

Statement of The Nature Conservancy
Fiscal Year 2015 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations
Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate
April 10, 2015

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member Moran and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit recommendations for Fiscal Year 2015 appropriations. 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 FY2015 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 FY2014 funding levels for Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service conservation programs. Our budget recommendations this year reflect a balanced approach with funding levels consistent with the President's Budget request or, in rare instances such as wildland fire or funding for the states, reflect specific program needs. Of particular note, we wish to work with this Subcommittee and the authorizing Committees on identifying permanent funding solutions for wildfire funding, the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Payment in Lieu of Taxes Program. The Conservancy is concerned about the increasing impacts of wildfire suppression funding on Interior funding levels and urge the Committee to adopt the bipartisan and widely supported Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (S. 1875; H.R. 3992). This process of funding suppression for the Department of the Interior and the USDA Forest Service will create budgetary stability and accountability while liberating critically needed appropriations funds within the Interior allocation.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The FY2015 President's Budget proposes the establishment of a dedicated source of long-term funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. In the proposal, the President's Budget includes \$350 million for LWCF activities through "current authority" or discretionary appropriations and then an additional \$550 million in "permanent authority" for LWCF funding. The budget then proposes to reach the \$900 million funding level in FY2015 through this blend of current and permanent funding. The Conservancy supports this phased shift to mandatory funding for the LWCF Program. However, consistent with last year and as noted above, we believe the Administration must work closely with the relevant appropriations and authorizing committees to move this proposal forward. Additionally, the Conservancy supports the ongoing emphasis in the budget on both "core" projects and "collaborative" LWCF projects. Projects in the Longleaf Pine region will benefit greatly from this collaborative emphasis, along with projects in the California Southwest Desert, Upper Rio Grande, the High Divide and National Trails. Our "core" and "collaborative" priorities this year include the Nez Pearce National Historic Trail/Henrys Lake ACEC (ID), Francis Marion National Forest (SC), Silvio O. Conte NFWR (NH/VT/CT/MA), and the working ranches of FL's Everglades Headwaters NWR & Conservation Area, ND and SD's Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area, MT's Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area and KS's Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area.

Forest Legacy. We support a minimum of \$53 million for the Forest Legacy Program in current discretionary funding and the \$47 million in permanent funding (with our aforementioned caveats) with a focus on 2 projects – Hall Mountain (ID) and Carter Mountain (TN).

Endangered Species. The Conservancy supports a funding level of at least \$50 million for the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (CESCF), and also requests the Subcommittee give consideration to the additional FY15 President’s Budget request of \$50 million in permanent funding per our earlier request for negotiations to occur between the Administration and relevant Congressional committees on a path forward for this funding.

Colorado River Basin Recovery Programs. The Conservancy supports the President’s FY2015 Budget request of \$5.05 million for USBR and \$1.39 million for FWS for the Colorado River Basin recovery programs, including 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.

Wildlife Planning. The Conservancy supports the Western Governors’ Association’s (WGA) request for the Subcommittee to consider issuing a recommendation to land management agencies within its jurisdiction to utilize state fish and wildlife data and analyses to inform the land use, land planning and related natural resource decisions of those agencies. As an example of strong state-led data systems, WGA has partnered in recent years with state wildlife agencies and the federal government to develop statewide GIS mapping tools to identify crucial wildlife habitat and migratory corridors. These geospatial mapping tools, which provide access to credible, broad-scale scientific data – compiled and analyzed by the states – are designed to reduce conflicts and surprises while ensuring wildlife values are better incorporated into land use planning, particularly for large-scale linear projects. WGA launched its West-wide GIS mapping tool called CHAT (Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool) in December 2013. CHAT is a non-regulatory decision-support system that knits together state wildlife data and analysis on a regional landscape level using a common framework. Our Arizona TNC Chapter has been very integrated in the development and enhancement of the Arizona data system (HabiMap) – a decision support system – which is the basis for our work on mitigation, habitat assessments and land planning in the state.

Invasive Species. The Conservancy supports the President’s FY15 Budget request of \$138.9 million for the FWS’ Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Conservation program, including \$4.4 million to address the invasion of Asian carp in the Great Lakes and priority watersheds, including the Missouri, Ohio and Upper Mississippi River.

State Wildlife Grants. The Conservancy requests the FY14 funding level – \$58.695 million – for this 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. We are concerned about the impact of the FY15 proposed cut on state fish and wildlife agencies nationally and request these funds be restored to the FY14 level.

Wildlife Conservation Programs. The variety of wildlife conservation programs conducted by FWS continue a long and successful tradition of supporting collaborative conservation in the U.S. and internationally. We urge the Committee to fund the President’s request for such established and successful programs as the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund (NAWCA), Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (NMBCA), and the FWS Coastal Program. We support the President’s request for the Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and the FWS

Migratory Bird Management Program. For the latter, we are particularly supportive of FWS' efforts at developing updated eagle permitting regulations which will both support the development of renewable energy in our country and contribute to sustainable and growing populations of these iconic North American species. We support the President's FY15 request for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the requested increase in funding for Cooperative Landscape Conservation (\$17.7 million) and Adaptive Science (\$15.1 m). The latter will help support DOI's overall commitment to Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and will contribute to collaborative problem solving for some of our nation's most challenging issues. We also request strong funding this year for the National Fish Habitat 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 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's (FWS) Multinational Species Conservation Funds, the FWS Wildlife Without Borders regional and global programs, the U.S. National Park Service International Program, and the U.S. Forest Service International Program (USFS-IP). We urge that these programs receive in FY15, at a minimum, level funding with FY14.

