

WILDLIFE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

VOLUME VII



Courtesy Wild Sheep Foundation / Greg Rensmaag

A Publication of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners

WILDLIFE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

VOLUME VII

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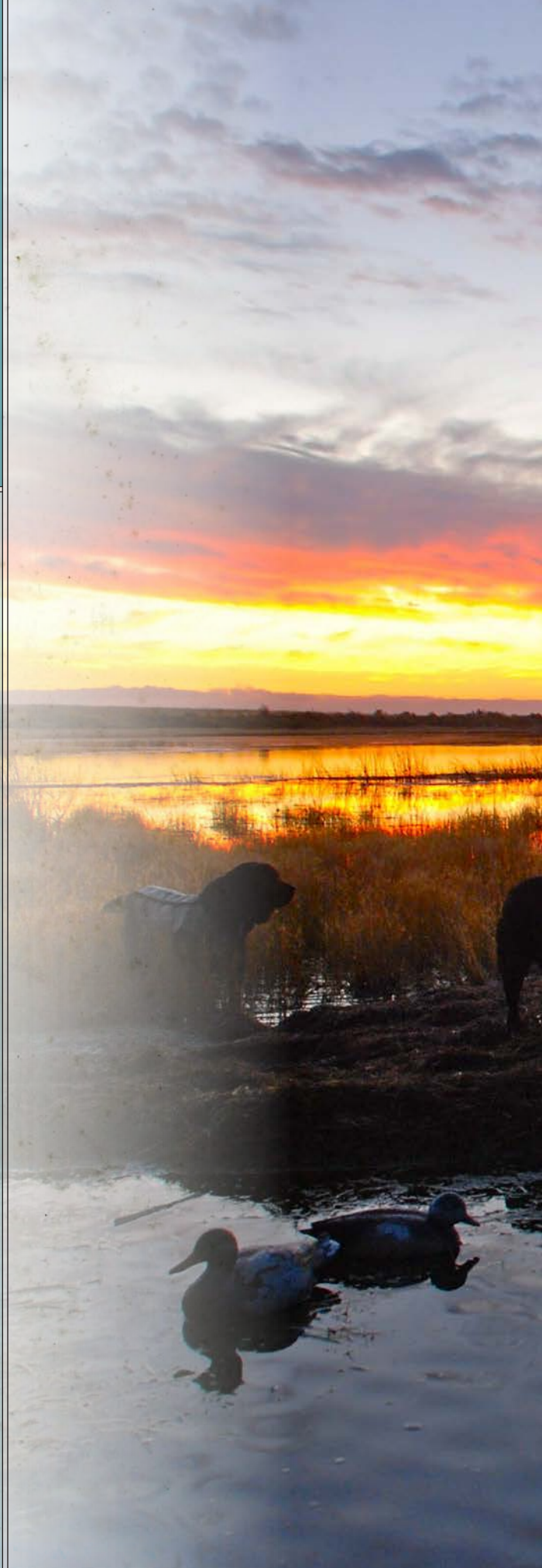
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AWCP Organizations

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HOW SPORTSMEN AND SPORTSWOMEN SUPPORT THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF CONSERVATION FUNDING

LAST YEAR ALONE... \$3.3 BILLION

\$1.06
BILLION

generated by the Pittman-Robertson Fund, from hunting and recreational shooting-related excise taxes

\$990
MILLION

generated from hunting licenses



\$898
MILLION

generated from fishing licenses



\$382
MILLION

generated by the Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux Fund, from fishing and boating-related excise taxes

Since 1939 state fish and wildlife agencies have received over

\$82.2
BILLION

from sportsmen and sportswomen

60%

of funding for state fish and wildlife agencies is paid for by sportsmen and sportswomen

DATA FROM U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE OFFICE OF CONSERVATION INVESTMENT

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AWCP

AMERICAN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PARTNERS

FOUNDED IN 2000

The American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) present the following nine recommendations and subsequent sub-recommendations, known as Wildlife for the 21st Century (W-21) Volume VII, for the next presidential Administration and the next two Congresses. Collectively, these recommendations will bolster fish and wildlife populations, enhance the conservation of America's lands and waters, and provide crucial access opportunities for America's tens of millions of sportsmen and sportswomen. These recommendations will also help ensure the wise use of our public resources, keeping America strong, sustainable, and healthy.

In 2000, AWCP was founded by leading conservationists who recognized the need to bring together organizations with a focus on wildlife conservation, ethical hunting, and responsible wildlife management. The idea was to gather wildlife and natural resource professionals with similar interests in order to leverage individual strengths for the greater good of conservation and access. During the inaugural meeting at Boone and Crockett Club's (North America's oldest conservation organization) headquarters, there were 35 organizations represented. Today, AWCP consists of 52 organizations that work to proactively address the most pressing challenges facing sportsmen and sportswomen, wildlife, and our treasured lands and waters.

Since its founding, AWCP has developed a new volume of W-21 every four years. The recommendations contained in W-21 Volume VII build upon the vision and leadership of AWCP as contained in previous volumes of W-21.

While each individual member of AWCP maintains its own primary areas of interest, the recommendations contained in W-21 Volume VII represent a consensus amongst the AWCP organizations. Each AWCP organization reserves the right to maintain their own position on any policy issue contained in this document.

We urge the Administration and the next two Congresses to consider and adopt the recommendations contained in W-21 Volume VII. AWCP looks forward to working with them to enact and deliver on these priorities.

Taylor Schmitz

Taylor Schmitz, 2024 Chair

American Wildlife Conservation Partners

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WORKING GROUP LIST

W-2I is the result of a consensus and partner-driven process. It is through the constant dialogue between AWCP members, working collaboratively to produce a mutually agreed upon and owned document, that AWCP's founding vision is fully recognized. The diversity of AWCP's membership allows for each organization to bring unique perspectives and specialized insight to help create a thoughtful and purposeful document. This collaborative process ultimately enhances W-2I's depth, but also provides for mutually shared ownership over the recommendations contained in this document. While many AWCP members participate in a wide range of W-2I recommendation work groups, the following is a list with the lead organization for each recommendation – specific contact information is on the back cover.

