

**Testimony of Stephen Guertin,
Deputy Director for Policy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,
Department of the Interior, before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
regarding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request**

July 21, 2021

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Stephen Guertin, Deputy Director for Policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the Service's Fiscal Year 2022 budget request.

For more than 150 years, the Service has worked closely with partners to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. From rocky coasts to hardwood forests and black-footed ferrets to bald eagles, the Service stewards an array of natural resources for a diverse public. Our work is especially important now as our nation's natural resources and people face climate change, a global pandemic, and other unprecedented threats. The proposed budget would provide funding to help better accomplish our mission in a changing world and it recognizes the Service's potential to build a brighter future for fish, wildlife, and people.

The Fiscal Year 2022 budget requests \$1.9 billion in current appropriations for the Service. This reflects a \$331 million increase over the 2021 enacted level – the largest proposed budget increase in the Service's history. The budget also includes \$1.6 billion in permanent funding, most of which is apportioned to the States and Territories to support their fish and wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation programs.

The President's budget will restore capacity across the Service's programs, building our conservation workforce and enhancing our ability to care for our trust resources. It also recognizes the Service's key role in supporting the Administration's top priorities—the intersecting challenges of climate change, COVID-19, economic recovery, and racial justice. Leveraging the Service's existing work and capacities in these areas, the budget provides targeted investments to advance climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience efforts agency-wide; prevent future pandemics associated with zoonotic diseases; create new jobs, infrastructure, and recreational opportunities; and enhance equity in all the services and recreational experiences we provide. Administration priorities for the Service are reflected in the budget, including implementing the America the Beautiful initiative, deploying clean energy, and promoting agency-wide equity and diversity.

- **Conservation Efforts, such as the *America the Beautiful Initiative*.** The budget proposal for the Service is a total of \$1.2 billion in funding to support President Biden's efforts to increase conservation efforts to help address the climate crisis. The budget includes an increase of \$240 million above the 2021 enacted level for programs and projects that will contribute to minimizing the negative effects of climate change, bolster community resilience, and increase carbon sequestration. The budget also accelerates

conservation efforts by supporting the America the Beautiful initiative, which aims to conserve 30 percent of U.S. land and water by 2030 through investments in partner programs, climate science and habitat adaptation and resilience. Additional funding will be used to support land management and restoration while creating job opportunities for Americans in the outdoors, including \$584.4 million in funding for the operations and maintenance needs across 568 National Wildlife Refuges, an increase of \$80.5 million above the 2021 level.

- **Advancing Science to Pursue Clean Energy and Climate Resiliency.** The budget request includes \$35.5 million, an increase of \$15 million above 2021, for climate science that is necessary to guide expanded use of clean energy sources and improve resiliency to changing temperatures, water levels, and weather patterns. Fish, wildlife, and plant resources are integral to the nation's natural landscapes and have played a major role in shaping America's history, identity, and character, but global and national conservation challenges such as wildfire, drought, invasive species, changing ocean conditions, and other impacts to the land, water, and wildlife are magnified by a rapidly changing climate. The budget will expand the application of scientific research into the assessment and understanding of habitat requirements to enable economic development and inform conservation decisions in cooperation with the U.S. Geological Survey and other federal agencies, state, Tribal, and local government partners, and non-government organizations.
- **Deploying Clean Energy.** The budget proposes \$27.6 million for the Service, an increase of \$13 million, for activities associated with clean energy development, including a program increase of \$8 million for the Ecological Services Planning and Consultation program to support reviews and permitting of clean energy projects. Within the Migratory Bird Management Program, the budget includes a program increase of \$5.1 million for clean energy project permitting to enable renewable resource development while protecting migratory birds, notably iconic bald and golden eagles. The Service supports the responsible development of clean energy sources to create new industries to support American workers while reducing emissions that contribute to climate change.
- **Promoting Equity and Diversity.** The budget request for the Service includes \$1.4 million as part of a Department of the Interior-wide Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility budget initiative to address high-priority needs in support of Executive Order 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, and Executive Order 13988, Preventing and Combating Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The Service administers the National Wildlife Refuge System, the nation's network of lands and waters dedicated to conserving America's rich fish and wildlife heritage. Founded in 1903, the Refuge System contains 568 refuges that span more than 850 million acres of lands and waters, including over 760 million marine acres. It protects many of the country's most iconic ecosystems and provides high-quality habitat for a diverse array of fish, wildlife, and plants, including hundreds of threatened and endangered species.

With a refuge in every state and territory and over 100 refuges within 25 miles of cities with populations over 250,000, the Refuge System also provides premier recreational opportunities for a diverse public. In 2020, the Refuge System hosted a record breaking 61.4 million visits, reflecting a growing interest in outdoor recreation. These recreation visits yield major economic benefits for local communities, generating \$1.1 billion annually in job income and over 41,000 jobs.

