

**Testimony of Martha Williams,  
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,  
Department of the Interior,  
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries  
On the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request**

**May 23, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Fiscal Year 2024 budget request, and for the Subcommittee's continued support of the Service's work. The Administration continues to show strong support for the Service and our conservation mission through its annual budget request.

This past year we were pleased to begin implementation the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, through which the Service received nearly \$111 million for just over 300 projects across the country. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is a significant investment in the nation's infrastructure and economic competitiveness. The law is also a substantial investment in wildlife conservation. In the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law's inaugural year, the Service identified 12 projects in the Delaware River Basin, 33 project in the Klamath Basin and five projects in the Lake Tahoe area that will provide habitat restoration, invasive species control, conservation of at-risk species and other benefits to these ecosystems. The Service and its partners also started work on 40 National Fish Passage Program projects, which are restoring habitat connectivity for aquatic species and reducing flooding risks and public safety hazards throughout the country. And, we co-sponsored a first-ever National Fish Passage Bipartisan Infrastructure Law workshop to pull together diverse stakeholders, including more than 100 practitioners from federal and state agencies, Tribes, conservation organizations and other partner organizations, to identify shared goals in an effort to make the most of this opportunity. We are also improving habitat by plugging 175 orphan wells on six National Wildlife Refuges in Louisiana and Oklahoma. These wells are actively leaking hydrocarbons, methane and contaminated water, and pose a threat to wildlife, their habitat and nearby communities. And through the Service's Sagebrush Conservation program, we are implementing 49 projects in the western states to conserve strategic areas within the sagebrush ecosystem and safeguard precious water resources for neighboring communities and wildlife.

As excited as we are about the opportunity afforded to us by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Service would not be capable of undertaking this work without a robust base budget to fund our dedicated staff who implement programs and projects. I am pleased to announce that the Administration's budget request provides significant resources for base capacity and our conservation mission. Throughout, the Service's budget request carries forward our commitment to building successful partnerships and working collaboratively. Working with others is a critical component of our mission and something we rely on daily to be successful.

The FY2024 President’s budget request for the Service totals \$4.2 billion, including current appropriations of \$2.2 billion. The discretionary portion of the Service’s request is an increase of \$315 million above the 2023 enacted level. A majority of this increase directly supports conservation and retaining biodiversity on the landscape.

The budget also includes \$2 billion available under permanent appropriations, most of which is provided directly to states for fish and wildlife restoration and conservation.

The FY2024 budget promotes strategic investments to implement the goals of America the Beautiful, the Administration’s conservation initiative to address the impacts of climate change on natural resources, conserve species and habitats, reconnect Americans with the outdoors, facilitate economic development and create good-paying job opportunities. At its core, America the Beautiful is about supporting locally-led and voluntary efforts to conserve, steward and restore lands and waters on local, state, Tribal and private lands. America the Beautiful is about working with communities to identify what conservation programs and projects work well for them. We want to invest in those efforts and stitch them together into a collaborative and inclusive approach to conservation across the country.

Key investments in the FY2024 budget request also include Conservation and Biodiversity, Service Capacity, Science and Customer Service.

### **Conservation and Biodiversity**

This year we are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Our budget request includes an increase of \$19 million for species recovery and an overall increase of \$88.5 million for our Ecological Services program, which will support our endangered species work. The ESA provides a critical safety net for fish, wildlife and plants and has prevented the extinction of hundreds of imperiled species, promoted the recovery of many others and helped conserve habitats upon which they depend.

But the ESA alone cannot recover imperiled species. The law’s success depends to a large extent on partnerships and our collaborative efforts with stakeholders across the country. The ESA continues to be tremendously successful because it facilitates and incentivizes collaborative conservation.

Our FY2024 budget request will continue to support those collaborative efforts through a nearly \$30 million increase in our Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, which will help improve habitat for listed and at-risk species while supporting traditional land uses such as ranching. The Partners program will also invest \$3 million in connecting wildlife corridors to allow for species to move across the landscape, connecting habitat.

The budget also provides \$14.6 million in additional funding for our Migratory Bird program’s conservation and monitoring efforts to help address the documented loss of over 3 billion birds since 1970, a net loss of 29 percent of the breeding bird population over the last half-century. In contrast, we have been tremendously successful in keeping waterfowl populations at sustainable levels. So, we know how to conserve birds – if we have the resources to do it. The total requested

increase for Migratory Birds is \$38.1 million, including funding for our partners in Joint Ventures around the country.

Another persistent conservation challenge is invasive species. We need to shift our approach from funding eradication efforts for already established species to funding prevention, so species do not get the chance to establish. The budget would provide \$7.4 million in additional funding for invasive species prevention to address problem species before they spread.

### **Conservation Capacity Needs**

The Service's ability to address the threats to wildlife and ecosystems and effectively leverage investments like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law depends on the capacity of our programs to do their day-to-day work. The FY2024 budget request invests heavily in that capacity, with additional funds for endangered species consultation and other environmental permitting work, as well as funding for recovery of listed species, migratory birds and native fish.

The National Wildlife Refuge System spans more than 850 million acres of lands and waters and includes 568 national wildlife refuges, 38 wetland management districts, 49 coordination areas and five national marine monuments that cover 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters. There are refuges located in all 50 states, including 63 refuges with wilderness areas. The Refuge System embodies our nation's commitment to conserving wildlife populations and biodiversity for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Yet, the Refuge System has 800 fewer staff than they did 10 years ago, when there were far fewer refuges.

