



**Ducks Unlimited**

**TESTIMONY ON SB 145  
Jim Pitman, Biologist, Ducks Unlimited  
Kansas Senate Ways and Means Committee  
March 15, 2021**

Good morning, Chairman Billinger and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important issue today. My name is Jim Pitman and I'm a biologist for Ducks Unlimited based in Emporia. I have worked in the conservation field in Kansas for more than 20 years and I've been an avid outdoorsman since my youth. I'm here today to testify in support of SB 145 on behalf of our nearly 15,000 Kansas DU members and over 650,000 members nationwide. Allowing the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWP) to acquire land to expand the Byron Walker Wildlife Area will significantly increase the recreational opportunities in southern Kansas.

**INTRODUCTION**

Ducks Unlimited is a science-based conservation organization working to protect wetlands for waterfowl, wildlife and people. While we are a conservation organization, our membership is largely made up of sportsmen and women. Through voluntary incentive-based programs, we've worked hand in hand with Kansas landowners to conserve habitat, improve working farms and ranches, and promote public access for sportsmen and women.

Hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation have been a part of Kansas' heritage since statehood – it's part of the state's fabric and identity. Unfortunately, we've seen a general national decline in hunter numbers over the past 35 years, while the mean age of hunters continues to rise. This trend not only threatens the sustainability of our hunting heritage, but the associated decline in license sales also reduces the amount of funding available for wildlife agencies to deliver conservation practices. Lack of access is often cited as a primary reason for the decline in hunter participation. Hunting success largely depends on having quality places to hunt and since only 1.9% of lands in Kansas are public, it's no wonder hunting participation is on the decline.

This relationship is why the proposed acquisition that would expand the Byron Walker Wildlife Area is so important, and why Ducks Unlimited is urging the committee to support SB 145. More public

land is essential for Kansas to maintain its hunting heritage. Allowing KDWPT to acquire this piece of property will directly help Kansas' outdoor recreation economy, wildlife, and sportsmen and women.

### **LAND TRANSACTION BACKGROUND**

In 2017, Ducks Unlimited was approached by the Kjellin family about purchasing a 497-acre tract of land adjacent to the Byron Walker Wildlife Area. This property shares 1.75 miles of its northern boundary with the wildlife area. DU purchased the property for its high habitat value, especially the South Fork of the Ninnescah River and associated wetlands. This stretch has the highest concentration of overwintering mallards in Kansas in a region where wintering habitat is very rare and public access is even more limited. The property shares some of the same habitat features as the wildlife area, but also includes over 40 acres of emergent riparian wetlands, approximately 1.2 miles of the South Fork of the Ninnescah River, 1.2 miles of Mead Creek, a large expanse of unbroken tallgrass prairie, and some cropland. The Kjellin property addresses the need for additional habitat to sustain wildlife populations as well as increased public access that will help to sustain the number of hunters, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts in Kansas. One of the more notable benefits of the acquisition would be the public road access to the upstream portion of the river. Adding river access by a road will not only open tremendous waterfowl hunting and viewing opportunities, but also promote fishing, canoeing, kayaking, and other water sports.

Ducks Unlimited purchased the land from a willing seller at appraised market value, and the land will be acquired by KDWPT at appraised market value. Ducks Unlimited retained the existing tenant, and even assisted them with a land swap transaction. DU paid taxes on the land during its ownership, and KDWPT would also continue to pay the rate determined by the county tax assessor. This acquisition presents an unprecedented opportunity for KDWPT to expand and improve one of the premiere outdoor recreation sites in Kansas. We encourage the committee to recommend the passage of SB 145. Thank you for your time and your service.



# BYRON WALKER ENHANCEMENT

## WILDLIFE AREA BACKGROUND

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWPT) wants to expand the Byron Walker Wildlife Area through the purchase of an adjacent 493-acre property. KDWPT would buy the property from Ducks Unlimited at appraised market value, using funds from state, federal and private sources. KDWPT will continue to pay local taxes on the land. Because the parcel exceeds 160 acres, legislative approval is required for the acquisition.

- The recreation hub is about 45 miles west of Wichita, on Highway 54.
- The area is known for its abundance of migrating birds and provides hunting opportunities for other game species, including deer, turkey, quail and pheasant.
- The wildlife area has the highest concentration of overwintering mallards in Kansas in a region where wintering habitat and public hunting access are rare.

## WHY THIS PURCHASE IS IMPORTANT

- The Byron Walker Wildlife Area is a primary attraction for Kingman County and has a considerable impact on the local economy.
- The wildlife area and lake attract an average of 60,000 visitors a year for hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, camping, canoeing and hiking.
- The purchase would expand the Byron Walker Wildlife Area by nearly 500 acres.
- The property would provide new public road access to the Ninnescah River.
- The access would give new opportunities for hunting and wildlife viewing, as well as promote fishing, canoeing, kayaking and other water sports.

## HISTORY OF PROPERTY

- In 2017, the Kjellen and Deweese families approached Ducks Unlimited about purchasing the parcel.
- DU purchased the property because of its high habitat value.
- The property was purchased from a willing seller at appraised market value.
- Ducks Unlimited continued to pay taxes on the land during its ownership.
- DU has worked with KDWPT on invasive tree removal and other upland management, and wetland restorations are planned after the transfer.