Recognizing the potential of the Refuge System to make significant strides toward meeting the administration's climate, conservation, and job creation goals, the budget requests \$584.4 million for the Refuge System in 2022. An increase of \$51.7 million for Refuge System operations will help accelerate climate adaptation and resilience efforts across the nation and improve climate science. This funding will be used to develop new climate adaptation decision support tools, advance landscape-scale conservation planning, and monitor and study key wildlife populations including pollinators, migratory birds, and endangered species.

The budget also provides funding to help the Refuge System "Build Back Better" in several different ways. Targeted investments to restore the Refuge System's conservation and management capacity will enable us to hire new biologists, visitor service professionals, and federal wildlife officers. This will benefit both the natural resources we manage and the millions of Americans who enjoy them. The budget includes \$13 million for the Refuge System to administer the Civilian Climate Corps, which will create living wage jobs and provide a pathway to careers in conservation and recreation – a win-win for the economy and the environment.

Additionally, the budget includes \$48.6 million for deferred maintenance at our refuges, which is a start in supporting the resources needed to address our maintenance backlog and shift to life-cycle investments. Analysis shows that investing in cyclical maintenance saves taxpayers 40% over waiting until maintenance is deferred.

Additional funding is requested to expand the Refuge System's work in urban communities through the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program. These investments will help address inequalities in recreational access and establish long-term, meaningful connections with culturally and ethnically diverse urban communities to achieve our conservation mission.

Ecological Services

The Service's Ecological Services program is a leader in conserving our nation's imperiled species and their habitats, ensuring that sustainable populations of fish, wildlife, and plants continue to thrive for future generations. One of its primary responsibilities is administering the Endangered Species Act (ESA), one of our Nation's most important wildlife conservation laws. The ESA has had notable success since its passage nearly 50 years ago, including the recent recovery of the interior least tern, Monito gecko, Hawaiian hawk, and Borax Lake chub. Preventing extinction and achieving recovery of listed species continues to be one of the Service's highest priorities. To further this priority, the Service's budget request proposes a total of \$332 million to implement the ESA and other laws under the Ecological Services program, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Coastal Barrier Resources Act.

The Service will align funds from this proposed increase with our highest priority actions to prevent extinction and achieve recovery for listed species. This includes supporting voluntary conservation efforts on private lands, which are essential to many species-recovery efforts and consistent with the Administration's goals for the America the Beautiful initiative. Habitat conservation and restoration efforts for at-risk species often have the added benefit of helping us mitigate the effects of climate change, including high-severity wildfire and invasive species.

Within Ecological Services, the budget proposes an increase of \$8 million to support reviews and permitting of clean energy projects. This funding will allow us to improve and streamline consideration of these projects, facilitating environmentally-sound energy development while ensuring conservation of trust resources.

The budget request will also support work to restore and protect resilient ecosystems through the maintenance of undeveloped coastal barriers; restoration of fish, wildlife, and habitats injured by hazardous substances; and advancement of tools and knowledge to assist partners in their wetland conservation efforts.

Migratory Birds

As climate change and other threats drive declines in North America's bird populations, the Service's Migratory Bird Program plays a critical conservation leadership role at home and abroad. The Migratory Bird Program leads migratory bird conservation and management efforts in the U.S. and internationally through effective partnerships, applied science, and innovative strategies. Working closely with States, Tribes, sporting and conservation groups, and other partners, the program monitors and assesses bird populations, works to balance human-wildlife conflicts, and provides a variety of migratory bird-related recreational opportunities.

To address climate change, habitat loss, and other threats to migratory birds, the 2022 budget proposal requests \$66.1 million for Migratory Bird Management – an \$18.2 million increase over the 2021 level. This funding will enable the program to conduct new habitat and species analyses, develop new management techniques, and promulgate regulations that protect birds and provide greater certainty to regulated parties. The budget contains more than \$5 million for the clean energy review and permitting processes, enabling us to advance the Administration's clean energy goals while minimizing impacts to migratory birds. Funding for the Joint Venture Program will increase habitat resilience across the nation's four migratory bird flyways.

In addition, the budget request reflects the important role the Migratory Bird Program plays in promoting more equitable access to nature. The budget includes increased funding for the Urban Bird Treaty program, which will allow the Service to improve bird conservation in cities and expand recreational and educational opportunities to underserved communities.

Fish and Aquatic Conservation

The Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program (FAC) leads the Service's efforts to study, protect, and restore our fish and aquatic species, working collaboratively with a broad array of partners.

