

Written Testimony of Jonathan Asher,
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Chair McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and highlight several priorities of The Wilderness Society and our over one million members and supporters, specifically at the Department of Interior, as you begin the Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations process. The Wilderness Society is celebrating its eighty-fifth birthday this year, and remains a committed leader in ensuring our natural treasures and wild places are protected and equitably available for generations to come.

I would like to start by commending you and your staffs' hard work to produce truly laudable funding outcomes for Fiscal Year 2020. Your work across the aisle to first raise what would have been devastating caps associated with the Budget Control Act, and second, produce full-year appropriations bills avoiding damaging de-facto cuts associated with a Continuing Resolution, will have tangible benefits for our country, local communities and the natural world. While hopes were high that broad funding packages would carry along with them any multitude of other priorities, leaving many of us with some disappointment over important unfinished business; from a funding perspective your committee and colleagues in leadership produced one of the best Interior Appropriations bills seen in recent memory, providing key investments and eschewing new environmentally damaging policy riders. Please know that those efforts and successes are noticed and appreciated.

While not an exhaustive list, below are a number of key funding priorities The Wilderness Society hopes you will pay particular attention to this upcoming fiscal year:

The Land and Water Conservation Fund – The Land and Water Conservation Fund remains one of the top funding and policy priorities for The Wilderness Society because of its on-the-ground and felt benefits to conservation, our public lands and local communities. The LWCF funding level of \$495 million in FY 2020, a noteworthy increase over recent years, is commendable, justifiable and greatly appreciated. However, the fact that this increased funding level remains roughly half of the authorized and envisioned amount underscores the need for this vital program's funding to be made mandatory. Hundreds of millions of conservation dollars should not be left unused simply because appropriators are handcuffed by 302(b) allocations and competing priorities.

This is particularly true at a time when population centers near public lands are booming and equitable access to recreation and nature are in ever increasing demand. Furthermore, LWCF is one of our best current climate adaptation tools, already utilized nation-wide to protect communities and ecosystems threatened and impacted by climate change.

In California's Sierra Nevada, for example, checkerboard ownership left over from the railroad-days presents daunting challenges in managing the forests to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. A joint partnership with the Forest Service, the State of California, and land trusts has utilized LWCF, allowing for comprehensive forest management and

treatment, preventing and suppressing fire much more efficiently. Elsewhere, the state of New Jersey, the Army Corps of Engineers, and NGO's have worked together to restore coastal wetlands. The wetland restoration, funded by \$23.95 million from LWCF, serves as critical climate infrastructure by absorbing and slowing down flood and storm waters. In a 2016 study by a risk modeler for the insurance industry and others, showed that marsh wetlands saved over \$650 million in property damages during Hurricane Sandy and reduced annual property losses by nearly 20% in Ocean County, New Jersey.

Renewable Energy Development on Public Lands and Waters – Public lands have a large potential to not only provide climate adaptation benefits, but also aid in the growth of clean energy. Several accounts within the Interior Appropriations bill fund important work aimed at responsible renewable energy development on public lands and waters. We support the adoption of the Public Lands Renewable Energy Development Act (PLREDA), and support current funding for the Department of Interior to develop and deploy renewable energy infrastructure on public lands where appropriate.

The Wildlife Refuge System – The Wilderness Society has long advocated for properly funding our wildlife refuge system. These areas too have faced long-time underfunding and also face a significant maintenance and conservation backlog. Furthermore, any attempt to underfund or undermine the listing of endangered species is not welcome. The Endangered Species Act is a bedrock environmental law, and appropriate funding for the listing process is a cornerstone element of the functioning of that law. Numerous wildlife refuges have also faced immediate impacts from natural disasters. Recent disaster supplemental appropriations have helped backfill some of the damage, but up-front investment to gird for future impacts is both needed and more fiscally efficient than inconsistent and ad-hoc disaster funding.

Public Lands Infrastructure, and Legacy Roads and Trails – The Wilderness Society also supports funding that benefits equitable access to and enjoyment of our public lands. Well-maintained infrastructure in the right places ensures everything from safe public and recreational access to the protection of water quality. We are disappointed with the continued move over the last several appropriations cycles to consolidate the Legacy Roads and Trails program into the broader Capital Improvement and Maintenance (CIM) account. With already limited resources, and a maintenance backlog throughout our public lands system, we urge the committee to ensure that the valuable benefits realized by the Legacy Roads and Trails (LRT) program do not disappear. Ideally, the program would remain independent, and at the very least current language to protect it's functioning and to track the impacts of LRT investments should be strengthened.

Land Use Planning and Recreation Management – The core functions of our land management agencies remain vitally important in this time of increased stressors from population growth and climate change. Many of our public land plans remain woefully out of date or revisions behind schedule. Funding for land use planning including resource management planning, travel management planning and recreation resource planning are critical investments that ensure the protection of public resources, the efficient management of those resources by public land managers and pay dividends to

local communities and public land users, providing safe access and enjoyment, spurring local economies and helping to avoid user conflict.

