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Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
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Good afternoon, Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and subcommittee members. It is a pleasure and an honor to testify before you in support of H.R. 3538, the Wildlife Confiscations Network Act of 2025. My name is Craig Hoover, and I am the Executive Vice President of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, also known as AZA.

Founded in 1924, AZA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that our more than 250 accredited zoos, aquariums, and science centers reflect the global gold standard of excellence in animal care and wellbeing, conservation, education, science, and guest experience. Our members welcome more than 200 million visitors annually, including 55 million school-aged children, generating more than \$22 billion in economic activity and supporting more than 198,000 jobs across the country.

At the heart of AZA are our mandatory accreditation standards, which involve an independent, objective process of self-evaluation, rigorous on-site inspection, and critical peer review of each and every AZA member facility, both current and prospective. Our standards are publicly available and continuously evolve and improve as we continue to learn more about the needs of the wildlife in our care. Once earned, AZA accreditation confers best-in-class status and assures that AZA is strictly comprised of only those institutions truly committed to meeting, and even exceeding, the global gold standard in wildlife care, an important message for local, state, and federal governments as well as the visiting public. All AZA members are required to undergo the accreditation process every five years, ensuring that AZA members continue to grow as standards improve.

Prior to joining AZA in 2019, I served as the Chief of the Division of International Conservation in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's International Affairs Program. During my time with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I was actively involved in the Service's efforts to implement the National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking, including strengthening controls on trade in elephant ivory, rhino horn, and other protected species and products. Earlier in my career, I served as the Service's Chief of the Division of Management Authority, responsible for implementing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). I also served as the Deputy Director of TRAFFIC North America, a joint wildlife trade monitoring program of World

Wildlife Fund and International Union for the Conservation of Nature. I began my career on the front lines of the effort to combat wildlife trafficking, working as a Wildlife Inspector in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Law Enforcement, interdicting illegally traded live wildlife and wildlife products.

AZA and its members are leaders, partners, and participants in wildlife rescue and conservation. AZA works in concert with Congress, federal agencies, conservation organizations, state governments, the private sector, and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. AZA and its member facilities are proud to have longstanding partnerships with a number of federal agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

AZA's Wildlife Trafficking Alliance envisions a world where people work together to end the illegal wildlife trade – a global conservation crisis that is pushing thousands of species toward the brink of extinction. The Alliance is a coalition effort, comprised of over 100 private companies, non-profit organizations, and AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums working closely with U.S. government agencies to combat wildlife trafficking. Wildlife trafficking is a transnational organized crime worth up to \$23 billion annually that drives poaching, wreaking havoc on wild animal populations, while financing criminal syndicates and extremist groups that threaten U.S. security interests and corrupt the rule of law. Due to increasing demand for exotic pets and the ease with which these animals can be acquired via the proliferation of online marketplaces, the trade in live animals has created a domestic crisis for wildlife law enforcement at U.S. borders and major ports of entry.

In a recent five-year period, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Law Enforcement intervened in 834 cases of live wildlife interdiction, involving 48,793 individual live animals – an average of nearly 30 per day – each requiring placement and care. These law enforcement officials know that when live wildlife is seized at U.S. ports of entry or exit, it is critical to provide the highest standard of care, as quickly as possible, both to ensure the survival of these animals and to maintain their value as evidence in ongoing criminal investigations. Qualified facilities with experts in animal wellbeing, including aquariums, zoos, sanctuaries, and rehabilitation centers, are often called upon first to provide immediate care, housing, and rehabilitation for confiscated wildlife. To better coordinate these efforts, AZA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service chose to shift from a siloed, ad-hoc approach to a structured, collaborative partnership.

In October 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and AZA launched a cooperative agreement to create the Wildlife Confiscations Network. The Network is a first-of-its-kind program, currently operating as a pilot in Southern California, to increase support for law enforcement by providing a single point of contact and coordinated system to ensure the

care and welfare of confiscated live wildlife. The Network's full-time wildlife confiscations coordinator assists federal wildlife law enforcement officers by connecting them with vetted, high-quality animal care facilities capable of assisting with species identification and providing basic safety and husbandry advice for short-term handling and holding, immediate triage needs, and long-term care and housing.

Due to an increasing number of confiscations, and the unique complexities involved in wildlife handling and triage, it is critically important to have an effective and efficient system providing care for these victims of illegal trade. In the face of increasing capacity demand, the structure of the Network allows us to move quickly, provides a larger pool of animal care facilities to call upon, and offers opportunities to coordinate "resource-sharing" in the event one facility does not have the capability to handle an entire caseload of animals from a single confiscation. The Network has brought together zoos and aquariums, animal sanctuaries, animal rehabilitation centers, non-governmental organizations, and universities as key partners to provide quality care and management to confiscated wildlife. This collaborative approach benefits law enforcement by relieving them of the heavy logistical burden of finding placement and reduces the burdens on facilities located near major ports of entry that have historically received the majority of these calls. This allows law enforcement to focus on their core mission—stopping illegal wildlife trade.

The efficacy of this program is now established and proven. Since its inception less than two years ago, the pilot Wildlife Confiscations Network in Southern California has assisted in over 135 wildlife trafficking cases and successfully placed over 4,600 animals into quality care. While this program is a clear success in the region, it is inherently limited in both scope and duration due to its pilot design. While the mandate of our cooperative agreement is limited to Southern California, our coordinator is already taking calls from officers across the country and along the entirety of our southern border.

