Testimony of
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On
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's FY 2025 Budget Request

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Committee. I am Martha Williams, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the Service's Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget request. The FY 2025 budget promotes strategic investments to: address the impacts of climate change on Service trust resources, conserve species and habitats, reconnect Americans with the outdoors, facilitate economic development, and create good-paying job opportunities.

The President's Budget for FY 2025 invests in America and prioritizes key conservation initiatives while following the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023. The President's Budget request for the Service totals $1.9 billion, an increase of $163.4 million above the FY 2024 enacted level.

The mission of the Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Meeting our mission is dependent on the Service leading with our values of collaboration, stewardship, integrity, respect, and innovation. The Service is a diverse and largely decentralized organization that works collaboratively and creatively to meet its conservation and management responsibilities. In addition to our headquarters office, the Service has eight regional offices and nearly 800 field stations. The backbone of the Service is its nearly 9,000 dedicated employees working in our regional offices and field stations across the country. The Service's headquarters office sets national policy to provide consistency and clarity, and stewards and implements most of our international conservation work, while the majority of our domestic conservation work is carried out on the ground by our regions and field stations. Our biologists, refuge managers, hatchery operators, and more build relationships at the global, regional, state, Tribal, and local level, to implement the Service's mission and carry out our statutory mandates in a way that respects local needs and fits the places where we work. The Service is a relatively small agency, but our reach is large due to the strength of our partnerships with other federal agencies, states, Tribes, foreign governments, landowners, scientists, hunters, anglers, nongovernmental organizations, industry, and the public. However, building and sustaining those partnerships takes people and resources.

Over the past twenty years the Service's capacity has eroded significantly, while at the same time costs and workloads have increased, and challenges to wildlife conservation have become more complex. In this challenging budget environment, the Service has been forced to adapt. We are

expanding our partnerships, seeking reimbursable agreements to support our staffing needs, establishing refuge complexes for management efficiencies, and establishing cross-programmatic teams to share expertise. The Service continually strives to be efficient and innovative with the resources Congress provides to us. For example, we continue to enhance our Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) decision support system to streamline the environmental review process. We similarly work to enhance our ePermits system to improve electronic permitting for a variety of stakeholders and the public. We have also sought good neighbor authority and stewardship contracting authority to enable the Service to partner with states, Tribes, and counties to conduct ecosystem restoration projects on Service lands. While we have found opportunities to adapt and be more efficient with the resources we have, these challenging budgets have required us to pull back on important partnerships and conservation work.

The Service's FY 2025 budget request seeks to address our needs to deliver our mission now and how to build towards the future. Through strategic investments like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, commonly referred to as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the Service has shown that when given the resources to accomplish our mission, we, together with our partners, can do great things for wildlife, local communities, and the economy. If funded, the Service's FY 2025 budget request would help restore our capacity and invest in key conservation partnerships. My testimony below discusses the discretionary portion of our request in greater detail.

Ecological Services

For over 50 years, the Ecological Services Program has implemented the Endangered Species Act (ESA), our country's most important law for protecting imperiled fish, wildlife, and plants. The total request for the Ecological Services Program for FY 2025 is $338.2 million, an increase of $49.9 million above the FY 2024 enacted. The ESA is extraordinarily effective at preventing species from going extinct and has inspired action to collaboratively conserve at-risk species and their habitat before they need to be listed as threatened or endangered. Since it was signed into law in 1973, nearly all of the species listed under the law are still with us today and many species have recovered, been downlisted, or received the necessary conservation to not require listing.

Preventing extinction and recovering listed species has always been, and will continue to be, one of the Service's highest priorities. Through close collaboration with our federal, state, and Tribal partners, and range countries around the world, we have recovered species from the brink of extinction, restored critical habitat, and applied a balanced approach for building better natural and human communities. For example, on January 25, 2023, we celebrated the recovery and delisting of five species on the U.S. Navy-owned San Clemente Island (San Clemente Island paintbrush, lotus, larkspur, and bush-mallow plants and San Clemente Bell's sparrow). This conservation success was due to four decades of partnership between the Service and the Navy and shows how collaborative conservation can drive species recovery. The FY 2025 budget proposes $126.4 million for recovery of threatened and endangered species, a $15.9 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding would allow the Service to reduce the recovery plan backlog for listed species that do not yet have recovery plans, conduct required 5-year reviews of listed species, and allow the Service to propose or finalize an estimated 25 delisting or downlisting rules. Additionally, funding would be used to catalyze and support high priority recovery actions identified in Service recovery plans for priority species.

