



Date: August 22, 2023

To: House Committee on Water
Representative Jim Minnix, Chair

From: Dr. Heidi Mehl, Director, Water and Agriculture Programs
The Nature Conservancy in Kansas

RE: Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonpartisan, conservation nonprofit that has worked for over 30 years in Kansas to fulfill our mission of conserving the lands and water on which all life depends. We have permanently conserved over 150,000 acres in Kansas including the 7,706-acre Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve.

Kansas is one of only two states with two designated Wetlands of International Importance, Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge (Quivira). Separated by less than 30 miles as the crane flies, these wetlands provide wintering and migration stopover habitat for migratory birds along the Central Flyway of North America including one of the world's rarest birds, the whooping crane. There are only around 500 whooping cranes left in the world, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of them travel through Kansas each year. Other species that utilize the wetland habitat include waterfowl, bald eagles, and sandhill cranes. The abundant wildlife draws many visitors each year to bird watch and hunt, with fewer opportunities in recent years due to drought.

In 2016, TNC joined with partners including U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Groundwater Management District #5, WaterPACK, and Kansas State University to remove invasive trees, promote irrigation monitoring and improved efficiency, and provide irrigation technical assistance. This work has included the launch of the Rattlesnake Creek Irrigation Efficiency Project funded by an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant. We have had tremendous interest in this project – we have outpaced our original goal of 25 fields and currently have 38 fields enrolled. The partnership is working to secure funding to continue and expand this project.

TNC is committed to continue working in this area to find solutions that support wildlife and agriculture, along with everyone else who relies on Rattlesnake Creek and its underlying aquifer for water. As the Division of Water Resources develops its plan to satisfy the Refuge's needs, TNC continues its commitment to collaborate with all stakeholders, to ease negative impacts and promote conservation.