

**STATEMENT OF
DAN ASHE, DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE, INTERIOR SUBCOMMITTEE,
REGARDING THE FISCAL YEAR 2017 BUDGET
March 15, 2016**

Good morning Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Fiscal Year 2017 budget request, and for the Subcommittee's continued support of the Service's work.

The Service celebrated some remarkable successes in the past year, thanks in large measure to the support and partnership of this committee. I want to mention just a few of the highlights.

We delisted the first-ever fish species due to recovery – the Oregon chub – thanks to our collective work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the State of Oregon, and private landowners. Thanks to a successful six-state conservation partnership effort in the Northeast, we were able to put conservation measures in place for the New England cottontail, averting the need for Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection. We also delisted the Delmarva fox squirrel and the Modoc sucker, both fully recovered species thanks to the efforts of many partners. Thanks to this committee's provision of additional funding, we hope to delist and downlist additional species this year.

We celebrated new Urban Wildlife Conservation Partnerships in Houston, Atlanta and Portland. These partnerships promise to help thousands of urban families and kids experience nature as never before. We will build partnerships with two more refuges in 2016 to allow even more people to get exposure to traditional outdoor activities.

We crushed contraband ivory with our partners in Times Square, focusing worldwide attention on the issue of ivory and wildlife trafficking. At the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, we participated in an entire session dedicated to wildlife trafficking – culminating in a pledge by the Chinese government to ban the ivory trade. Thanks to the Committee's support for our law enforcement efforts overseas, we will have placed five officers in key trafficking spots around the globe.

We worked hand-in-hand with partners in 11 states on the largest land conservation planning effort ever undertaken. This monumental effort successfully put in place historic conservation measures for Greater sage grouse and sage steppe habitat on millions of acres – addressing threats to the sage grouse and averting the need for ESA protection. It's a tremendous victory for landscape-scale, partnership-driven conservation – and we couldn't have made it happen without your support!

The sage grouse effort is only one example of how the Service works through partnerships with landowners and others to conserve broad landscapes and the species that depend upon them. We believe that keeping landowners on their land and preserving working landscapes, benefits both species and traditional land uses, such as agriculture and ranching. In most cases, species will greatly benefit from appropriately managed intact private lands. This emphasis on partnership-driven conservation and working together to preserve working landscapes has built and strengthened community trust and support for our work across the Nation. In turn, our employees have deep roots in the communities they serve, and many come from ranching and farming families. Nowhere were these mutual ties more evident than in Harney County, Oregon where years of collaborative conservation work spurred community support for the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and its staff - undercutting the appeal of the illegal occupation and helping defuse a volatile situation.

The Service's budget request carries forward our commitment to building successful partnerships. We can accomplish great things together when we make an investment in our Nation's future.

The budget underscores the importance of expanding opportunities for all Americans to access public lands and experience the great outdoors, regardless of where they live. It emphasizes improving the resilience of communities and wild landscapes, enabling them to better adapt to a rapidly changing environment, and uses smart investments in conservation and landscape-level planning to improve the Service's ability to facilitate economic growth.

The budget requests \$1.6 billion for the Service, which represents an increase of \$54.4 million over the FY 2016 enacted level, and includes about \$1.5 billion in permanent appropriations, most of which goes directly to States to support their fish and wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation programs.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is one of the Nation's most important conservation programs, and refuges are a critical resource for Americans nationwide as places to hunt, fish, hike, bird watch, and recreate outside. Refuges are also frequently critical to the economies of local communities, supporting thousands of outdoor recreation and tourism-related jobs and businesses while working collaboratively with communities and neighboring landowners to manage the land for mutual benefit. This budget proposes \$25.2 million in additional funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System for biologists, maintenance personnel, and other specialists who support wildlife and habitat management and restoration efforts, visitor services, and other key functions of our refuges. These investments are critical to reverse the trend of staffing reductions at refuges that has occurred since 2010, reductions that have hindered our ability to deliver on important conservation goals and engage the public in the outdoors.

With 101 refuges within 25 miles of urban areas, the Refuge System has many opportunities to engage local urban communities. In areas where the Service does not have a land base, we are developing urban partnerships with local non-profits, government agencies, and other partners. Through the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, the Service is engaging non-traditional stakeholders and new audiences in outdoor experiences. We are grateful to the Committee for providing an additional \$2.5 million for this effort in 2016. For 2017, the Service is requesting an

additional \$7.5 million, including \$5.5 million for Refuge Visitor Services and \$2 million for Refuge Law Enforcement. The requested \$2 million increase for Law Enforcement would be used to place 14 new Federal Wildlife Officers at priority urban refuges.

The expansion of the Pacific Marine National Monuments in 2014 protected extensive, pristine, and diverse marine ecosystems. The seven atolls and islands represent the most widespread collection of coral reef, seabird, and shorebird protected areas on the planet under a single nation's jurisdiction. These areas will be crucial for conservation of ocean resources.

The designations significantly increased the Service's responsibility for open water from 4,400 to 490,000 square miles, an area almost three times the size of California, in an area that is extremely remote, and many of the islands are far from each other, some a several-day boat ride away. To better understand and more effectively protect these unique ecosystems, the Service is requesting an additional \$2 million for management of these Pacific Monuments. The requested funding will enable the Service to strategically establish a scientific baseline for this area through the development and implementation of two comprehensive, five-year inventory and monitoring plans at the 12 refuges within the four Marine National Monuments in the Pacific Ocean with our partners, including National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Phoenix Islands Protected Area.

The budget also requests \$59.4 million for taking care of the American public's investment in lands and facilities managed by the Service. This increase of \$6.1 million over the 2016 enacted level includes \$3 million for fish hatchery deferred maintenance, \$500,000 for refuge deferred maintenance, and \$2.6 million for maintenance at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, WV. Investing in and appropriately managing deferred maintenance is a Service priority to ensure completion of needed repairs and to prevent further deterioration and unsafe conditions at these facilities. Thanks to the Committee's support, our refuge program is using a \$4 million increase provided in 2016 to address priority deferred maintenance needs.

Also in the Refuge System, the budget requests an increase of \$3.7 million for the Service's Inventory and Monitoring (I & M) program, which will enhance monitoring of biological resources, ecological processes, components of the physical environment, and human interactions with these resources to improve conservation delivery. Through these investments, the Service will be better equipped to work with its partners to deliver strategic, science-based conservation projects.

The I & M program works directly with the National Park Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and other Federal and State partners to integrate data collection and systems and minimize duplication of effort. The I & M program directly supports our Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC) Network and ensures that survey design, data storage, analysis, and reporting are consistent with Service policy.

Including the Refuge I&M program, the budget request includes \$65.9 million – an increase of \$9.5 million above the 2016 enacted level – to enable the Service and its partners to better understand complex environmental challenges, such as climate change, and improve the ability of communities and landscapes to adapt to these challenges. The funding will support a

nationwide network of 22 LCCs through which the Service, other Federal agencies, State and local governments, tribes, and non-governmental groups work together to determine how to use limited resources to most effectively conserve populations of fish, wildlife, and plants at landscape scales. A December 2015, congressionally requested National Academy of Sciences study found that the LCC network is filling an important national need to develop resource management strategies across jurisdictions and sectors. LCCs are working with partners in the West to understand the impacts of invasive species and fire management on wildlife and develop strategies to keep native wildlife healthy. LCC capacity has been used to help develop and implement strategies for species such as the Greater sage grouse and New England cottontail before they needed protection under the ESA, thereby limiting the need for regulation.