The program administers the National Fish Hatchery System, a national network of 70 propagation hatcheries, 6 Fish Health Centers, and 7 Fish Technology Centers. The National Fish Hatchery System is an international leader in the propagation of imperiled aquatic species, including endangered freshwater mussels, and rears more than 100 million fish annually. This work aids in the recovery of threatened and endangered species, helps fulfill the Service's tribal trust responsibilities, mitigates the impact of federal water development projects, and enhances recreational fishing opportunities for the public. In addition, FAC staff at our 51 Fish and Wildlife Conservation Offices work closely with a wide range of partners through programs like the National Fish Passage Program and the National Fish Habitat Partnership to improve and restore aquatic habitats across the country.

The program's work generates significant environmental and economic returns for fish and people. In 2020, the Hatchery System implemented almost 300 recovery actions benefitting 92 listed species and provided refugia for dozens more. The program also provided fishing and other aquatic-based recreational activities at a time when interest in outdoor recreation continues to grow.

The budget requests \$254.9 million for Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Conservation, an increase of \$48.3 million above the 2021 enacted level. The request includes a \$16.2 million increase for operation of the National Fish Hatchery System and an additional \$24.7 million for maintenance and equipment to help maintain an aging hatchery infrastructure, address a \$293 million deferred maintenance backlog, and support propagation programs vital to the health of our nation's aquatic ecosystems and fisheries.

The request also includes program increases to expand aquatic invasive species prevention efforts, \$1 million for the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, and \$2.9 million to support the species population assessment and habitat conservation work of our 51 Fish and Wildlife Conservation Offices.

International Affairs

The International Affairs Program leads domestic and international efforts to protect, restore, and enhance the world's diverse wildlife and their habitats. The program provides technical and financial assistance to conserve priority species and habitats across the globe, such as elephants and rhinos. It also implements the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and other laws and treaties to ensure wildlife trade is legal and does not threaten the survival of species in the wild. The program's work to enhance the resilience of wildlife, habitats, and local communities is more important than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to underscore the critical role that biodiversity conservation plays in preventing future pandemics.

The budget proposal includes \$29.3 million for the International Affairs Program. This funding will enable us to expand conservation capacity in range countries; combat wildlife trafficking; and develop conservation methods to address the impacts of climate change. The budget will also support the program's engagement in the governmentwide One Health approach, which considers how animal, human, and environmental health are closely linked. Funding will be used to support wildlife and habitat conservation projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America,

including in regions that are hotspots for disease. These investments will also support education and outreach to build awareness of the role of conservation in preventing the spread of zoonotic disease.

Additionally, the budget supports ongoing efforts to modernize the Service's permitting system and address administrative and security issues pertaining to CITES permits. The budget proposal also includes increased funding necessary to address the Service's significant international permitting workload and eliminate the existing permitting backlog.

Office of Law Enforcement

As the Service's investigative arm, the Office of Law Enforcement supports our conservation mission by enforcing wildlife laws, ensuring sustainable and legal wildlife trade, and investigating wildlife crimes. Wildlife trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry that fuels instability and has been linked to other illicit activities such as human, arms, and drug trafficking. The Service's special agents leverage their investigative skills to combat the transnational criminal organizations behind the global wildlife trafficking crisis. The Service's wildlife inspectors are the front-line defense in the illegal wildlife trade, inspecting and interdicting shipments entering and moving through U.S. ports of entry. Working closely with international and domestic partners, the Office of Law Enforcement plays a key role in addressing the conservation and global security threat posed by illegal wildlife trade and trafficking.

The budget requests \$95 million for the Office of Law Enforcement, which will support efforts to ensure legal wildlife trade, reduce demand for illegal wildlife products, and build local enforcement capacities in other nations. This investment will also enable the Service's special agents and inspectors to focus their efforts on preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases through the illegal wildlife trade. The proposed budget also focuses on special agent and wildlife inspector staffing levels. Due to mandatory retirement age for law enforcement positions, field agents are at an historical low while global responsibilities continue to grow. An increase of \$7.7 million is included to hire a new class of Special Agents, enabling the program to build its workforce to keep pace with its growing global responsibilities.

Science Applications

Since climate change, habitat loss, and other environmental issues span geographic and political boundaries, addressing these issues requires collaboration between diverse partners at a landscape scale. The Service's Science Applications program plays a vital national leadership and coordination role in helping the Service and its partners address these issues using an inclusive and participatory approach to landscape conservation. Science Applications convenes and facilitates States, Tribes, private landowners, NGOs and other partners in identifying and addressing shared conservation priorities. This work helps secure durable conservation outcomes, such as proactive and voluntary actions to conserve at-risk species.

