From private forestland and rangeland to nearly 6 million acres of traditional cropland, agriculture is an integral part of Idaho.

First, like most other speakers, I want to address the importance of the Conservation Reserve Program to Idaho. CRP has provided important habitat to many species of wildlife and critical habitat to some, including the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. This native upland gamebird has declined by over 95% since the turn of the century and the last large populations exist here in Idaho. Before CRP, this bird was declining even here in Idaho but the addition of key areas of CRP in the eastern part of the state has changed this. Populations have increased dramatically and harvest is 10 times what it was a decade ago. Increases have occurred to the extent

that birds are being trapped and transplanted to restored habitat in Idaho and other parts of the West. Transplant of Idaho birds could eventually reestablish populations in California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Montana and Utah. Loss of CRP will, however, probably result in the end of Columbian sharp-tailed hunting and eventually its extinction throughout its range. This resource is worth several million dollars every year in economic activity by hunters and nonconsumptive viewers. I hope that the Committee will do everything it can to maintain habitat for this unique bird and other grassland wildlife.

Big game hunting is a major industry here in Idaho. About \$110 million dollars a year is generated for the state's economy by resident and nonresident hunters. As Congressmen Crapo and Chenoweth know, during the drought of recent years big game damage to privately-owned crops was a major problem in Idaho. Millions of dollars of state and private funds have been spent to help alleviate damage to our agricultural producers. Without CRP this damage would have been even greater than was suffered. Many CRP fields are located in key areas for wintering big game and help protect Idaho's farmers and ranchers as well as protect the hunting opportunity so important to Idahoans. I urge you to allow this important wildlife habitat to be reenrolled into CRP.

Water and the quality of that water is an issue that is near and dear to people that live here in the arid West. CRP and other Farm Programs have been doing a lot to improve that water quality. If

we are to maintain our aquatic resources we need to maintain the health and productivity of our waterways. The 1995 Farm Bill plays an important part in this effort and I hope it will continue to provide the leadership needed to improve water quality for salmon and other aquatic life so important to us here in Idaho.

In the time I have left I would like to provide three specific recommendations on the 1995 Conservation Title:

- 1) Wildlife conservation should be a co-equal objective with soil erosion control and water quality improvement. This will insure that the most important wildlife habitat is conserved and that Farm Programs provide multiple conservation benefits.
- 2) Cropped wetlands and Water Bank Program lands should be made eligible for CRP enrollment. This provides **INCENTIVE NOT REGULATION** for landowners to conserve wetlands. I realize that the Wetland Reserve Program can also do this but WRP lacks the flexibility important to many producers.
- 3) Finally, a number of groups in Idaho, including the Idaho Farm Bureau and Pheasants Forever, have been working to have the eligibility criteria for CRP and WRP changed to allow enrollment of riparian habitats within 150 feet of cropland in the arid West. These acreages are small and enrollment would be relatively inexpensive but these habitats are extremely important to conserve in the arid West. My colleagues

throughout the West have told me repeatedly that riparian habitat improvement is desperately needed in their states also.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game is a partner in improving and maintaining wildlife habitat on private agricultural land. In the last several years, we have worked with over 5,000 landowners and completed habitat projects on about 3,000 parcels covering over 60,000 acres. We have provided over \$1.8 million in cost-share funds to help private landowners develop habitat on their land. Private landowners, private conservation groups and the Department will continue to improve and restore habitat in Idaho. I hope that the 1995 Farm Bill can be a partner in our effort.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for taking the time to come here to Idaho. I will be happy to answer any questions.

# Idaho Sharp-tailed Grouse

## Harvest vs CRP Acreage in Eastern Idaho

