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June 14, 2018

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman
Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
410 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Endangered Species Act Amendments 2018 discussion draft legislation

Dear Chairman Barrasso:

Thank you for the opportunity to engage and offer my support for your important efforts to improve the Endangered Species Act (ESA) via your proposed 2018 amendments. While there undoubtedly have been some successes under the existing ESA, reform is long overdue, and legislation such as this is vital to ensuring conservation of species is more collaborative, efficient and recovery-focused.

Many before you have been tempted to “gut” or otherwise completely overhaul the ESA in one fell swoop. I commend you on this more measured approach that focuses on a few critical improvements that stem from years of experience – oftentimes frustration – in attempting to do what is best for at-risk species. Chief among the improvements, and in my view the most meaningful reform from a wildlife recovery perspective, is your proposal to ensure State wildlife agencies are more firmly ensconced in the ESA process.

Like most other State wildlife agencies, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) has a public trust responsibility to manage our citizens’ fish and wildlife resources. Accordingly, I deeply appreciate the opportunity afforded by your draft legislation for States to play a much more integral role in listing, delisting and species recovery. Indeed, it is important for us to be viewed not just as partners with the Federal government, but as leaders in species management and the recovery process. Giving State wildlife agencies greater weight in ESA decisions will make the entire process more productive and successful at conserving at-risk species. I am equally encouraged that this bill stops short of saddling the States with unfunded mandates, thus recognizing that we are often constrained by lack of adequate funding and resources for species of greatest conservation need.

ODWC’s core belief is that fish and wildlife should be managed to ensure that wildlife populations will be sustained for future Oklahomans – a goal we ultimately share with the ESA. I am encouraged to see legislation that strives for species recovery through scientific data, cooperation, transparency, proactive conservation, and species monitoring. This type of focus on what is best for a species, rather than on process or procedure, is essential for properly managing species recovery and achieving the stabilization that ultimately leads to downlisting or delisting a species.

Thank you for your leadership on this important reform bill. I have long appreciated the hard work the EPW committee does every day to improve our Nation's natural resources, and I truly believe this bill will go a long way to putting the ESA process on a more solid and sustainable footing. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide additional information or support.

Gratefully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. D. Strong", written in a cursive style.

J. D. Strong
Director