

Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Oversight Hearing
1324 Longworth House Office Building
May 21, 2019
3:00 pm

Oversight hearing entitled, “Examining the President’s Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.”

Questions from Rep. Huffman for Ms. Everson, Fish and Wildlife Service:

1. There are 19 memos from the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) regarding oil and gas drilling on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The cover memo, “Priority Information Needs for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge 1002 Area,” notes that additional information on polar bears and 10 priority studies are needed.
 - a) Have any of these studies been completed? If so, when? Please provide any completed studies as referenced in the above FWS memos.

Response: These are shared research priorities with USGS, the agency with primary responsibility for scientific research of Polar Bears. The pilot forward-looking infrared survey for polar bear den detection, “Aerial Infrared Detection Survey for Polar Bear Maternal Dens in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska”, was completed as planned in February 2018 and the report is attached. Other studies and field research are ongoing.

- b) There is nothing in the FY20 Interior Budget that is allocated towards these studies, despite the need for roughly \$2.7 million for the polar bear study and \$1.25 million for the other studies, according to the FWS memos. How much of the Department’s FY20 budget will be used for the studies that are yet to be completed, and that are still needed to meet regulatory requirements, for the BLM-led EIS for the 1002 Area in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

Response: Depending on final enacted FY 2020 congressional appropriations, FWS anticipates continuing to dedicate \$1.2 million to research needs in the 1002 Area, as was accomplished in FY 2018 and FY 2019, when FWS dedicated \$1.2 million for research needs for oil and gas development in the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

- c) Did you review these memos? Who in the Department outside of the Fish and Wildlife Service was aware of the existence of these memos? Were these memos sent to anyone in the Department outside the Fish and Wildlife Service? If so, who and when?

Response: I had not joined the Department by that time. This memo was drafted by career staff at the request of Department leadership to inform decision-making and budget priorities considering the new Congressional mandate to conduct lease sales in the

Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge. The Department prioritized science requirements to support future NEPA, ESA, and MMPA related work in and around the Coastal Plain.

2. It is my understanding that the 19 FWS memos were not released under Freedom of Information Act requests regarding efforts to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
 - Can you confirm that these were not released?
 - Can you confirm that these were also not listed as being withheld from the FOIA requests?
 - Was Department leadership aware that these memos were not released?
 - If these were not released nor listed as being withheld, please provide documentation for the decision as to why these memos were not released under FOIA.

Response: FWS has and will continue to adhere to all statutory FOIA obligations as they pertain to this and other matters. FWS has received multiple FOIA requests over the last two years on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Many of those FOIA requests are still ongoing due to the fact that they are large in scope, and documents for those requests are being processed in chronological order. The 19 memos referenced have not yet been processed as part of those larger FOIA requests, but any responsive documents will be released in compliance with FOIA when the process is completed. FWS also received other FOIA requests that are narrower in scope, have been completed, and under which these documents were released in compliance with FOIA.

3. Can you provide details on how FWS will incorporate feedback from the peer reviews of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project biological opinion?

Response: FWS is committed to using the best available science to inform its biological opinion. On April 12, 2019, FWS worked with a contractor to send portions of its draft biological opinion for the long-term operation of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project to three individuals with known expertise on Delta smelt for peer review. Responses from these individuals were received in late April. Our scientists have reviewed the input received from each of the peer reviewers and the underlying science supporting their assessments. We incorporated the input from the peer reviewers and revised the analyses, as appropriate, into the biological opinion, which the Bureau of Reclamation is expected to release soon.

4. There is much talk in recent years regarding the need to invest in infrastructure to support economic growth and development. Large-scale, multi-species Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs)—implemented under Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and funded in part through Section 6 grants—have a proven track record of success in resolving conflicts between endangered species and economic and infrastructure development. These plans also exemplify cooperative federalism through partnership with states in natural resource conservation, and through acknowledging the land use authority of local governments. Large-scale, multi-species HCPs facilitate efficient permitting under the ESA. However, in many places, development also requires permitting under the Clean Water Act (CWA). If every project covered by an HCP must go through a separate federal permitting process under the CWA, the permitting

efficiency of HCPs--and therefore the incentive for local governments to prepare them--can both be significantly diminished.

