

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 7, 2024

The Honorable Christopher A. Coons
Chairman
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,
and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,
and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Coons and Ranking Member Graham:

As you develop the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts, we urge you to provide strategic increases in funding for programs that help to conserve global biodiversity and promote sustainable natural resource management at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), State Department (State), and through the Tropical Forest and Coral Reef Conservation Act (TFCCA) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Robust U.S. investments in international conservation are needed to address the rapid loss of nature and biodiversity on a global scale, which poses long-term threats to our security and prosperity. The fragmentation and overexploitation of nature is also exacerbating climate change and driving increased spillover and spread of zoonotic pathogens that can lead to pandemics. Global conservation investments are among the clearest and most cost-effective solutions to addressing them and the threats they pose to the United States and U.S. interests abroad. The U.S. has a central role to play in helping to galvanize global action, ambition, and investments to address these problems. Developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean are home to most of the world's remaining biological diversity, but these countries often lack the financial resources and technical capacity to conserve and protect their globally significant forests, lands, waters, and wildlife populations. Developed countries like the U.S. are key partners in this respect, and they will need to significantly increase the resources available for conservation in the developing world if we are to protect these places and the people that depend on them.

The large-scale loss of critical ecosystems and the services they provide poses a direct threat to the health and security of people and the stability and prosperity of nations, including the United States. A 2019 intergovernmental report on the state of our planet concluded that biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in human history, and that "Nature and its vital contributions to people...are deteriorating worldwide." The Council on Strategic Risks identifies such ecological disruption as one of the most underappreciated threats to U.S. national security. In its 2022 Global Risks Report,^[2] the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked biodiversity loss as one of the

^[2] <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2022/>

top three risks facing the world. The destruction and fragmentation of critical ecosystems, growing scarcities of natural resources due to over-exploitation, and illegal exploitation and trade of wildlife, timber, and fish are undermining food and water security, harming economic growth, contributing to regional tensions, and providing support and financing to transnational criminal organizations. The destruction of tropical forests and the commercial trade in wildlife that risks transmitting pathogens from animals to people are also major drivers of the spillover of zoonotic diseases, such as HIV, Ebola, and COVID-19, and threaten to spark future pandemics. The costs of responding to such spillover after it has occurred are 100 times greater than the costs of preventing it in the first place through strategic conservation investments.

USAID Biodiversity Programs

Most U.S. foreign assistance for on-the-ground conservation is delivered through USAID and its robust portfolio of conservation and forestry programs. These programs help to protect some of the largest, most at-risk natural landscapes and seascapes, including tropical forests in the Amazon, Central Africa, and Southeast Asia; savannahs and grasslands; and transboundary water basins, as well as the livelihoods of millions of people who directly depend on such natural resources for their survival and economic growth. By preventing deforestation and the degradation of biodiverse and carbon-rich ecosystems, these programs also help to prevent zoonotic spillover and to combat climate change. They work in partnership with foreign governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities to address direct threats to biodiversity loss and the underlying drivers of species extinction. While most efforts are focused on conserving biologically significant areas, USAID programs also strengthen policies, raise public awareness, and tackle global challenges such as the illegal trade in timber, fish, and wildlife. Funding through USAID Biodiversity programs is also used to support partnership activities between USAID and other federal agencies with technical expertise in international conservation, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and US Forest Service (USFS). For FY 2025, we request at least \$500 million for USAID Biodiversity Programs, of which we request at least \$50 million to support joint USAID and USFWS efforts to implement the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) in the Congo Basin. Increases over the FY24 enacted levels would also support regional landscape programs in the Amazon, Central America, and include support to USFWS, USFS, DOI, and NOAA, leveraging the technical agency capacity and partnerships to conserve forests, great apes, and other vulnerable species.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF)

The Global Environment Facility (the GEF) is an independent international financial institution that provides grants to support sustainable use and improved management of natural resources. Operating in 183 countries, projects unite donor and recipient countries with U.S. corporations and NGOs. America's investment in the GEF also yields a very high rate of return.

