

**Testimony of  
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior  
Before the  
House Committee on Natural Resources,  
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries  
On  
H.R. 4389, Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023 and  
H.R. 5009, WILD Act**

**October 18, 2023**

**Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Stephen Guertin, Deputy Director for Policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior (Department). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on two bills that reauthorize three longstanding and successful programs that invest in partnerships to conserve wildlife at home and abroad.

The Service's mission is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more than 150 years, the Service has collaborated with partners across the country and around the world to carry out this mission. The programs reauthorized in the legislation before the Subcommittee today are pivotal to these conservation partnerships.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) has created durable and effective partnerships with other nations to conserve a shared resource. Each year, 390 species of neotropical migratory birds migrate to and from the United States, spending winters in southern countries and returning to North America in the summer. These birds include beloved and familiar species such as the Baltimore oriole, the Golden-cheeked warbler, and the American oystercatcher along with broader groups of songbirds, shorebirds and birds of prey. In addition to their role in pollination, seed dispersal and pest control, migrating birds also provide warnings of the effects of climate change and environmental contamination and generate billions of dollars of economic activity through bird watching and photography. A key aspect of this law is that it ensures that conservation activities undertaken in the U.S. are bolstered by habitat conservation outside of the U.S. in key areas of the species' ranges. It also leverages about four times the funds invested and has provided critical support for neotropical bird conservation and research throughout the Western Hemisphere for over two decades.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program has long been a critical tool in helping the Service advance collaborative conservation on private lands. With more than 70 percent of land in the U.S. in private ownership, the success of the Service's conservation mission hinges on its ability to work with partners to conserve and restore fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. Established in 1987, the PFW Program facilitates conservation with private landowners to benefit both trust species and landowners. Through over 200 PFW biologists located in all 50 states and territories, the Service provides free technical and financial assistance to private

landowners, managers, tribes, corporations, schools, and nonprofits interested in improving wildlife habitat on their land. Projects are custom designed to meet the unique needs of each partner and can range from several-acre wetland restorations to grassland restoration projects that stretch thousands of acres.

Similarly, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds have been essential to conserving some of the world's most iconic species, as identified by Congress, through partnerships in their range countries. Poaching, wildlife trafficking, human-wildlife conflict, habitat loss, and disease have all contributed to the decline of these species, which include elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, great apes, and marine turtles. Key populations of many of these species are found in countries where these threats are compounded by political instability, expanding human populations, and a lack of funding and capacity for conservation. Projects supported by the Multinational Species Conservation Funds mitigate threats to these species, conserve ecosystems, advance diplomacy, improve stability in foreign countries, and build good will towards the United States.

### **H.R. 4389, Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023**

H.R. 4389, the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023 would reauthorize the NMBCA through fiscal year (FY) 2028. The bill would increase the federal share of each project to a maximum of 33.3 percent; require the Service to submit a report to Congress within 180 days of enactment describing the implementation of existing collaborative requirements in the Act; increase the allowable administrative expenses available to the Secretary each fiscal year to a maximum of four percent or \$200,000, whichever is greater; and increase the authorization of appropriations. The Service supports H.R. 4389, with some recommendations for improvement, which would continue the legacy of effective international, collaborative conservation and provide increasing financial support for, and thereby public access to, bird conservation.

The Service's Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation program provides grants for the conservation of neotropical migratory birds to countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States. The program operates an annual grant cycle where Service staff and outside experts review eligible project proposals and makes recommendations to the Director. Since 2002, NMBCA has provided more than \$89 million to support 717 projects in 43 countries. These projects have positively affected more than 5 million acres of bird habitat and leveraged an additional \$346 million in partner funding. This May, the Service awarded \$5.1 million in federal funds, leveraging more than \$19.6 million in partner contributions, for 32 projects across 30 countries. The networks developed through this program have evolved into a powerful conservation tool.

Increasing the federal cost-share requirement to 33 percent from the current 25 percent will open doors to a broader coalition of applicants and partners. However, the Service notes that if the federal share were increased to a maximum of 50 percent, a 1:1 match, it would enable the Service to engage an even larger number of partners, take on a greater partnership role with projects, and reduce risk to the program if partners are unable to raise a higher match level.

Similarly, while the Service appreciates support for increasing allowable administrative expenses, we recommend increasing the amount permitted under the legislation to up to 5

percent or \$300,000, whichever is greater. If the federal cost share increases, increased administrative funding will be critical to handle the additional workload associated with an expected increase in applicants and grant recipients. Additionally, increasing the maximum amount to the recommended level would enable Service employees to ensure better compliance with federal financial assistance requirements that improve performance and conservation delivery.

