

**NRECA Statement at the Congressional Western Caucus'  
"Endangered Species Act Modernization Forum and Legislative Rollout"  
Thursday, July 12, 2018 – 2:00 - 3:30 pm**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement. My name is Janelle Lemen and I am a Regulatory Director of Environmental Policy at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. On behalf of NRECA, we thank you for your commitment to modernize and improve the Endangered Species Act.

NRECA is the national service organization that represents the nation's more than 900 not-for-profit, consumer-owned electric cooperatives that provide power to 42 million people across 56 percent of the nation's landmass. NRECA members own and maintain 2.6 million miles, or 42 percent, of the nation's electric distribution lines. With a commitment to contribute to the vitality and prosperity of the communities served by our members, electric cooperatives are dedicated to a healthy environment, building vibrant rural communities, and providing reliable and affordable electricity to our consumer-members.

ESA implementation has become increasingly cumbersome, challenging, and uncertain, which in turn has increased costs and permitting delays for electric co-op infrastructure construction and maintenance needs. All the while, these processes appear to slow rather than improve natural resource conservation.

NRECA strongly supports efforts by the Congressional Western Caucus to improve the Endangered Species Act through a series of targeted updates to the statute and its implementation. The Caucus' package of bills will continue to protect threatened and endangered species, while providing flexibility and greater regulatory certainty and encouraging voluntary conservation efforts as a cost-effective means of achieving Endangered Species Act goals. These improvements will bring greater efficiencies and help reduce electric cooperatives' costs of building and maintaining critical infrastructure that serves one in eight Americans.

Voluntary conservation efforts continue to be the heart of most species' recovery. The LOCAL Act, for example, will promote and encourage these efforts by creating new avenues for States, local governments, and private property owners – including easement holders like electric co-ops – to proactively participate in species recovery efforts. For example, in the Lesser Prairie-Chicken range – which includes New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas – voluntary conservation measures by NRECA members and other public and private stakeholders have been key in protecting the species and its habitat. Over 10 million acres in total are currently under protections for the benefit of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. Now, the Fish & Wildlife Service is required to make a new determination whether listing is warranted. Even if the species is listed in the future, participants in voluntary conservation programs need assurances that 1) their voluntary actions will be recognized, 2) that they will be shielded from potential liability for their activities, and 3) that additional conservation measures will not be imposed without future consent. The LOCAL Act helps address those liability concerns and provides certainties about what would be required for infrastructure projects.

America's electric co-ops are committed to protecting the nation's natural resources, while providing safe, reliable, and affordable power to 42 million Americans. We thank the Caucus for its leadership on promoting balanced and effective legislation that will help us achieve these important goals. NRECA and its members look forward to working with you as these bills move through the legislative process to achieve the protection and recovery of species.