The Service's work supports economic growth and job creation in the U.S. through timely reviews of proposed infrastructure and development projects that are consistent with statutory environmental requirements. We provide expertise and technical assistance to applicants, coordinating early whenever possible. We also continuously seek ways to innovate and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our environmental review and permitting of projects. A clear example of this is the IPaC decision support system, a web-based application that allows federal agencies and project proponents to instantly obtain official species lists and recommended conservation measures. This system was conceived proactively by Service biologists who saw an ever-increasing consultation workload under flat and declining projected budgets. This innovative solution enabled the Service to address rising demand through greater efficiency. In the last 5 years, IPaC users generated over 115,000 documents using determination keys (DKeys), and over half required no further action on the part of the Service or the IPaC user. DKeys typically result in a final document in less than 30 minutes and all administrative logging for Service project tracking is completed automatically. This is a huge time savings and win-win for the Service, consulting federal agencies, and project proponents.

However, between 2003 and 2023, our environmental review staff decreased by 20 percent, while the number of species listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA has risen by 39 percent. This degradation of capacity has made it increasingly difficult to achieve our mission and meet the needs of federal agencies and applicants in a timely manner. To address the increasing needs for consultation in a growing economy, the Service is requesting $146.6 million for planning and consultation, a $28.4 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level.

Additionally, the Service is requesting $23.9 million for listing activities, a $1.9 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. The Service is requesting $41.2 million for conservation and restoration activities, a $3.6 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. These investments will put key staff on the ground to work with partners and the public to carry out the essential mandates of the ESA and facilitate important development projects.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The Refuge System spans all 50 States and 5 U.S. Territories, with more than 856 million acres of lands and waters, and includes 571 national wildlife refuges, 38 wetland management districts, 48 coordination areas, seven National Monuments, and 760 million acres in Marine National Monuments. In addition to conservation, the Refuge System delivers outdoor recreation and economic benefits to local communities. According to the Service's 2017 Banking on Nature report, the economic impact on local communities from recreation visits totaled $3.2 billion, and the Refuge System generates $1.1 billion in job income and over 41,000 jobs nationally.

In FY 2023, the Refuge System hosted a record-breaking 67 million visits to national wildlife refuges, an increase of 46.6 percent since FY 2011. This shows the growing importance of our

national wildlife refuges to the public. Without adequate staffing, our ability to safely manage and welcome visitors is strained. To begin to address this capacity need as well as on-the-ground conservation and public engagement, the Service is requesting a total of $602.3 million for the Refuge System, $75.3 million above the FY 2024 enacted level. This requested additional funding will position the Refuge System to meet expected increased demands for access, visitation, and ecological functioning.

At current funding levels, the Service maintains 125 visitor facilities, most of which are wholly volunteer-operated, have limited hours of operation, or are staffed by administrative officers or refuge managers as collateral duties. The FY 2025 budget request includes $93.6 million for visitor services, an increase of $17.6 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. The majority of this funding would be used to ensure safer operations at existing facilities and contribute to rebuilding the visitor services workforce, focusing on entry-level positions to greet visitors, teach students, engage communities, and coordinate volunteer programs.

Similarly, the Department of the Interior's (Department) Law Enforcement Task Force found that Refuge System law enforcement has had a 28 percent reduction from its 15-year high officer base, the highest of all the Department's bureaus. To address this need, the Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $63.4 million for Refuge System law enforcement, an increase of $17.9 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding would enable the Service to hire an additional 48 officers, bringing the Service closer to the International Associations of Chiefs of Police recommended minimum number of officers and enhancing the protection of the Refuge System and its visitors. It would also support additional needs of Refuge System Law Enforcement.

