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**Statement of The Nature Conservancy
Fiscal Year 2014 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
April 16, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Nature Conservancy's recommendations for Fiscal Year 2014 appropriations. My name is Christopher Topik and I am the Director, Restoring America's Forests, North America Region, for the Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy is an international, non-profit conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends.

As we enter the FY2014 Budget cycle and another year of a challenging fiscal environment, the Conservancy continues to recognize the need for fiscal austerity. The Conservancy also wishes to thank this Subcommittee for the final FY2013 funding levels for Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service conservation programs. As this Subcommittee begins to tackle yet another difficult budget cycle, the Conservancy stresses our concerns that the wildlife and land conservation programs should not shoulder a disproportionate share of cuts in this budget. As we are submitting this testimony prior to the release of the President's FY14 Budget, our budget recommendations this year reflect a balanced approach with funding levels indicated at FY12, FY13 or expected FY14 levels, dependent upon program needs. Moreover, as a science-based and business-oriented organization, we believe strongly that the budget levels we support represent a prudent investment in our country's future that will reduce risks and ultimately save money based upon the tangible economic, recreation and societal benefits natural resources provide each year to the American people.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The Conservancy supports the President's FY2014 Budget request for the Land and Water Conservation Fund with the aim of continuing to work toward full funding for the program. We expect the FY14 request will be consistent with the FY13 requested levels for the program, while also taking into account support for shifting this program toward a higher funding level with a focus on mandatory in addition to discretionary funding. The President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative is also expected to continue to have a prominent focus in this annual LWCF Budget with the inclusion of collaborative funding for several top priority landscape conservation areas where the Conservancy and our partners are working in close coordination with the federal agencies, states, counties, local landowners and business communities including the Crown of the Continent (MT/WY/ID) and Longleaf Pine Conservation Areas (FL/GA/AL/SC) as well as potentially a new Trails Initiative and a large conservation area in California. Due to our long-term holding status of projects in Montana (MT Legacy Project, USFS ~\$33 million to complete) and FWS projects in Florida (St. Marks and Everglades Headwaters NWR&CA), the Conservancy is strongly supporting a robust LWCF funding level including both the collaborative and core components of the Administration's FY14 LWCF request. Some of our other priorities include Silvio O. Conte NFWR and Francis Marion NF in South Carolina. We are also supportive of annual funding this year for LWCF investments

in support of the working ranches of KS's Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area, ND and SD's Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area, and MT's Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area.

Forest Legacy Program. We support the Forest Legacy Program and requests a funding level no lower than the FY12 enacted level of \$53.3 million and consistent with the President's FY14 Budget. The Conservancy will be supporting several projects this year including McArthur Lake East (ID), Pascagoula River Conservation Lands (MS), Carter Mountain (TN), and Discover Woods (IN). We hope this year to complete the acquisition of these important lands that will provide income to local economies, recovery for wildlife habitat and rare species, public recreational access to hunting and fishing, and outdoor educational experiences to financially disadvantaged children and those with special needs.

Endangered Species. The Conservancy supports at least \$60 million in annual funding for the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (CESCF). The Conservancy and its partners have used the Habitat Conservation Planning (HCP) Assistance and Recovery Land Acquisition Grants Programs to conserve key habitat for numerous threatened, endangered and at-risk species and, thus, to help avoid conflicts over ESA issues. We also support continued endangered species funding for the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, recovery funds for the San Juan River Basin Recovery Implementation Program, and fish hatchery needs associated with the recovery plans in this region.

Climate Change. The Conservancy appreciates the President's commitment to respond to the global climate challenge and this Committee's sustained leadership in supporting cooperative, science-based programs to help ensure resilient land and seascapes. In particular, we welcome this Committee's ongoing commitment to the USGS-led Climate Science Centers as well as DOI's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, and efforts to ensure integration and coordination of these initiatives with existing efforts such as the Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and National Fish Habitat Partnerships.

National Wildlife Refuge System. The Conservancy supports the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement Coalition's request of at least the FY12 enacted level of \$486 million for Refuge System O&M. We expect this to be consistent with the President's FY14 request and represents the funding necessary to maintain management capabilities for the Refuge System.

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration. The Conservancy appreciates the Committee's support for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Program, which demonstrates that stakeholder collaboration can facilitate large-scale management that benefits people, economies and the environment. We recommend that FY12 funding be sustained for CFLR with \$40 million to restore large forest landscapes, provide jobs that sustain rural economies, reduce the risk of damaging wildfire, address invasive species, improve wildlife habitat and decommission unused, damaging roads. We also encourage your support for the Landscape Scale Restoration program proposed at \$18 million in the FY12 State and Private Forestry (S&PF) Budget. We believe this program could provide a valuable compliment to CFLR by facilitating restoration treatments on non-federal land in priority landscapes. We also recommend reauthorization of stewardship contracting, a vital tool for forest landscape restoration.