RECOMMENDATION 1 - FUNDING FOR CONSERVATION

All of AWCP

RECOMMENDATION 2 - ACCESS

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

RECOMMENDATION 3 - WILDLIFE MIGRATION

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

RECOMMENDATION 4 - ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

The Wildlife Society

RECOMMENDATION 5 - PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

Pheasants Forever / Quail Forever

RECOMMENDATION 6 - ACTIVE MANAGEMENT OF FEDERAL LANDS

Ruffed Grouse Society / American Woodcock Society

RECOMMENDATION 7 - SPECIES CONSERVATION

National Wildlife Federation

RECOMMENDATION 8 - WILDLIFE HEALTH

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

RECOMMENDATION 9 - CLIMATE CHANGE

Boone and Crockett Club

Protect and Secure Permanent and Dedicated Conservation Funding

America's outdoor recreation provides for \$1.1 trillion annually in consumer spending. Our nation's hunters and recreational shooters contribute approximately \$150 billion annually and support approximately 970,000 jobs. To sustain these outdoor traditions, financial investments from Congress and the Administration are paramount. Unfortunately, the long-term trend of investments into conservation has been diminishing. Federal funding for natural resources and environment, known as Function 300 in the federal budget, has been cut in half since the 1970s. Meaningful conservation efforts require sustained and predictable funding to be effective. Funding is central to Wildlife for the 21st Century and that is why funding is at the top of AWCP's priorities.



Recommendations:

- Ensure LWCF mandatory funds remain in the program and improve the federal appraisal process to effectively complete LWCF projects. Interior/All agencies; Agriculture/FS
- Maintain the integrity of the Pittman-Robertson Act. Congress; Interior/FWS
- Use LWCF recreation access dollars to make public lands public. Interior/BLM, FWS, NPS; Agriculture/FS
- Establish a permanent migratory corridors program through authorization legislation and appropriations. Interior/FWS, BLM; Agriculture/NRCS, FS, FS; Congress
- Establish a Wildlife Corridors Grant Program to provide matching funds for states and tribes to conserve wildlife corridors. Congress; Interior/FWS; Agriculture/NRCS
- Direct a portion of revenue from energy development on federal lands to federal and state agencies to mitigate losses of fish, wildlife, or their habitat from energy development. Congress
- Fully fund and implement conservation programs authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill, and its successors. Congress, Agriculture/NRCS, FS
- Make the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund permanent. Congress
- Strategically utilize IRA and IJA funding and other federal programs to advance active wildlife conservation efforts. Congress; DOI/All bureaus; Agriculture/FS
- Provide appropriations for wildland fire mitigation and management on a multi-year, rather than an annual cycle. Congress
- Increase funding and capacity for education, management, and prevention to combat the invasive species epidemic across all lands and waters. Congress
- Enact legislation to provide sustained sufficient funding for states and tribes to implement State Wildlife Action Plans. Congress
- Fully fund the activities authorized under the CWD Research and Management Act and complete the comprehensive CWD Study convened by the National Academy of Sciences. Agriculture/APHIS
- Ensure all current and future climate-focused tax, market, and credit programs include wildlife habitat conservation as a viable purpose by amending 26 U.S.C. § 45Q. Congress

Key to Cabinet Departments and Agencies

Agriculture - Department of Agriculture

Commerce - Department of Commerce

Defense - Department of Defense

DOJ - Department of Justice

Energy - Department of Energy

EPA - Environmental Protection Agency

GSA - Government Services Administration

Homeland - Department of Homeland Security

HUD - Department of Housing and Urban

Development

Interior - Department of the Interior

Transportation - Department of Transportation

Treasury - Department of the Treasury

APHIS - Animal and Plant Health Inspection

Service, Agriculture

BLM - Bureau of Land Management, Interior

BOEM - Bureau of Ocean Energy Management,

Interior

CG - Coast Guard, Homeland Security

COE - Army Corps of Engineers, Defense

FHA - Federal Highway Administration,
Transportation

FS - Forest Service, Agriculture

FSA - Farm Services Administration, Agriculture

FWS - Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior

IRS - Internal Revenue Service, Treasury

NOAA - National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration, Commerce

NRCS - Natural Resources Conservation Service

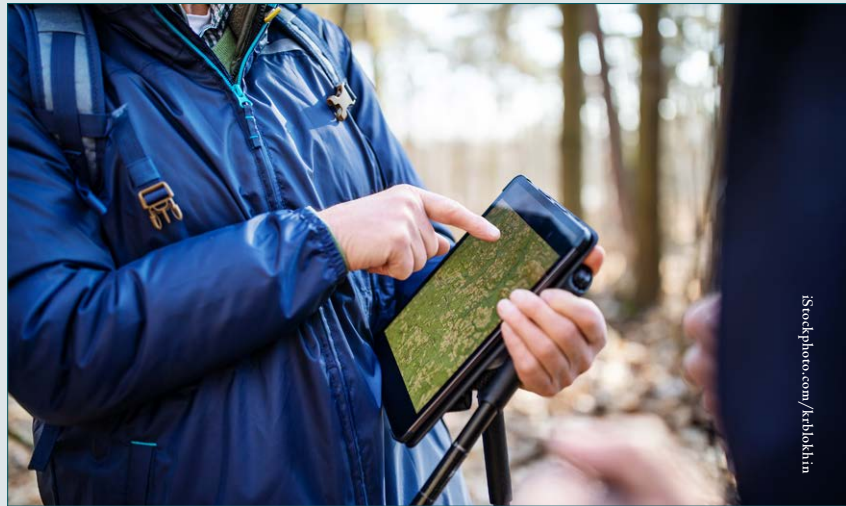
Enhance Access for Hunters, Recreational Shooters, and Other Recreationists

Access is cited as one of the greatest factors limiting hunting participation. Increasing and maintaining access opportunities to America’s 640 million acres of public lands will help ensure there are places to hunt, shoot, and recreate on federal lands.

Improve Public Land Access Databases

- Implement the Modernizing Access to our Public Land (MAPLand) Act (P.L. No 117-114). Interior/BLM, FWS, NPS, BOR; Agriculture/FS; Defense/ACE
- Pass the Modernizing Access to our Public Waters (MAPWaters) Act. Congress
- Pass a federal recreation package that directs BLM and USFS to develop transportation maps in each public land unit. Congress

With a smartphone in hand, recreationists can navigate public lands and waters with precision. But smartphone technologies are limited by the quality and quantity of information used to support them. Implementation of the 2022 MAPLand Act, and future passage of the MAPWaters Act and Recreation Package will improve public land access databases and access information available to the public.



Ensure Land Transactions Enhance Federal Land Access

- Use Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF; P.L. 116-9 Sec. 3001) recreation access dollars to make public lands public. Interior/BLM, FWS, NPS; Agriculture/FS
- Establish public access to four Dingell Act Section 4105 (P.L. 116-9) priority areas per agency over the coming four years. Interior/BLM, FWS; Agriculture/FS
- Utilize land exchanges/FLTFA (P.L. 116-9 Sec 1008) and strategic acquisitions to consolidate the checkerboard federal/private land ownership and create a net benefit for public access. Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS
- Ensure LWCF mandatory funds remain in the program and improve the federal appraisal process to effectively complete LWCF projects and exchanges. Interior/All agencies; Agriculture/FS

The Land and Water Conservation Fund includes specific dollars used to open public lands for recreational access – often appropriated at \$60+ million annually. Recreation access dollars should continue to open access to public

lands, including Dingell Act Section 4105 priority areas. Additionally, DOI and USFS must improve and standardize their appraisal processes and functions to take advantage of full and permanent LWCF funding.

