

**STATEMENT OF HENRI BISSON**

**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR RENEWABLE RESOURCES AND PLANNING**

**BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT**

on

**H.R. 4790 Hunting Heritage Protection Act**

**BEFORE THE**

**HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS**

**JULY 20, 2000**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee;

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding H.R. 4790. Recreational hunting on public lands is a longstanding tradition which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) support to the fullest extent. The vast majority of the public lands are open to recreational hunting. These Agencies strongly oppose this legislation because it would be difficult and costly to administer; moreover, we feel this legislation is not needed.

Management of wildlife habitat on Federal lands is the cooperative responsibility of the Federal Agencies and respective State fish and wildlife agencies. State fish and wildlife agencies regulate hunting within their respective states, except in the case of migratory wildlife, such as waterfowl, where the USFWS has responsibility for setting hunting regulations and monitoring population levels.

Hunting is permitted on most BLM and USFS administered public lands, where consistent with State hunting laws and regulations, unless those laws and regulations would permit activities that conflict with land use plan and resource management responsibilities. Hunting, fishing, and trapping of fish and wildlife and associated practices on most Federal lands are subject to State fish and wildlife laws and regulations. Most State wildlife management agencies have agreements with the Federal agencies to jointly manage the wildlife populations and habitats on Federal lands. These agreements basically provide the lead for population management to State wildlife agencies and the lead for habitat management to Federal agencies.

Hunting on Federal land has provided a positive force in habitat conservation, support for wildlife restoration, and significant benefits to State and regional economies throughout the nation. For example, in a 1996 study, people using the National Forest System for hunting spent 27.8 million activity days with estimated economic expenditures of \$2.1 billion in retail sales, \$1.69 billion in salaries and wages, and supported 72,719 (FTE) jobs for the U.S. economy. Hunting within the National Forest System also provided tax revenues by generating \$105.7 million in state sales tax, \$32.6 million in state income tax revenues, and \$181.7 million in federal income tax revenues.

Opportunities to hunt within the National Wildlife Refuge System of the USFWS are spread coast to coast with 49 states having at least one refuge open to hunting, and its importance is reflected in its inclusion as one of the priority wildlife dependent recreation activities listed in the Refuge Improvement Act (P. L. 105-57). In 1999, the USFWS had 287 refuges open to public hunting. These refuges represent a vast majority of all refuge acreage. Additional refuges will open for the 2000-2001 season to different types of

hunting in Alabama, Louisiana, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

Hunters have been vital partners in the success of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In response to the drought of the early 1930s and its devastating effects on our Nation's waterfowl, Congress passed the Duck Stamp Act in 1934 requiring waterfowl hunters over the age of 16 to possess a Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp. Hunters generated revenues; crucial nesting and resting habitat in the Upper Midwest was protected; and, waterfowl populations rebounded, benefitting hunters across the Nation. Today these prairie jewels are waterfowl production areas, units of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and are open for the public to enjoy. They reflect the successful partnership between hunters and the USFWS -- a partnership that benefits both wildlife and people.

Let me now discuss some specific reasons why the Federal land management agencies cannot support this legislation.

In most cases, hunting is an environmentally acceptable activity that is currently available on federally-managed BLM lands and waters. However, there may be specific instances where hunting may adversely affect other uses of the land and water. For instance, in some areas and during certain times of the year, hunting may create safety hazards or conflict with other land use activities. These situations should be judged by local managers on a case-by-case basis through specific land use planning and environmental analysis.

The language in Section 3 (a) could be interpreted to mean that hunting will always be allowed unless there is a specific provision of law that would require a closure. It may be interpreted so as to preclude making site specific judgments about the need for closure on a case-by-case basis through land use planning and site specific management plans. Currently, these decisions are made through a planning process that allows considerable public input, including State and local governments and user groups.

The No Net Loss provision (Section 3 (c)) is extremely impractical to administer. When a closure to hunting occurs, lands would have to be acquired or opened to hunting to replace the lands that are closed. For instance, if a new recreational development were built on a 40-acre tract and the tract was closed to hunting to provide for public safety, an acquisition or opening of 40 acres elsewhere would be required. This would be very difficult to fund and would unnecessarily complicate the management of Federal lands. It also would impose new and expensive administrative burdens to maintain a Nation-wide data base on Federal lands open to hunting.

The No Priority provision section states that preference to hunting over other uses is not required but, in effect, other sections of the bill do seem to give priority to hunting over other uses. This standard is arbitrary and would be difficult to measure. What is open and available for hunting is often a matter of personal perspective. For example, those who prefer to hunt in a non-motorized, back-country setting on horseback or on foot might feel that a decision to open a road to motorized travel in their favorite hunting area would result in the loss of a hunting opportunity.

Section 4 (a) establishes a National Recreational Hunting Coordination Council. This section is too vague and does not provide specific guidance regarding how Council responsibilities will be carried out or how Federal agencies will relate to the Council. It is unclear whether the Council is advisory in nature. In addition, it is unclear whether Federal agencies would be bound by law to follow the required plan. There is no provision for staffing or funding authorization for the Council's activities. The Council appears to be a bureaucratic entity that requires additional coordination requirements for Federal agencies in carrying out their land management responsibilities.

Section 4 (e) requires the development of a Recreational Hunting Resources Conservation Plan. This section could be construed to mean that hunting access takes priority over the need to regulate motorized vehicles or other kinds of access on Federal lands where hunting opportunities are available. These kinds

of decisions are now made through local land use plans with the input from the public and local user groups, wildlife management agencies and State and local governments.

The Federal land management agencies are currently taking positive, proactive steps to improve wildlife habitats that can positively impact hunting opportunities. Rather than devote staff and resources in support of another oversight board (the proposed National Recreational Hunting Coordination Council).

The Administration would prefer to utilize our limited resources in support of the broad budget themes identified in our FY 2001 budget submission. BLM's budget requests include:

- -\$19 million to update land use plans to accurately address the growing demands and needs of the Federal lands for a wide variety of resource decisions and uses.
- -\$14 million for the Restoration of Threatened Watersheds, including clean water initiatives, eradicating invasive weeds, and managing Wild Horse and Burro populations, thereby improving habitat and the resultant hunting opportunities.
- -\$16 million to proactively address operational issues relating to the protection and management of BLM's public land treasures. Included are restoration efforts on sagebrush and prairie grassland ecosystems, home to more than 100 bird and 70 mammal species.
- -These initiatives will support widespread improvement of Federal lands for multiple resource benefits, including improved wildlife habitat and, as a result, improved opportunities for recreational hunting.

Mr. Chairman, for all of these reasons we strongly oppose this Bill. We remain committed to improving wildlife habitats and to encouraging hunting as a recreational use of the Federal lands, but we feel this legislation is unnecessary and costly.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.