An additional \$3.6 million is included in the budget for Ecological Services to fund planning and consultation that support economic recovery and job creation in the United States. Timely evaluations of proposed infrastructure, real estate, and other development projects contribute to job creation and economic growth, while ensuring that impacts to native wildlife and habitat are avoided and minimized to the greatest degree possible. This funding increase will allow the Service to expedite project reviews and work with developers on appropriate mitigation and avoidance measures. One example of a highly successful consultation occurred last year when carcinogenic contaminants were found in Pratt, West Virginia's water supply. West Virginia American Water urgently needed to construct a pipeline across the Kanawha River in order to provide a new, safe, supply of drinking water for the town. The Service worked collaboratively with the company to conserve endangered mussels in the project footprint and the project went forward without delay. The company was grateful and delivered on their promise to provide safe drinking water to the town before Thanksgiving.

The 2017 budget continues the Service's commitment to the recovery of species listed as endangered and threatened under the ESA. Since 2009, the Service has removed 15 species from the Endangered and Threatened Species List, more than any other Administration. To continue with this momentum, the budget includes \$89.2 million, an increase of \$7.2 million above the 2016 enacted level, for recovery activities, a portion of which will support continued evaluation of nearly 50 species that have been identified for potential delisting or downlisting from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act. We are hoping to delist at least an additional four species this year, pending final decisions.

One uniquely successful component of our recovery program is the Cooperative Recovery Initiative (CRI), which was established to restore and recover threatened and endangered species on the landscape scale, focusing on national wildlife refuges and surrounding lands. This initiative provides opportunities for focused, large-scale conservation efforts that leverage resources across programs and with partners to meet the highest priority imperiled species needs. In FY 2017, the Service requests a total of \$9.7 million for Cooperative Recovery, an increase of \$2.8 million over the 2016 enacted level. The requested funds will be used to implement recovery actions for species near delisting or reclassification from endangered to threatened, and actions that are urgently needed to prevent extinction of critically endangered species. From FY 2013 to FY 2015, the Service funded a total of 41 projects across the Nation, covering 57 national wildlife refuges and benefitting 102 trust species. Recently, two species, the Columbian white tailed deer and the Oregon Chub, were delisted or downlisted partly because of previously

funded CRI projects.

The budget calls for an additional \$3 million for review of and technical assistance for restoration projects in the Gulf of Mexico that may be funded by the pending Deepwater Horizon oil spill settlement or the RESTORE Act. We thank the Committee for the \$1 million increase provided in FY 2016. The Service's expertise can help guide and prioritize restoration efforts across the entire Gulf watershed to maximize the return on investment for the American public by strategically connecting restoration efforts and merging existing conservation efforts with proposed projects. With this additional funding, the Service can better meet the expected demand for technical assistance and environmental clearances for projects in the region.

Notably, the President's budget proposes an increase of \$2 million to help the Service and its partners conserve pollinators. Without the assistance of these insects, birds and bats, most plants cannot produce the fruits and seeds that are vital for people and wildlife and critical for our agricultural economy. These funds would target habitat restoration and enhancement projects to benefit pollinators, such as the treasured but struggling monarch butterfly; inventory and monitor for key pollinator populations; and provide education about pollinator conservation.

Legislative Proposals

In addition to our funding requests, the Service is proposing two legislative changes to reduce costs and enhance State and Federal conservation programs.

First, the Service is requesting authority similar to the National Park Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which would allow us to seek compensation from responsible parties who injure or destroy Refuge System or other Service resources. Today, when Refuge System resources are injured or destroyed, the costs of repair and restoration falls upon our appropriated budget for the affected refuge, often at the expense of other refuge programs.

Last, we appreciate Congressional approval of the first increase to the cost of a Federal Duck Stamp in many years, and request additional language that will provide stability to the purchasing power of the Federal Duck Stamp. We request limited authority for the Secretary of the Interior, with the approval of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, to increase the price of the Federal Duck Stamp, which will allow the program to keep up with inflation.

Conclusion

The actions we take today will have repercussions for generations of Americans to come. The native species and ecosystems of our planet support billions of people and help drive the world's economy. Despite the challenges we face, I am incredibly optimistic about the future. With the President's budget request we can help preserve the values Americans support, leave a legacy to our children and grandchildren, and sustain species and habitat. Thank you for your work on behalf of the American people, and for your support of the Fish and Wildlife Service. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.