Protect and Increase Access and Opportunity

- Address “emergency closure” loopholes to Dingell Act “open unless closed” requirements (P.L. No. 116-9, Sec. 4103). Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS
- Pass legislation that directs BLM and USFS to develop shooting ranges in each public land unit. Congress
- Mitigate recreational shooting closures on federal land through creation of new public shooting ranges. Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS
- Maintain public access for hunting and shooting if and when redesignation of federal land occurs. POTUS; Interior/BLM, FWS, NPS
- Prevent hunting closures in Alaska without legitimate conservation or subsistence justification and return the Office of Subsistence Management to the FWS. Interior/FWS; Agriculture/FS
- Fully fund the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program in the next Farm Bill. Congress (see Private Lands Section on Page 14)

Sportsmen and sportswomen are concerned by reports that the USFS is imposing “emergency” closures across large swaths of national forests with indefinite timeframes. The USFS and BLM should comply with Section 4103 of the Dingell Act and establish a reasonable maximum timeframe for “emergency” closures.

Target shooting is an Olympic sport and crucial source of conservation funding through ammunition excise tax revenues. Congress should prioritize increased target shooting opportunities, including passage of a recreation package with Range Access provisions. Federal agencies should mitigate recreational shooting closures on federal land by opening nearby public shooting ranges that replace lost shooting days.

Further, if and when future monument designations or redesignations of federal public lands occur, hunting, shooting, and access to conduct wildlife management activities should be explicitly maintained as consistent with the conservation purpose of these lands or waters. Finally, our community is concerned about closures to recreational (non-subsistence) hunting in Alaska. The Federal Subsistence Board recently closed recreational hunting of certain species on over 20 million acres of federal land. Most recent closures represent an unsupported loss of hunting access for those who do not live in the immediate area, and steps must be taken to ensure that closures do not occur without legitimate conservation or subsistence justification.

Ensure Access to Harvest Methods Including Lead Ammunition

- Utilize public-private partnerships and federal funds to incentivize the voluntary selection of non-lead ammunition. Interior/FWS
- Apply science-based decision making at the unit level. Interior/FWS
- Address impediments for industry to develop non-lead ammunition. Justice/ATF

Questions are increasingly being raised about the use of lead ammunition with the created confusion leading to angst among hunters, wildlife managers, and the public. Broad bans or phase-outs of lead ammunition would reduce hunting opportunity given the lack of availability or limited affordable alternatives for commonly used bullet types. Voluntary and incentive-based measures to increase the use of non-lead ammunition are proven and less intrusive than lead bans or phase-outs.

To address these concerns, partnerships could be used to educate and share information with the hunting public on the effectiveness and availability of non-lead ammunition. Federal agencies are encouraged to work collaboratively with state fish and wildlife agencies when developing voluntary

non-lead programs. Agencies should make specific budget requests for funding to develop and implement non-lead ammunition incentives, including rebate and subsidy programs. In addition, agencies should scientifically gather data and deploy site-specific (e.g., field data) studies to inform future regulatory actions so any proposed restrictions on traditional lead ammunition are targeted to specific and finite geographic areas and time periods. Finally, the DOJ Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms’ interpretation of the Gun Control Act (18 U.S.C. § 921(17)(B)) has restricted the firearm and ammunition industry’s ability to develop and sell alternative non-lead projectiles designed and intended for the hunting market. ATF should enable increased use of the “sporting exemption” to encourage further development of non-lead ammunition.



Institutionalize and Support Wildlife Migration Corridors and Habitats

Hunters have followed wildlife on their annual migrations for generations and see the importance of habitat connectivity firsthand. Most game and non-game wildlife populations in North America depend on different habitats throughout the year, including migratory birds, ungulates, and small mammals. Moving between habitats is essential for long term viability of these populations. This is especially fundamental to the ecology and management of elk, mule deer, caribou, pronghorn, moose, and wild sheep. These pathways are critical to big game animals, but also serve as arteries of protein that support entire ecosystems.

Technology has allowed researchers to document the location of migration routes, stop-overs, and bottlenecks along migration corridors with precision. This enables managers to focus conservation efforts on these vital habitats. Expanding housing, industrial, and transportation infrastructure increasingly fragments and disrupts seasonal habitats and migratory pathways of many species. Our nation's accompanying road network, coupled with expanding human development, increases vehicle traffic resulting in wildlife-vehicle collisions with significant direct mortality of big game along traditional migration corridors.

Hunters have worked with researchers and managers at several levels of government to develop innovative, place-based solutions to these issues, but more work and more resources are needed to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.

Institutionalize Migration Corridors Beyond a Secretarial Order

- Establish a permanent migratory corridors program through authorization legislation and appropriations, with assigned staff and adequate funding for research and habitat conservation and improvement projects by federal and state agencies, tribes, private landowners, and non-governmental organizations. Interior/FWS, BLM; Agriculture/NRCS, FS, FS; Congress
- Establish a Wildlife Corridors Grant Program to provide matching funds for states and tribes to conserve currently utilized or to re-connect fragmented wildlife corridors through voluntary partnerships with private landowners and other stakeholders. Congress; Interior/FWS; Agriculture/NRCS

Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362 (SO 3362), signed in February 2018, helped direct broad engagement and focus on the challenge of researching, managing, and conserving big game migration corridors and seasonal habitats. In addition, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) passed a resolution in June 2019 supporting the conservation and state-led management of wildlife migration corridors. This resolution also calls on federal agencies to support locally developed initiatives to conserve migration corridors and habitat.

Unlike many Secretarial Orders and other executive actions, SO3362 has persisted across two Administrations, but discretionary funding and prioritization has waned absent congressionally directed appropriations and

authorization. The order also was limited to Interior, while the Department of Agriculture and its agencies play an important role in both the federal land estate through the Forest Service and private lands programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Continued and expanded collaboration on this issue will enhance efforts of state and federal agencies, tribal governments, private landowners, and non-governmental conservation organizations that are beginning to make significant progress on these challenges.

