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To: House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources, Rep. Ken Rahjes, Chair
From: Jacqueline Augustine, Executive Director, Audubon of Kansas
Date: January 22, 2024
RE: HB 2541 – Establishing a state conservation fund

Chairman Rahjes and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2541. Audubon of Kansas is a member of the Kansans for Conservation coalition which has led the collaborative drafting process of HB 2541.

Conservation is the proper management of our natural resources and there are few investments more critical to the quality of life in Kansas. Our economic success, public health, and future generations are dependent upon us maintaining and improving these resources. Currently, the state does not provide the proper funding for this work and is subsequently losing out on federal or private matching dollars to the 35 states that have already established dedicated conservation funding, including all four of our neighbors.

Audubon of Kansas' mission is "to promote the enjoyment, understanding, protection, and restoration of the state's natural ecosystems with a focus on birds, other wildlife, and their habitat for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity." We promote the enjoyment of nature through two birding festivals, our Nature Adventurepack environmental education program, and our sanctuaries program.

Our 'Celebration of Cranes' birding festival occurs the first weekend of November and offers participants the opportunity to see endangered Whooping Cranes at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge as they migrate through Kansas. However, declining water resources are threatening the crane's essential stopover habitat in Kansas and our ability to show people this unique natural treasure. **This bill could provide financial incentives for neighboring landowners to enact water conservation strategies and protect our Kansas wetlands.**

Our second birding festival is the Kansas Lek Treks Prairie-Chicken Festival, held in mid-April in Hays, KS. Over 130 participants from all over the country come to Kansas to see both Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens on private lands. Both species benefit from the restoration of grasslands. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays landowners to convert agricultural lands to grasslands, which benefit a wide range of grassland species, including prairie-chickens. The program was quite popular when it was first introduced because payment rates were on par with commodity prices. Since then, commodity prices have increased but CRP payments have declined. **This bill could fill the gap between CRP payment rates and commodity prices to make voluntary conservation and restoration of grasslands economically feasible for more landowners.**

In the past year, we have launched our Nature Adventurepack program which seeks to connect diverse communities to nature. We provide libraries with a backpack containing adult and children's binoculars, a map showing locations in their county to look for wildlife, and fold-out field guides to birds, butterflies, and the moon. These backpacks are made available to library patrons to check out. We were awarded a Chickadee Checkoff grant to roll out this program in southwestern Kansas. **If this bill were passed, we would be able to obtain a larger grant to implement this environmental education program and additional programs on a statewide scale instead of regionally.**

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Finally, Audubon of Kansas seeks to demonstrate how people and wildlife can coexist through our sanctuaries program. Our largest sanctuary is a 5000-acre ranch along the Niobrara River in northern Nebraska. The land is leased for cattle ranching, but the property also hosts mountain lions, elk, sharp-tailed grouse, and other wildlife. The Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm is located near Lincoln, KS. Most of the land is cultivated on a corn, milo, soybean, and wheat rotation, but there is also a nature trail along Bullfoot Creek that meanders through restored grasslands and huge bur oak trees. **If this bill were funded, we could expand our sanctuary program to provide public access to more lands throughout the state, and continue to demonstrate how land can meet both human and wildlife needs.**

As outlined above and by our fellow coalition members, the establishment of state conservation funding benefits all Kansans, allows for the proper stewardship of the resources bestowed upon us, and enables the state to be competitive for match opportunities. Therefore, we ask you to support HB 2541.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jacqueline Augustine'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Jacqueline' being more prominent than the last name 'Augustine'.

Jacqueline Augustine
Executive Director