The number of units in the Refuge System has increased over the past ten years, changing staffing and expertise needed to fulfill the Service's stewardship responsibilities. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $280.4 million for wildlife and habitat management on the Refuge System, an increase of $25.7 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding would enable the Service to fill vacancies in the Refuge System that support scientific studies, habitat restoration and management, landscape conservation, and climate resiliency, as well as implementation of the National Seed Strategy, subsistence management and Tribal co-stewardship.

The Refuge System maintains over 44,000 assets representing over $58 billion in public investments, including 6,400 buildings, 17,500 roads, bridges, and trails, 8,700 water management structures, and 11,400 other real property assets. A robust maintenance workforce is required for responsible rehabilitation, maintenance, and construction of Service infrastructure. The FY 2025 budget requests $160.1 million for Refuge System maintenance, an increase of $12.1 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. This additional funding would be used to build capacity in our infrastructure workforce and address deferred maintenance as well as annual maintenance needs across the Refuge System.

Additionally, the Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $68.1 million for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) Program, a $9.1 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. This voluntary, community-based program supports important conservation initiatives for

wildlife and habitat on private lands. The program is emblematic of how the Service carries out its mission through on-the-ground implementation that leverages the capabilities of partners and is tailored to fit the needs and aspects of the local community. Since inception, the program has restored more than 7 million acres of habitat while leveraging program funding with partner contributions at a ratio of greater than 4:1. The Partners Program also yields significant economic benefits for local communities. The Service's 2017 report titled "Restoration Returns: The Contribution of Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and Coastal Program Restoration Projects to Local U.S. Economies" found that every dollar the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program invested in a project creates $6.15 in local economic returns. Additionally, a recent report developed by the Jobs Through Restoration and Resilience Sub-Team of the Service's National America the Beautiful Team identified that every $1.0 million in FY 2022 spending under the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program supported 12.28 jobs.

Migratory Birds

The Migratory Bird Program is the premier federal leader in migratory bird conservation and manages birds in the U.S. and internationally through effective partnerships, applied science, and innovative strategies. Migratory birds provide significant benefits to our ecosystems and economy. They pollinate, control pests, and support recreational opportunities. The *2022 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation Report* estimated that the 2.8 million migratory bird hunters and 96 million bird watchers in the U.S. spent billions of dollars participating in these activities.

However, migratory birds are experiencing significant population declines. In 2019, a report published in *Science* found that 3 billion breeding birds have been lost since 1970 in North America. Habitat loss, invasive species, climate change, disease and human-caused mortality are among the leading drivers for bird declines. The mission of the Migratory Bird Program is as relevant and important today as it was at the inception of the Service: to ensure a legacy of healthy bird populations for the American people. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes a total of $73.1 million for the Migratory Bird Program, a $19.9 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level.

The Migratory Bird Program provides expertise in the conservation and management of over 1,100 species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (Eagle Act) and 269 species included in the Birds of Conservation Concern. Migratory Bird Program staff develop decision-support tools and guidance for energy, infrastructure, and other development projects to avoid and minimize impacts to migratory birds. They also provide technical assistance and implement bird conservation partnerships under Partners in Flight and the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership.

The Migratory Bird Program is also responsible for the continental-wide monitoring of migratory bird species, including waterfowl banding, aerial population surveys, and hunter harvest surveys. The Service's six-decade history of migratory bird monitoring data provides a unique perspective on shifting bird distributions and habitat conditions across North America over time. These rich datasets allow the Service to evaluate population shifts, migration chronology, and productivity, and prioritize land acquisition for the Refuge System and population goals for the North

American Waterfowl Management Plan. Additionally, this data is used to set and evaluate migratory bird hunting seasons.

Each year the Service conducts extensive migratory game bird surveys and bird banding programs across North America that provide valuable information about bird population, harvest, and habitat. Results from these surveys provide the foundation for the establishment of annual hunting seasons for migratory game birds. The Service is struggling to maintain its critical role in monitoring migratory game bird species abundance and establishing annual hunting regulations due to funding and workforce constraints. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $40.9 million for conservation and monitoring, a $10.5 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. A portion of this funding will address capacity gaps and allow the Service to pursue enhancements and efficiencies in its monitoring activities and current harvest management processes. This increase will also provide targeted investments in partner engagement, monitoring, technical assistance, conservation planning, on-the-ground conservation delivery, and promoting bird-friendly practices.

