CONSERVATION UPDATE 99

ROD GRAMS

UNITED STATES SENATOR ■ MINNESOTA

Dear Friends:

Since my election to Congress in 1992, I've been an advocate for balancing the need for environmental protection with our reliance upon economic growth to maintain our standard of living. Far too often, those two laudable goals are intermixed in combative rhetoric which only serves the extremes in our society.

The issues and initiatives you'll find in this newsletter represent only a small portion of the matters we're currently addressing in the United States Senate. They're issues I believe are important to people throughout our great state. In Minnesota, we have a unique understanding of the value of both rural and urban areas. We're perhaps alone in our diversity of culture, opinion, landscape, and way of life. That's why issues of environmental concern are so important to us and why we must be ever vigilant of the consequences of our actions.

I hope you'll find this newsletter helpful toward your understanding of what's happening in your nation's capitol. I welcome your comments, both positive and negative, and encourage you to contact my office at any time with your thoughts and concerns. I often say that Minnesotans are the true experts on the issues, and I rely upon you for guidance in the United States Senate.

Sincerely,

Rod Grams
United States Senator

MINNESOTA VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

I was proud to join other members of the Minnesota delegation this year in seeking an additional $3 million for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. This money will go a long way toward protecting the refuge well into the future. I was also proud to support the efforts of the Refuge, the Friends of the Minnesota Valley, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Metropolitan Airports Commission in reaching an agreement which allows both for the expansion of the Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport and protects the long-term health of the Refuge. Minnesota is very fortunate to have such an impressive urban wildlife refuge, and we must always be watchful in protecting this important resource. I hope the agreement and the process through which it was obtained serve as a model across the country in forming partnerships among the private sector and government agencies to both grow our economy and protect the environment.

PAYMENTS IN LIEU OF TAXES (PILT)

As most Americans are aware, the federal government doesn't pay property taxes to counties and localities

The effects of the July 4th storm near the BWCA.

for land that it owns. Because many northern Minnesota counties contain large amounts of federally owned land, this lack of tax revenue places tremendous pressures on counties trying to meet the most basic needs of both residents and visitors. In order to make up the difference in lost tax revenue, the federal government is supposed to pay counties a set amount of money, called payments in lieu of taxes (PILT), to fund basic services such as roads. Regrettably, Congress has been sorely under-funding the PILT program for many years. I've been working with several of my Senate colleagues to restore full funding for the PILT program and to bring some fairness back to rural counties. I'm proud to say that we've been successful in steadily increasing PILT funds for rural counties, but we still have a long way to go.

NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION ACT

I'm proud to say that the Congress recently reauthorized the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). Last year, I joined 55 of my colleagues in cosponsoring the NAWCA legislation. In Minnesota, NAWCA currently funds a total of 20 programs. During its eight-year history, NAWCA funding of $18.4 million in Minnesota has spurred an additional $25 million in private contributions to complete habitat projects. In 1996 alone, 1.6 million Minnesotans participated in wildlife-associated activities generating an estimated $3.6 billion for the state's economy.

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

In October, I wrote to Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman asking him to work with me and other members of Congress on the possibility of combining an increased authorization for CRP with a short-term easement option that would come out of the new acreage. Many farmers across Minnesota have asked me to consider a short-term option that would provide greater management flexibility for those who have experienced consecutive years of flood, disease, or drought – as has happened in northwestern Minnesota. I do believe, however, that we must protect the conservation aspects of the CRP and ensure that the current program remains in place. That's why I'm interested in combining the short-term program with new acreage authorizations. The CRP has been one of our nation's most successful conservation programs since its inception, and I will remain one of its most ardent supporters in the United States Senate.

REFORESTATION TAX ACT

I was honored to join Senator Frank Murkowski and 13 of my Senate colleagues in introducing legislation this year that would provide tax incentives for reforestation activities. Under current law, tax incentives for reforestation activities don't extend to mid-to large-size private landowners who would like to undertake sustainable forestry activities. The legislation I'm supporting assists private landowners in their efforts to plant new trees and undertake sustainable forestry activities on their land. Any delays in or inadequate reforestation can reduce environmental benefits, including clean water and wildlife habitat, as well as reduce the economic viability of forests for future use. A portion of this legislation was included in the House and Senate-passed tax relief bill but was unfortunately vetoed by President Clinton. I'm hopeful we can bring the bill before the Senate again and pass it into law.

FOREST SERVICE TIMBER PROGRAM

The Forest Service's Timber Program came under considerable attack this year by those who want to end logging on our National Forests. I believe those attacks, however, are misplaced for the following reasons. First, you cannot have healthy forests and healthy forest-based ecosystems without an active timber program. Second, when special interests want to take millions of dollars from the timber program, they're also taking money from rural counties and rural schools. Third, such attacks are just one more step toward the zero-cut policies being pushed by the anti-logging crowd in Washington. And most importantly for me, any reduction in the amount of money in the Timber Program

means fewer timber-related jobs for northern Minnesotans. I've spent considerable time in northern Minnesota during my time in the Senate. The people who work in the timber industry are good people who work the land responsibly and care about the legacy they're leaving for our children. That's why I'll continue to support the federal Timber Program as strongly as I can.

