

**Testimony of Collin O'Mara**  
**President and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation**

Before the House Natural Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife  
Hearing on the Recovering America's Wildlife Act and the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act  
October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, Members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation, our 52 state and territorial affiliates and our more than 6 million members, thank you for the honor of testifying before you today.

Today's hearing comes at a crucial time and may be the most important Congressional conversation about the future of wildlife in more than 45 years.

America's wildlife is in crisis.

Last year, the National Wildlife Federation, in partnership with The Wildlife Society and the American Fisheries Society, issued "Reversing America's Wildlife Crisis," a report which showed that more than one-third of U.S. species are at heightened risk of extinction.

The findings include that:

- More than 40 percent of our native freshwater fish species are at risk of extinction.
- Amphibian populations are disappearing at a rate of 4 percent a year.
- More than 60 percent of our freshwater mussels are imperiled or vulnerable.
- Many species of native bees, once very common in backyards across the country, are facing precipitous declines in the past few decades.
- Monarch butterfly populations have declined nearly 90 percent, while 17 percent of all butterflies in the U.S. are at risk of extinction.
- Woodland caribou once occupied northeastern, Great Lakes, and northern Rocky Mountain states, but after many decades of decline were fully eliminated from the continental United States in January.

Five months ago, you heard from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service (IPBES), which found an unprecedented 1 million species are threatened with extinction around the globe in the coming decades.

And just last month, a major study published in *Science* documented dramatic declines in North American bird populations, with the loss of nearly 3 billion breeding birds since 1970, a nearly 30 percent decline.

These are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine.

We're seeing the collapse in populations of large species, like moose and caribou; smaller species like grassland birds, frogs, and bats; as well as invertebrates such as native bees, monarch butterflies, and freshwater mussels. And the causes are many: from habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation to diseases, invasive species, and a rapidly changing climate.

We're in the midst of a sixth extinction. It affects all sizes and types of species, in all corners of the U.S.

But there's a silver lining: We can fix this.

The U.S. has led the world in conserving species that we hunt and fish. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which combines scientific management with a user-pay model and collaboration among state agencies, federal agencies, conservation partners, and landowners, has helped restore populations of deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, wild turkeys, and waterfowl.

In fact, the recent *Science* report on North American bird populations documented that contrary to overall trends, populations of waterfowl—ducks and geese—increased by more than 56 percent since 1970. This is a direct result of combining collaborative efforts with dedicated funding for wetland conservation through the Federal Aid in Wildlife Conservation Act of 1937 (Pittman-Robertson), Duck Stamps, and innovative programs that leverage millions of private dollars, like the North American Wetland Conservation Act and parts of the Farm Bill, with common-sense protections under the Clean Water Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

We also have enjoyed incredible species successes through the Endangered Species Act, which has prevented more than 99 percent of listed species from going extinct. This includes the recovery of iconic species like the Bald Eagle, Yellowstone Grizzly, American Alligator, Brown Pelican, Peregrine Falcon, and Louisiana Black Bear. Today, more than 1,630 wildlife and plants are listed—and more than 460 species are petitioned for listing—and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

The good news is that we do a remarkable job saving wildlife when we put our mind to it.

The bad news is that we're only investing in a small number of the species in need and we are headed for an absolute train wreck, if we don't act now. Not only will we lose magnificent species that help make America, America, but we will irreparably harm our nearly \$900 billion outdoor economy, industries will face greater regulatory uncertainty and litigation risk, and taxpayers will face greater costs.

### A History of Success – With Reliable Funding

A century ago, America faced a wildlife crisis of a somewhat different nature. Extensive dam construction had disconnected aquatic species like shad and river herring from spawning grounds. Indiscriminate timber harvest and mining had harmed upland habitat and led to rampant erosion, destroying streams and heavily impacting many aquatic species. Many of our most iconic, well-known species were in serious trouble: elk, wood ducks, pronghorns, striped bass, wild turkey and many other species had become extremely rare, with some on the verge of extinction. The American response to these conditions formed the basis of the conservation movement of the 20th century, and led to the successful restoration of these and other game and fish populations.