- a) What will FWS commit to doing to increase the capacity of the agency to support development of these plans in collaboration with non-federal partners? Will FWS commit to increased support—in terms of both funding and staff capacity--for collaborative conservation partnerships, including large-scale, multi-species HCPs?

Response: FWS agrees with the value of large-scale, multi-species HCPs for reconciling endangered species conservation and economic development needs, and, within existing resources, FWS is already prioritizing our work in support of developing and permitting HCPs for those that are large-scale and multi-species in scope. The President's FY 2020 budget requests an increase of \$6.1 million within the Planning and Consultation subactivity for increased staffing to support HCPs, section 7 consultations, and other environmental review efforts.

- b) Will FWS commit to working with the Army Corps and the Environmental Protection Agency to improve coordination of both planning and permitting under ESA and CWA, in partnership with state and local governments?

Response: Yes, FWS is committed to continuing our work with federal partners, including the Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, and state and local governments to improve the coordination of planning and permitting under the ESA and CWA.

Questions from Rep. Case

1. As isolated islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Hawai'i has one of the highest numbers and rates of endemic species in the world. The introduction of exotic species over the last few centuries, diseases, overdevelopment and now the real effects of climate change have taken a devastating toll on native flora and fauna. Any delay of grant funding from the Fish and Wildlife Service can be devastating to protection efforts.

For example, Hawai'i is at risk of losing its native snail species due to the increased range of predator snails. A delay in funding at this point could lead to irreversible damage or extinction of this critical species.

A primary source of federal assistance under the Endangered Species Act is the Traditional Conservation Grant Funds Program. The State of Hawai'i has two non-traditional Section 6 grant extension requests that went to the Department of Interior for signature in August 2018 and have not yet been approved and released. I have been told that changes to the Department of the Interior's grant processes may be a factor in the delay.

Please (1) summarize the new grant review process and funding decision criteria and (2) answer the following questions:

- a) When should the State of Hawai‘i expect the release of funding for its two non-traditional Section 6 grant extension requests submitted to the Department of the Interior in August 2018?

Response: The extensions were approved on February 27, 2019, allowing the State of Hawaii to continue using funds released to them during previous fiscal years.

- b) What steps is the Department of Interior taking to address any delay in the releasing of federal funding for these critical projects?

Response: The responsibility for approving grant requests and extension requests related to non-traditional Section 6 grants is with the FWS Ecological Services program. The Ecological Services program strives to approve requests in a timely manner, however discussions of rescissions of prior year Section 6 funds caused delays in processing recent requests.

- c) Why did the Department of Interior change its approval process for all grants over \$50,000?

Response: The Department is committed to appropriately administering a grant and cooperative agreement program that distributes over \$5.5 billion of taxpayer money each year. The Department's review of financial assistance programs included examination of 83 audits by the Department's Inspector General (IG) over the last 5 years which illustrated-questionable disbursements of over \$88 million. The IG also made 419 recommendations for corrective action. In addition to the audits, numerous IG investigations were conducted reveal waste, fraud, and abuse, including lack of a competitive process, conflict of interest abuse, lacking adequate processes involving acquired Federal interest in lands through financial assistance, and financial irregularities. Furthermore, we found there was no Department-wide process in place to manage these awards. As stewards of taxpayer resources, we found the status quo to be wholly unacceptable.

- d) To what extent did the Department of Interior considered how this new process could lead to additional paperwork and administration burdens on grantees?

Response: With an eye on establishing a reasonable path forward – although minimum thresholds for review were initially set – the process for review is an evolving one. The guidance provides that the review process may be modified to address particular programs. We are striving to better manage the risks associated with awards of taxpayer moneys to third parties. We are regularly adapting our process to strengthen grants review, and reduce paperwork, while still protecting the public interest.

- e) To what extent did the Department consider if the process might encourage grantees to request funds below the \$50,000 threshold instead of requesting a larger grant?

Response: The Department has a responsibility to manage the public's fiscal resources appropriately. We are regularly adapting our process, in accordance with all applicable laws, to strengthen grants review and reduce paperwork, while still protecting the public interest.

- f) How long does it take the department to process Section 6 grant extension requests today compared to before June 2018 when the approval process changed?

Response: The Department does not process requests to extend the period of performance of financial assistance awards. The Ecological Services program strives to process grant extension requests in a timely manner.

