

Written Statement of Alan Rowsome
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Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Regarding the FY 2016 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill
March 18, 2015

The Wilderness Society (TWS) represents more than 535,000 members and supporters who share our mission to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places. We thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the Fiscal Year 2016 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.

When deciding on funding that affects hundreds of millions of Americans, we urge you to take into account the full economic, social, environmental and cultural value of the many programs managed by this Subcommittee. Our public lands and waters contribute significantly to the U.S. outdoor recreation economy. The Outdoor Industry Association's latest report shows that outdoor recreation alone generates \$646 billion in direct consumer spending, supports 6.1 million direct jobs and generates \$79.6 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue.

Modest, prudent investments in these critical programs will provide jobs and protect the health and economic wellbeing of local communities. We urge bold, immediate action in support of conservation funding for Fiscal Year 2016. Specifically, TWS recommends:

Wilderness Management

America's National Wilderness Preservation System, now 50 years old, is suffering from a serious lack of funding. Trail maintenance, law enforcement, monitoring, and user education are all significantly underfunded, leading to an erosion of wilderness values and a diminution of the experience for visitors. We recommend that each of the agency wilderness management accounts be increased to support much needed trails maintenance, update signage, fight invasive species, restore watersheds, and monitor effects of climate change, among other critical needs.

- **Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Wilderness**
TWS supports restoring BLM Wilderness funding to the FY11 level of \$19.663 million. The budget proposal of \$18.559 million for BLM wilderness management is strong, but still 6% lower than the FY11 enacted level. To just keep pace with inflation the FY16 request would need to be \$20.430 million.
- **Forest Service Recreation, Wilderness and Heritage**
We urge Congress to support wilderness and recreation by restoring funding to the FY10 level of \$285.1 million for the Recreation, Heritage and Wilderness Program. Recreation is the most ubiquitous use of our forest lands, and accounts for more than half of all job and income affects attributable to Forest Service programs (over 190,000 jobs and \$11 billion in spending effects by visitors).
- **National Park Service Wilderness**
We support the proposed FY16 funding increase for the base wilderness program to \$462,000. As the Park Service prepares for their Centennial next year this modest increase would help address the backlog of Wilderness Stewardship Plans, support training for wilderness park superintendents, improve coordination with interagency Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, and reduce the likelihood of litigation.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

Having just celebrated its 50th Anniversary year, LWCF remains the premier federal program to conserve our nation's land, water, historic, and recreation heritage. It is a critical tool to protect national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests, BLM lands, and other federal areas. The companion LWCF state grants program provides crucial support for state and local parks, recreational facilities, and trail corridors. LWCF also funds two other important state grant programs – the Forest Legacy Program and Cooperative Endangered Species programs – that ensure permanent conservation of important forest lands and threatened and endangered species' habitat, as well as important wildlife and recreational habitat and ensures that public lands stay public for hunters, anglers, and other outdoor recreationists for generations to come.

- *TWS strongly supports fully funding LWCF at the proposed \$900 million, with a discretionary funding level of \$400 million.* Full funding for LWCF will allow land management agencies to manage our public lands more efficiently and cost-effectively. This is in part achieved through strategic inholdings acquisition which reduces internal boundary line surveying, right-of-way conflicts and special use permits.

Emergency Wildfire Funding

For years USFS and DOI have had to divert funds from vital conservation and wildfire prevention programs to cover wildfire suppression costs. This is having long term negative effects on conservation and land management, especially where these funds are diverted from programs aimed at reducing fire risks and costs, which creates a vicious cycle. With longer and more severe fire seasons the Forest Service has seen wildfire management rise from 13% of the agency's budget in FY1991 to almost 50% today.

- *TWS strongly supports the bipartisan funding request at 70 percent of the ten year average, and the \$841 million to be made available under the disaster funding cap adjustment.* This will eliminate the need to pillage other accounts to pay for the worst one percent of wildfires, and will treat them as the natural disasters they truly are.

BLM Onshore Oil and Gas Policy

The BLM is implementing important management reforms of its oil and gas program that is leading toward a better balance between oil and gas development on public lands and the protection of the numerous natural resource values that were put at risk by previous policies. It will also lead to federal lands that are fully and fairly valued for the American people. TWS support the following Administration proposed reforms of the BLM's oil and gas program:

- *A fee on onshore federal operators to provide for a \$48 million per year inspection and enforcement program to implement recommendations made by the GAO*
- *An increase of \$5.8 million in BLM to accelerate development and completion of Master Leasing Plans to ensure proper planning and conservation during siting and development of oil and gas wells.*
- *Funds to enact royalty reforms and improve revenue collection process to ensure that resources on federal lands are fully and fairly valued and delivering fair taxpayer returns*
- *Funds to implement regulations to reduce methane waste from wells on federal lands.*

Sage Grouse Initiative

The Wilderness Society supports the administration's \$45 million increased request for the BLM's Greater Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy. If successful, implementation of this strategy will lead to recovery of this important western game species without the necessity of a listing under the Endangered Species Act.

BLM's National Landscape Conservation System

The National Landscape Conservation System (Conservation Lands) comprises some 27 million acres of congressionally and presidentially designated lands and waters, including National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, Wilderness Areas and other designations.

