

Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Oversight Hearing on “America First: U.S. Leadership & National Security in
International Conservation”

January 21, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement for the record.

Transnational criminal organizations are commodity agnostic, dealing in illegal narcotics, weapons, humans, wildlife, marine resources, timber, and almost anything available with which they can generate revenue, including natural resources. They have complex international networks to smuggle shipments, foster corruption, launder money, and routinely use violence and extortion to protect their market share. The goals of these organizations run counter to American interests at home and abroad and present a direct threat to our national security.

President Trump’s America First agenda prioritizes the safety, security, and prosperity of the American people in directly addressing these international criminal syndicates. On his first day in office, the President issued Proclamation 10886, recognizing the dangers of cartels, criminal gangs, smugglers and more to the U.S. and declaring a national emergency at our southern border. President Trump issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14157, Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Since then, the Department of State has designated 15 cartels and transnational organizations under such authorities. On April 17, 2025, the President issued E.O. 14276, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness, which addresses the impact that Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing has on American seafood competitiveness. Additionally, E.O. 13773, Enforcing Federal Law With Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking, issued in 2017 is still in effect and directs federal law enforcement agencies to prioritize efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations, noting the threat to national security posed by illegal activities, including smuggling and trafficking of humans, drugs or other substances, wildlife, and weapons.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is part of a broad law enforcement effort implementing the President’s E.O.s to combat transnational criminal organizations. The inherent complexity of these crimes requires a whole-of-government approach, and the Service works closely with our federal partners to support these efforts wherever possible. The national security impacts of illicit activity can be broken down into three interconnected areas: resource security, economic security, and border security and safety.

U.S. Resource Security

The United States is blessed with abundant natural resources that serve as a vital economic driver for the nation. Many of our resources are legally traded globally. Unfortunately, transnational criminal organizations are poaching and trafficking native wildlife, marine resources, timber, and

other products out of the U.S. to more lucrative markets such as China. This illegal trade not only undermines federal and state management of those resources but also undercuts honest and legitimate trade. It reduces opportunities for Americans and may unnecessarily increase pressure on those resources.

The Service's special agents work closely with state and tribal partners to combat poaching and trafficking of American resources. One example of this work is the Service's ongoing Operation Terrapene, a coordinated effort with other federal and local law enforcement agencies to detect smugglers of primarily native eastern box turtles and three-toed box turtles and dismantle highly organized syndicates.

U.S. Economic Security

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES or Convention) provides a framework for legal global trade in protected animals and plants. The Service is the implementing agency for CITES for the U.S. and issued nearly 18,000 permits under CITES in 2025. Improving opportunities for Americans through legal international trade in CITES-listed species and their products is a priority for the Administration. Criminal organizations seek to avoid, exploit, or corrupt the CITES system around the world, creating an unfair competitive advantage for criminal entities. The Service works to provide effective enforcement and implementation of both CITES international regulations and U.S. laws.

U.S. Border Security and Safety

In support of E.O. 14165, Securing Our Borders, the Service created a dedicated position focused on border enforcement and investigations to serve as a liaison with the Department of War (DoW) and Department of Homeland Security to strengthen security at the border. One Service-led investigation exposed a criminal network trafficking in totoaba swim bladders, sea cucumbers, and other wildlife from Mexico through the U.S. to China.

The convergence of trafficking of natural resources with other sectors of organized crime provides opportunities for federal law enforcement to have a significant impact on the continued existence and operations of these criminal networks. The Service partners with the Intelligence Community (IC), the Department of Homeland Security, DoW and other federal agencies to strengthen U.S. efforts to combat these transnational criminal organizations in support of U.S. national security interests.

Conclusion

Transnational criminal organizations are a national security threat to the American people. These dangerous groups are using the same networks to traffic in natural resources, narcotics, weapons, and humans and pose a direct threat to the resource, economic, and border security of the United States. Under President Trump's leadership, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is dedicated to working with our federal and state partners to protect the safety, security, and prosperity of the American people. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.