Questions from Rep. Sablan

1. The Draft Management Plan for the Marianas Trench National Monument was required under Executive Order 8335 to be completed by January 6, 2011, which was 8.5 years ago for those of us who are counting. I asked this question at last year's hearing and in a QFR was told that the draft was being revised subsequent to submerged land conveyance completed three years ago and will be issued when that work is completed. Can you simply inform us if we will ever see the draft management plan and when that might be?

Response: To date, a number of steps have been taken to address or resolve important outstanding issues between FWS and NOAA - National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to complete work on the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument draft Monument Management Plan and associated documents. Currently, both agencies are revising the draft Plan and associated Environmental Assessment for the Monument. Once the internal processes are completed and all issues addressed, FWS and NMFS will coordinate input from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) before preparing a final draft Monument Management Plan for public review and comment. The anticipated timeframe for coordination with the CNMI is late summer 2019.

Questions from Rep. Rob Bishop

1. You note the President's budget includes a request for \$509.5 million to administer the Refuge System. Included within that request is \$146 million for maintenance backlog. Can you reiterate the importance of maintaining the refuge system for sportsmen's and visitor access?

Response: FWS manages 567 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts and operates 70 national fish hatcheries, seven fish technology centers, and nine fish health centers. FWS is responsible for over \$46 billion in constructed real property assets that include over 25,000 structures (e.g., buildings and water management structures) as well as over 14,000 miles of roads and bridges. The estimated total deferred maintenance backlog for FWS facilities is \$1.3 billion.

National wildlife refuges are a hub for outdoor recreation and conservation and are valued destinations for local residents as well as visitors. Every state and territory has

wildlife refuges, and over 55 million people visit FWS refuges and hatcheries each year. They are places where families go on a weekend day to spend quality time outdoors, through activities such as hunting, fishing, and birding. FWS lands generate over \$2 billion for local economies and support tens of thousands of private-sector jobs.

As crown jewels of our public lands, FWS will continue to focus appropriations on the infrastructure and public works of these important places to ensure the public has welcoming, safe, and reliable hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreational access on their public lands.

2. Have deferred maintenance issues caused any closures or loss of access for sportsmen and visitors in the past year in any of our nation's refuges?

Response: Providing access to quality wildlife dependent recreation is one of the primary purposes of the National Wildlife Refuge System. More than 55 million people per year visit national wildlife refuges to enjoy many outdoor recreation activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography. Due to this emphasis, Refuge System staff prioritize available deferred maintenance funding to ensure outdoor recreation facilities are safe and accessible for visitors. Each year, the Refuge System invests a minimum of 60 percent of its deferred maintenance budget on projects that support outdoor recreation and wildlife habitat.

While FWS tries to mitigate impacts to the visiting public, maintenance issues have caused closures and loss of access in the past year.

3. What role do sportsmen play in the local economies locate near America's refuges? How important to the Service is it that America's refuges remain open for sportsmen to pursue their outdoor passions freely and with access?

Response: American sportsmen and sportswomen are the backbone of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation that is admired around the globe. The 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, indicated that 101.6 million Americans, 38 percent of the U.S. population 16 years old and older, enjoyed some form of fishing, hunting, or wildlife-associated recreation. The report also noted that outdoor recreation is a huge contributor to our Nation's economy, spurring annual expenditures estimated at \$156.3 billion. This spending creates thousands of jobs, supports countless local communities and their economies, and provides vital funding for conservation.

The National Wildlife Refuge System plays an essential role in providing outdoor recreation opportunities to the American public and the associated economic benefits to local communities. In FY 2018, over 55 million visitors to National Wildlife Refuges hunted, fished, observed or photographed wildlife, or participated in environmental education or interpretation on a refuge. The most popular visitor activities were use of our trails, wildlife auto tour routes, and wildlife observation programs. These activities help National Wildlife Refuges serve as an economic engine for local communities,

supporting 37,000 jobs and \$2.4 billion annually in visitor expenditures, according to the FWS's latest Banking on Nature report, published in 2013.

4. Former Secretary of the Interior Zinke issued an executive order to expand hunting and fishing opportunities wherever possible across the Refuge system. Is FWS continuing this crucial directive under current Secretary Bernhardt? What gains have been made recently?

