Statement for the Record
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Oversight Field Hearing

September 6, 2024

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. A fundamental responsibility of the Service is the administration and enforcement of the laws passed by Congress, including the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). The Service uses the best available science and prioritizes transparency in our work as we fulfill our statutory responsibilities.

The Service is dedicated to the effective and efficient implementation of the ESA. This involves consultation with other agencies to evaluate the impacts of federal water development projects on federally listed threatened and endangered species. The Service also coordinates with other agencies regarding the conservation of wildlife and habitat on National Wildlife Refuge System lands and management of the National Fish Hatchery System to propagate fish and other aquatic species to carry out Tribal trust responsibilities and sustain wild populations, among other responsibilities. We deploy all of these efforts in our work to conserve fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats across the nation.

California's Central Valley and the Klamath Basin

The Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation) Central Valley Project (CVP) and California's State Water Project (SWP) provide water to farms, wildlife, and communities throughout California. Reclamation consults with the Service on operations of the CVP and SWP through Section 7 of the ESA. The Service also works alongside the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) for consultations on the CVP and SWP. The Service has been working closely with federal and state agencies on developing biological opinions using the best available science since Reclamation reinitiated consultation in October 2021.

In the Central Valley, the Service is working with federal and state partners to develop a supplementation program to reintroduce captively raised Delta smelt into the wild. To begin testing actions associated with supplementation, the Service, Reclamation, CDFW, DWR and others began an experimental release program. Approximately 189,000 marked Delta smelt have been released into the Delta over the last three winters. To capitalize on this success and prepare for the future supplementation, the Service, with the support of Reclamation, is leading the effort to build a new fish facility in the Bay Delta region. This facility would be used to produce significant numbers of Delta smelt for supplementation efforts, house a refugial population, and

provide research opportunities for Delta smelt and other native fishes. The Service is also working with multiple partners to support Chinook salmon populations.

The Service believes the CVP can be operated in a way that meets the needs of the Central Valley's imperiled fish populations, while supporting California's farms and communities. Finding this balance takes an open, transparent, creative, and collaborative effort by all interested parties, including Tribes, agricultural producers, communities, and state and federal agencies. Ongoing collaborative efforts like the Floodplain Forward work in the Sacramento Valley and the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes discussions represent efforts to transform water conflicts into partnerships that optimize resource use for all interests.

The Service has also diligently sought collaborative solutions in the Klamath Basin, which has seen unprecedented water supply challenges that have a ripple effect on communities, Tribes, fish and wildlife, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service is working closely with Tribes, local governments, farmers, federal partners, and local communities to meet the needs of species and national wildlife refuges while providing a sustainable water supply to Klamath Project irrigators.

Lost River and shortnose suckers remain highly imperiled, with juvenile recruitment in the wild remaining practically nonexistent, with fewer than 4,000 shortnose suckers remaining in Upper Klamath Lake, and with low spawning numbers in recent years suggesting the onset of senescence in the aging sucker populations of both species as they approach their maximum life expectancy. Klamath refuges also continue to suffer from prolonged drought, lack of consistent water supply, and management challenges that have resulted in reduced migratory bird populations across the refuge complex. However, the Service is making significant investments in addressing these issues.

The Service is investing $162 million over five years in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding to restore the regional ecosystem, while also helping local economies. To date, the Service has allocated almost $90 million in BIL funding to support 41 projects driven by Tribes, partners and communities addressing local and regional needs. These wide-reaching conservation projects are helping build a more resilient Basin that can support the communities that call it home through a deeply collaborative, transparent, and stakeholder-informed process.

Additionally, Klamath Falls National Fish Hatchery is now fully funded with $30 million in BIL funds and construction continues, with an anticipated completion date in 2027. To date, the hatchery has released 70,000 suckers into Upper Klamath Lake, and, when completed, the facility will be able to produce 40,000 to 60,000 juvenile suckers every year. This hatchery will also employ state-of-the-art technology and design to ensure the hatchery itself is maximizing water efficiency to conserve water. The Service is also working closely with our partners at Reclamation, Basin Tribes, and farmers to ensure a water supply for refuges that also supports aquatic habitat for fish and waterfowl and resilient agriculture in the Upper Klamath Basin.

While this funding helps to address high-priority challenges, we recognize that the cost of Basinwide restoration will be much greater. The Service continues to support a unified approach for the coordinated restoration and recovery of the Klamath Basin.

In both the Klamath Basin and Central Valley, hydrology is expected to trend drier, which will impact and complicate consultation, restoration, and other long-term planning efforts. These challenges to our environment and communities must be addressed through collaborative partnerships and transparent processes among a wide variety of stakeholders who work together to develop holistic solutions. In the face of climate change-induced challenges to hydrology and the environment, the Service continues efforts to stabilize imperiled fish populations through the use of multiple tools, including habitat restoration, water operations actions and supplementation, and propagation programs.

California's Central Valley and the Klamath Basin are critical migration and over wintering areas in the Pacific Flyway. National wildlife refuges work with neighboring farms and ranches and state partners to create a network of habitat for migratory birds. This habitat, whether on a national wildlife refuge or on privately held lands, is dependent on sufficient water to create appropriate conditions. Partnerships like those seen in the Sacramento Valley between rice farmers and the Sacramento Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex and in the Tule Lake area of the Klamath Basin are models for the important role agriculture plays in species conservation.

Conclusion

The Service is dedicated to continuing its work to develop innovative solutions that holistically address the ongoing challenges of species protection, drought, and human use. The Service looks forward to working within the Administration and with the Committee to ensure that federally listed aquatic species are managed as effectively, responsibly, and efficiently as possible under the ESA while working to find collaborative, holistic solutions that also support the water needs of Tribes, farmers, and communities.