Climate Change. The Conservancy appreciates the President's commitment to respond to the global climate challenge, and this Subcommittee's sustained leadership in supporting cooperative, science-based programs to respond to the global climate challenge and to help ensure resilient land and seascapes.

National Wildlife Refuge System. The Conservancy supports the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement Coalition's request, consistent with the President's FY14 Budget, of \$476.4 million for the Refuge System's Operations and Maintenance accounts. Found in every U.S. state and territory, national wildlife refuges conserve a diversity of America's environmentally sensitive and economically vital ecosystems, including oceans, coasts, wetlands, deserts, tundra, prairie, and forests. This represents the funding necessary to maintain management capabilities for the Refuge System.

USFS & DOI Wildland Fire Management. The President's FY15 Budget proposes language similar to the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA - S. 1875; H.R. 3992) which would fund a portion of the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) wildfire suppression costs through a budget cap adjustment under the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, as amended. The enactment of WDFFA would not only significantly reduce the need for the USFS and DOI to transfer but also provide the Committee with added flexibility to allocate funding for activities that reduce fire risk and long-term suppression costs. The Conservancy supports adopting this language and funding suppression in FY15 accordingly. The Conservancy appreciates Congress' emphasis on proactive hazardous fuels reduction and community preparedness along with a commitment to safe and cost-effective wildfire response strategies. In light of this approach and with the enactment of WDFFA, the Conservancy recommends investing in Hazardous Fuels at levels of \$479 million and \$178 million for USFS and DOI, respectively, and repeating the Committee's FY12 instructions for allocating funds to priority landscapes in both WUI and wildland settings. We also recommend the USFS State Fire Assistance program be funded at \$86 million.

USFS Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration. The Conservancy recommends increasing funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program to \$60 million for the existing 23 and new projects. This important program works to restore large forest landscapes, provide jobs that sustain rural economies, reduce the risk of damaging wildfire,

improve wildlife habitat and decommission unused, damaging roads. The Conservancy also recommends supporting the Landscape Scale Restoration proposal funded at \$24 million.

Integrated Resource Restoration. The Conservancy appreciates the Committees support of the Integrated Resource Restoration pilot and continue to follow its implementation with the outcome expectation of increased restoration. The Conservancy believes it is premature to nationalize the IRR pilot, but supports continuation of the pilot for a fourth year.

USFS Forest Health & Research. The Forest Health program is a critical resource supporting efforts to prevent, contain, and eradicate dangerous pests and pathogens affecting trees and forests. Further, this program leads federal efforts to counter forest pests which have become widespread, including gypsy moth, hemlock woolly adelgid, white pine blister rust, thousand cankers disease, oak wilt, and many others. The Conservancy recommends funding the federal and cooperative Forest Health programs at a combined level of \$111 million. The Forest and Rangeland Research program provides the scientific basis for policies that improve the health and quality of urban and rural communities, by providing protection from fire, detecting and managing forest pests and the pathways, improving water and air quality, among many other benefits. For Forest & Rangeland Research, the Conservancy requests the FY12 level of \$304 million.

Sage Grouse Conservation. The Conservancy supports the President's FY15 Budget request of \$15 million for the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) focus on sage grouse conservation. Greater sage-grouse populations have experienced a precipitous decline across the West in recent years due to a number of impacts and a well-aligned comprehensive effort is needed across public and private lands to reverse its decline.

BLM Landscape Approaches to Land Management and Renewable Energy Development. The Conservancy supports the Administration's recommended FY15 funding for BLM's initiatives to implement landscape approaches to land management which include Rapid Ecoregional Assessments, Resource Management Planning and the Planning 2.0 initiative, Regional Mitigation Planning, coordination with LCCs, and the Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) Strategy. Many BLM programs contribute to these cross-cutting initiatives including: National Landscape Conservation System - (\$34 million request, \$2.1 million increase over FY14); Resource Management Planning program (\$42 million request, \$5 million increase over FY14); Wildlife and Fisheries management (65.2 million request); and Threatened & Endangered species management (\$21.6 million request). Additionally, the Conservancy supports continued funding for BLM's renewable energy development program at \$29.1 million which includes implementation of the Western Solar Energy Program. Collectively, these efforts will help BLM manage its lands efficiently and effectively for energy development, species and habitat conservation, recreation, and other uses to maximize the public benefit from these lands.

Environmental Protection Agency. EPA's "geographic" programs including the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico, Puget Sound and Mississippi River programs make a significant contribution to protecting habitat and water quality in the large landscapes where they work. The Conservancy urges the Committee to continue funding for these programs at the FY2014 enacted level at a minimum.

Thank you for the opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's recommendations for the FY2015 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.