Response: Yes, FWS is continuing these crucial directives; in response to Secretarial Orders (S.O.) 3347 and 3356, the Service is engaging in efforts to assess FWS's hunting and sport fishing regulatory alignment to State regulations, and to identify opportunities to increase access for hunters and anglers. A web-based tool called the FWS's Hunt/Fish Opportunity Tool (SHOT) was developed, and a team of Regional Chiefs of Hunting and Fishing are assessing all FWS lands and waters for regulatory alignment to State hunting and fishing regulations. As part of the 2018-2019 station-specific final rule, which published in the Code of Federal Regulations on September 10, 2018, thirty refuges opened or expanded opportunities for hunters and anglers on 251,000 acres of the Refuge System. As assessments are completed in 2019, this data will support further proposals to increase access for hunters and anglers for the 2019-2020 station-specific rule.

5. Regarding ESA, last week Director Brian Nesvik of Wyoming Fish & Game Department testified before this subcommittee on the need to delist the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) Grizzly bear population. The Director was testifying against a bill, H.R. 2532, introduced by the Chairman of this Committee, Mr. Grijalva that would create additional protections for grizzly bear populations that have been fully recovered under ESA. What is the current position of the Service regarding the GYE grizzly population's recovery status? (answer: according to USFWS, it's fully recovered)

Response: FWS stands behind our finding that the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bear is biologically recovered and no longer requires protection under the ESA.

6. Does the Service have a formal position on the Chairman's legislation, H.R. 2532, "*Tribal Heritage and Grizzly Bear Protection Act*"?

Response: FWS does not have a position on H.R. 2532, "*Tribal Heritage and Grizzly Bear Protection Act*".

7. Can you describe the role the US FWS plays in helping states and tribes work to recover species listed under the ESA? Is the management role of the Service, in your opinion, designed to be one of a permanent nature under the ESA?

Response: The ultimate goal of the ESA is to recover species to the point where they no longer require protections of the Act and can be returned to State and Tribal management. FWS pursues the goals of the ESA knowing that the Federal government cannot successfully achieve these goals on our own, and must work collaboratively with States, Tribes, landowners, and other partners. FWS partners with States and Tribes in recovery

using a number of tools including, but not limited to, Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund grants, cooperative agreements for species management under Section 6 of the ESA, Habitat Conservation Plans, Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, and State and Tribal Wildlife Grants.

8. How important is the role of states and tribes in resource management once a species is fully recovered under ESA?

Response: States and Tribes are critical to the ongoing management of recovered species. Once a species is delisted due to recovery under the ESA, management of that species returns to the States and Tribes.

9. You note the Service has requested \$95 million dedicated to the recovery of species listed under ESA and an additional \$26.4 million for conservation and restoration activities that can help keep at-risk species off the threatened and endangered list. Does the Service have an estimate of how much money it spends on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Grizzly population, despite its own conclusion that the GYE population is fully recovered?

Response: FWS contributes approximately \$557,000 per year toward Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Grizzly Bear recovery efforts.

10. What other species has the Service recommended be delisted yet are still currently listed?

Response: There are currently twenty-seven species that are recommended for delisting due to recovery that remain protected under the ESA. Of those, FWS has published proposed delisting rules for nine. FWS recently published a revised national work plan to address all outstanding delisting and downlisting recommendations in the next three fiscal years. The work plan can be found here: https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/3-Year_Downlisting_Delisting_Workplan.pdf.

11. What is the total estimate of funding the Service expends on those species that have been recommended for delisting?

Response: FWS reports on Federal and State expenditures, including those of FWS, for all species listed as Threatened or Endangered under the ESA for a given year. These reports are available at: <https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/index.html#expenditure>

12. How many species that have been deemed recovered under ESA have been relisted because of backsliding in the species' population under state management?

Response: We are not aware of a species that has been deemed recovered under the ESA that has been relisted later due to reduced populations under state management.

Questions from Rep. González-Colón

1. How does the FY 2020 budget request seek to address the Fish and Wildlife Service's deferred maintenance backlog, particularly across national wildlife refuges?

Response: The FWS deferred maintenance totals \$1.3 billion. The maintenance backlog includes \$280 million for roads, bridges and trails; \$311 million for water management and habitat structures; nearly \$355 million in hatcheries, boat docks, fishing piers, recreational sites and other public use infrastructure; and nearly \$355 million for visitor centers, offices, housing and historic structures.

For FY 2020, FWS has requested \$45,991,000 for deferred maintenance activities across the National Wildlife Refuge System. This request will allow FWS to complete about 135 of the highest priority deferred maintenance projects, which will generate an estimated \$143 million and 841 jobs in local and State economies and provide opportunities for public-private partnerships. This funding will also allow FWS to invest in infrastructure projects to reduce or proactively address deferred maintenance and operational costs, ultimately saving taxpayer dollars. Improved infrastructure provides safe and reliable outdoor recreational access for the American public.

In addition, the Administration has proposed a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund that would help address the FWS and other agencies' deferred maintenance backlogs. The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture manage an infrastructure asset portfolio with over \$18 billion in deferred maintenance, which includes structures, trails, roads, utility systems, and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. To address these needs, the FY 2020 budget includes \$6.5 billion over 5 years for a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund. The Fund will support infrastructure improvements through an allocation of 70 percent for national parks, 10 percent for national forests, 10 percent for wildlife refuges, five percent for BIE schools, and five percent for lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The Fund will be supported by the deposit of 50 percent of all Federal energy development revenue that would otherwise be credited or deposited as miscellaneous receipts to the Treasury over the 2020–2024 period, subject to an annual limit of \$1.3 billion. The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture would prioritize projects, monitor implementation, and measure results. This investment will significantly improve many of America's most visible, visited, and treasured places.

2. What actions have been taken to date to address the maintenance backlog in Puerto Rico, particularly after the 2017 hurricanes?

Response: FWS is investing \$25.8 million in funding from the FY 2018 Supplemental Appropriations to address hurricane-related damages to equipment real property. We are ensuring all repairs and replacements made to damaged infrastructure incorporate hardening components to minimize damages during future storm events. In FY 2018 and FY 2019, FWS also invested more than \$2.65 million of Deferred Maintenance funding in Puerto Rico including replacement of a bridge at Laguna Cartagena NWR, fencing and utility lines at Vieques NWR, and repairs to buildings at Cabo Rojo NWR and Culebra NWR.

3. As you know, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administers 5 National Wildlife Refuges in Puerto Rico: the Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, Cabo Rojo, Culebra, and Vieques National Wildlife Refuges.

Addressing the National Wildlife Refuge System's deferred maintenance backlog is particularly important to the island-municipalities of Vieques and Culebra.

The Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is a former U.S. Navy Weapons Training Base that was actively used for more than 60 years. When the US Navy left the island of Vieques in the early 2000s, thousands of unexploded ordnance (UXO), munition related debris, and several dump sites were left behind. The Navy has been conducting environmental cleanup efforts ever since. Although much progress has been made, a major portion of the eastern refuge is still closed due to the danger of unexploded ordnance and the cleanup process occurring in that area.

In a December 2018 report to Congress, the U.S. Department of the Navy stated that land and water cleanup efforts in Vieques would be completed between 2031 and 2032, respectively.

What actions does the Fish and Wildlife Service intend to take to help the Department of Defense and local authorities expedite the cleanup process in Vieques and Culebra, where applicable? What efforts are currently being pursued to ensure the National Wildlife Refuges contribute to the islands' local economies?

Response: FWS, representing the Department of the Interior, is a party to the Federal Facilities Agreement for Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (Vieques) and also participates in interagency teams formed for the clean-up of Culebra National Wildlife Refuge (Culebra). In this role, FWS reviews and comments on related documents, establishes priorities for different areas on Vieques and Culebra, provides the team with land use plans, actively participates in community meetings, and works alongside the Department of Defense and its contractors to ensure that natural resources are protected during the clean-up. A priority for FWS is to open areas for compatible public use while also ensuring public safety. The area of the Berdiales lighthouse on Vieques was opened to the public recently, and it is anticipated that areas on the western part of Vieques will be opened within the next year.

