



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

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Submitted to: House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

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Re: FY 2024 Appropriations for USGS, FWS, and BLM

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The Wildlife Society (TWS; wildlife.org) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony concerning the FY 2024 budgets for the **U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) (USFS)**. Founded in 1937, TWS represents approximately 15,000 wildlife professionals, including research scientists, biologists, managers, and students, with a mission to inspire, empower, and enable professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitat through science-based management and conservation.

Appropriations for the following programs within the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies will affect the current and future status of wildlife and wildlife professionals in North America. To enable the appropriate use of science within these programs and beyond, TWS respectfully requests the following programmatic funding in FY 2024.

FY 2024 Interior Appropriation Requests — The Wildlife Society			
Agency	Program	FY 2023 Enacted	FY 2024 TWS
USGS	Climate Adaptation Science Centers	63.1 M	87.3 M
	Cooperative Research Units	28.2 M	32 M
	National Wildlife Health Center Infrastructure Improvements	-	*135 M
FWS	National Wildlife Refuge System	541.6 M	712 M
	State and Tribal Wildlife Grants	73.8 M	100 M
	Ecological Services	269 M	384.5 M
	Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund	24.6 M	25 M
	NMBCA	5.1 M	9.9 M
	Partners for Fish and Wildlife	60.3 M	79.7 M
	Migratory Bird Joint Ventures	16.8 M	25 M
BLM	Wildlife Habitat Management	149 M	162 M

*no-year funding request appropriated until expended

U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)

Within the Ecosystems Mission Area, the **Climate Adaptation Science Centers** program responds to regional wildlife, ecosystems, and community-based stakeholder needs in the face of a changing climate. Minor funding increases in recent fiscal years have allowed for increased program responsiveness and additional capacity to ensure tribes have proactive opportunities to shape projects and distribution of resources. However, funding has not kept pace with identified needs, particularly in ensuring USGS has the resources to communicate scientific outputs to stakeholders to act on project findings. **In FY 2024, we recommend full implementation of the Administration's proposal, with a goal of reaching no less than \$87.3 million.**

The Survey-wide **National Wildlife Health Center** located in Madison, WI is the nation's only federal BSL-3 facility exclusively dedicated to scientific investigation and research on wildlife diseases that threaten human, animal, and environmental health. TWS thanks Congress for providing \$55 million in funding for phase one improvements to the National Wildlife Health Center in FY 2021. However, an estimated \$135 million in no-year funding is still required for project completion. The Center is making progress on the modernization plans and has awarded contracts for the building design and environmental assessment. The design is expected to be completed by October 2024, making FY 2024 appropriations especially timely. **Securing the remaining funding in FY 2024 would be least disruptive option and would minimize the risk of rising costs due to inflation. TWS requests the remaining \$135 million in funding, appropriated until expended, to complete these much-needed infrastructure improvements.**

The **USGS Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Units (CRUs)**, which fosters federal, state, NGO, and academic partnerships to provide actionable science tailored to the needs of natural resource managers, plays a pivotal role in the implementation of state and federal management decisions. The support of many state agencies, universities, and non-government organizations has allowed the program to be a model for cooperative natural resource science programming and leverage an average of three dollars in outside funds for every federal dollar invested. The Wildlife Society thanks appropriators for their understanding of this need and the associated funding increases provided in FY 2023. In the past year, the program was able to establish a new unit in the state of Michigan and onboard 37 new unit scientists. Additional states have discussed the opportunity to host units responsive to their scientific needs, but have been limited by available federal funding. **The Wildlife Society requests a small increase in funding to \$32 million in FY 2024, which will allow the CRUs to build on these new partnerships and establish units in states that have long requested them.**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

With 850 million acres of lands and waters in every U.S. state and territory, the **National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS)** plays a key role in the conservation of native species and connects Americans to recreation opportunities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, and environmental education. Unfortunately, the current NWRS Operations and Maintenance (O&M) budget is nowhere close to meeting the needs of native species and the American public. In order to effectively conserve species on NWRS lands and align with the multiuse goals of the Refuge System, significant investments in O&M programming are required. Conservation planning, a core O&M subactivity that deals with the creation of multi-stakeholder Comprehensive Conservation Plans for refuge system units, has been chronically underfunded. As a result, 40 percent of these congressionally mandated plans are either out of date or do not

exist. In addition to inadequate funding for long-term planning, the NWRS has lacked funding to meet their own identified needs in bringing diverse audiences into USFWS programming. The Urban Wildlife Program, housed under NWRS O&M, seeks to target USFWS investments to underserved communities to bolster recreational access and conservation outreach. Through the Urban Wildlife Program, and the more than 100 refuges located less than 25 miles from a city center, NWRS is well-positioned to engage diverse constituencies in the conservation of our native species. Unfortunately, NWRS is not able to meet these needs given currently available funding. **TWS urges Congress to consider the significant shortcomings of the operations and maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY 2024, and provide at least \$712 million in funding to begin making inroads on adequate visitor services, habitat management activities, and long term conservation planning.**

