

**Statement of Tom Cors, Director of Conservation Finance, The Nature Conservancy
Fiscal Year 2016 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations
Committee on Appropriations, United States House of Representatives
March 18, 2015**

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit recommendations for Fiscal Year 2016 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 FY2016 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 FY2015 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 in most cases with FY15 funding levels or, in rare instances, 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, the Payment in Lieu of Taxes Program and Secure Rural Schools. 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 (H.R. 167; S. 235). 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. We also strongly support the emphasis on funding for sage grouse conservation in the FY16 budget request.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The FY2016 President's Budget again 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 \$400 million for LWCF activities through "current authority" or discretionary appropriations and then an additional \$500 million in "permanent authority" or mandatory funding for LWCF. The budget then proposes to reach the \$900 million funding level in FY2016 through this blend of current and permanent funding. The Conservancy supports this phased shift to mandatory funding for the LWCF Program. However, consistent with prior years 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 balanced approach in the budget on both "core" and "collaborative" LWCF projects. Projects in the Upper Rio Grande landscape in CO and NM, Rivers of the Chesapeake in MD and VA, and the Island Forests at Risk landscapes of HI will benefit greatly from the collaborative emphasis. Our core priorities this year include the Silvio O. Conte NFWR (NH/VT/CT/MA) and the working ranches and agricultural production areas of FL's Everglades Headwaters NWR & Conservation Area, ND and SD's Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area, UT, ID and WY's Bear River Watershed Conservation Area and KS's Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area.

Forest Legacy. We support a minimum of \$61 million for the Forest Legacy Program in current discretionary funding and the \$39 million in permanent funding (with our aforementioned caveats).

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 for 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 \$1.46 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 continues to support the Western Governors' Association's (WGA) and this Subcommittee's efforts to recommend federal land management agencies 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.

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants. The Conservancy supports the FY16 funding level – \$70 million – for this program. Strong federal investments are essential to ensure strategic actions are undertaken by state, Tribal and federal agencies and the conservation community to conserve wildlife populations and their habitats.

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 FY16 request for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the requested funding for Cooperative Landscape Conservation and Adaptive Science (\$17.87 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.

Resilience. The Conservancy wishes to highlight three components of the President's budget focused on resilience: \$50 million for a DOI competitive grant program modeled after the

Hurricane Sandy Competitive Grant Program to expand the footprint of healthy ecosystems that deliver valuable ecosystem services, including flood attenuation and storm risk reduction, to nearby communities; \$89 million for DOI's WaterSMART program, which promotes water conservation initiatives and technological breakthroughs; and \$20 million to continue expanding and improving the recently-released online Climate Resilience Toolkit, which provides scientific tools and information to help tribes, communities, citizens, businesses, planners, and others understand and manage their climate-related risks and opportunities, and improve their resilience to extreme weather events. The Conservancy supports these requests.

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 FY16 levels for these programs remain equivalent to FY15 levels at a minimum.

National Wildlife Refuge System. The Conservancy supports the President's budget request of \$508.2 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 Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA) must be passed prior an FY16 appropriations package to adequately fund suppression and provide flexibility to fund activities that reduce fire risk and long-term suppression costs in FY16. The Conservancy greatly appreciates the Committee's support of this much-needed fire funding fix.

Hazardous Fuels and Restoration. The Conservancy also 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 through 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. The Conservancy appreciates the Committee's support of the Integrated Resource Restoration pilot with the expectation of increased restoration. The Conservancy recommends continuing the IRR pilot for another year. We recommend \$86 million for the State Fire Assistance program. 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.

Roads and Trails. The National Forests have a legacy of unneeded roads that erode into streams and fragment wildlife habitat. Road maintenance and decommissioning is an essential restoration action that improves the health of lands and waters, while providing jobs. The Conservancy recommends the Legacy Roads and Trails program be funded at \$45 million. Additionally, the Conservancy recommends report language that directs the agency to prioritize road and trail (construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and decommissioning) projects that

would improve stream crossings for aquatic organisms and other important multiple benefits, such as flood mitigation.

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. 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, separate from a request of \$83 million for Forest Inventory & Analysis.

Sage Grouse Conservation. This budget includes a much-needed infusion of funding toward the ongoing efforts to restore and conserve sagebrush habitat and the greater sage-grouse through the inclusion of \$78 million for Interior agencies (\$68.3M - BLM, \$5M - FWS, \$4.8M - USGS) to implement BLM plans and to support the partnership and science necessary for effective conservation. The budget also contains \$62.6M for LWCF sage-steppe related conservation projects and \$30 million in funding for the a new Resilient Landscapes program within the Office of Wildland Fire that the Department anticipates will support resilience work in the sagebrush ecosystem. This funding, combined with support for agency core budgets and partnership programs such as the State and Tribal Wildlife Grant Program and Section 6 Cooperative Endangered Species Grant Program, resembles a ramped up effort by this Administration to work in a more coordinated fashion with states and non-federal partners toward on-the-ground conservation.

BLM Landscape Approaches to Land Management and Renewable Energy

Development. The Conservancy supports the Administration's recommended FY16 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 - (\$11.2 million); Resource Management Planning program (\$59.34 million); Wildlife and Fisheries management (\$89.38 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 \$29.3 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 strong funding for these programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's recommendations for the FY2016 Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.