Dear Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree:

As you draft the FY24 Interior, the Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, we ask that you include $30 million for the Multinational Species Conservation Fund (MSCF) and $31 million for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) International Affairs (IA) program to maintain and expand upon the funding levels increased by the Subcommittee in recent years.

The MSCF is made up of a group of five Congressionally-established funds that provide seed money for public-private partnerships to conserve several of the world’s most iconic and most imperiled species—tigers, African and Asian elephants, rhinos, great apes, turtles, and tortoises—in their native habitats. While the MSCF supports specific groups of species, the FWS IA program supports broader efforts to conserve our planet’s rich wildlife diversity by building capacity for landscape-level wildlife conservation and stopping illegal wildlife trade. The program also provides oversight of domestic laws and international treaties that promote the long-term conservation of plant and animal species by ensuring that international trade and other activities do not threaten their survival in the wild.

We are grateful for the Committee’s strong, bipartisan support for these programs. We believe additional funding is needed, particularly in light of three major challenges that are intertwined and rooted in the loss of nature: the rapid decline of wildlife and biodiversity on a global scale, with as many as a million species at risk of extinction by the end of this century; the ongoing fallout from a global pandemic, which has already claimed millions of lives and cost the U.S. economy trillions of dollars; and the worsening impacts of climate change, which threaten to undermine communities and ecosystems as well as our national security.

Investments in global conservation, including the work supported by these U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service international programs, directly address root causes of all three of these challenges, including by promoting conservation and restoration of forests and other wildlife habitats, improving monitoring wildlife health and reducing the risks of zoonotic spillover and future pandemics, and preventing wildlife trafficking. Moreover, these programs have built trust...
in and goodwill for the United States in the countries where these projects take place, often under challenging conditions. Given both the growing needs and return on investment that these programs provide, we are asking for an increase in funding for the programs for FY24.

Numerous scientific reports have made clear that we are in the midst of a global extinction crisis, with wildlife populations declining at a staggering rate. According to the World Wildlife Fund’s most recent Living Planet Report, released in 2022, the size of wildlife populations has declined by 69% on average globally since 1970 -- a stunning drop in the course of just five decades. Driving this loss of wildlife and biodiversity is the loss of habitat, largely due to agriculture and other forms of development, as well as overexploitation of species, harmful pollutants, invasive species, and--increasingly--climate change. The rate of biodiversity loss in Latin America and the Caribbean is particularly alarming, with the abundance of wildlife populations declining an average of 94% over the past fifty years in a region that is home to 6 of the 17 megadiverse countries of the world and harbors over 40% of Earth’s biodiversity, according to a 2010 UN Environment Report.

Biodiversity is the foundation of healthy ecosystems, and the loss of a single, keystone species (species like elephants, rhinos, tigers, and gorillas, for example) can cause the entire system to unravel. Healthy ecosystems can absorb water to prevent flooding, function as significant watersheds, reduce the ambient temperature on hot days, and are more resilient and resistant to wildfires. Conserving and restoring biodiversity, as these programs help to do, provides a front line of defense against extreme weather, helping to protect human life and property and reducing the costs of recovery from weather-driven disasters.

The Species Conservation Catalyst (SCCF), launched by FWS-IA in 2022, serves as a ‘conservation accelerator,’ focusing on select species to fully map and understand threats along the wildlife trafficking chain and identify strategic points of intervention. Appropriations will support this fund to allow FWS IA to respond to evolving threats, identify species of greatest concern, and launch targeted, high impact projects to reverse the trajectory of population declines. The initial round of funding has been focused on saiga antelope and cheetah–two species highly vulnerable to overexploitation from illegal wildlife trade. The SCCF program aims to support projects that are 2-5 years in length, in order to establish robust programming with measurable impact. The list of vulnerable species is ever-increasing, though, and it is critical for the SCCF to be nimble and responsive by adding new species and programs annually. As an example, many species of songbird, including U.S. native species, are captured from the wild for food, singing competitions, and the pet trade. Rare birds create increased demand and drive higher prices. FWS IA has significant expertise and is well-positioned to lead multi-faceted programming that addresses the growing songbird trade in the US and abroad. As saiga antelope and cheetah programs are already underway, additional funding will be needed to launch programming for other taxa.
These funds provide front-line protection against zoonotic disease by supporting programs that prevent the conditions that lead to pathogen spillover events. Zoonotic spillover events increase when people come into closer contact with wildlife through the destruction and degradation of wildlife habitats, particularly tropical forests, or at live wildlife markets where animals are crowded for sale and slaughter. In both situations, wildlife is likely to be severely stressed, which further increases the potential for disease spillover to occur. Biodiversity loss can also contribute to zoonotic disease spillover by removing buffer species that protect against diseases jumping into human populations.

Additional support is also needed for conservation efforts in the Latin America and the Caribbean region to save these species and secure globally significant, carbon-rich forests and other ecosystems, including the Amazon. Today, emblematic species like the jaguar are now extinct in at least two countries where they used to roam, and they face more threats than ever due to ecosystem degradation and fragmentation, decline of natural prey, human-wildlife conflict, and the emerging and growing threat of illegal trade.

The most pressing threats to wildlife–habitat degradation, human-wildlife conflict, illegal wildlife trade, climate change–cannot be decoupled from the human and societal issues that are driving them. FWS recognizes that it must look beyond strictly biological threats and has increased its social science workforce. Finding solutions that work for people and animals is the only way to secure a future for both.

The appropriations bills from the past four fiscal years also included report language directing the Department of the Interior to implement policies and procedures for the execution and oversight of international conservation programs to ensure that grant recipients have policies in place that safeguard the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the human rights of individuals and communities in and around protected areas supported by grant monies. We support retaining these safeguards and urge the Committee to include sufficient funding to support their implementation.

The Committee’s support is needed now more than ever, given the intense pressures that wildlife and nature are under, and the role that conservation plays in helping to address several large and intertwined global challenges. For these reasons, we support funding the MSCF at $30 million and FWS IA at $31 million and urge you to include at least this level of funding in the FY24 Interior, the Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Act. Thank you for taking the time to consider our views and for recognizing the ongoing importance of these programs in protecting our world’s rich biological diversity and the people and communities who rely on it.

Sincerely,
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