Funding at the state level was initially provided from hunting and fishing licenses dedicated back into professional wildlife departments. The federal government began supplementing state license funds through the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, which redirected the excise tax on firearms and ammunition into state fish and wildlife management, and later through the Dingell-Johnson Sportfish Restoration Act of 1950, which dedicated funds from fishing tackle to fish conservation. A key component of the success in recovering America's game species was the creation of these dedicated funding streams, but the third leg of the stool—dedicated funding for the full diversity of wildlife—never materialized.

Similarly, species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act are more likely to be recovered with adequate funding. Unfortunately, Congress chronically underfunds the Endangered Species Act, including species recovery programs. This adds considerably to the already significant costs of recovering species once they become threatened and endangered – a conservation and financial crisis best avoided with funding to prevent species from declining to the point of endangerment in the first place.

#### Reliable Funding Required, Particularly for Species of Greatest Conservation Need

In 2000, Congress created the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (P.L. 106-553). This program was established as a subaccount of the Pittman-Robertson Fund, providing apportioned funding to state fish and wildlife agencies for implementing conservation programs targeted at species of greatest conservation need. However, unlike the primary Pittman-Robertson program, the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP) was not set up with a dedicated source of funding. Congress provided one year of appropriations in Fiscal Year (FY) 2001, but the program has been unfunded since that time. In lieu of funding the WCRP, Congress has appropriated funds for State Wildlife Grants for the last 18 years. Appropriations have ranged from \$50 million to \$90 million appropriated over the period of FY 2001-2019, with an average of \$60 million dollars provided annually to all states and U.S. territories.

With the establishment of the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program, Congress mandated that state fish and wildlife agencies develop State Wildlife Action Plans as a way to conserve all of America's wildlife, and guide the way each state spends their programmatic dollars. These plans set clear priorities by identifying those species in greatest need of attention, the habitats on which they depend, and the conservation actions necessary to sustain and restore their populations. Development of these plans is led by the state wildlife agencies, but they are crafted in coordination with a wide array of public and private partners and intended to reflect a comprehensive and shared vision for wildlife conservation in the state.

However, under the existing user pay/user benefit model, the majority of wildlife species have no stable or consistent funding. Eighty percent of state fish and wildlife agency budgets come from hunters and anglers, and species that are hunted and fished understandably continue to receive the bulk of that funding—and even these revenue streams are unpredictable as the number of hunters continues to decline.

State wildlife agencies have embraced their role in maintaining all of the wildlife and fish in their state, but lack sufficient funding to fulfill this responsibility. Many states have secured some

additional funds through general appropriations or lottery funds, the dedication of sales taxes or real estate transfer taxes for conservation purposes, the creation of voluntary state tax check-off programs, or sales of specialty license plates. These creative solutions help, but fall short of the serious needs facing fish and wildlife.

### A Solution of the Magnitude of the Problem: The Recovering America's Wildlife Act

We face a choice: Do we maintain the status quo and watch the ongoing losses and try to prevent extinction primarily through regulation and litigation? Or do we choose a different path and catalyze unprecedented collaborative conservation to proactively restore ecosystems and recover species in every corner of the country?

The bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act—sponsored by Representatives Dingell and Fortenberry and nearly 130 of their colleagues—proposes a visionary, collaborative solution that matches the magnitude of the monumental crisis wildlife face.

The premise of the bill is simple: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. We can save wildlife and save money in the long run through proactive collaboration, before species need more restrictive and expensive emergency room measures.

We know exactly what to do. Every state and territory is already mandated by Congress to develop a State Wildlife Action Plan that identifies clear strategies for recovering species of greatest conservation need. In developing these plans, State fish and wildlife agencies have identified more than 12,000 species in need of proactive conservation attention. But these plans have largely been an unfunded mandate with only \$60 million annually available for implementation nationwide.

The Recovering America's Wildlife Act is based in a broadly shared commitment to conservation. In 2014, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies convened a “Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources” comprised of business and conservation leaders, of which I was honored to be part, to determine how to tackle the problems facing wildlife in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The businesses involved all cited healthy fish and wildlife as essential to their bottom line. These leaders recognized the magnitude of the solution must match the magnitude of the problem and recommended the establishment of a federal fund dedicated to preventing wildlife from becoming endangered. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act is built upon the recommendations of that panel.

The bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act invests \$1.3 billion in state-led wildlife conservation efforts and \$97.5 million in tribal wildlife conservation efforts to restore at-risk species populations, including listed species, by implementing the State Wildlife Action Plans. The bill is designed to leverage significant outside resources, while rewarding innovative solutions that are replicable and scalable.

This isn't just important for wildlife. When we save wildlife we save ourselves. We create healthier and more resilient communities. We create more jobs in the outdoor economy. We

provide greater regulatory certainty for industry and less costs for taxpayers. This is why the legislation has support from more than 1,100 conservation groups and business associations.

**The Recovering America's Wildlife Act is simply the most significant piece of wildlife legislation since passage of the Endangered Species Act 46 years ago. It marks the best chance we have to win our race against the clock. The longer we wait to act, the more expensive and difficult the crisis becomes to solve.**

### Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act

Turning to the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act, sponsored by Representatives Beyer and Buchanan, one key to saving species and increasing their abundance is reconnecting wildlife habitat. For wildlife to thrive, we must ensure that species can move through increasingly fragmented landscapes. Wildlife move for seasonal migrations, mating, to rear young, and they move daily to access food, water and avoid predators. Unfortunately, wildlife habitat is often bisected by housing, roads, fences, energy facilities, and other barriers that make it difficult for species to reach food, water, shelter, and breeding sites.

At the same time, the need for wildlife to be able to move may be greater than ever. The expanding U.S. population is bringing more people and development into conflict with wildlife and their historic habitats. And climate change is fundamentally altering landscapes, forcing many species to relocate.

The Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act represents an important step forward. It proposes a voluntary, competitive Wildlife Movement Grants program to support efforts by private landowners, state and federal agencies, and tribes to restore wildlife corridors. It also proposes a voluntary, non-regulatory process for identifying priority wildlife pathways and key pinch-points will improve connectivity that will benefit many species, from top predators like the Florida panthers to insects like the monarch butterfly, from elk and mule deer to trout, trout, turtles and grouse.

The bill creates four important new conservation tools that are flexible, tailored to the needs of wildlife, and respectful of private property:

- It authorizes a voluntary grant program for non-federal lands. The wildlife movement grants program will fund important wildlife movement projects on state, private and tribal lands, such as modifying fences to allow big game to pass, creating culverts that allow fish and amphibians to cross barriers safely, or securing habitat patches for migrating birds.
- The bill establishes a process for identifying corridors on Tribal lands that may receive funding to manage these corridors.
- The bill encourages the consideration of wildlife connectivity in the management of public lands through the identification of key corridors: Maintaining the routes wildlife need to move across public lands will sustain wildlife populations; support wildlife-based recreation like hunting and fishing; and avoid conflicts with businesses that depend on public land resources.

- Lastly, it creates a national wildlife corridor database: This database will incorporate relevant data from federal agencies and help wildlife managers make more informed decisions.

To date, Congress has yet to establish policy to broadly address the need to maintain wildlife movements across our increasingly fragmented landscape. Passing the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act provides an incredibly important first step that will help allow wildlife to migrate and disperse with the changing seasons, boost biodiversity and resilience in degraded ecosystems, safeguard genetic flow between populations, and ensure species are better able to adapt to our changing climate.

### Conclusion

It's not too late to save America's wildlife.

The greatest ally of extinction is inaction. By acting today, we can ensure that our children and grandchildren inherit a full symphony of birds; streams teeming with fish; and grasslands dotted by herds of pronghorn and mule deer. That's a legacy of which we can all be proud.

The opportunity is before us to ensure that proactive wildlife conservation is prioritized as a national conservation strategy. We can conserve wildlife in ways that are collaborative, cost effective and preserve not only our wildlife and their ecosystems, but the myriad services they provide for our local communities. I encourage each of you support passage of the Recovering America's Wildlife Act and the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.