The Service's FY 2025 budget request also includes $13.4 million for migratory birds permitting, an increase of $8.0 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. With increasing infrastructure and energy development, the Service has also seen a rise in workload related to permitting reviews under the MBTA and Eagle Act. This funding increase would support capacity for migratory birds permitting staff, including in the Service's regional offices. The FY 2025 budget request also includes $1.1 million for the Federal Duck Stamp Program, an increase of $547,000 over the FY 2024 enacted level. A portion of this increase would be used to implement the new mandates of the Duck Stamp Modernization Act of 2023, recently enacted by Congress.

Additionally, the Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $17.6 million for the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and Migratory Bird Joint Ventures (JVs), an increase of $828,000 over the FY 2024 enacted level. JVs are another example of the Service creating partnerships to further our mission in a way that fits regional needs on behalf of the American people. Each JV is a network of regional, self-directed partnerships involving federal, state, and local governments; corporations; individuals; and non-governmental organizations. JVs are a model for collaborative conservation in the 21st century, using state-of-the-art science and public and private resources to ensure diverse habitat is available to sustain migratory bird populations. The increased funding would achieve target funding levels for all 21 JVs across the country.

Fish and Aquatic Conservation

The world's rivers and lakes once teemed with abundant and diverse communities of fish, invertebrates, and plants. However, aquatic species now represent some of the most imperiled organisms on the planet. Increasing impacts from habitat loss, fragmentation, aquatic invasive species, pollution, and climate change threaten America's freshwater ecosystems and native fish populations, which provide important benefits to communities, local economies, and the broader environment. The Service's Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program addresses these challenges by collaborating with states, Tribes, landowners, federal agencies, and other partners to conserve aquatic species and ecosystems. This includes conservation work through our National Fish

Hatchery System (Hatchery System), population assessments, habitat restoration and connectivity, and aquatic invasive species control. As the threats to freshwater ecosystems and native fish species have increased and changed, so must our tools, expertise, partnerships, and strategies. For FY 2025, the Service is seeking to increase and enhance actions to conserve native aquatic species and their habitats with a total request of $239.3 million for the Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program, an increase of $12.6 million above the FY 2024 enacted level.

The work of the Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program not only benefits aquatic ecosystems, it also creates and maintains outdoor recreation opportunities, yielding benefits for local economies. Fishing and other aquatic-based recreational opportunities are multi-cultural, multi-generational experiences that improve the quality of life for American families from all facets of our diverse society, and generate substantial economic returns for local communities. The *2022 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation* reports nearly 40 million anglers, age 16 or older, went fishing in 2022, spending a combined $99.4 billion, with the average angler spending $2,490 per year. And according to the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation's special report on fishing activities, roughly 54.5 million Americans went fishing in 2023.

For over 150 years, the Hatchery System has served communities across the U.S. Today, the Hatchery System consists of 71 National Fish Hatcheries, one historic National Fish Hatchery, six Fish Health Centers (Health Centers), seven Fish Technology Centers (Tech Centers), and the Aquatic Animal Drug Approval Partnership Program. The Service's captive rearing facilities produce over 150 million fish and other aquatic organisms each year to aid in the recovery of threatened and endangered species, restore imperiled species, mitigate the impact of federal water development projects on fish populations, meet Tribal trust responsibilities, and enhance recreational and commercial fishing opportunities. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $80.3 million for fish hatchery operations, an increase of $5.2 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding will focus on propagating fish and other aquatic species to carry out Tribal trust responsibilities and sustain wild populations, including actions to help prevent the further decline of at-risk species and reduce the need for listings under the ESA. The FY 2025 request also includes $31.6 million for Hatchery System maintenance, a $7 million increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding would help address the annual and deferred maintenance needs of the Hatchery System.

