March 27, 2023

The Honorable Jeffrey A. Merkley
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
531 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Merkley and Ranking Member Murkowski:

We thank you for your strong support for programs at the Department of the Interior (DOI) that support U.S. efforts to conserve wildlife, combat wildlife trafficking and illegal timber trade, and protect against the spillover and spread of diseases of zoonotic origin. As you draft the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Interior, 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 (USFWS) International Affairs (IA) program, to build upon the funding levels included in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328). We also urge you to provide $104.4 million—as requested in the President’s proposed budget—for the USFWS Office of Law Enforcement (OLE), which is the key agency at the DOI responsible for enforcing U.S. laws related to wildlife.

The MSCF comprises five congressionally established funds that provide seed money for public-private partnerships that conserve several of the world’s most iconic species—wild tigers, African and Asian elephants, rhinos, great apes, turtles, and tortoises—in their native habitats. Where the MSCF supports specific species, the USFWS IA program supports broader efforts to conserve our planet’s rich wildlife diversity by protecting habitats and species, combating illegal wildlife trade, and building capacity for landscape-level wildlife conservation. The program 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.

The USFWS OLE investigates wildlife crimes, inspects wildlife and wildlife products at the border and ports-of-entry, regulates wildlife trade domestically, and works in partnership with international, state, and tribal counterparts to conserve wildlife resources. It plays an integral role in the ongoing efforts to combat the global crisis of wildlife poaching and trafficking as well as in preventing illegal wildlife and timber imports into the United States.

This year, we ask the Committee to increase its support of the MSCF, the USFWS IA program, and the USFWS OLE as we continue to grapple with three intertwined crises: the rapid loss of wildlife and biodiversity; a global pandemic caused by a virus with zoonotic origins; and the worsening impacts of climate change. Additional investments in USFWS international programs, enforcement efforts, and global conservation are needed to help address these challenges, which are both causing and amplified by the loss of species and habitats.

Together, the MSCF, the USFWS IA program, and the USFWS OLE are helping to address some of the root causes of these challenges by serving as a primary funding source for critical on-the-ground projects and the implementation and enforcement of laws that protect wildlife and plant species. These projects include the conservation and restoration of forests and other wildlife habitats, wildlife health monitoring, and efforts to prevent poaching and wildlife trafficking.

As these important conservation efforts are implemented, it is imperative that they support and work collaboratively with local communities and do not impinge on their rights. To ensure respect for the rights of local and indigenous communities and help prevent human rights violations or other misconduct by local law enforcement engaged in anti-poaching activities, report language in the last three appropriations bills directed the DOI to develop policies and procedures to establish safeguards for grants related to funds transferred from the United States Agency for International Development. We strongly support this language and recognize that additional resources and capacity are needed to effectively implement this enhanced oversight.

Recent increases in the USFWS OLE budget have enabled the agency to deploy 12 USFWS attachés in targeted U.S. embassies overseas in countries where wildlife trafficking is a serious problem. While the attachés have been incredibly effective, we request that at least $1 million be made available for the USFWS OLE to carry out additional operations that identify key actors in the illegal trade chain and dismantle criminal networks overseas. Further expansion of the attaché program is warranted given the success of the program to date and the need for additional attachés and support staff in other countries struggling to address wildlife trafficking. USFWS OLE also plays a central role in implementing the 2008 Lacey Act Amendments that prohibit trade in illegal timber products and needs additional funding to fully enforce these, in order to prevent illegal products from entering the U.S. market and undermining American jobs and businesses in the forestry sector.

The MSCF, the USFWS IA program, and the USFWS OLE have enjoyed longstanding bipartisan support in Congress and enthusiastic interest among our constituents, many of whom place a high value on the protection of iconic wildlife species, especially in concert with the promotion of the rights of local and indigenous communities. With nature and biodiversity declining globally and with multiple negative spillover effects for human health, development, and the climate, support for these programs is needed now more than ever.

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For these reasons, we believe that the MSCF, the USFWS IA program, and the USFWS OLE each fully merit an appropriation of $30 million, $31 million, and $104.4 million, respectively, in the FY24 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our views and for recognizing the importance of these programs in protecting our planet’s rich biological diversity.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

Tina Smith
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Jacky Rosen
United States Senator