Stewardship of the Conservation Lands provides jobs for thousands of Americans while supporting vibrant and sustainable economies in surrounding communities. The Conservation Lands provide immeasurable public values from modest investments: outstanding recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, clean water, wilderness, and open space near cities.

- *TWS strongly supports the Administration's FY 2016 recommendation of \$81.079 million to ensure the natural, cultural, and historical resource protection provided by the Conservation Lands for the American public.*
- *TWS also supports the proposed BLM Challenge Cost Share Program funding of \$12.416 million. This is a cross-cutting program within DOI, which provides a 1:1 match for volunteer activities.*

Renewable Energy

TWS is a strong proponent of transitioning our country to a clean energy economy by developing our renewable energy resources responsibly. We believe renewable energy is an appropriate and necessary use of public lands when sited in areas screened for habitat, resource, and cultural conflicts. Identifying and avoiding conflicts early is essential to avoid costly fights and create allies with local communities and the renewable energy industry. TWS hopes the Department will continue to support a program that ensures our public lands play an important role in supporting renewable energy infrastructure through environmental review, suitability screening, and energy zone identification to find suitable places for renewable energy projects. TWS is also a supporter of Secretarial Order 3330 on Mitigation that would ensure that any impacts are avoided or offset. TWS urges Congress to:

- *Support increased funding for renewable energy programs across Interior from FY 15 enacted, up to \$110.4 million total.*
- *Support an increase of \$5 million in Cadastral, Lands, and Realty Management program to enhance BLM's ability to designate energy corridors to site high-voltage transmission lines, substations, and related infrastructure in an environmentally sensitive manner*

Implementation of Landscape Level Management

The Wilderness Society supports the Department of Interior's philosophy of looking at development on a landscape level with proper mitigation policies. The recently released draft of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan in the California Desert is a prime example. It is crucial that the Department is fully funded to put in place processes that designates areas for energy development, both traditional and renewable, at the same time setting aside important areas for wildlife, cultural, and recreational values.

National Wildlife Refuge System Funding

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's finest network of protected lands and waters. Designed to conserve our fish and wildlife resources, refuges are located in every state and territory and provide enormous economic benefit for their local communities. Every year, the System attracts 45 million tourists, hunters, fishermen, and other recreationists, generating \$1.7 billion in sales, sustaining nearly 27,000 jobs annually, and contributing over \$185 million in tax revenue. The Refuge System has been under increasing fiscal strain, however, with a maintenance backlog of over \$3 billion.

- *We urge Congress to support funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System at the President's recommendation of \$508.2 million.*

National Forest Restoration

The Legacy Roads and Trails (LRT) and Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) programs provide essential funding to restore watersheds, improve recreational access, protect aquatic species and advance collaborative restoration projects. LRT funding was slashed 50% in FY11 and 22% in FY14. Given the recent evaluation of the Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) program we recommend that LRT be removed from IRR, to enable it to operate as a complementary program to IRR, similar to CFLR. We also do not recommend that the IRR pilot program be expanded until the test regions have proven that IRR can improve restoration without a loss of transparency and accountability. Specifically, TWS recommends that Congress:

- *Restore Legacy Roads and Trails funding to \$45 million and fully fund the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program at \$60 million*

Forest Service Inventory & Monitoring and Planning

The Inventory and Monitoring Program is integral to forest planning. The Planning Program funds amendments and revisions to Land Management Plans, the overarching documents that guide the management of individual forests and grasslands. By providing adequate and consistent funding to both these programs, we advance plans and projects and avoid bad decision-making, unnecessary costs, and reduce risks to water quality and quantity, wildlife, and recreation. TWS recommends that Congress:

- *Support Inventory & Monitoring and Planning by restoring funding to the running 10-year average of \$162,060,500 and \$45,712,600, respectively.*

National Forest Roads

Forest Service roads funding has been cut by 41% since 2010, adding even more strain to a severely under-maintained road system. The road system enables management, recreation and restoration on our national forests and grasslands. It is also one of the most significant stressors on watersheds and ecosystems, contributing to water pollution and declining fish populations. Adequate funding is needed to create a sustainable, safe road system that minimizes negative impacts of roads, provides high quality recreational access, and to stormproof roads against anticipated severe flood flows resulting from climate change.

- *We urge Congress to fund Capital Improvement and Maintenance Roads at the running 10-year average of \$201,702,200 in FY 2016.*

National Forest Trails

There are 158,000 miles of trails in the National Forest System. These trails provide 50 million visitor days of cross-country skiing, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and off-road vehicle use each year. Annual visitor days have grown 376% since 1977, and the total mileage of trails has grown 56.9% to accommodate this. Unfortunately, the trails maintenance and reconstruction line item has remained essentially flat since 1980, after adjusting for inflation. In FY15 the trails budget was cut 9% compared to FY10, despite the fact that GAO has reported a \$500 million trail maintenance backlog. Currently, the Forest Service is only able to maintain a quarter of its trail miles to a minimum standard condition.

- *We urge Congress to fund Capital Improvement and Maintenance Trails at its FY2010 level of \$85,381,000 in FY 2016.*