Finally, the Service is requesting \$9.9 million for this program in the President's FY 2024 budget. In recent years, proposals for funding have totaled close to \$10 million annually. Authorizing appropriations at the Service's requested level would allow the program to meet increasing demand from applicants and improve outcomes for birds that are facing threats from climate change, habitat degradation, and other challenges that require long-term education, research and monitoring.

For these reasons, we would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee to ensure the NMBCA can continue its legacy of collaborative conservation and meet the demand from applicants and partners across the Hemisphere.

### **H.R. 5009, Wildlife Innovation and Longevity Driver Reauthorization Act**

H.R. 5009, the Wildlife Innovation and Longevity Driver Reauthorization (WILD) Act reauthorizes two popular, longstanding Service programs that promote species and habitat conservation: the PFW Program and the Multinational Species Conservation Funds. The Service supports H.R. 5009, which would enable the Service to continue leveraging some of our most successful collaborative conservation efforts at home and abroad.

Over the past 35 years, the PFW Program has been highly successful in helping the Service and its partners meet shared conservation goals, helping around 30,000 landowners complete more than 50,000 habitat restoration projects totaling more than 6.4 million acres of fish and wildlife habitat. A 2014 study found that for every \$1 the PFW Program contributed to a project, the program generated \$15.70 in economic returns to local communities. Whether the program is restoring coastal marshes in Ottawa County, Ohio, or working with the partners to restore a park in Bay City, Michigan, it proves to be a flexible and effective program that provides lasting benefits to wildlife and communities.

The Multinational Species Conservation Funds are authorized through five laws that created individual competitive grant programs supporting the conservation of international at-risk species. These programs provide critical technical and financial assistance to local communities, government agencies, and non-government organizations, working to conserve at-risk species and habitat across the globe. From 2015 to 2022, the Funds provided \$92.5 million in grants and cooperative agreements and leveraged nearly \$200 million in additional funds towards conserving these species. Since their inception, the Funds have engaged nearly 600 domestic and foreign partners in over 54 countries.

Each of the five Funds are applied to unique species conservation challenges abroad: The African Elephant Conservation Fund provides critical support for curbing the current African Elephant poaching epidemic, combatting the trafficking of this species' ivory and meat,

and reducing the demand for these products. The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund specializes in enhancing human-Asian Elephant coexistence through local stewardship and community outreach in addition to promoting applied research and transboundary conservation efforts. The Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund is aimed at community engagement in both South Africa and South Asia, and includes a suite of measures, such as wildlife trafficking mitigation measures that seek to eliminate collection and sale of rhinoceros horns as well as tiger pelts, teeth, bones, and products, and establishing networks of citizens to protect tigers through reduced human-wildlife conflict. The Great Ape Conservation Fund seeks to preserve some of our world's most intelligent animals by combatting pet-trade related capture and poaching throughout Africa and Asia. Lastly, the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund addresses threats to turtle survival through nesting site protection, marine debris reduction, fishery bycatch reduction, and other localized conservation projects. The program was also expanded by Congress in 2019 to include support for the conservation of freshwater turtles and tortoises.

H.R. 5009, Wildlife Innovation and Longevity Driver Reauthorization Act, reauthorizes funding for the PFW Program through FY 2028; reauthorizes funding for the Multinational Species Conservation Funds at existing funding levels through FY 2028; and authorizes multiyear grants for up to five years for the Multinational Species Conservation Funds programs.

The Service has identified some suggested modifications, which are discussed below.

Reauthorization of the PFW program would enable the Service to continue to achieve strong conservation outcomes through hand-in-hand collaboration with private landowners. However, the Service notes that the Administration's FY 2024 budget request includes almost \$80 million for the PFW Program – nearly \$5 million more than would be authorized by H.R. 5009. This proposed increase underscores the need for collaborative efforts to enhance private lands, protect trust species, and support ecosystem and community resiliency and the program's capability to address that need. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Subcommittee how the PFW Program is equipped to deploy the additional funding included in our budget request, including how we anticipate an increase in funding could amplify the program's achievements and benefits to landowners and neighboring communities.

With regard to the Multinational Species Conservation Funds programs, we note that the current caps on administrative funds are not consistent across the five programs, nor are they sufficient to cover total administrative costs associated with implementing and overseeing the Funds. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with the sponsor and the Subcommittee.

### **Conclusion**

The Service appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in our conservation partnerships. Working with others is central to the Service's mission, and reauthorization of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, and Multinational Species Conservation Funds will enable the Service to continue our work with our partners to conserve species at home and abroad.