



June 30, 2021

The Honorable Henry Stern, Chair
 Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee
 State Capitol, Room 5046
 Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 614 (Aguiar-Curry) – SUPPORT

Dear Senator Stern:

Our organizations, which represent hundreds of thousands of wildlife conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts in California, urge you to support AB 614 (Aguiar-Curry), which would provide necessary funding for the Nesting Bird Habitat Incentive Program (NBHIP).

The NBHIP was authorized in 2018 by AB 2697 (Gallagher) to encourage farmers and other private landowners to voluntarily cultivate or retain upland cover crops or natural vegetation on idled lands to provide waterfowl, upland game bird and other bird nesting habitat. This not only benefits birds and other wildlife, but helps to sequester carbon, improve soil health and provide air quality benefits. As such, it is consistent with Governor Newsom’s Executive Order 82-20 on climate change and biodiversity that seeks to support conservation measures on working lands.

The NBHIP was supposed to be initially funded from Proposition 3, but that bond measure failed on the statewide ballot in 2018. Because of this, an alternative funding source is now needed. AB 614 would provide for a \$10 surcharge on both the State Duck and Upland Game Bird Stamps, each required to hunt waterfowl and upland game birds in California. This would generate over \$2 million annually for the NBHIP, including critical start-up funding. It should be noted that when the Federal Duck Stamp price was increased in 2015 by \$10 to protect breeding habitat on private lands in the Prairie Pothole region of the upper Midwest and Canada, there was no corresponding drop in stamp revenues. A 2016 study by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources also found that hunting licenses sales tend to be inelastic. That is, modest increases in price lead to net increases in revenue.

There is a pressing need for the implementation of the NBHIP. Lack of sufficient vegetative cover (especially in agricultural areas like the Sacramento Valley rice growing region) is a significant limiting factor for breeding waterfowl and other grassland-nesting birds, as identified in the 2020 Central Valley Joint Venture Implementation Plan (which both the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Wildlife Conservation Board are signatories to): [CVJV 2020 Implementation Plan.pdf \(centralvalleyjointventure.org\)](https://www.centralvalleyjointventure.org).

Mallard breeding populations have declined 36% statewide since 1992. Most notably, mallard breeding numbers have fallen by 72% in the Sacramento Valley (as compared to the period of 1992-2000), the greatest decline of any waterfowl breeding region within our state. It should also be noted that there was a die-off of over 60,000 waterfowl at the Klamath Refuges in 2020 due to an avian botulism outbreak; many of birds affected were local mallards that breed in the Central Valley but use of Klamath Refuges for molting purposes, putting further stress on their populations.

Studies have demonstrated that providing nesting cover through the breeding season can greatly benefit mallards and other local waterfowl. For example, the results of the 2013 Rice Cover Crop Rotation Pilot Project, which was part of the DFW's Ecosystem Restoration Program, found that annual cover crops located adjacent to rice cultivation produced on average 39% nest success (which is well above the 15% that is typically targeted by waterfowl biologists).

Ring-necked pheasant, tricolored blackbird and sage grouse populations have also experienced substantial statewide declines. Implementation of the NBHIP would help to address these declining population trends, as well as benefit other grassland-dependent species.

The NBHIP would be administered by DFW, which has the technical expertise to successfully deliver private land wildlife habitat incentive programs. AB 614 would also allow nonprofit conservation groups to assist with the implementation of the program.

The NBHIP is designed to be flexible enough to meet California growers' needs. For example, it would allow for one year or multi-year contracts and permit farmers to rotate their fallowed fields each year. It would also incentivize wheat farmers to delay harvest of their crop to give nesting waterfowl and other birds enough time to successfully hatch their eggs.

In addition, AB 614 would provide greater accountability and improved transparency over the spending of funds collected via the Upland Game Bird Stamp. The bill would ensure the Upland Game Bird Advisory Committee meets at least once per year and require that non-habitat project expenditures (e.g. for administration and enforcement) are reviewed by the committee and posted on DFW's website.

Finally, AB 614 would make the Winter Rice Habitat Incentive Program, which provides wintering waterfowl habitat benefits, more flexible for landowners and thus increase participation in that program.

AB 614 builds on the highly successful, non-regulatory approach of other waterfowl/bird conservation initiatives, such as those provided through the Federal Farm Bill, Federal Duck Stamp and North American Wetlands Conservation Act, that provide financial incentives and work cooperatively with private landowners. For these reasons, please support AB 614 when it is considered by your committee.

Sincerely,

Mark Hennelly, Vice President of Legislative Affairs
California Waterfowl

Paul Buttner, Manager of Environmental Affairs
California Rice Commission

Todd Manley, Director of Government Relations
Northern California Water Association

Rachel Zwillinger, Water Policy Advisor
Defenders of Wildlife

John Devney, Senior Vice President
Delta Waterfowl

Steve Chappell, Executive Director
Suisun Resource Conservation District

James Stone, Executive Director
NorCal Guides Association

Don Kirby, President
Cal-Ore Wetlands and Waterfowl Council

Fred Harpster, President
The Black Brant Group

Dan Whisenhunt, CEO
California Deer Association

Al Eiden, West Region Director
Pheasants Forever/ Quail Forever

Ric Ortega, President
Grassland Water District

Steve Miller, President
Tulare Basin Wetlands Association

Gary Brennan, President
San Diego County Wildlife Federation

Keely Hopkins, California State Director
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Mike Lynes, Director of Public Policy
Audubon California

Katie Little, Policy Advocate
California Farm Bureau Federation

cc: Members, Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee