

**Testimony of Madeleine West
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**Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Water, and Wildlife**

“Opportunities to Conserve Wildlife Movement and Corridors Through Partnerships”

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Good afternoon, Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Lummis, and members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to represent the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) at today’s hearing. I am Madeleine West and I serve as the Director of the Center for Public Lands at the TRCP, a coalition of 63 hunting, fishing, outdoor recreation, landowner, and scientific organizations that was founded in 2002. At the TRCP, we are dedicated to ensuring the places where Americans love to hunt and fish are conserved and the species upon which we depend as hunters and anglers are managed at sustainable levels. The conservation of wildlife corridors and seasonal habitats is therefore core to our mission and has been a significant focus of our work for over a decade. And we are not alone. The TRCP works closely with state wildlife agencies and Governor’s offices, primarily in the West, federal agencies, non-governmental hunting and fishing and conservation organizations, and private landowners—all of whom have invested significant time and resources in the collection of data and research to better understand how, why and where wildlife move across the landscape, and apply that best available science to make smart decisions in support of the conservation of species within their jurisdictional authorities.

Across all corners of the country, wildlife migrate seasonally in search of adequate cover and food sources to support their full life cycle needs. Depending on the species type, those migrations may be far or they may be short. Wildlife also make daily movements that, while smaller in scale, have an impact on overall survival. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and our partners in the hunting, fishing and conservation community, have primarily focused on the seasonal migration patterns of big game species in the Western U.S., and that is where the majority of my remarks today will focus. But collaborative efforts to study how, why and where a variety of wildlife species move and migrate—and actions to conserve those movement corridors—are underway in many parts of the country.

Today I will touch on the history of the broad partnerships that advance wildlife habitat and corridor conservation, particularly in the West, and the bipartisan support for specific programs that incentivize collaborative, bottom-up approaches to conservation.

Relevancy of Wildlife Corridor Conservation to Hunting, Fishing and Conservation Organizations

All across the Western U.S., herds of elk, mule deer, pronghorn, big horn sheep, moose and bison make seasonal movements year after year from their summer ranges to their winter ranges and back again—passing down migratory knowledge from one generation to the next. Healthy, robust big game herds contribute to a way of life for many in the West, and they contribute to a \$454

billion national outdoor recreation economy (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021), particularly in rural communities that are close to public land utilized for hunting and other forms of recreation. Economics—the economics of hunting and fishing, and also of wildlife watching—is one reason why state and federal agencies have invested in the conservation of migration corridors for big game species across the West for decades. But it's not only about economics.

Big game species themselves directly contribute to a critical ecological food chain by serving as prey for apex predators like mountain lions and bears. Without the ability for big game to migrate seasonally, wildlife abundance would decline and ecosystem balance could be disrupted. The seasonal habitat utilized by big game is also habitat that supports a diverse suite of other species, such as sage grouse, grassland birds, pollinators, and riparian and aquatic species. By making sure those seasonal habitats are connected, through the conservation of migration routes, we are ensuring that a multitude of species have a greater ability to adapt and be resilient to changes now and into the future—changes like prolonged drought, harsher winter conditions, and habitat conversion due to the spread of non-native weeds and the increased wildfire risk they cause.

Given all the benefits of conserving big game migration corridors and seasonal habitats, it's not a surprise that this conservation issue has received broad bi-partisan support. Conservation actions that allow migration corridors to remain open, such as the removal of fencing in critical locations or the addition of fencing in other areas to guide wildlife to safe highway crossings, are essential to maintain this ecological process that has occurred for millennia.

History of Bipartisan Support for Wildlife Movement Corridors

State wildlife agencies have statutory authority and responsibility to manage wildlife species within their borders for the benefit of the public today and into the future. In service of this mission, state wildlife agencies have historically collected data and conducted research to better understand the needs of each species and management approaches to support their existence at viable population levels. In 2008, a bipartisan group of 19 Western Governors, through the Western Governors' Association, recognized that wildlife do not obey political boundaries and identified the need for improved collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries to better understand how species migrate across distances large and small. This commenced a multi-year effort that brought together state agencies, federal agencies, Tribal wildlife agencies, private landowners, industries, and non-governmental hunting, fishing and conservation organizations for the purpose of prioritizing the conservation of wildlife movement corridors, crucial seasonal habitats that those corridors connect, and areas necessary to provide connectivity for a variety of species to move across political jurisdictions to meet their life cycle needs. A significant focus of the discussion was on long, cross-jurisdictional corridors, however the scope of the effort applied to all wildlife species under state management. During this time, resources were provided by the Obama Administration to state agencies and local collaborative efforts to support this locally driven, bottom-up approach.

An emphasis on the importance of conserving wildlife movement corridors and crucial seasonal habitat was elevated by the Trump Administration with the signing of Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretarial Order 3362, [*Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors*](#), in 2018. Secretarial Order 3362 focused on three distinct big game species—pronghorn, mule deer, and elk—across 11 Western states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming)

and directed agencies within the Department of the Interior to take specific steps to coordinate with states to enhance and improve the quality of seasonal winter range and migration corridors. The Secretarial Order created staff positions and instituted a suite of programs and financial incentives to support local efforts to improve data collection, conduct research, and complete on-the-ground conservation projects.

This funding proved to be a major catalyst to advance work on big game wildlife movement corridors across the West, and it built off work previously initiated by western governors. It also came at a pivotal time when significant advancements in GPS technology catapulted knowledge about how, why, and where big game migrate seasonally from the metaphorical dark ages into modern times. The emphasis on this work by the Trump Administration also reinvigorated coordination between the 11 Western states—resulting in a [policy resolution](#) from the bipartisan Western Governors’ Association and establishment of a [migration-specific committee](#) by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies; prioritized efforts within Department of the Interior agencies that resulted in key staffing positions including regional liaisons across the West; and renewed engagement from private landowners, and hunting, fishing and conservation organizations.

The Secretarial Order, and the funding support it created, is embraced by a broad spectrum of the hunting and fishing community because of the relevance of big game migration corridors and important seasonal habitats to our missions, and because of the deference it gives to states and Tribes as the managers of those species. It also has received broad support from the wider conservation community because, while being limited to big game, healthy habitats that support big game also support a suite of other wildlife species, and improve watershed health along with associated water supplies vital for animals and people.

So, when the Biden Administration began in 2021, DOI explicitly embraced the Secretarial Order with the endorsement of state and Tribal agencies, private landowner organizations, and the hunting and fishing and conservation community. The Biden Administration consistently included this issue in their early priorities and actively continued to implement programs and support staffing and funding streams initiated by the previous administration. In April 2022, DOI announced a first-of-its-kind agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society to coordinate support and engagement to meet conservation needs, such as improving wildlife corridors and connectivity. The Biden Administration also expanded their focus beyond DOI. First announced in 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) initiated a new program to incentivize big game corridor conservation efforts on private lands. USDA’s Migratory Big Game Initiative first utilized existing Farm Bill programs to target voluntary conservation efforts in areas important for big game corridors in Wyoming. The program has since expanded into Montana and Idaho and is an example of the way federal agencies and funding can significantly support conservation actions that make a real difference for wildlife.

Support for wildlife corridor conservation has persisted across three presidential administrations and has continued to earn support from a bi-partisan collection of Governors in the West. This speaks to the value this work offers to the American public and is evidence that it is a broadly supported, bipartisan issue.

Existing Federal Programs That Support Wildlife Corridor Conservation

The following popular programs and associated funding were established through Secretarial Order 3362 starting in 2018. Implementation has focused on the areas of emphasis in the Secretarial Order—three big game species and priority areas within 11 Western states—and work has recently been broadened to include Tribes. These initiatives offer a model for how the federal government can support state and Tribal-led wildlife corridor conservation efforts more broadly across the country.

- [Western Big Game Seasonal Habitat and Migration Corridors Fund](#) – Administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, this competitive grant program aims to conserve critical winter range and migration corridors for pronghorn, mule deer and elk in priority areas within 11 Western states outlined through Secretarial Order 3362. The Bureau of Land Management, USFWS and U.S. Forest Service have contributed approximately \$3 million for each funding cycle, augmented by additional private funds.

Five rounds of grants have been announced under this program since 2019, which cumulatively awarded \$15.6 million across 66 projects, leveraging \$72.3 million in matching contributions to generate a total conservation impact of more than \$87.9 million. The projects funded state and Tribal agencies, private landowners and non-governmental organizations to conduct projects such as habitat treatments to reduce invasive annual weeds, retrofit fences to be more wildlife friendly and increase connectivity, and conservation easements. The program consistently receives more applications than it has resources to fund.

- [State Research Grants](#) – DOI provided discretionary research grants to 11 Western state fish and wildlife agencies through the [USFWS Science Applications program](#) for the purpose of addressing gaps in scientific knowledge. Approximately \$3 million was provided in grants to states to address their priority needs. States have indicated there is a continued need for support.
- [Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program](#) – The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program managed by USFWS has a successful history of developing partnerships and leveraging resources for projects that benefit people, communities and fish, wildlife and habitats. Through this program, USFWS provided approximately \$1.5 million to support voluntary, private landowner conservation projects within the 11 Western states relevant to SO 3362.
- [U.S. Geological Survey \(USGS\) Corridor Mapping Team](#) – SO 3362 prompted USGS to establish the Corridor Mapping Team—a collaboration between USGS and participating state and federal wildlife management agencies, as well as numerous Tribes. USGS has provided a range of \$300,000-500,000 annually to increase state and Tribal wildlife agency capacity to consistently map big game migrations and seasonal ranges throughout the West. When approved by the state or Tribal agency, these maps have been published through the Ungulate Migrations of the Western United States report series. Three Volumes of the series to date have detailed and mapped the migrations and seasonal ranges of 152 ungulate herds across the majority of the region.

Additionally, the following programs, created after Secretarial Order 3362 was issued, meaningfully advance wildlife corridor conservation and also share broad support:

[USDA Migratory Big Game Initiative](#) – Initiated in 2022, USDA provided \$15 million to help willing landowners and their partners conserve private lands for the benefit of migratory big game populations in Wyoming through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, in addition to rental payments to producers who enroll in the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program. This funding supported projects such as removal of fencing that blocked wildlife movement, treatment of invasive weeds that reduce forage quality for wildlife, or voluntary conservation easements that prevent habitat fragmentation. The program was expanded in 2023 to include Montana and Idaho and an additional \$21.4 million was provided.

[Federal Highway Administration \(FHWA\) Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program](#) – The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 authorized \$350 million total for federal fiscal years 2022 through 2026 for FHWA to administer this competitive grant program for the purpose of reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions while improving habitat connectivity for terrestrial and aquatic species. The scope of this program is broader than big game, and eligible entities are state, regional or local transportation authorities, Tribal agencies, and federal land management agencies nationally. In April 2023, FHWA issued the first Notice of Funding Opportunity and is prepared to award over \$111 million in this initial round of funding.

Building from the conservation successes these federal programs have catalyzed specific to big game in the West, the TRCP believes they could be efficiently scaled up to accommodate broader wildlife species and additional state and Tribal jurisdictions. Currently, the programs’ purposes are discretionary and subject to support from future administrations. Further, from the beginning, funding levels have been discretionary and sourced from reprogrammed funds—meaning that funds to pay for this work are being pulled away from other agency priorities. Reprogramming will only continue to occur so long as staff at the Departments and agencies prioritize this work—an approach that does not provide reliable and consistent funding. It should come as no surprise then that funding levels for SO 3362 programs have declined over the past six years since their inception. This leaves state and Tribal agencies, private landowner groups, non-governmental organizations—the recipients of these programs—unable to plan for long-term conservation projects and priorities that will most benefit wildlife, and which require reliable funding levels to sustain.

Opportunities to Enhance Conservation Successes for Wildlife Corridors

1. Consistent programmatic direction: The TRCP and many of our partners support clear Congressional direction for federal agency programs that support the research, mapping, and conservation of wildlife corridors. The programs listed above have demonstrated the ability to drive conservation outcomes for a subset of big game species in a subset of the country, and we believe this should persist over time. With clear direction from Congress, and an expanded scope of additional wildlife species and geographies, we feel confident that positive conservation results would be realized and that this action would be met with strong support.
2. Dedicated funding: Federal funding to incentivize and increase capacity for state and Tribal

agencies, private landowners and non-governmental organizations has dramatically advanced conservation actions for big game species in the West, and any funding provided through federal programs should be dedicated and consistent. Funding to date, even for this narrow subset of species and geographies, has been well below demonstrated demand and need, and has been reprogrammed from other sources—an unreliable and inconsistent approach. Additionally, each year the current programs have been subject to discretionary funding levels, which limit the ability of grantees to effectively plan for future projects, maintain ongoing research projects and effectively plan for multi-year projects.

3. Increased coordination: Given the varied partners that must coordinate effectively to advance wildlife corridor conservation efforts it is critical that coordination between federal, state and Tribal agencies, as well as private landowners and hunting, fishing and conservation organizations continue and be fostered. Funding through the programs listed above plays a large role to increase coordination. Federal coordination must also occur internally to ensure all relevant Departments and agencies play a support role. Since wildlife do not obey political jurisdictions and land ownership patterns, there are many federal jurisdictions that can have a positive impact on wildlife corridors from public land management at DOI and USDA, to voluntary private land incentive programs within USDA, to a variety of transportation infrastructure programs administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Conclusion

In closing, I thank Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Lummis, and members of the Subcommittee for calling attention to the important opportunity to conserve wildlife movement corridors and crucial seasonal habitats. This is truly an opportunity to institutionalize programs and policies that have demonstrated success and share broad bipartisan support. The TRCP and our partners in the hunting and fishing community stand ready to work with Congress to advance solutions that will realize this opportunity and build off decades of past work.