Currently, the Network lacks both the resources and direct congressional authority to expand beyond the Southern California region. Expanding the Network is essential to moving forward in our fight against the transnational organized criminal rings perpetrating the widespread illegal trade in wildlife. Many other regions in the U.S., especially along our borders, are facing a concurrent onslaught of wildlife trafficking and would greatly benefit from robust support from the Network.

The Wildlife Confiscations Network Act of 2025 would codify this thriving program, expand the established success of the Wildlife Confiscations Network across the country, and authorize the dedicated resources needed to support additional coordinators to reduce the burden on wildlife law enforcement nationwide. This bipartisan legislation will not only

provide critical care to wildlife victims of the illegal trade but will, more importantly, provide an additional layer of security for both our law enforcement agents and the American public. The Network provides essential capacity to these officers, empowering them to focus their efforts on their true mandate, interdicting illegal live wildlife.

As wildlife professionals, we know that animals experience immense stress while being closely confined for illicit transport. Birds are routinely shoved into water bottles and toilet paper tubes, a substantial number suffocating in transit. Turtles are tightly wrapped in duct tape, stuffed into luggage or concealed on the body of a smuggler. Infant monkeys are tied up, their limbs tightly bound to their bodies, dehydrated and malnourished. Along the trafficking routes around the world, these animals are often kept together in dank warehouses prior to being smuggled across borders, circumventing federal biosecurity protocols. By interdicting these animals and providing the immediate medical care and disease testing they need, we can minimize this risk and maximize our nation's biosecurity.

The cases we support are equally shocking and heart-wrenching. Hundreds of turtles stolen from their native habitats along the Eastern U.S. – wrapped tightly in tape, stressed and sick – discovered by a trained K9 officer at the point of export, bound for a Chinese market. Venomous snakes smuggled through the mail, stuffed into a Pringles can, posing a life-threatening risk to an unsuspecting U.S. Customs and Border Protection official who spots an unusual shape on an x-ray screen.

Perhaps the best example of this insidious trade is the spider monkey. Like Baby “J”, a 5-month-old spider monkey who was tossed out of the window of a vehicle after someone was caught attempting to smuggle him across the U.S.-Mexico border in Southern Texas. Baby J, trapped in a suitcase and abandoned by the roadside, wasn't found until 18 hours later by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. He was subsequently seized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and was, unfortunately, unable to be returned to the wild. The Network facilitated Baby J's transportation to the Dallas Zoo for emergency care and his eventual placement at Florida's Brevard Zoo for long term care, where he has been successfully integrated into their troop of spider monkeys.

Baby J is the rare exception to a very cruel rule. Baby black-handed spider monkeys sell for up to \$20,000 on the black market. Mexican spider monkeys in the pet trade, a relatively new yet accelerating trend, are known to be captured from the wild as infants. First, the mother is slaughtered, to make it easier for poachers to steal their young. Once captured, the infant monkeys make the traumatic journey to the border stuffed inside a bag or small cage, along with a variety of other poached animals bound for the pet trade — all battling dehydration, starvation, injury, and disease. Most die along the way. Those that survive to be smuggled across the border are bound for the hands of those lacking the knowledge and

capacity to properly care for them. The Wildlife Confiscations Network Act will provide support to care for wild animals, like Baby J, and empower wildlife law enforcement to stem the tide of this scourge.

Overall, the Wildlife Confiscations Network has created an efficient, streamlined, and centralized system to identify care and placement for wildlife victims of illegal trade. Not only does this partnership increase the odds of survival for these vulnerable animals, it also concurrently preserves their legal chain-of-custody and evidentiary value to be used in the prosecution of criminal cases. The support provided by the Network frees law enforcement bandwidth to deeply investigate each individual wildlife trafficking case, supporting them in their work to move beyond the low-level smugglers and mules and to instead follow the evidence upstream to identify and prosecute the high-level leaders of these criminal organizations. The high-level traffickers, viewing wildlife crime as low-risk, high-reward, are known to also trade in other illicit goods, including narcotics and arms, and are even engaging in human trafficking. By interdicting cases of wildlife crime consistently and aggressively, federal agents can identify the patterns of crime convergence amidst these criminal networks and leverage such cases to dismantle global trafficking operations.

Federal agencies, and the broad community of wildlife professionals who partner to combat illegal wildlife trade, are well-versed in these dynamics. The Wildlife Confiscations Network Act has broad support from the stakeholder community, with 75 organizations endorsing the bill within a month of its introduction. These endorsements include zoos, aquariums, sanctuary partners, and others engaged in the Wildlife Confiscations Network pilot program.

We ask that the House Natural Resources Committee consider this legislation with the utmost urgency, recognizing the growing need for greater support for our law enforcement officers doing this critical work each day at every airport, seaport, and border crossing across the country.

At its core, the Wildlife Confiscations Network Act is a nonpartisan initiative that every American can support. It is a common-sense step forward to provide humane care to victimized wildlife, preserve the valuable biodiversity of smuggled threatened and endangered species, and provide critical support to our law enforcement who strive every day to protect the American public from the dangers of transnational organized crime. With broad support from the stakeholder community and bipartisan support in Congress, there should be no question that the Wildlife Confiscations Network Act is in the best interest of our national security.

In closing, on behalf of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, I wish to thank the House Natural Resources Committee staff who aided in the preparation of this bill for introduction and the co-chairs of the Congressional Zoo and Aquarium Caucus, Mr. Garbarino and Mr. Quigley, for their leadership as the lead sponsors of this bill. Finally, I extend our immense gratitude to the Subcommittee for your swift consideration of this important legislation.

Thank you.