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GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

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Ducks Unlimited advises Congress on bird populations Chief Biologist recommends water protection to benefit people and ducks

WASHINGTON – July 10, 2008 – Testifying before a Congressional committee today, Ducks Unlimited Chief Biologist, Dale Humburg identified several key factors in declining bird populations across North America: Loss of grassland nesting habitat, deterioration of coastal wetlands and loss of protected wetlands in all parts of the country.

“Changes in bird numbers and their distribution can be taken as strong signals that key environmental functions are ‘broken,’” said Humburg. “Birds serve as the proverbial ‘canary in the coal mine,’” but on a continental scale.”

Humburg testified before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife in a hearing about declining bird populations across the continent, and identified several key waterfowl species that are in decline, as well as the diverse causes for those declines. Due to various reasons for the population losses, Humburg stated that effective conservation was less about managing individual species, and more about “protecting or restoring habitats and ecological processes at a landscape scale.”

The solution, according to Humburg, lies in fully utilizing existing programs to the maximum benefit of people and waterfowl. Several conservation programs carried out by the Department of Agriculture support small farmers and ranchers, provide grazing land for cattle, and sequester atmospheric carbon while at the same time providing waterfowl habitat. The Conservation Reserve Program alone has been responsible for more than 2.2 million additional ducks in the fall migration each year, while also providing needed grassland reserves for times of drought.

Humburg also identified the Clean Water Act as one of the critical tools to both promoting healthy waterfowl populations and healthy areas for humans as well. Improved water quality, flood protection, and recreational opportunities are all benefits of wetland protection. Currently, a bill to restore the Clean Water Act is pending in both the House and Senate. It could revise recent regulations that eliminated certain protections for wetlands. Ducks Unlimited supports this legislation.

Mitigating the effects of climate change, both in the Northern Great Plains and in Canada’s Western Boreal Forests, will also offset impacts to bird populations. Many

birds, including species in decline like Greater and Lesser Scaup, use boreal forests for nesting.

With more than a million supporters, Ducks Unlimited is the world's largest and most effective wetland and waterfowl conservation organization with more than 12 million acres conserved. The United States alone has lost more than half of its original wetlands – nature's most productive ecosystem – and continues to lose more than 80,000 wetland acres important to waterfowl each year.

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