



DIVISION OF NATURAL RESOURCES
Wildlife Resources Section
324 4th Avenue
South Charleston, West Virginia 25303-1228
Telephone 304-558-2771
Fax 304-558-3147
TDD 800-354-6087

Stephen S. McDaniel
Director

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL
RESOURCES
CONCERNING S.2836 – AMERICA’S REVEGETATION AND CARBON
SEQUESTRATION ACT OF 2021

BY MR. PAUL JOHANSEN
CHIEF – WILDLIFE RESOURCES SECTION
WEST VIRGINIA DIVISION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Senate Bill S.2836 – America’s Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act of 2021. My name is Paul Johansen, and I am a Certified Wildlife Biologist with more than 38 years of service to the citizens in West Virginia. I have held various positions within the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, including Wildlife Manager, Assistant District Biologist, Wildlife Planner, and Assistant Chief in Charge of Game Management. Currently, I serve as Chief of the Wildlife Resources Section where I am responsible for administering the statewide wildlife and fisheries management program. I am honored to work with some of the finest wildlife professionals in North America and to serve dedicated hunters, anglers and other wildlife-associated recreationalists. I hold a Bachelor of Science Degree in Wildlife Biology from the University of Massachusetts and a Master of Science Degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Science from Virginia Tech. I serve on many committees for regional, national, and international professional wildlife organizations, including the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Section is responsible for the conservation and management of the state’s wildlife resources for the use and enjoyment of

its citizens. Our primary objective is to maintain and perpetuate fish and wildlife populations at levels compatible with the available habitat, while providing opportunities for wildlife-associated recreation, research, and education. The state's wildlife resources are maintained for values that may be either intrinsic, ecological, or of benefit to man. Such benefits include (1) hunting, fishing, and other diversified recreational uses; (2) economic contributions in the best interest of our citizens; and (3) scientific and educational uses.

Senate Bill S.2836 provides a comprehensive, science-based approach for improving the management of the Nation's forests and rangelands through the establishment of robust revegetation programs and carbon sequestration activities. This morning, I will be focusing my comments on one important component of Senate Bill S.2836 (i.e., Title I, Section 106 – Revegetation on Abandoned Mine Land). Section 106 creates a pilot program designed to establish native trees, shrubs, and grasses on eligible mined land, including federal, state, tribal, and private lands. The program offers financial assistance to support activities associated with projects designed to establish vegetation on these eligible mined lands. These activities include the following: site preparation (e.g., ripping compacted soils and incorporating soil amendments), planting, maintenance, and managing competing vegetation. The pilot program seeks to establish vegetation that meets the following criteria: is ecologically appropriate; has a high capacity to sequester and store carbon; serves to reconnect established landscapes or enhance habitat connectivity; establishes underrepresented wildlife habitat.

Restoring and revegetating reclaimed and abandoned mine lands will produce significant ecological and economic benefits across the Appalachian region. West Virginia alone has more than 440,000 acres of land impacted by surface mining for coal. These lands are a legacy from our past. They provide a link to our history and remind us of the role Appalachia played in meeting the Nation's energy needs. These lands also represent a bridge to the future. The America's Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act of 2021 will enable us to polish this legacy by restoring biological diversity, enhancing wildlife habitat, providing essential employment training, and putting people back to work across the Appalachian coal fields. The desired outcomes will be restored ecological balance within these altered landscapes and positive economic impacts for people and communities.

Most of these lands are presently overrun with non-native, invasive ground vegetation and shrubs that provide little if any benefit to native wildlife populations in West Virginia and throughout Appalachia. Converting these non-native grasses, shrubs, and other vegetation into landscapes supporting native grasses, shrubs, and forests address two critical needs within the region (i.e., job creation and ecological restoration). There is a unique symmetry taking place here that involves opportunities for people formerly engaged in coal extraction to transition to work in areas of ecological rehabilitation on these same lands. This habitat restoration work will not only provide environmental benefits, but it will also deliver a sustainable economic boost to local communities.

Education, rehabilitation, and reclamation are the cornerstones of Title I, Section 106 of Senate Bill S.2836, as it provides rural Appalachia with hope and a clear path forward. This program affords opportunities for training in the following professional fields: heavy equipment operation, horticulture, environmental remediation, and natural resource management. These

training programs would be designed for recent high school graduates, displaced or retired mine workers, and those seeking to learn an employable skill. The training would provide participants with fundamental skills necessary for advancement in these new professional fields.

Rehabilitation of the workforce through initial, experiential, and transitional training from coal mining operations to reclamation and restoration would lay the foundation for building a new, dynamic, and employable workforce. The new and transitioned workforce would subsequently revitalize local economies and increase individual consumer opportunities.

Ecological reclamation priorities will focus on the removal and control of non-native and invasive herbaceous and woody species in an effort to establish native species of vegetation. The selected native vegetation would provide greater benefits to pollinators and a wide variety of wildlife, including shrubland dependent, grassland dependent, and forestland species. These areas will become increasingly important, especially during fall and spring avian migrations.

Shrubland dependent species include game and non-game species. Among them, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, American woodcock, and a whole suite of migratory songbirds, many of which are experiencing declines in their population, would reap the benefits of habitat restoration. These restoration efforts provide suitable habitat more quickly for these species, as planting occurs in the loosened soil substrate during the site preparation process which promotes rapid plant growth.

Following reclamation, these areas will provide increased environmental services. Opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, bird watching, and other forms of wildlife-associated recreation will greatly expand on these restored lands. The production of both soft and hard mast is expected to increase on these lands. There also exists the potential to establish community apiaries that could generate honey for both personal consumption and commercial production. These environmental services would provide economic diversification to many of the small communities in rural Appalachia.

Abandoned mine lands require active restoration to enhance ecological integrity, restore biological productivity, and create the connectivity necessary for fully functioning landscapes across Appalachia. The America's Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act of 2021 creates an important opportunity to provide targeted funding to local communities, conservations organizations, state fish and wildlife agencies, and federal natural resource agencies in a coordinated manner designed to restore wildlife habitat and provide opportunities for social and economic growth within the Appalachian region.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of the America's Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act of 2021. I urge your favorable consideration of this forward thinking and comprehensive legislation designed to improve our Nation's forests and rangelands through the establishment of robust revegetation programs and carbon sequestration activities. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.