FWS has a stake in the wellbeing of these communities and engages continuously to help them thrive. For example, following Hurricane Maria, Vieques actively assisted the municipality and the Commonwealth in reopening roads and other protected areas, storing equipment, and providing areas for temporary placement of debris. Today, FWS is offering numerous recreational opportunities, including opening for night fishing, and working with local outfitters to allow fishing, kayaking, biking, paddleboarding, and birding tours on and adjacent to the refuges. Prior to Hurricane Maria, at least 30 outfitters had permits to operate their businesses on Vieques. FWS has diligently worked to reopen the refuge following Maria and is assisting outfitters and the community to restart their businesses by guiding them through the process and closely coordinating

with the Puerto Rico Tourism Company. FWS also provides job opportunities to youth in Puerto Rico by hiring 30 young people just this year as part of one of the largest Youth Conservation Corps summer programs in the country.

4. According to data from the website of the FEMA Recovery Support Function – Leadership Group, the Fish and Wildlife Service was allocated \$3.1 million for disaster relief efforts in Puerto Rico, specifically for construction.

However, as of March 31st, 2019, only \$1 million had been obligated and less than \$500 thousand had been outlayed or delivered.

Can you discuss the status of disaster relief and rebuilding efforts across the Fish and Wildlife Service’s units in Puerto Rico? Are there any obstacles that have prevented the agency from releasing more of its disaster relief funding intended for Puerto Rico? How can we speed up the process?

Response: FWS was recently provided \$25.8 million from the FY 2018 Supplemental Appropriations to address Hurricane-related damages in Puerto Rico for real property, as well as debris removal and equipment replacement. FWS has been working diligently to ensure that internal accountability procedures are followed and that solicitations are accurate, properly awarded, and properly administered. Initial project planning and acquisition planning for all projects within Puerto Rico has been accomplished with a goal of having all projects under contract by the end of September 2019.

5. Could your office provide this Committee a breakdown of estimated hurricane damages across the Service’s units in Puerto Rico, including the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program’s Iguaca Aviary and the 5 national wildlife refuges?

Response: *A breakdown of estimated hurricane damages at FWS Puerto Rico field stations is provided below.*

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Estimated Damages</u>
<i>Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office</i>	<i>\$950,000</i>
<i>Puerto Rican Parrot Aviaries</i>	<i>\$11,463,000</i>
<i>Cabo Rojo NWR</i>	<i>\$1,026,000</i>
<i>Culebra NWR</i>	<i>\$859,000</i>
<i>Laguna Cartagena NWR</i>	<i>\$49,000</i>
<i>Vieques NWR</i>	<i>\$11,517,000</i>
<i>Total Estimated Hurricane Damages</i>	<i>\$25,864,000</i>

6. Earlier this year, Congress passed a bipartisan lands package that, among other provisions, reauthorized the Multinational Species Conservation Funds (MSCF) administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service. I am particularly proud that language was included to give the five U.S. territories access to the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund, which only applied to foreign or international organizations.

At least four of the seven species of sea turtles are found in Puerto Rico's waters: the leatherback, the hawksbill, the green turtle, and the loggerhead. As the Island's sole representative in Congress, I am naturally very interested in the success of this program and in ensuring we take all actions to protect these magnificent creatures.

Can you discuss what efforts the Fish and Wildlife Service is currently undertaking to implement the changes to the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund recently enacted into law, including its expansion to include freshwater turtles and the eligibility of U.S. territories?

Is the Service conducting any outreach to pertinent stakeholders across the 5 U.S. territories to raise awareness about these changes and their eligibility to apply for funding under the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund?

Will entities in U.S. territories be eligible to apply for funding from the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund in Fiscal Year 2019?

Response: FWS is implementing changes to the Marine Turtle Conservation Act (MTCA) that were recently enacted into law through the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Act). These changes expand the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund (MTCF) to include freshwater turtles and tortoises and make the U.S. territories eligible for funding. The U.S. territories will not be eligible to apply for funding from the MTCF in FY 2019 because FWS posted the FY 2019 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) prior to the enactment of the Dingell Act. FWS posted the FY 2019 NOFO in September of 2018 in order to accommodate the summer and winter nesting seasons for marine turtles. The FY 2020 NOFO will include language explicitly inviting proposals for freshwater turtle and tortoise conservation, as well as marine turtle applications from U.S. territories. FWS plans to conduct outreach to raise awareness about these changes to the MTCA and the eligibility of the U.S. territories to apply for funding under the MTCF. For example, FWS staff will attend the Turtle Survival Alliance Conference in August 2019 to provide a presentation on the new funding opportunities for the territories as well as freshwater turtles and tortoises.