The **State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (STWG)** is the nation's only program that encourages development and implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans. Collectively, STWG funds support strong partnerships among federal, state, tribal, private, and nonprofit entities that enable wildlife professionals to implement on-the-ground conservation activities that benefit over 12,000 at-risk species, with the goal of eliminating the need to list them under the Endangered Species Act. In FY 2010, appropriations were at \$90 million for the program – allowing states to complete more of the projects deemed necessary for monitoring and management of at-risk species. Subsequent budget reductions in STWG, however, have not allowed this highly successful program to reach its full potential. **TWS requests that Congress once again work to increase funding for the program to at least \$100 million annually.**

Through the **Ecological Services Program (ESP)**, USFWS works with diverse public and private partners to help identify species facing extinction, reduce threats to their populations, and return species back to the public trust responsibilities of states and tribes. Wildlife professionals in USFWS are working on new strategies to increase efficacy of ESP, though the primary impediment to effectiveness remains inadequate funding. To effectively move species through all components of the ESA listing and delisting process, **TWS requests full implementation of the Administration's FY 2024 request of no less than \$384.5 million for all subactivities.**

States and territories are critical partners in the recovery of species listed under the Endangered Species Act. The **Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund** serves as a vital tool for states and territories to serve as equal partners in implementation of on-the-ground conservation practices that work towards species recovery. The Wildlife Society requests Congress allocate no less than **\$25 million in USFWS dollars to the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund in FY 2024.**

Since 2002, the **Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA)** has provided more than \$80 million in grants to support 686 projects in 43 countries. These grants have enabled partner entities and wildlife professionals to conserve approximately 400 migratory bird species across more than 5 million acres. Moreover, NMBCA has achieved a partner match ratio of nearly 4:1 despite requiring only a 3:1 match. The needs of U.S. migratory bird species and conservation efforts to keep these species common extends to landscapes far beyond U.S. borders. As a result, **TWS recommends Congress increase funding to no less than \$9.9 million in FY 2024 to achieve greater proactive conservation results under the NMBCA program.**

Further promoting USFWS' partnership with non-federal stakeholders is the **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program**. This program allows voluntary habitat restoration goals, aligned with identified strategic priorities, on private lands to be achieved through cost-efficient financial and technical assistance. If adequately funded, this program has the potential to serve as a vital tool in implementing private land conservation efforts and proactively conserving at-risk species prior to reaching the point of Endangered Species Act listing. **TWS supports an increase in Partners for Fish and Wildlife program funding to no less than \$79.7 million in FY 2024.**

The **Migratory Bird Joint Ventures (MBJV)**, part of USFWS' **Migratory Bird Management** program, are locally-directed partnerships that develop and implement science-based habitat conservation strategies for all species of birds across North America. These partnerships have leveraged federal funds at 31:1 to enhance and conserve over 27 million acres of avian habitat. The MBJV's Urban Bird Treaties grant program supports partnerships to conserve birds in urban environments by conserving nearby wetlands and creating parks for local communities to learn about wildlife. **TWS supports \$25 million in FY 2024 for the Migratory Bird Joint Ventures to enhance and promote the program's highly effective and collaborative partnerships.**

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

The **Wildlife Habitat Management program** maintains and restores fish, wildlife, and their habitat across a large portion of America's western landscapes. This includes projects to balance effects of multiple public land uses, such as energy development and livestock grazing, with the needs of native species. This program also includes management of approximately 300 listed species under the Endangered Species Act. **TWS recommends Congress support the Wildlife Habitat Management program with no less than the Administration request of \$162 million in FY 2024.** Within the Wildlife Habitat Management line item, TWS also wants to emphasize our support for the Administration's request of \$2 million in funding for Tribal co-stewardship of lands and waters that contain natural resources of significance to Tribal nations.

The Wildlife Society recognizes free-ranging horses and burros in the U.S. as ecologically invasive, feral species. Free-ranging, legally designated "wild", horse and burro populations on BLM lands were estimated at over 82,000 individuals in March of last year, only the second estimated population decrease in a decade. While TWS has been pleased to see the BLM's increased use of gathers and adoptions, population estimates still exceed the agency's threshold for ecological sustainability by more than 55,000 animals. By the BLM's own estimates, it will take hundreds of millions of dollars and several years more to reach ecologically sustainable levels. **TWS recommends support for the BLM in their efforts to employ all the tools at their disposal to achieve ecologically sustainable levels.** Additionally, TWS requests **the elimination of an annual appropriations rider limiting sale and/or destruction of unwanted or unadoptable horses and burros.** This will allow for the flexibilities and long-standing protections to herd health as outlined in the 1971 Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act to be implemented as originally outlined by Congress.