Transportation Planning and Infrastructure to Reduce Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions

- Reauthorize and make permanent the existing Highway Crossing Pilot Program established in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117 - 58 Sec. 11123). **Congress**
- Incorporate states and wildlife agencies in the evaluation and planning of crossing projects at the local level, and with the Department of Transportation at the national level in the development of grant programs and review of proposals to ensure habitat connectivity is integrated with infrastructure development for maximum ecological benefits. **Congress, Transportation/FHA**

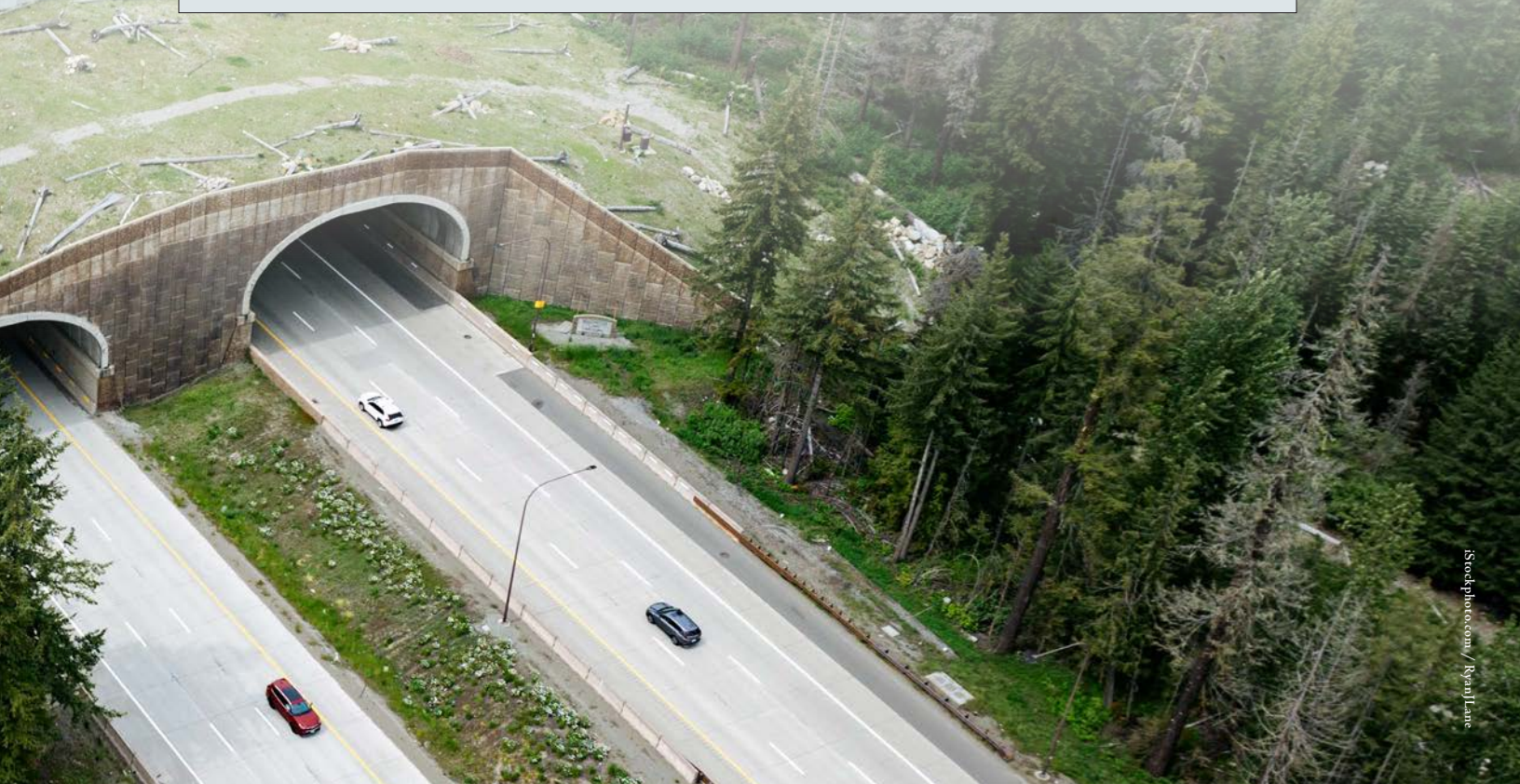
Increasing traffic volumes on highways is a significant issue impacting conservation of big game and other wildlife. Millions of wildlife species are struck by vehicles in the U.S. every year, and in some units, vehicle collisions are the largest source of mortality for antlerless mule deer. Highways also fragment habitats, often becoming migration bottlenecks and barriers that impact populations due to avoidance. Properly constructed infrastructure, such as highway overpasses and underpasses designed for wildlife crossings, have reduced mortality by as much as 80%. Ongoing migration studies (via SO3362) are identifying important migration intersections with highways and roads to inform wildlife crossing placement.

Congress established a Wildlife Crossings Pilot Project in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021 with an initial appropriation of \$350 million over 5 years, ending in 2026. This pilot grant program provides competitive grants to states, tribes, and local governments to plan and fund highway crossing projects. While this is a positive first step, it is not adequate to address the existing big game/human safety problem spots in the country. There is strong

demand for this funding as proven by the results of the first funding cycle where 67 applications covering 34 states requested \$549 million. Of these, 19 projects representing 17 states and four tribes, were funded with \$110 million made available as of December 2023.

Transportation infrastructure planning that incorporates wildlife crossings as a component of the overall construction can be implemented for a fraction of the cost of stand-alone crossing structures. A permanent program that integrates wildlife crossings at the front end of transportation planning will provide significant savings on a per-project basis.

Equally important to federal funding is coordination between wildlife and state/federal transportation agencies to resolve the impact of highway infrastructure and traffic on big game and other wildlife movement. While administrative flexibility for such coordination exists, it is not exercised often. Without such support, coordination, and action, wildlife managers are at a disadvantage in applying results of their research to conserve corridors and wildlife species for future generations.



Ensure Wildlife and Habitat Goals are Integrated into Energy Sources and Impacts are Mitigated

The U.S. is not only the world's largest consumer of energy, but also one of its leading producers. Oil production in the U.S. hit an all-time high in October 2023 and development of renewable energy sources is surging to meet growing demand.

The rapid expansion of renewables, coupled with continued non-renewable and mineral development, is concerning for wildlife conservation. All forms of energy development impact land, either directly or indirectly. Energy development includes such things as access roads, pipelines, mining pits, drill pads, solar arrays, wind farms, and electrical transmission lines. Various development activities are known to fragment habitats, disrupt wildlife movements, and impair water quality and quantity, thus significantly degrading habitat. Wildlife and habitat impacts from these various activities are well documented.

Wildlife and other natural resources, as well as developed energy resources, provide economic benefits for the country and are needed for future generations. Achieving sustainability for all resource uses will require comprehensive planning that considers goals for habitat, wildlife, and water to balance energy development and conservation. Conflicts should be addressed by state and federal wildlife, land management, and utility regulatory agencies working together with the energy industries. A general policy to begin coordination in the earliest stages of projects, when most options are available, will lead to more success incorporating energy planning with landscape-scale mitigation policies, resource management plans, and conservation actions on both public and private lands.

Mitigate Wildlife and Habitat Impacts During Energy Project Development and Operations

- Ensure that mitigation accounts for both direct (project footprint) and indirect (avoidance of otherwise suitable habitat due to disturbance from development) habitat impacts minimally to a no-net-loss standard. Mitigation should also consider cumulative impacts and their influence on achieving a minimum no-net-loss. Interior/All bureaus; Agriculture/All bureaus; Defense/All bureaus
- Direct a portion of revenue from energy development on federal lands to federal and state agencies to mitigate losses of fish, wildlife, or their habitat from energy development. Congress

Integrate Wildlife Population and Habitat Goals Early in Energy Project Planning

- Revise energy development planning rules, associated guidance, and internal processes to give equal consideration to wildlife and habitat resources both site-by-site and cumulatively across developed energy areas. Include consultation with state fish and wildlife agencies early and often before public notices are published. Interior/All bureaus; Agriculture/All bureaus; Defense/All bureaus; Energy
- Develop and implement processes to resolve conflicts between competing objectives for energy and wildlife conservation and ensure equal treatment of wildlife that precludes unnecessary litigation. Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS; Energy
- Update energy statutes to fully consider and address potential impacts on wildlife and habitat during the energy development planning process and subsequent project implementation. Congress
- Provide funding for research adequate to develop data necessary to fully understand wildlife needs and potential impacts from development activities. Additionally, provide resources to develop and/or validate specific guidelines for locating and operating energy projects that avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential negative impacts on wildlife. Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS; Energy
- Ensure that energy projects avoid, minimize, or mitigate wildlife and habitat impacts during project planning. Give preference to and encourage siting in areas proactively identified that avoid key habitat, wildlife migration corridors, and migratory bird flyways. Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS; Energy
- Develop a permit system for renewable energy projects on private, state, and federal lands that specifically incorporates and considers wildlife impacts. Include a fee structure that covers permit processing costs, but also wildlife impact and mitigation costs. Congress

The pace and scale of energy development is increasingly concerning for wildlife and habitat conservation. Avoiding and minimizing impacts of energy development to wildlife and their habitats is critical and requires thoughtful planning that incorporates smart siting principles. Once energy projects are developed and operational, impacts on wildlife and their habitats should be mitigated.



Incentivize Private Landowners to Conserve Wildlife and Habitat

More than two-thirds of the U.S. land area – 893 million acres – is privately owned by two million farmers, ranchers, and landowners, and an additional 10.6 million Americans own nearly half a billion acres of private forestland. Private land conservation policy focuses on voluntary, incentive-based programs to enhance wildlife habitat and promote markets for sustainably managed agriculture and forest products. These programs ensure that landowners are compensated for their efforts to address wildlife habitat needs and other ecological concerns while improving their bottom line and the overall quality of their property.

Reauthorize and Enhance Farm Bill Conservation Programs

- Fully fund and implement conservation programs authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill (P.L. 115-334), and its successors, that encourage landowner participation in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP), and other Conservation Title programs. **Congress, Agriculture/NRCS, FS**
- Continue and expand the “Working Lands for Wildlife” partnership from the 2018 Farm Bill to conserve habitats for at-risk species on agricultural land and provide producers regulatory certainty. **Interior/FWS; Agriculture/NRCS**
- Ensure that vegetation planted as part of Farm Bill conservation programs is consistent with the purpose of the program, by encouraging native vegetation use where practicable. **Agriculture/NRCS, FS**
- Eliminate Adjusted Gross Income restrictions to foster landscape-scale conservation, the creation and enhancement of migration corridors, carbon sequestration, at-risk species conservation, wetlands restoration and protection, and increase USDA program efficiency. **Congress**

The Farm Bill is the largest single source of funding for conservation efforts on private lands, with the current Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 dedicating approximately \$6 billion in annual funding. USDA must implement all authorized programs to realize intended benefits.

The CRP should be enhanced to ensure that vegetation planted and managed on enrolled land is consistent with the congressional intent of the program. Likewise, financial assistance programs like EQIP and CSP are also essential to encourage wildlife conservation benefits. Working Lands for Wildlife adds regulatory certainty for Farm Bill conservation program participants.

Easement programs, like ACEP, which includes Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Agricultural Land

Easements (ALE), and the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) or its potential successor in the form of the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP), benefit wetland, upland, and woodland wildlife and promote long-term stewardship of private lands. We urge the USDA to maximize public investment in ACEP, including maintaining historical allocations for ALE and WRE, while prioritizing easements that meaningfully advance wildlife conservation.

The VPA-HIP provides block grants to state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies to fund hunting and other wildlife-dependent recreational access and habitat improvement programs on private lands. The RCPP leverages private dollars to maximize federal investment in conservation projects. We urge the USDA to continue supporting these successful and popular programs.

Support Wetland and Grassland Ecosystem Conservation

- Congress and the administration should reaffirm a national no-net-loss of wetlands policy objective while taking specific actions to protect and enhance remaining wetlands and streams. Congress; Interior; Agriculture/NRCS, FS; EPA; POTUS/CEQ
- Congress and the administration should prioritize national grassland conservation goals that complement those enacted for wetlands. Congress; Interior; Agriculture/NRCS, FS; EPA; POTUS/CEQ

To address the loss of wetlands, each administration since the 1970s has endorsed a national wetlands conservation goal. Further recognizing the value wetlands provide, the administration should proactively establish a net gain of wetlands policy to protect and enhance the functions and values of wetlands and the ecosystem services they provide. Voluntary and incentive-based programs for wetlands restoration, management, and protection, including support for Farm Bill conservation programs and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), should be pursued vigorously to sustain conservation and water quality in North America.

Given the increased recognition of the roles that our nation's grasslands play in providing critical wildlife habitat while addressing ecological challenges, national

grassland conservation goals that complement those enacted for wetlands are warranted. Specifically, Congress and the administration should prioritize resources to enhance and conserve the nation's remaining wetlands and grasslands while generating ecosystem service benefits. Farm Bill provisions such as conservation compliance and Sodsaver ensure that federal farm policy voluntarily precludes wetland drainage or conversion of native grasslands. Under this direction, landowners must conserve wetland and grassland habitats on their land to be eligible for federal farm programs. These practices must be maintained to ensure that agricultural production does not work at cross-purposes to basic conservation standards that have been a normal part of farming and ranching operations for decades.

Utilize Easements to Conserve Important Habitat

- Reaffirm the federal government's commitment to supporting land and habitat protection through conservation easements that keep existing wetlands, grasslands, and forests in conservation uses. Interior/FWS; Agriculture/NRCS, FS
- Replace the HFRP with the proposed FCEP, bringing parity to forest landowners within the Farm Bill. Congress; Agriculture/NRCS

The sale or donation of easements preserves agricultural landscapes, helps producers keep their working lands working, and conserves wetland, grassland, and woodland habitats. Easements available through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, funded through purchases of federal Duck Stamps have been the

backbone of habitat conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region and other core habitats for nearly sixty years. We encourage the administration and Congress to reaffirm the importance of these tools that conserve and protect the public benefits of these landscapes for future generations to enjoy.



istockphoto.com / Barbara Gabry

Improve Public Land Wildlife Habitat Conservation by Increasing Active Management, Collaboration, and Reducing Litigation

Habitat management on public lands, primarily those administered by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), is essential to support sustainable wildlife populations. However, decades of fire suppression, hotter and drier weather, land uses that impair habitat function, and inadequate land management actions have degraded important wildlife habitat. Forests have become dense and overgrown, decreasing habitat value and increasing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Rangelands are at risk from long-term drought, conifer encroachment, invasive annual vegetation, and more frequent wildfires that destroy essential shrubs like sagebrush. Grasslands have experienced a significant loss of acreage from conversion to agriculture or encroachment by non-native species.

Recent efforts and funding by Congress, USFS and BLM have leveraged partnerships to improve habitats, but more action is needed. For example, the USFS wildfire crisis strategy aims to treat up to an additional 20 million acres of national forests over the next decade – but accomplishments to date and projected actions fall short of this target. Accelerating the pace and scale of stewardship and restoration efforts while streamlining procedural obstacles is essential for managing our public lands.

Formalize Collaboration to Deter Litigation

- Enact a fix to the Cottonwood opinion by law, rule, or both (see more information on this legal decision in Recommendation 7). **Congress; Interior; Justice**
- Amend federal land planning statutes to require the consideration of collaborative recommendations alongside other decision alternatives. **Congress**
- Amend the Equal Access to Justice Act to reinstate its original requirement that reimbursed legal fees are available only to successful litigants who hold a direct and personal interest in the disputed action. **Congress**

Litigation can be a serious issue through delaying or even derailing land management projects, and special interests often use the threat of litigation to stop projects they do

not like. By institutionalizing collaboration in legislation and curbing abusive litigation, we can redirect incentives toward achieving stewardship outcomes.

Ensure Continued Funding to Reduce Severe Wildfire Risk

- Increase the pace and scale of fuels reduction projects and prioritize wildfire reduction projects in places where they also benefit wildlife species. **Congress; Agriculture/FS**
- Provide appropriations for wildland fire mitigation and management on a multi-year, rather than an annual cycle. **Congress**
- Make the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund permanent. **Congress**
- Use prescribed fire as a tool to manage habitats and improve wildlife function, including in designated areas where management tools are limited. **Interior/BLM, FWS, NPS; Agriculture/FS**

The “fire funding fix” in the 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act has improved the capacity of the USFS to fight wildfires and reduced the need to ‘borrow’ funding from their many other priority programs, however

this critical funding fix was authorized for seven years and must be made permanent. In addition, continued funding for fuels projects that reduce wildfire risk while improving habitat conditions is crucial.

Expand, Improve, and Fund External Partnerships for Habitat Management Actions

- Formalize and continue the use of the NGO Keystone Partnership approach for use of IHA, IRA, and future funding opportunities. **Congress; Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS**
- Strategically utilize IRA and IHA funding and other federal programs to advance active wildlife conservation efforts. **Congress; Interior/all bureaus; Agriculture/FS**
- Utilize longer-term agreements, up to 20-years, for larger project areas. **Interior/All bureaus; Agriculture/FS**
- Streamline the procurement process for reaching agreement with non-federal partners. **Congress**
- Continue the practice of reducing or waiving partner match requirements, including removing the policy requirement for substantial cash contributions. **Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS**
- Enact legislation that expands Good Neighbor Authority to allow counties and Tribes to retain revenues from restoration projects on federal lands. **Congress**
- Expand funding for partners to implement summer range habitat restoration projects on both public and private lands to increase forage productivity for ungulates. **Congress; Agriculture/FS**

Reductions in federal staff and increased demands on remaining staff have left a large capacity need to implement land and habitat management projects on USFS and BLM lands. The use of Stewardship End Results Contracting, Good Neighbor Agreements, Challenge Cost Share, and other programs allow external partners to work with the agencies to accomplish needed

actions that reduce wildfire risk, improve habitat conditions, implement forestry activities, and address local needs. Because NGOs can often move more quickly and efficiently than federal agencies, this collaborative approach has been extremely successful and must be sustained, accelerated, and scaled up to maximize its impact.

Support Active Habitat Management that Improves Habitat Function for Wildlife

- Direct the USFS and BLM to identify and implement opportunities to improve habitat function for key wildlife species in each region/state, including active management to restore young growth forests, prairies, meadows, and other key complex early seral habitats. **Congress; Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS.**
- Continue to direct federal funding for restoration, enhancement, or maintenance of rangeland and grassland habitats (particularly sagebrush and native grassland ecosystems), including the reduction of encroaching woody vegetation (conifers) and treatment of annual invasive plant species. **Congress; Interior/BLM, FWS; Agriculture/FS**
- Increase funding and capacity for education, management, and prevention to combat the invasive species epidemic across all lands and waters. **Congress**

Action is needed to prioritize forest management actions that mimic natural disturbance events and create young forest habitats. These restoration/stewardship projects (including pre-commercial and commercial harvest) enhance wildlife habitat and provide wood products that sustain the rural communities and mill infrastructure that also support the viability of future projects. In addition, the native rangelands and grasslands that are essential for many important wildlife species – particularly mule deer, pronghorn, sage-grouse, and many others – require habitat management efforts to maintain habitat viability.

Invasive species are a serious threat to America's fish and wildlife as well as federal lands and waters. Invasive species are a leading cause for habitat loss, a key contributing factor to threatened and endangered species listing, and they exacerbate risks of wildfire across the landscape. Federal agencies should increase their focus on public education and collaborate closely with the sportsmen's and sportswomen's conservation community to ensure stakeholder and public user concerns are considered prior to management decisions. Federal agency budgets to manage invasive species should reflect the growing seriousness of the threat.

Achieve Greater Results from an Improved ESA and Overall Species Conservation by Enhancing the Use of Collaboration and Incentives

The most effective species conservation occurs when states, tribes, and the federal government exercise their wildlife and land management authorities in collaboration. The partnerships formed with hunters and anglers, landowners, recreationists, and others also play an integral role in managing fish and wildlife populations. Collectively, this work helps maintain healthy wildlife populations, enhances habitat, increases social tolerance for conflict species, and facilitates opportunities for outdoor recreation, hunting, and angling.

Collaborative and incentive-based conservation efforts can be successful whether used under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) or in a system that invests in wildlife and habitat in a way that removes the need for listing under the ESA.

Create incentives and foster collaboration on effective, landscape-level conservation efforts to conserve species and avoid ESA listing

- Enact legislation to provide sustained and sufficient funding for states and tribes to implement State Wildlife Action Plans. *Congress*
- Enact the Endangered Species Recovery Act (S. 3146-111th Congress) to create a tax incentive for private land habitat conservation. *Congress*
- Increase appropriations for the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. *Congress*
- Allocate at least \$500,000 per year and technical assistance to accelerate collaborative species conservation through the Sentinel Landscape Program. *Interior/FWS; Agriculture; Defense*
- Maintain recently finalized ESA Section 10 regulations (80 FR 8380) that support and reduce obstacles for participating in voluntary conservation programs, and ensure they are implemented and retained in the future. *Interior/FWS*

Addressing threats to at-risk species before they warrant listing is the most efficient way to improve species conservation. This includes providing states and tribes with the resources necessary to manage the species of greatest conservation need identified in State Wildlife Action Plans. In addition to funding, avoiding listing requires states, tribes, federal agencies, and private entities to work together. For example, there are voluntary, public-private partnerships that employ strategies like community engagement, habitat conservation, and sustainable resource management, instead of top-down regulatory approaches to achieve conservation goals without adversely impacting livelihoods.

Similarly, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is another

voluntary program for landowners seeking to conserve and enhance habitat. The technical and financial assistance provided through the program has supported tens of thousands of projects covering more than six million acres across every state.

ESA section 10 permits are important tools to encourage voluntary conservation through Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) and Safe Harbor Agreements (SHAs). However, the process for completing these conservation agreements can be time intensive, confusing, and costly. Landowners and others looking to engage in voluntary conservation agreements would benefit from greater resource investments in Section 10 programs to reduce wait times and other obstacles to participation.

Improve ESA Implementation

- Amend Section 4 of the ESA to codify the National Listing Workplan to supersede the 12-month deadline for decisions on listing actions. **Congress**
- Create a science-based, reliable process for delisting species. **Interior/FWS**
- Use Section 4(d) to facilitate expanding states' management authority once certain recovery goals are met. **Interior/FWS**
- Update Section 7 of the ESA to clarify that the requirement for reinitiating consultation does not apply at the planning level and is triggered only by new, best-available scientific information. **Interior/FWS**
- Amend Section 9(c)(2) of the ESA to confirm that non-commercial imports of threatened-listed species do not require an import permit. **Interior/FWS**
- Issue regulations for species conservation banking programs, as directed by Congress in Section 329 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2021 (P. L. 116-283). **Interior/FWS**

The ESA is a powerful tool to prevent species extinction, but targeted regulatory and statutory improvements could make the ESA better at recovering species, without undermining its effectiveness in preventing species extinction. Listing decisions should be prioritized in accordance with the FWS' available resources and assessment of conservation need. Similarly, determinations on whether to remove a species from the endangered species list should be informed by a clear and reliable process, which could be accomplished if Congress codifies the FWS' National Listing Workplan. To reduce delisting litigation that erodes support for the ESA, Congress and the FWS should unlock the full potential of Section 4(d) by creating a path for returning management of a listed species back to states – even while it remains listed.

Under Section 7, the FWS must review every federal government action that may affect a listed species. *Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. Krunger* (9th

Cir. 2015) made consultation issues worse by requiring federal land management agencies to repeat consultations on plans and programs each time a new species is listed, or new information is received. Congress should pass legislation ensuring requirements for re-consultation are based only on verifiable, peer-reviewed scientific information and applied only when productive for conservation purposes.

Last, FWS regulations have reduced conservation incentives and benefits for foreign species that are being successfully conserved in their range countries. Section 9(c)(2) sought to avoid both over-regulation and burden on the FWS through presuming the legality of non-commercial imports of threatened-listed species already protected under international law. Making this provision mandatory would encourage foreign conservation programs and increase collaboration with foreign countries and stakeholders most engaged in conserving iconic species.



Support and Assist State Fish and Wildlife Agencies in Addressing Wildlife Health Challenges

Wildlife diseases pose a serious threat to human health, food security, economic activities, and to wildlife populations. As wildlife diseases become more prevalent, so does our collective understanding of these pathogens and the interconnection of people, animals, plants, and our shared environment. We must continue to identify and develop collaborative, cross-sector, and cross-discipline strategies to better address emerging threats.

Zoonotic diseases – those that may jump from animals to people – are a growing concern for human health as we crowd more domestic animals, people, and wildlife on smaller landscapes. The emergence of diseases like Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenzas (HPAI) is just one example. HPAI causes extensive mortality in captive poultry, die-offs of wild birds, and may also be transmitted to humans. In other cases, disease outbreaks are driving Endangered Species Act decision-making, as with white nose syndrome and its impact on bats.

Two prominent diseases pose an immediate threat to big game in North America and the enormous outdoor recreation economy driven by hunting: Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in cervids and Pneumonia in sheep.

Promote a Comprehensive and Collaborative Approach to Addressing Wildlife Health Issues

- Authorize and appropriate funding for state fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, and federal agencies to effectively monitor and respond to existing and emerging wildlife diseases. *Congress*
- Require interagency guidance to drive federal collaboration with state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies and between federal agencies in zoonotic and wildlife health issues. *Congress*
- Facilitate voluntary partnerships via regional Centers for the Study and Diagnostics of Wildlife Diseases (modeled on Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study) to provide technical assistance to states and tribes, conduct research and development, and provide diagnostic services to federal, state, and tribal agencies. *Congress; Interior/FWS, USGS; Agriculture/APHIS*

Risk reduction is far more effective and less costly than trying to address outbreaks as they race across the globe, as we learned from COVID. Responding to outbreaks of wildlife diseases requires the mobilization of people and resources that match the scale of the problem. We are lacking on both fronts and need to move aggressively to better fund, coordinate, and implement strategies designed to detect and respond to existing and emerging wildlife diseases. The challenges of a fragmented surveillance framework between states, federal agencies, tribes, and

NGOs are compounded by the lack of resources for on-the-ground surveillance and coordinated information sharing.

Without dedicated funding it is difficult to build and maintain effective wildlife disease surveillance programs, which require full-time staff. While influxes of funding through short-term grants to address new or perceived threats often allow for temporary progress, consistent funding is needed to maximize the expertise, monitoring, and coordination capacity of agencies.



Support a Comprehensive Chronic Wasting Disease Response as directed by Congress in Public Law 116-188 (16 U.S.C. 667h)

- Fully fund the activities authorized under the CWD Research and Management Act (P.L. 117 - 328) and complete the comprehensive CWD Study convened by the National Academy of Sciences. *Agriculture/APHIS*
- Immediately initiate and convene the CWD interagency task force. *Interior/FWS*
- Complete a comprehensive review of the USDA-APHIS Herd Certification Program and implement recommendations based on the findings of the review. *Agriculture/APHIS*

CWD is an imminent risk for all cervid populations in North America. As of May 2024, CWD has been detected in free-ranging cervids in 34 states and four Canadian provinces and in captive cervid facilities in 19 states and three provinces. In captive cervids, the disease appears even at farms in compliance with the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) CWD Herd Certification Program (HCP). An always-fatal disease in deer, elk, and moose, the infectious agent is easily transmitted and can persist in the environment

for years. Managers currently lack a reliable live-animal test and practical decontamination methods.