Across the nation, millions of barriers to fish passage and aquatic connectivity have compromised the ability of waterways to sustain healthy fish populations and ecosystems. Barriers like old culverts, dams, and levees, can also lead to public safety hazards, water quality degradation, and higher water treatment costs. Utilizing its national network of fish biologists and engineers, the Service works with partners to restore natural flows to streams, rivers, floodplains, and tidal areas, restore riparian areas and wetlands, remove barriers to fish passage and aquatic connectivity, and improve water quality. The investments in this work will pay valuable benefits far into the future as natural systems improve in health year after year once aquatic connectivity is restored.

This is another example of the Service working on the ground to deliver our conservation mission on behalf of the American people, in ways that fit the local circumstances. In addition to

the lasting benefits to fish and wildlife, the Service's work to restore degraded habitats benefits local communities through development of more resilient infrastructure, reduced public safety hazards, and improved recreational opportunities. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $18.6 million for fish passage improvements, an increase of $3.6 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. The Service will also continue to implement BIL funding for fish passage in FY 2025, building on our success and collaborative work with partners on priority projects.

Invasive species are a significant threat to human, animal, and plant health, infrastructure, the economy, and cultural resources. The Service plays a critical role in safeguarding the Nation's waters from aquatic invasive species by preventing introduction, detecting and responding to new invasions, and suppressing populations of existing invasive plants and animals. In FY 2025, the Service will prioritize prevention efforts, which are the most cost-effective strategy to minimize the long-term risk and impacts of invasive species. The FY 2025 budget request includes $10.4 million for prevention, an increase of $7.7 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. Funding would be used to establish a pilot Aquatic Invasive Species Rapid Response Fund and to build capacity in the Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program to conduct early detection surveillance within invasion hotspots and points of entry into the U.S. as part of a nationally coordinated Early Detection and Rapid Response Framework developed under BIL.

Science Applications

The Science Applications Program works across the Service's programs and with partners to addresses complex conservation challenges through voluntary, landscape-level partnerships and the innovative application of science and data management. The Service's FY 2025 request includes a total of $37.9 million for the Science Applications Program, an increase of $4.1 million over the FY 2024 enacted level.

Collaborative conservation is among the most effective methods to meet the enormous and diverse conservation challenges facing our nation. For more than a decade, the Service's Science Applications' Science Partnerships program has built trust with partners, successfully fostering regional, national, and international collaborations to identify shared conservation goals and deliver conservation actions. For example, the Science Partnerships program plays a central leadership, collaboration, and technical assistance role for the Center for Pollinator Conservation, which is conducting pollinator inventory and monitoring with the Refuge System and milkweed distribution analysis with the Monarch Joint Venture. Science Partnerships is also supporting implementation of the 2023 memorandum of understanding between the Service, National Alliance of Forest Owners, and National Council for Air and Stream Improvement through collaborative science and technical project management. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $27.3 million for Science Partnerships, an increase of $2.3 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. This funding would be used to further support partnership conservation initiatives and build capacity, including for data managers and geospatial mapping technicians to better incorporate information in collaboration with our partners.

Office of Law Enforcement

There is a significant amount of trade involving wildlife that occurs globally and within our nation's borders. The legal trade of wildlife into and out of the U.S. alone is valued at several billion dollars a year. This trade provides great benefits to Americans, but the high market value for wildlife creates incentives for bad actors to circumvent wildlife laws for ill-gotten financial gain. The Office of Law Enforcement is the investigative arm of the Service tasked with enforcing our wildlife laws. Our special agents, attachés, wildlife inspectors, intelligence analysts, forensic scientists, and other staff serve on the front lines to regulate the wildlife trade, investigate wildlife crimes, prevent the introduction of invasive species, and partner with international, Tribal, federal, and state counterparts to conserve and protect wildlife resources. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes a total of $110.8 million for the Office of Law Enforcement, a $18.9 million increase over the FY 2024 level.

The ever-changing nature and growing complexity of wildlife crime has required the Office of Law Enforcement to adapt, develop innovative techniques, and expand our partnerships and our presence across the globe. Many wildlife crimes were once predominantly crimes of opportunity committed by individuals or small groups. Today, wildlife trafficking is largely carried out by transnational criminal organizations that are sophisticated, violent, and capable of illegally moving large commercial volumes of wildlife and laundering its proceeds. These transnational criminal organizations also traffic in people, weapons, narcotics, and other contraband.