Climate Change and Public Lands – As noted already, climate change and our public lands and waters are intimately intertwined. Our natural ecosystems are on the front lines of felt climate impacts, and our public lands play a significant role in carbon emissions, and carbon sequestration. Appropriators should examine activities undertaken by the Department of Interior with taxpayer dollars through a climate lens, as taxpayer money spent to worsen the climate crisis is not a wise use of public funds.

Examples of wise climate-aware investment of public resources to the Department of Interior during FY 2020 include increased funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Cooperative Landscape Conservation Program for tribes to address the impacts of climate change on tribal lands. Likewise were increases in the Tribal Climate Resilience program for climate mitigation activities, and the U.S. Geological Survey's National and Regional Climate Adaptation Science Centers, providing climate research support to states and localities grappling with adaptation. These examples are in addition to the ongoing climate work at the National Parks Service, as well as climate science and mitigation programs within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service, which should all receive your continued support.

It is worth noting that a recent analysis of LWCF investments found a 400% economic return on investment for every \$1 spent to acquire or improve public lands. For the National Park Service, every tax dollar invested saw a \$10 return to the U.S. economy. With recent and surely continued news about the deficit likely reaching \$1 Trillion dollars this year, appropriators should be honest about the fact that the deficit we face is the result of the 2017 corporate tax cuts, and not seek to pass that fiscal harm on to taxpayers by cutting or undermining public investments that benefit every American.

In addition to critical funding levels, The Wilderness Society wants to underscore several other priorities we hope you will pay close attention to this year:

Legacy Riders – We remain supportive of efforts to remove damaging anti-environmental legacy riders from this year's appropriations bills. These policy riders are vestiges of past policy issues that were not resolved through a regular authorization process. These stand in direct logical conflict with the recent agreements made to keep new controversial and damaging policy riders out of appropriations bills. Appropriators on both sides of the aisle should recognize that irony and work to not include legacy riders from the outset, and further work to remove these damaging provisions from appropriations bills during all stages of the process.

Oversight and The Power of the Purse – Congress, and particularly congressional appropriators are given constitutionally a central check and balance on the Executive Branch; the power of the purse. The Trump administration has shown time and again its lack of respect for congressional directives in report language, and even in bill text. They have openly violated the Anti Deficiency Act as noted by the Government Accountability Office, have flagrantly impounded taxpayer dollars and twisted existing programs and

funding for political gain, as exemplified by their mismanagement of National Park revenue during the 2018 government shutdown. Yet another example is the continued Department of Interior reorganization, and the highly destructive relocation of the Bureau of Land Management Headquarters. Congressional appropriators should feel confident and emboldened in the use of your legitimate and justified oversight responsibilities, and your power of their purse. This effort should not fall along party lines, as fiscal conservatives should be among the most ardent supporters of ensuring taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly, according to congressional directive, and not wasted or misused.

Within this realm, there are a number of areas where the administration is advancing efforts counter to the public interest and wise use of taxpayer resources. Additionally, several provisions in the FY 2020 appropriations bill are commendable and should be continued, or similar efforts undertaken this fiscal year.

Language regarding Chaco Culture National Historic Park ensures the value of this special place and the priceless cultural and historic resources it houses, held in the public trust, are protected from encroaching oil and gas development for this fiscal year. This provision should be continued.

In Alaska, over the objection of the U.S. Forest Service, and with taxpayer dollars potentially illegally funding timber-industry advocacy, the Trump Administration has moved to broadly exempt the Tongass National Forest, one of the world's largest carbon sinks from protection under the "Roadless Rule". Timber cutting in the Tongass, one of the world's last intact temperate rainforests is already a losing proposition fiscally, costing taxpayers \$30 million per year. With approximately 3 million tons of carbon sequestered annually by the Tongass, a loss of this resource would be significant, roughly equal to taking 600,000 cars off the road each year. Appropriators should avoid throwing good money after bad, and protect taxpayer resources along with protecting the Tongass National Forest. Similarly, the House FY 2020 appropriations bill included important taxpayer protections with respect to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The erroneous valuation associated with the proposed development of oil and gas within "America's Serengeti," was a flagrant misuse of the budget reconciliation process and an attack on the public's resources rightly fought by this committee's oversight responsibilities. We support continued oversight of the effort to develop the Arctic Refuge this fiscal year.

The FY 2020 House appropriations bill included commendable report language regarding efforts by the administration to undermine the study of an public process surrounding a proposal to allow mining that threaten the famed Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota. We greatly appreciate the strong leadership Chair McCollum took on this issue during the last fiscal year, and support the committee's efforts this year to continue to protect the Boundary Waters' public resources as it sees appropriate given additional existing legislation.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of The Wilderness Society's Fiscal Year 2021 priorities.