The Chronic Wasting Disease Research and Management Act authorized funding for states to manage existing CWD outbreaks, conduct research to improve testing and disease containment mechanisms, and initiate a review of the HCP. States are currently funding CWD control out of their base budgets at the expense of other wildlife management priorities and programs.

Support Policies that Control Sheep Pneumonia

- Implement congressional direction to minimize *M.ovi* outbreaks in wild sheep herds on federal public lands through land and resource management planning processes. *Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS*
- Direct federal land management agencies to evaluate their separation strategies that are intended to address the risk of *M. OVI* outbreaks, assess their effectiveness, identify and implement new solutions, and integrate them into federal land management agency grazing programs. *Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS*

Wild sheep are susceptible to infection by a family of bacteria (*M.ovi*) that cause fatal pneumonia. These bacteria can be transmitted among wild and domestic sheep and goats, though domestic varieties have a higher level of immunity to infection. Separating sheep and goats in time and space – notably where federal land grazing allotments and private land production may overlap wild sheep ranges – can help reduce the risk

of disease transmission. State wildlife agencies are responsible for maintaining and restoring herds of wild bighorn sheep, but these efforts are complicated by the spread of this disease. For decades, sportsmen and producers have worked to address this issue, but the time has come for even greater collaboration. Today, our focus has turned from containing or eliminating this disease to mitigating risks.



Enhance the Resilience of Wildlife Habitat and Wildlife Populations in the Face of a Changing Climate by Strengthening Conservation and Restoration Programs, Policies, and Funding

Sportsmen and sportswomen are among the first to notice the impacts of more frequent and persistent extreme weather events on wildlife and habitat and have supported actions to mitigate and improve resilience against the impacts of a changing climate. As our collective understanding of climate resilience continues to advance, additional research and innovations will be required to conserve and enhance habitat to meet these changing needs.

Improvements are needed to expedite the delivery of existing conservation programs and ensure the permitting process is streamlined and responsive to the future demands of both changing environmental conditions and our country's interest in advancing both built and natural infrastructure. Finally, we know carbon as a commodity has value, and restoration of our wildlife habitat is one of the best ways to sequester and store carbon. Our federal policies and programs should provide voluntary incentives to private landowners, the corporate sector, and non-profits to advance climate solutions with carbon benefits.

Encourage Natural Infrastructure Solutions

- Maintain departmental climate adaptation plans, incorporating natural defenses and climate-smart conservation practices into future management plans while increasing departmental action for wildlife habitat conservation and connectivity. **Administration**
- Authorize and appropriate funding for coastal damage mitigation, natural infrastructure, and ecosystem restoration via energy development revenue sharing models. **Congress**
- Reauthorize and increase appropriations for the North American Wetlands Conservation Act; the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds; the National Coastal Resilience Fund, and the climate resilience, hazard mitigation, and flood abatement programs of the Army Corps, Department of Transportation, and Federal Emergency Management Agency; and private lands programs including, but not limited to, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Farm Bill, among others that conserve habitat and sequester carbon. **Congress**

Intact wetlands, forests, and grasslands are resilient to extreme weather events and have also been shown to temper the impacts of these events. As lands are converted to agricultural, industrial, or residential uses, planners must design necessary infrastructure and utilize existing biological and geological features in a manner that will

increase resiliency for both human and wildlife populations in the face of changing weather patterns. Functioning natural ecosystems adjacent to and incorporated in these developments will aid in mitigating climate change effects while providing critical wildlife habitat and much needed habitat connectivity for migratory species.

Reform Permitting and Environmental Review Requirements

- Increase coordination efficiency among federal agencies and ensure coordination with states and tribes during permitting and environmental review of actions that benefit wildlife conservation. *Interior; Agriculture; FERC*
- Authorize and appropriate federal resources for permitting review agencies to advance existing processes, including new permitting tools included in federal law and regulations. *Congress*
- Streamline permitting for active forest, grassland, and rangeland management and restoration of wetlands, floodplains, and other natural systems, particularly as it relates to efforts that include wildlife habitat conservation and connectivity in their permit applications (see Recommendation 6). *Congress; Interior/BLM; Interior/FWS; Agriculture/FS*

In 2023, Congress passed updates to the permitting and environmental review process with a focus on the energy sector. While these changes signal Congress' interest in further streamlining the permitting process, there is more work to be done to ensure comprehensive reforms do not come at the cost of wildlife and their

habitats. Permitting reform cannot be just about energy projects. Future reforms must also address our vast conservation needs and account for the importance of restoring those habitats for wildlife and permitting processes should reduce regulations that restrict restoration activities.

Expand Carbon Offset and Credit Programs to Include Wetlands and other Types of Wildlife Habitat

- Ensure all current and future climate-focused tax, market, and credit programs include wildlife habitat conservation as a viable purpose by amending 26 U.S.C. § 45Q (P.L. 110-343). *Congress*
- Identify other private sectors that are contributing to carbon solutions and wildlife habitat conservation for future federal investments. *Congress; Energy; Agriculture/FS; Interior/BLM*

Private markets are playing a significant role in wetland conservation through mechanisms such as mitigation banking for the loss of wetlands. Yet the conservation and restoration of farms, forests, ranchlands, wetlands, floodplains, and other systems have been omitted from consideration as viable carbon offset options both in access to climate finance and carbon markets.

As additional policies and programs are developed to provide incentives for the public and private sectors to offset and sequester carbon, financial incentives designed to improve climate resilience and address carbon in the environment must not exclude natural climate solutions with benefits for wildlife and their habitats.

Recognize the role of sportsmen-led conservation programs and practices in efforts to increase carbon sequestration and storage

- Strategically utilize IRA and IJIA funding and other federal programs to advance active wildlife conservation efforts. *Administration; Interior/BLM; Agriculture/FS*

The active conservation and restoration of forests, grasslands, wetlands, and other key ecosystems that hunters have funded and supported over the last century are inherently beneficial to sequestering and storing carbon. Approximately 30% of needed carbon emission reductions can be achieved through voluntary partnership on working lands such as farms, forests, wetlands, and

grasslands. Additionally, active management of our forests to improve wildlife habitat while simultaneously sequestering carbon is critical. This history of hunter-led wildlife and habitat conservation must be recognized as a viable means of achieving climate-focused objectives within the context of current and future mitigation and ecosystem resilience.

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