To begin to address this dire capacity need, we are requesting an additional \$30.5 million for wildlife and habitat management. Funding for refuge operations—including wildlife and habitat management, visitor services, refuge law enforcement and planning—is \$454.3 million, or \$63 million above the previous year's enacted level. The increase will be used for adaptive management, habitat resilience and the use of science-driven decision making.

Another capacity issue is in our Ecological Services program. Ecological Services planning and consultation capability is at an all-time low due to spiking workload and a real decrease in funding. Effective project development and economic growth depends on the work completed by our Ecological Services program. To meet the increasing demand, we are requesting an increase of \$50.5 million.

In addition to the requested funding to increase environmental permitting capacity, the budget also proposes to expand our existing authorities to allow federal agencies to more effectively transfer funds provided under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to both the Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service to complete permitting activities. This authority will help address the unique workload surge anticipated from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and would accelerate environmental reviews in support of responsible development of priority infrastructure projects and energy solutions across the country.

In addition to demand for consultations, requests for other environmental reviews such as those related to migratory bird permitting are also at historically high levels due to infrastructure

funding and economic growth. This budget request proposes to provide an additional \$7.8 million to support staff handling migratory bird permitting in our regional offices.

Many of the Service's programs are currently facing capacity issues; however, our Fisheries field offices have not received any increased funding in recent years. The ability of these offices to assess the status and trends of aquatic species, evaluate the causes of species decline and work with partners to implement actions to restore fisheries populations is lagging. Our request would provide an increase of \$10 million to provide more capacity for Fisheries field offices.

### **Advancing Science**

Science is the foundation of our work, and a robust science program is critical to ensure we are making fully informed decisions across all of our programs. The President's budget request includes an increase of \$20 million for the Service's Science Applications program, including \$13.5 million for Science Partnerships to work with partners on landscape level planning and shared science, as well as \$6.6 million for translating science into useful tools for on-the-ground management.

### **Customer Service**

The Service's mission is to conserve wildlife on behalf of the American public. Our efforts to provide the public with the best customer service possible are another cornerstone of the FY2024 budget request. We are engaged in a series of efforts to improve customer service, including addressing the fact that environmental policy decisions have often failed to adequately account for environmental injustices. One of our primary focal points for supporting the Administration's initiative to advance racial equity in conservation and recreational access is the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program.

The program encompasses 101 urban national wildlife refuges, including seven flagship refuges that deliver additional programming for visitors, 32 designated Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership cities and 30 Urban Bird Treaty cities. The FY2024 budget includes an additional \$5.5 million to support creation of five more urban flagship refuges and an additional \$1 million to support urban bird treaties.

In order to serve members of the public seeking one of our permits, we are requesting an additional \$6 million for upgrades to our online system, known as E-permits. Enhancements will include continued work on secure paperless CITES permitting, the inclusion of the Migratory Bird program's permits and allowing users to apply online for Refuge System special use permits. We envision that all Service permits will be available online in the next few years.

### **Construction and Maintenance**

Implementing an aggressive agenda to tackle conservation in the face of climate change requires a commensurate investment in support resilient facilities and real property. The Service is responsible for more than \$50 billion in constructed real property assets that include over 25,000 structures as well as nearly 14,000 roads, bridges and dams. Our FY2024 construction request is

\$51 million, \$21 million more than the 2023 enacted amount, including \$42 million for line-item construction projects.

Starting in FY2021, the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund provided mandatory funding for Refuge System Deferred Maintenance. This is in addition to the Deferred Maintenance funding within our Refuge program, which is funded at \$48.6 million.

Altogether, this budget includes \$366.2 million for asset maintenance and construction. The Service will use these funds to address high-priority health and safety needs for Service-owned assets to begin a transition to a life-cycle maintenance strategy that will reduce long-term maintenance costs and improve the experience of our visitors.

### **Law Enforcement and International Affairs**

The Service's Office of Law Enforcement investigates wildlife crimes and enforces the laws that govern and facilitate trade in wildlife and wildlife products. FY2024 funding is proposed at \$104.4 million for the Office of Law Enforcement, an increase of \$12.3 million above the 2023 enacted level.

We continue to work with the State Department, other federal agencies and foreign governments to address the threat to conservation and global security posed by illegal wildlife trade and trafficking. A portion of the funding proposed for the Office of Law Enforcement will support implementation of the new Big Cat Public Safety Act, which prohibits the private possession of big cats and makes it illegal for exhibitors to allow direct contact with cubs.

The budget request also includes \$26.7 million for the International Affairs program, \$5.1 more than the 2023 enacted amount. This increase will support expanded conservation capacity for iconic species such as elephants and rhinos, as well as climate adaptation and resiliency efforts abroad.

Our international program complements our law enforcement efforts by developing strategies to target consumer demand for illegal products, which is driving a rapid increase in the poaching of species such as tigers and pangolins. And, as part of the One Health effort, the two programs also work to protect against disease transmission through the wildlife trade.

### **Legislative Proposals**

This year's budget request contains a number of important legislative proposals which would enhance the Service's ability to use our resources to the maximum extent possible. As discussed above, we are asking for transfer authority for Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds from other federal agencies to support environmental reviews for covered projects. This has worked well where existing authority exists, such as with the U.S. Forest Service.

Another legislative proposal is to expand good neighbor authority to the Service. This would allow states, counties and Tribes to enter into agreements to perform forest, rangeland and watershed restoration work on federal land. Another proposal for stewardship contracting authority would allow the Service to trade forest products for land management and services.

A fourth legislative proposal was also included in our FY2023 budget request. Resource protection authority would allow us to recover funds from responsible parties when Service resources are injured or destroyed. Currently, the costs of repair and restoration falls upon the appropriated budget and any fines or penalties are paid to the U.S. Treasury.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for your support for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.