

**STATEMENT OF
W. ELTON KENNEDY
TO THE
SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
REGARDING
PRESERVING AND PROTECTING OUR NATURAL RESOURCES**

Presented by
W. Elton Kennedy
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Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Grassley, my Honorable Senator John Breaux and distinguished committee members. My name is Elton Kennedy and I live in Mer Rouge, Louisiana. I'm in the agricultural business which includes crops such as rice, cotton, corn, wheat, soybeans, milo, as well as timber and wildlife. My investments in land are located in Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas. I am currently participating in WRP in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas and CRP in Louisiana. I have placed conservation easements on property in Colorado. Also, I have sold the United States Fish & Wildlife Service numerous properties in Louisiana, some directly and some indirectly through conservation organizations.

I have lived in an era that has seen most of our great Mississippi River alluvial flood plain converted from bottom land hardwoods to crop production. This huge conversion of approximately 20,000,000 acres to only 4,000,000 acres of remaining bottom land hardwoods happened in less than 35 years. It was due to not only to high soybean prices, but also to the encouragement of a society that did not realize the consequences of its actions. Over the last decade, we have seen many individuals go bankrupt in the farming business because of this lack of foresight.

As is the case with many farmers, I try to utilize my land for its highest and best use in order to make it economically viable. Many years ago, I realized, my highest and best use was not always crop production. Due to a high recreational demand by the public and the compatibility with rice farming, many of us in northeast Louisiana and other parts of the Lower Mississippi Valley have found that waterfowl hunting offers an alternative that can be economically rewarding. Waterfowl hunters are willing to pay for hunting in rice or other flooded agricultural fields. Other types of wildlife oriented recreation offer similar possibilities with an incentive to the landowner.

I might add that not only do waterfowl benefit from this new attention to wetland habitat, but shorebirds and wading birds as well. Water control structures and technical assistance for habitat

development are being furnished through the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Wildlife Program. This mix of rice farming and waterfowl habitat development has reduced herbicide usage, helped recharge aquifers, and improved water quality.

During the late 1980s I began to take advantage of conservation programs offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Fish and Wildlife Service, and other nonprofit conservation organizations like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Ducks Unlimited. Utilizing conservation easements and technical assistance from the respective agencies has allowed me to diversify my agribusiness interests and to put more reliance on the natural productivity of the land on a more sustained basis.

Conservation easements such as the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and the Partners for Wildlife Program have enabled me to economically convert marginal farm land to wildlife habitat. This conversion has included former cropland that is now restored wetlands and former overgrazed pasture that is now prime elk range. Needless to say that as a former Board Member of the Louisiana Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited Life Sponsor, and an active member of Safari Club International, Wild Turkey Federation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, this perpetual restoration has given me great pleasure because of my strong interest in wildlife conservation.

I must say, however, that without the financial considerations of these conservation incentives, I would not have been able to make the switch in many cases. Even today, many of these USDA programs such as WRP are unfunded and the current tax deduction for qualified agricultural producers does not provide meaningful incentives for landowners to donate an easement. The result of this current situation is that tremendous conservation benefits are missed and we continue to support marginal agricultural operations on lands that are far better suited to conservation.

Unfortunately, not all of us in Louisiana own or lease land that is suited for both rice and commercial duck hunting. Most of us, however, do own land that can be restored to woodland for the benefit of a whole host of wildlife species including migratory song birds whose numbers are on the decline, resident game animals, and the threatened Louisiana black bear. Landowners just need the incentive to make this transition. After all, 74.0% of all wetlands are owned by private landowners.

I own a substantial acreage of farmland around Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge which is located in northeast Louisiana. This historic tract of bottom land hardwood was the last home for the now extinct ivory-billed woodpecker, and some of the last occupied range of the red wolf, and Eastern cougar in Louisiana. Today it has been identified as an important migratory bird zone for expansion of habitat for many species of neotropical song birds whose populations are being reduced globally. Utilizing WRP and conservation easements, I have already enrolled or I'm in the process of restoring most of this acreage to bottom land hardwoods and wetlands.

My restoration, along with other private landowners will increase the base size of the Texas woodlands, thus increasing the productivity of many interior sensitive species of song birds by reducing the effect of fragmentation. The brown-headed cow bird parasitizes the nests of many of these species if they are in fragmented habitat. In addition the threatened Louisiana black bear will benefit from increased habitat.

In my home state of Louisiana, the WRP has enrolled 140,000 acres of marginal farm land for the benefit of soil conservation, water quality, air quality, a host of fish and wildlife species, and has benefited the American tax payer by reducing the financial burden of supporting agriculture that was marginal at best. The tragedy of this program is that in Louisiana alone another 500 applicants representing an additional 102,000 acres cannot be enrolled because the program has capped out and no funds or authority exists to continue this valuable program next year.

Government programs cannot provide all the protection or restoration that is needed. We must utilize a combination of conservation easements and government programs to restore and to protect unspoiled areas. I have personally donated 3,400 acres of my Colorado ranch to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's conservation easement program. This critical migration and winter range will be perpetually protected as open space. We must increase tax advantages to the landowner to make this program and similar programs offered by The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wildlife Federation and others reach their full potential.

I've been fortunate to be able to diversify my agribusiness operations and to take advantage of these conservation programs, but others have not been so fortunate and bankruptcy continues to be a problem in the farming community on marginal land. We desperately need more conservation programs and technical assistance to diversify our operations and at the same time protect and restore our important ecological communities. Long term protection and restoration of marginal farmland are so important to not only protecting the economy and the well being of the family farm, but protecting the environment as well.

I urge you to provide adequate incentives for all landowners to protect existing wildlife habitat and to restore marginal farmland that was once part of our Mississippi Alluvial Plain. It will provide for a cleaner environment, provide habitat for wildlife, reduce the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and reduce the tax payers burden by reducing crop insurance, disaster payments and other associated costs for keeping marginal farmland in production.