In addition to our domestic special agents, the Service also has 11 personnel (10 attachés and one intelligence analyst) stationed internationally. Our attachés partner with foreign governments, share and coordinate intelligence, support and assist with investigations, and provide training. The Service also manages the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory, the world's only full-service crime laboratory devoted exclusively to supporting wildlife law enforcement. Additionally, the Service manages the Digital Evidence Recovery and Technical Support Unit, which supports the retrieval and analysis of computer-based records and advanced digital surveillance techniques, which is critical as wildlife crime has moved increasingly online. The Service's domestic agents, attachés, intelligence analysts, forensic scientists, and inspection teams work together to combat the illegal wildlife trade. In FY 2023, the Service conducted over 9,600 wildlife crime investigations, which resulted in ordered restitution of $1.9 million in fines, $1.0 million in civil penalties, 64 years in prison, and 222 years of probation. Wildlife trafficking remains a serious threat to conservation, national security, economic prosperity, global health, and community stability. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes an increase of $8.9 million over the FY 2024 enacted level to support, equip, and expand the capacity of our law enforcement workforce and to implement the Department's Law Enforcement Task Force priorities.

The U.S. remains one of the world's largest markets for wildlife and wildlife products, both legal and illegal. The Service's Wildlife Inspection Program is based at U.S. ports of entry and monitors the wildlife trade, processes legal shipments, intercepts wildlife contraband, prevents the introduction of invasive species, and works with special agents to support wildlife trafficking investigations. In FY 2023, the Service's wildlife inspectors processed nearly 175,000 declared wildlife shipments and facilitated legal trade valued at over $4.6 billion. The Wildlife Inspection Program faces a critical juncture as international wildlife trade expands in complexity, and responsibilities have evolved beyond facilitating legal imports and exports. Funding for the Service's wildlife inspectors is based on user fees, which have not increased since 2012. The

Service's FY 2025 budget request includes an increase of $10.0 million over the FY 2024 enacted level to support the Wildlife Inspection Program. This increase would enable the Service to modernize technology to enhance risk analysis and inspection efficiency, increase special operations nationally to target high-risk trade routes, bolster biosafety measures, increase capacity at ports of entry, and strategically deploy K9 interdiction teams.

International Affairs

Global biodiversity faces ever-growing and evolving threats, including climate change, wildlife trafficking, rapid habitat loss, and disease, which are pushing species to extinction and threatening human well-being in many parts of the world. The Service has engaged in international conservation for more than a century, starting with the 1916 Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada. The Service's International Affairs Program has a long history of implementing global treaties and agreements, diplomatic engagement with foreign nations, collaborating with global partners to implement on-the-ground conservation, and supporting research and trainings abroad. The work of the International Affairs Program is critical to stemming global biodiversity loss and conserving some of the world's most iconic wildlife species, including African and Asian elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, great apes, sea turtles, scarlet macaws, and cheetahs. The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes $24.0 million for the International Affairs Program, an increase of $2.9 million over the FY 2024 enacted level. The Service is also requesting to move funding for the ePermits system into its own line to reflect the cross-bureau nature of that effort.

For over 50 years, the Service's International Affairs Program has served as the implementing body for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) through the Divisions of Management and Scientific Authorities. CITES provides a global framework to ensure scientific integrity and international cooperation to facilitate legal, sustainable trade of the over 37,000 species listed in the CITES Appendices, and to combat wildlife trafficking. The International Affairs Program implements CITES by leading U.S. engagement at CITES meetings, ensuring that U.S. exports and imports comply with CITES requirements, and supporting CITES capacity-building efforts around the world. The Service's FY 2025 budget request would support the Service's preparations for the 20th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, which will take place in mid-2025. It will also help address the Service's CITES permit workload through greater efficiencies.

