



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

FEB 12 2024

The Honorable Cliff Bentz
Chairman, Natural Resources Subcommittee
on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bentz:

Enclosed is a response prepared by the Department of the Interior to a question for the record submitted to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Deputy Director for Policy Stephen Guertin following his appearance at the October 18, 2023, legislative hearing before your subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to you on this matter.

Sincerely,

Christopher P. Salotti
Legislative Counsel
Office of Congressional and
Legislative Affairs

Enclosure
cc: The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member

Questions for the Record
House Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
Legislative Hearing
October 18, 2023

Question from Chairman Bentz

Question 1: Why is the Service not utilizing the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program more to reduce or eliminate the need for listing rather than putting more money towards Ecological Service budget and personnel? Often times the work of the ecological services department would be duplicative of the work that could be done by the partners program before a species is listed.

Response: Conservation of fish and wildlife habitat on private lands is critical to recovering threatened and endangered species and conserving at-risk species. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners Program) plays a key role in advancing the Service's efforts to conserve trust species by supporting voluntary, collaborative projects on private lands. With program biologists located in all 50 U.S. states and territories, the Partners Program provides technical and financial assistance to willing landowners for projects that conserve, improve, or restore fish and wildlife habitat. These projects often result in major benefits for both listed and at-risk species. Since 1987, the program has supported conservation efforts benefitting 794 threatened or endangered species and contributed to the downlisting of 16 species and delisting of 14 species. The Partners Program has also helped prevent 28 species from being listed due to voluntary conservation efforts on private lands, such as the greater sage-grouse, mountain plover, Gunnison's prairie dog, Atlantic salmon, and Arctic grayling.

Currently, there is more private landowner demand for the Partners Program's technical and financial assistance than existing funding levels can support. The program is authorized to receive up to \$75 million annually, but it currently receives approximately \$60 million annually. The Administration's FY 2024 budget request includes \$79.7 million for the Partners Program, in recognition of the importance of this program's work, including for conservation of at-risk species.

The work of the Partners Program is not duplicative of, but complements and supports, the work funded through the Ecological Services' Candidate Conservation program. The Candidate Conservation program focuses on two primary activities: species assessment and facilitating voluntary conservation efforts for species under consideration for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) or other at-risk species. The Candidate Conservation program uses all available information to conduct a scientifically rigorous assessment process that identifies species that warrant listing. The Service uses a species status assessment framework, which is an analytical approach to deliver foundational science for informing all ESA decisions.

The ESA not only inspires diverse partnerships to prevent the need to list species, it also supports proactive collaborations with states, Tribes, private landowners, conservation groups, and industry to conserve species before they require federal protections. The Service's Candidate Conservation program works with landowners to develop conservation agreements for actions to conserve at-risk species and that may prevent the need to list the species in the future. Sometimes

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these agreements overlay with Partners Program projects, but many agreements are through states and involve multiple landowners. Proactive conservation for at-risk species requires close engagement with communities and landowners. A majority of at-risk species are found on private lands, and our partnerships with private citizens, state and local governments, Tribes, and businesses are critical to the conservation of these species. The Administration's FY 2024 request includes an increase of \$4.871 million to support 27 FTEs that will work with landowners to conserve at-risk species.