BWCA STORM DAMAGE

The July 4th storm in northern Minnesota did tremendous damage to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) and created countless difficulties for the many homeowners and resort owners who live and work in the area. Sadly, the enormous amount of downed timber in the region will soon become overwhelmed by disease and eventually dry up, creating an unusually high threat of catastrophic fires for many years to come. I've written to the Forest Service on two occasions regarding the fire threat and the Service's plans for protecting residents of and visitors to the region. I'm afraid that a catastrophic fire is more a matter of "when" than "if." My concerns center around the safety of human beings in the region and their property – that should be our first priority. I've asked the Forest Service to provide me with a detailed accounting of both the potential recreational and ecological impacts of a catastrophic fire and what authority they possess in mitigating the fire threat. I'll continue to work with the people of northern Minnesota, the Forest Service, the State of Minnesota, County Commissioners and any other interested party to ensure every possible action is undertaken to protect the safety and property of those who live in the region.

MINNESOTA/ONTARIO FISHING DISPUTE

I support and have been active in the talks between the United States, Minnesota, and Canadian officials to work out our opposition to Ontario's requirement that Minnesotans can only keep fish caught in Canadian waters if they stay overnight at a Canadian resort. Hopefully we're close to a resolution of this unfair treatment by Ontario, and I'll keep the pressure on to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

A CLOSER LOOK: MINNESOTA'S HUNTING AND FISHING HERITAGE

With fall fast upon us and summer retreating for another year, sportsmen and sportswomen from Lake of the Woods to Albert Lea and from Ortonville to Pine City are readying their gear for hunting season in Minnesota. Whether folks are checking their stands, readying decoys, cleaning shotguns, or brushing up on their duck calls, this time of the year always brings a rush of activity and anticipation.

Each fall, Minnesotans and sporting enthusiasts across the nation have one day during which we're invited to stop and reflect upon the impact that hunting and fishing and their many traditions have on our lives. This year, that day was September 25, when we celebrated National Hunting and Fishing Day.

In Minnesota, few other activities in our state's history have so consistently remained cornerstones of our character. Hunting and fishing are a way of life, bringing families together and keeping alive a culture fostered across the generations. Most people don't realize that 36 million Americans age 16 and older participate in fishing and 14 million consider themselves hunters — numbers that clearly show how important these activities are to the many Americans who take part.

Even more impressive than the commitment that hunting and fishing enthusiasts bring to their sport, however, is their commitment to the conservation of the nation's fish and wildlife populations. Through a variety of programs and initiatives, both public and private, American sportsmen and sportswomen work diligently to ensure that wildlife populations are not only preserved, but continue to grow. By participating in just one such effort, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), Minnesotans have matched over $18 million in federal funding with over $25 million in private partner contributions to support 20 conservation efforts across the state. This same program nationwide generates $2 in private contributions for every $1 provided by the federal government.

The Little Alfie logging site one year after harvesting.

Not only do those Minnesotans who hunt and fish contribute to our conservation efforts, but they contribute mightily to the state's economy. Ducks Unlimited, which has more than 47,000 members in our state alone, estimates that during a one-year period, 1.6 million Minnesotans participated in wildlife-associated activities that generated $3.6 billion in expenditures across the state. On a national level, those numbers grow to 40 million sportsmen and sportswomen spending over $72 billion on recreational activities.

It's also important to note that in the 1997/98 hunting season, Minnesotans purchased 138,331 Federal Duck Stamps.

While the economic benefits are impressive, the real value that outdoor activities provide is an increased awareness of nature and the importance of continued cooperative efforts towards resource conservation. In Congress, that awareness was evident last year with the re-authorization of NAWCA. I was proud to join 57 of my Senate colleagues as cosponsors of the re-authorization, which passed with unanimous approval in both Houses of Congress.

Similar conservation efforts abound throughout Minnesota and the nation. The members of groups like Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, the Ruffed Grouse Society, and the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association continue to lead the way in balancing the enjoyment of our natural resources with the protection and conservation of wildlife populations and habitat.

Everybody who's ever spent at least an afternoon hunting or fishing has a story about "the one that got away." Fortunately, the one thing Minnesotans have never lost while out on the lake or trekking through the woods is our love and respect for the out-of-doors. As I travel the state, one theme remains constant no matter with whom I visit or where I stop: Minnesotans value their time with their families and they appreciate the bountiful outdoor opportunities that help bring folks together. Hunting and fishing bridge those two values as few activities do – which is exactly why we celebrate National Hunting and Fishing Day each fall.

CONCLUSION

Your input is vital to the success of these and other initiatives Congress may consider, and, as always, I encourage you to contact me with your comments and suggestions.

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

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