Wildland Fire Management. We particularly want to thank the leadership of this subcommittee for supporting substantial wildfire funding through the recent full year FY13 CR process. The

Conservancy appreciates the Committee's ongoing support for a balanced approach to wildland fire management – one that emphasizes proactive hazardous fuels reduction and community preparedness along with a commitment to safe and cost-effective wildfire response strategies. In light of this approach, we believe it is essential to maintain at least the FY12 funding level for Hazardous Fuels Reduction and urge you to repeat your instructions in the FY12 conference report regarding the allocation of funding to priority landscapes in both WUI and wildland settings. A public investment in improving forest health and decreasing hazardous fuels before a damaging wildfire occurs can pay tremendous dividends by reducing the need for multi-million dollar emergency wildfire suppression efforts and subsequent post-fire rehabilitation and response. We also urge your support for level funding of the State Fire Assistance (SFA) program, which enables states and other non-federal land managers to pursue complementary hazardous fuels reduction and wildfire preparedness activities. Focusing both Hazardous Fuels and SFA dollars on communities that have taken steps to reduce their own exposure to wildfire will further increase the benefits of these programs. We are encouraged by the potential of the Fire Adapted Communities program to facilitate coordinated community and land management action. Finally, we recognize that even with a robust, proactive approach to land management, federal wildfire preparedness and suppression resources will need to be maintained at an effective level to protect life, property and natural resources. We urge you to fund federal wildfire suppression at the ten year average, at a minimum, and to maintain a sufficient balance in the FLAME reserve account so that the need for funding transfers from critical non-fire programs can be reduced. We also strongly support the use of naturally ignited fire as a cost-effective and ecologically beneficial tool for accomplishing resource management objectives whenever safe and effective to do so.

Integrated Resource Restoration. We appreciate the Committee's support for an Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) pilot, which has allowed three Forest Service Regions to test an integrated budget approach. The Conservancy continues to follow implementation of this pilot; we hope and expect to see an increase in restoration outcomes as a result. The Conservancy believes it is premature to take this pilot national, but supports continuation of the pilot for a third year. We understand that plans are underway for an external third-party review of IRR implementation. We strongly support this review as a way to capture lessons learned and determine whether full implementation is warranted.

Legacy Road and Trail Remediation. Roads are a key source of threats to water quality and watershed health. Despite recent progress in the number of roads repaired and decommissioned, a sizeable backlog of high priority roads and trails that degrade water quality remains. We recommend that Legacy Roads and Trails be funded at the FY12 enacted level to ensure that these actions are taken in a timely manner to protect our critical watersheds.

Forest Health Management; Forest Service Research Program. America's forests are threatened by a growing number of non-native pests and diseases. The Conservancy asks the Committee to maintain funding at the FY12 enacted level, which totals \$112 million. This funding is necessary to address effectively the most economically and ecologically damaging pests, including the Asian Longhorned Beetle, Emerald Ash Borer, Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, Sudden Oak Death, thousand-canker disease of walnut, and the goldspotted oak borer. We support the FY12 enacted level for the Forest Service Research program to maintain funding of research to improve detection and control methods for the Emerald Ash Borer, Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, goldspotted oak borer, thousand cankers disease, and other non-native forest pests and diseases.

Bureau of Land Management: Renewable Energy Development, Rapid Ecoregional Assessments & Resource Management. The Conservancy supports strong annual funding for BLM to support environmentally sound development of renewable energy sources on public lands including the evaluation of the impacts of renewable energy development on wildlife and habitat and effective coordination with affected States and Tribes to assess energy resources and evaluate project proposals.

State Wildlife Grants. The Conservancy endorses the Teaming with Wildlife Coalition's support for robust funding for this important program. Strong federal investments are essential to ensure strategic actions are undertaken by state and federal agencies and the conservation community to conserve wildlife populations and their habitats.

Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and Fish Habitat Partnership Programs. The Committee has consistently provided vitally important investments for a number of migratory bird programs. Such investments are essential to reverse declines in bird populations through direct conservation action, monitoring and science. We urge the Committee to fund the President's request for such established and successful programs as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), the Migratory Bird Joint Ventures, and the FWS Migratory Bird Management Program. We also request strong annual funding for the FWS Coastal Program and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program as well as the National Fish Habitat Initiative, particularly in light of the ongoing implementation needs of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretaries of Interior, Commerce and Agriculture in support of the Initiative.

International Programs. The international conservation programs appropriated annually within the Department of Interior are relatively small but are effective and widely respected. They encompass the FWS Multinational Species Conservation Funds, the FWS Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the FWS Wildlife Without Borders regional and global programs, the U.S. NPS International Program, and the USFS International Program (USFS-IP). All of these programs already have been cut since the FY09 or FY10 years, typically by about 20 percent. All have a great record of achievements and of leveraging matching funds from host governments and private conservation groups. These programs are past investments that the U.S. Government has made toward conservation in the developing countries. The unmet needs for conservation in those countries remain great. The proper management of their natural resources is not only a matter of biodiversity, it relates directly to their sustainable economic progress, domestic peace, and security. We urge that these programs receive, at a minimum, level funding with FY13.

Environmental Protection Agency. Congress should avoid disproportionate cuts to EPA's ecosystem-oriented water programs because those programs have such wide-reaching and beneficial impacts throughout the country. We also continue to support the allocation of sufficient funds for innovative strategic planning programs like the Healthy Watersheds Initiative, which embraces a whole-system planning approach to water resource management. This program should be endorsed as a means to enable Federal and state programs to protect and restore freshwater habitats at large scale through more bang-for-the-buck actions.

Thank you for the opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's recommendations for the FY2014 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.