In addition, Science Applications provides science support to Service programs and partners that helps coordinate, inform, and advance landscape and species conservation and climate adaptation efforts. Through the Science Support activity, the program works with partners to identify knowledge gaps around shared conservation priorities and provides technical assistance, tools,

and coordination support to inform conservation and management actions. Science Applications also provides science support for other Service programs by providing resources, guidance, and information that inform decision-making on a variety of conservation actions.

The 2022 budget requests \$18.8 million for the Cooperative Landscape Conservation activity and \$22.9 million for Science Support. These requests reflect a \$6.3 million and \$12.3 million increase above the 2021 levels, respectively. This funding will enable the Service to continue convening partners and facilitating collaborations around the country – a critical need for landscape conservation. It will also support new investments in technical, geospatial mapping, and social science capacity, allowing the program to work at the field-level and engage new partners, with a focus on underserved communities. This work will directly support the America the Beautiful initiative and climate and environmental justice priorities.

The increase in funding for Science Support will also advance Administration and Service priorities. The budget request includes \$7 million for climate science, enabling Science Applications to expand collaborative efforts to address climate change impacts with nature-based solutions at the landscape level. \$5 million is provided for the Service to advance pollinator science, partnerships, and outreach and engagement, which will help stabilize pollinator populations and sustain the economic and ecosystem services that they provide. Finally, funding is included to engage students from minority and under-served communities in internships that contribute to America the Beautiful while providing interns with the opportunity to explore careers in public service.

Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration

The Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) Program addresses the challenges of managing America's natural resources by providing federal aid and grants to states designed to benefit fish and wildlife while capitalizing on recreational opportunities across the country. The WSFR Program administers several types of grants for projects that improve and manage aquatic habitats, protect, and conserve coastal wetlands, hunter education, and provide important access and infrastructure for boaters. The programs are funded by Federal excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, archery gear, fishing equipment, electric motors, and a portion of the Federal gasoline tax.

The WSFR Program also administers the State Wildlife Grant program, which supports a strategic national conservation framework through individual State Wildlife Action Plans. These plans, developed in coordination with government agencies, conservation organizations and the public, are integral to national efforts to effectively address threats to priority habitats and species of greatest conservation need. The core value of all WSFR Programs is fostering cooperative partnerships between Federal and State agencies, working alongside hunters, anglers, and other outdoor interests, to enhance recreational opportunities while advancing sustainable resource goals. The budget includes \$74.4 million for State Wildlife Grants, an increase of \$8 million, to support the protection of wildlife habitat benefitting non-game species.

Working with Tribes

The Service is committed to the priorities outlined in President Biden's Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships. Tribes are important

conservation partners, and the Service's FY 2022 budget request recognizes the valuable role they play in efforts to conserve our nation's wildlife and the habitat upon which they depend.

The Service is requesting \$8 million for the Tribal Wildlife Grants (TWG) Program, an increase of \$2 million from the FY 2021 enacted level. The TWG Program supports Tribes in the development and implementation of wildlife and habitat conservation programs. The TWG Program directly benefits many Tribes whose members depend on wildlife for subsistence, cultural uses, and livelihoods. Other increases in the FY 2022 request include \$16.2 million for the National Fish Hatchery System to support Tribal partnerships and fulfillment of trust responsibilities, among other activities, and \$2 million for the Service's Native American Program to expand Tribal consultations.

The Service will continue to enforce the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA). The Office of Law Enforcement has found extensive violations of the IACA, where criminal networks are mass-producing counterfeit Native American art and fraudulently selling it as authentic Native American-made. This criminal activity threatens the livelihoods and culture of Native American artists, and Service agents are working hard to disrupt these networks and bring criminals to justice.

Administration Proposals

The Service's budget request also includes language to seek compensation from responsible parties who injure or destroy Refuge resources. This provision would provide the Service with similar authority to the National Park Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Today when Refuge System resources are injured or destroyed, the costs of repair and restoration falls upon the appropriated budget for the affected field station or office, often at the expense of other Service programs. Between 2015 and 2017, the National Wildlife Refuge System documented over 76,000 incidents of trespass, arson, and vandalism, with a total cost estimate of \$1.1 million of unrecovered damages.

This provision would allow persons responsible for harm—not taxpayers—to pay for any injury they cause. The Service 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 Refuge System 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 also recommends a decrease in the minimum required match for State Wildlife Grants for FY 2022. The decrease from 25 percent to 10 percent (for planning projects) and from 35 percent to 10 percent (for implementation projects) is necessary as States are facing unprecedented budget challenges due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your interest in the Service's FY 2022 budget request. The budget request promotes strategic investments that begin to address the impacts of climate change, provide all Americans with the opportunity to connect with the

outdoors, enable economic development, and create job opportunities. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.