

**TESTIMONY TO THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN
AFFAIRS
THE HONORABLE BEN NIGHORSE CAMPBELL, CHAIRMAN
APRIL 29, 2004
IRA NEW BREAST, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIVE AMERICAN FISH & WILDLIFE SOCIETY**

Mr. Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Distinguished Committee Members:

My name is Ira New Breast. I am the Executive Director of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society and an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe of Montana. I would like to respectfully thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the development of the “Native American Fish and Wildlife Management Act of 2004.” I am grateful that the discussion draft Bill has been presented to tribes, tribal organizations and others for comments and appreciate this Committee’s willingness to listen to and work with such entities to make this legislation the best that it can be.

The Society is a national non-profit organization, established in 1982, whose mission is to assist Native American and Alaska Native Tribes with the conservation, protection and enhancement of their fish, wildlife, habitat and cultural resources. The Society strives to assist tribes in their development and implementation of sound laws, regulations, policies and practices that preserve and protect fish and wildlife resources, are consistent with and enhance cultural traditions and values and improve the general welfare of Indian peoples through fish and wildlife related educational activities.

As a national organization the Society has a unique national perspective, all Tribes have distinctive perspectives and interests with a variety of fish and wildlife resources, diverse habitats and signature approaches to management. Our organization is not a substitute for important government-to-government relationships with tribes, we do offer forums in which federal agencies can initiate outreach to that end. The Society does not act in representation or proxy of individual tribes. The Society does have mechanisms to facilitate astute Tribal deliberation to planning, development and operational efforts surrounding fish and wildlife in Indian Country.

As an individual, I have 16 years experience working in the field managing fish and wildlife. For 12 of those years my work activities have included nearly all aspects of Tribal fish and wildlife conservation management, they extend into administration, law enforcement, policy and regulatory development, fund raising, and local to national representation. My experience has led me to witness first-hand the in depth needs that exist and depend in order to support management by tribes for their fish and wildlife resource. From this grassroots perspective I recall the history of the proposed legislation and continue to hope for the original purpose and intent.

While development of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Resources Management Act is a strong statement of the federal government’s commitment to Indian resources, tribes need the federal government to reinforce their management capabilities by and through a renewed and clarified commitment to tribal fish and wildlife resources, further defining the application of trust responsibility in the arena of Tribal fish and wildlife relationships. Funding cuts, reductions in programs and inequities or inconsistencies in budgeting and support perpetuates a lukewarm and uncertain

commitment by the federal government and cause difficulties for tribes in properly managing natural resources. General federal conservation and management programs targeting resource protection on a broader, national scale do not provide a consistent support mechanism upon which strong and effective tribal conservation and management programs can be built. Tribes need legislation to help resource management on Indian lands. Without specific devotion to the fundamental management of Indian resources, shortfalls and gaps will continue and resources will suffer.

The Society can attempt to provide its perspective on the challenges facing tribes as they strive to develop and sustain fish and wildlife management programs on tribal lands or for tribal resources. If legislation is to effectively respond to the challenges, the Bill as currently drafted needs to be narrowed and refined, identifying support mechanisms for on-the-ground management and conservation of fish and wildlife in Indian Country. The Bill needs to focus on fundamental fish and wildlife conservation management and should not be diverted for other purposes. While support of special and specific interests are valid in certain areas of Indian Country, S. 2301 attempts to achieve too much and should not dilute the basic unmet needs that exist for many Indian tribes. Legislation and funding for core Tribal fish and wildlife management programs should be stabilized, made equitable and consistent between tribes, and not be provided on a sporadic, competitive basis. In anticipation of objections to the success of the S. 2301, strategic foresight may prudently include a streamline structure consistent with the original intent, theme and title of this legislation.

In the event that the legislation is enacted, S. 2301 does not identify funding sources and will likely go unfunded, distinctive special issues or needs may find a higher degree of success on an individual basis or practical channel. Special issues and needs may likely be best effective and given attention in a Bill suited to the particular issues or needs. Unique interests should be addressed, but should be addressed in regards and in deference to affected representatives and unmet needs that do not exist for other tribes. Tribes must be afforded equitable opportunity reflected by their unique circumstances across the nation, as each tribe has some level of unmet resource management needs. Resource needs that exceed fundamental fish and wildlife conservation management needs (like the need for enforcement officers, scientific capacity or operational assets) may be dealt with on an alternative basis.

The Society is encouraged by the emphasis on resource education as it is consistent with the priorities of the Society. This Bill will take a leap forward in supporting sorely needed educational programs in tribal fish and wildlife management. It may be possible to combine some of the education provisions and to review the programs relative to current, similar programs.

Fundamental Tribal fish and wildlife conservation management should be supported and funded by the federal government on a permanent, non-exclusive and equitable basis, to secure adequate resources, and truly make this a success. Over the years, conservation and management programs for states and U.S. territories, funded by federal dollars, do not translate into conservation and management benefits for Indian Country. This legislation will demonstrate for Tribes equity in their part to manage vital natural resources that benefit the American people. We look forward to working with the Committee to identify this resolve and to implement or reinforce programs for the benefit of tribal natural resources. Thank You.