Every dollar America invests in the GEF generates an additional \$40 from other countries and partners for the GEF and its programs. GEF support has also been critical to placing 12 percent of the world's terrestrial area under protection, resulting in 3,300 protected areas that span 2.1 billion acres and contain at least 700 globally threatened species, as well as the improved cooperation and governance of one-third of the world's marine ecosystems. In addition to playing a leading role in protecting the world's forests and fisheries, the GEF funds programs to combat poaching and wildlife trafficking around the world by strengthening national laws and law enforcement, monitoring wildlife populations, and reducing demand. The GEF also provides significant support to developing-country efforts to address other pressing global environmental challenges, including the growing crisis of plastic pollution and marine debris, as well as toxic chemicals and desertification. In 2022, the U.S. and other donor countries finalized new 4-year pledges to the GEF as part of its 8th replenishment cycle (GEF-8). We request \$150.2 million in FY25 to support the third installment of the U.S. contribution to GEF-8.

Combating Wildlife Trafficking Programs at the Department of State and USAID

Since FY 2014 Congress has directed funding to address wildlife trafficking through programs at USAID and the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) at State. In 2022, Congress also reauthorized the bipartisan END Wildlife Trafficking Act to enhance existing efforts and support implementation of a national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking. Combating Wildlife Trafficking programs support U.S. security and economic interests by preventing transnational organized crime and corruption and helping to strengthen law enforcement and economic stability among our strategic partners around the globe. The illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products is worth of billions of dollars annually and is carried out by highly organized transnational criminal networks connecting poachers in Africa, Asia, and other regions to high-end black markets around the globe. Wildlife trafficking is also closely linked to other transnational organized crimes, including the illegal trade in narcotics, and has provided financing for organized crime syndicates and extremist groups, including those with terrorist ties. State INCLE and USAID are using funds provided by Congress to invest in projects that support anti-poaching and wildlife law enforcement, strengthen judicial systems and rule of law, disrupt transit hubs, and reduce consumer demand for illegal wildlife products. Trade in wildlife that risks contributing to zoonotic spillover is also a major driver of future pandemic threats, and additional funding is needed through these programs for USAID and State INCLE to support countries in their efforts to prevent wildlife trade that can pose such risks. For FY 2025, we request \$140 million in dedicated funding to support existing and new activities, including for INCLE to expand its efforts in Latin and South America and its work to address other nature crimes, including IUU fishing, illegal logging and timber trafficking, and illegal mining.

Tropical Forest and Coral Reef Conservation Act (TFCCA)

First enacted in 1998, the Tropical Forest Conservation Act has offered eligible countries the opportunity to reduce their official concessional debt owed to the U.S. government while generating funds locally to conserve biological diversity and protect ecologically and economically vital forest ecosystems. The Act was expanded to include coral reef ecosystems in 2019, and in 2022, Congress reauthorized this highly successful and innovative “debt-for-nature” program, which has produced tremendous returns on investment over the last 25 years. Last September, the U.S. finalized its 22nd swap under the program – an agreement with the Government of Peru to reduce its debt by \$20 million over the next 13 years, which also leveraged a combined \$3 million in support from World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Over time, current TFCCA agreements will have generated nearly \$400 million for long-term tropical forest protection in over a dozen countries. For FY25, we request \$15 million for the TFCCA.

Public-Private Partnerships in Conservation

The U.S. government is a leader in global conservation. The track record and reputation of global conservation investments, such as the ones outlined above, attracts other public and private sector donors. To leverage greater and sustained long-term financing for protected and conserved areas around the world, public-private partnerships can be facilitated by a U.S. foundation for international conservation. We also request the following report language be included in the SFOPS report:

Public-Private Partnerships. –The Committee directs that, of the funds appropriated by this Act and prior Acts under the heading “Economic Support Funds” made available to support a new public-private partnership foundation for conservation are in addition to funds otherwise allocated to the Biodiversity Conservation program at USAID in the act and are not to cause a reduction of total funds available to Biodiversity Conservation at USAID.

Taken together, these important U.S. government investments protect globally important ecosystems and natural resources, prevent the illegal trafficking of wildlife, timber, fish, and other natural resources, and provide some of the clearest and most cost-effective solutions to a number of serious global challenges, including combating climate change and preventing future pandemics. In doing so, they serve as a stabilizing force in fragile regions, promote global health and local community development and economic growth, protect our interests overseas, and enhance America’s economic and national security. We urge you to provide strategic increases in the funding for these international conservation programs in the FY 2025 SFOPS Appropriation Act.

Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Van Hollen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chris" being the most prominent.

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thom Tillis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thom" being the most prominent.

Thom Tillis
United States Senator