

Proponent Testimony to HB 2541 by the Kansas Corn Growers Association, Kansas Farm Bureau and Kansas Association of Wheat Growers

House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, January 24, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Rahjes and members of the committee for the opportunity to address the above organization's views on HB 2541. My name is Josh Roe and I serve as the CEO of the Kansas Corn Growers Association (KCGA). KCGA represents more than 1,100 members on state and national legislative and regulatory issues and actively works with other organizations to maximize the voice of Kansas corn producers. Kansas Farm Bureau is the state's largest general farm organization representing more than 30,000 farm and ranch families through the 105 county Farm Bureau Associations. The Kansas Association of Wheat Growers is a member-governed organization representing wheat growers in planning legislation, advising government and international agencies on matters affecting wheat and providing grass-roots leadership to the U.S. wheat industry.

Our organizations are also members of Kansans for Conservation (KFC), a diverse coalition of organizations that was brought together to address the growing need for dedicated funding aimed at conservation in Kansas. Conservation is the proper management of our natural resources and there are few investments more critical to the quality of life in Kansas. Our economic success, public health, and future generations are dependent upon us maintaining and improving these resources. Currently, the state is failing to provide the proper funding for this work and is subsequently losing out on federal or private matching dollars to the 35 states that have already established dedicated conservation funding, including all four of our neighbors.

Kansas is currently one of only fifteen states across the country that does not have dedicated conservation funding. What's more, all four of our neighbors, Oklahoma, Colorado, Nebraska, and Missouri have Constitutionally protected conservation funding. Kansas is falling behind in protecting its natural resources and wildlife and promoting tourism and hunting. HB 2541 would help address this issue and bring us more in line with what other states are doing.

This bill brought forth by KFC would help address the issue by redirecting funding, putting half of it to parks and recreation and wildlife, and half of it towards working lands agriculture. Working lands conservation programs are the bedrock of conservation in agriculture. Working lands programs are not only vital for conservation efforts, they also give the greatest flexibility to landowners, allowing for continued agricultural use. Having a dedicated funding pool available to help match federal dollars would greatly benefit the members of our collective organizations.

One such example of how these funds could be used is the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Established by Congress in 1964, the LWCF was a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources, and to provide recreation opportunities to all

Americans. The fund helps strengthen communities, preserve history and protect the national endowment of lands and waters. This program has provided more than \$5.2 billion in grants to state governments to partner with landowners in support of voluntary conservation activities on private lands and for the development of outdoor recreation sites.

Unfortunately, Kansas has historically missed out on these funds. Since the establishment of LWCF, Kansas has received \$102 million less than our average neighboring state with a dedicated funding for state conservation. Much of this is due to the inability of applicants in Kansas to provide any state match, much less a competitive one. This is just one example of the millions in federal dollars we miss out on.

The KFC bill would also help build rural communities, in which the vast majority of our collective organization's members reside. One such member is a fifth-generation farmer in Ness, Trego, and Lane counties, remembers when relatives and friends spread across the state and neighboring states would travel for opening weekend of pheasant hunting. He remembers waking up early, before the sunrise, and eventually hearing the countryside ringing with the sound of shotguns blasting away. Local businesses were at capacity for much of the hunting season and many community organizations received significant funding by hosting meals and events for out of area hunters.

Unfortunately, these decades-long traditions gradually began to fade after upland bird populations declined to where now only a few of the once plentiful birds remain. Naturally, with fewer birds, fewer hunters now visit the area, and with them, fewer dollars are being spent on lodging, food, and fuel. While Kansas had long been a hot spot for hunters to congregate every winter, we have seen this celebration of nature and sport all but vanish, heading to our competition, states like South Dakota.

How have states like South Dakota stolen what was once an impressive tourist attraction? What are they doing that we are failing to do as a state? Among many things, South Dakota has looked at pheasants as a commodity to ramp up tourism every year where Kansas has done little to stop the decline. South Dakota has invested in their natural resources with dedicated conservation funds that address bounty programs, walk-in-hunting-areas, and more. Their dollars help farmers to not only improve existing potential hunting areas, but also develop new ones. This bill could help bring some of this lost tourism and revenue back.

Further, conservation funding, and the means of funding it proposed, are popular with the voting public. According to polling, over 80 percent of respondents said they approved of dedicating existing state sales-tax revenue generated from sales of hunting, fishing, wildlife-watching, and outdoor recreational equipment to conservation. In the same poll, over three-quarters of respondents said they approved of using one-third of lottery revenues for conservation. Finally, when asked about using taxes on sports gambling, nearly two-thirds were in favor.

The bill utilizes existing funding mechanisms without increasing taxes to pay for this dedicated pool of conservation funding. First, it would redirect some of the state lottery prize revenue. The Kansas Lottery Act requires that at least 45% of total lottery revenue goes towards prizes. Since its creation in 1988, an average of 55% has gone towards prizes. From FY 2017-2022, 60.06% of the total revenue went to prizes, with a .66% average increase every year for the past decade. The bill would annually transfer \$32 million (approximately 10%) of lottery revenue to the state conservation fund. This would keep the state above its minimum prize requirement by 5% or more and put the money to work, instead of into prizes. It also redirects sports gambling funds into conservation projects that have proven economic and tourism track records.

Finally, HB 2541 keeps in line with the goals of this legislature in terms of government responsibility. The concept would utilize existing structures to the greatest extent possible, which means there would be no need for additional government programs or agencies. It also makes good on the promise of no new taxes or fees by redirecting existing budget surpluses and reducing inefficiencies to fund the projects. Meanwhile, it also provides for those funds moving swiftly to on-the-ground conservation projects as effectively and efficiently as possible.

As outlined above and by our fellow coalition members, the establishment of state conservation funding benefits all Kansans, allows for the proper stewardship of the resources bestowed upon us, and enables the state to be competitive for match opportunities. Therefore, we ask you to support HB 2541. We look forward to working with this Committee to ultimately get this across the finish line.