The Service's International Affairs Program also implements the Pelly Amendment to the Fishermen's Protective Act (Pelly), which authorizes the President to prohibit import of products from nations whose nationals are determined by the Secretary of the Interior or Commerce to be engaging in trade or take that undermines the effectiveness of any international treaty or convention for the protection of endangered or threatened species. In 2023, the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Department of State, issued two Pelly certifications to the President, finding that nationals of Mexico and the People's Republic of China (PRC), directly or indirectly, engaged in harvest or trade that diminishes the effectiveness of CITES. In Mexico, the concern is illegal fishing for and illegal trade in the totoaba, which is causing the imminent extinction of the vaquita, the world's smallest and most endangered marine mammal, with fewer than 10 individuals remaining. In the PRC, the concern is the illegal trade in pangolins, the most

trafficked mammal in the world. The Service's FY 2025 budget request would support implementation of Pelly, including ongoing efforts regarding the certifications of Mexico and the PRC.

The International Affairs Program supports on-the-ground conservation for priority species and habitats across the globe, including through the Multinational Species Conservation Funds (Species Funds). The Species Funds support strategic on-the-ground conservation projects for African elephants, Asian elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, great apes, marine turtles, and freshwater turtles and tortoises. From 2015 to 2022, the Species Funds provided $92.5 million in grants and cooperative agreements and leveraged nearly $200 million in additional funds towards conserving these species. The Service's FY 2025 budget request also includes $21.0 million for the Species Funds, a $500,000 increase over the FY 2024 enacted level. This increase would enable the Service to support additional conservation needs for priority species and their habitats.

Legislative Proposals

The Service's FY 2025 budget request includes a legislative proposal to provide the Service with good neighbor and stewardship contracting authorities. The good neighbor authority allows states, counties, and Tribes to enter into a Good Neighbor Agreement to perform forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration work on Service lands. Authorized restoration services include treating insect- and disease-infested trees, reducing hazardous fuels, and any other activities to restore or improve ecosystem health, including fish and wildlife habitat. Stewardship contracting authority will allow the Service to trade forest products for land management and ecosystem restoration services. While the Service was provided good neighbor authority in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2024, we would appreciate the opportunity to continue working with the Chairman and Committee on further technical assistance to meet the needs of the Service and provide stewardship contracting authority as well.

The FY 2025 budget request also includes a legislative proposal to allow persons responsible for harm to Service assets—not taxpayers—to pay for any injury they cause. Under current law, when Service resources are injured or destroyed, the costs of repair and restoration falls upon the appropriated budget for the affected field station or office. This is the case even when parties are ordered to pay restitution. Unlike some other land management agencies, the Service only has criminal penalties (fines) for those injuries occurring on Service property. In most cases, the injuries far exceed any fines recovered by the U.S. Government. With this authority, the recovery of damages for injury to Service resources would be used to reimburse assessment costs, prevent or minimize the risk of loss, monitor ongoing effects, and/or use those funds to restore, replace, or acquire resources equivalent to those injured or destroyed.

The Service's FY 2025 budget request also supports revising administrative amounts for both the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) to better keep pace with administrative needs. For NAWCA, this would mean increasing the administrative cap from four percent to seven percent to address increased administrative requirements and help our partners address threats to wetland dependent species and recover populations. For NMBCA, this would mean increasing the administrative cap from three percent to five percent and further lower match requirements passed in the

Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023 from 2:1 to 1:1 to encourage a wider variety of bird conservation partners.

The FY 2025 budget request also includes a proposal to grant authority for federal agencies to transfer funding provided under BIL to the Service to meet the consultation and environmental review workload for BIL projects. The Service appreciates Congress' inclusion of this authority in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2024. The Service is currently working to implement this newly provided authority.

Conclusion

The Service's FY 2025 budget request invests in America and prioritizes key conservation initiatives while following the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023. The Service strives to be efficient and innovative with the limited resources we have. However, over the past twenty years the Service's capacity has declined, while costs and workloads have increased, and wildlife conservation challenges have become more complex. The Service is in a moment where our decreased capacity is eroding our on-the ground conservation efforts.

If funded, the Service's FY 2025 budget request would help restore our capacity and invest in key conservation partnerships. The Service would maximize the budget's investments by building upon our experience in developing partnerships, leveraging the capacity of our partners, and tailoring the implementation of our mission to meet the conditions and needs of local situations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.