



# The Wildlife Society's Conservation Affairs Network

December 2024, Volume 10, Issue 12

*The Wildlife Society's Conservation Affairs Network supports communication, collaboration, and coordination on policy engagement across our organization and participating chapters, sections, and working groups. The monthly CAN Newsletter highlights policy issues occurring at local, regional, and national levels, and provides opportunities for wildlife professionals to engage with those issues.*

## Engagement Opportunities

**Next phase of input requested for TWS policy priorities** – TWS Council's Policy Priorities Committee is [now seeking input](#) during the second phase of the policy prioritization process. Thanks to feedback from units, members, and working groups, the Committee has identified 11 policy areas for consideration as TWS policy priorities. Chapter, Section, and Working Group Executive Boards are being asked to work with their CACs and other members to rank these policy areas from highest to lowest priority [using this form](#). Input will be collected through **January 10, 2025**. *Staff contact:* [Kelly O'Connor](#)

## On the Horizon

**Building relationships with new decision makers** – As we look towards the new year, there will be many opportunities to develop relationships between new members and their constituents with expertise in wildlife conservation. TWS staff will begin reaching out to CACs in the coming months to assist with writing letters of introduction and facilitating meet and greets with congressional offices. If your TWS unit has target offices that you'd like support engaging with, please reach out for assistance. *Staff contact:* [Kelly O'Connor](#)

## CAC Activities

**Florida Chapter opposes proposed surplus of state lands** – [The Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society](#) submitted a [letter](#) to the Director of the Florida Forest Service concerning the proposed surplus of 324 acres of the Withlacoochee State Forest. In the letter, the Chapter opposed the surplus proposal, pointing to the conservation value of the tract proposed for surplus based on available soil and land cover data. They also noted the role of the parcel in maintaining landscape connectivity across the region; the parcel falls within the [Florida Wildlife Corridor](#) and is part of a network of conservation lands in an otherwise heavily urbanized part of the state. *CAC contact:* [Jay Exum](#)

**Leadership opportunity in Section Conservation Affairs Committee** – The **Northwest Section** seeks a member interested in serving as Section Conservation Affairs Committee Chair. Section CAC Chairs communicate policy engagement activities and issues of interest from across the section's jurisdiction to the section's board, provide coordination and support to chapter CACs, and meet every other month with TWS staff and other section CAC Chairs to

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coordinate on regional and national policy issues. Please reach out to Kelly if you have any questions about this opportunity or are interested in serving as a Section Chair. *Staff contact:* [Kelly O'Connor](#)

*Activity updates, success stories, and CAC Contact information – Does your CAC have a success story to tell? Is a new partnership developing at your organization unit? Do you have a new CAC Chair? Send it in! Let the CAN hear about it and help you in your work. Email [koconnor@wildlife.org](mailto:koconnor@wildlife.org)*

## Federal Updates

### **TWS supports disaster relief funding request for the National Wildlife Refuge System –**

The Wildlife Society joined with the National Wildlife Refuge Association and other organizations in a recent [letter](#) to congressional leadership highlighting damages to the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) caused by recent natural disasters, and requesting funding for the NWRS in a disaster relief supplemental funding bill. 37 different natural disasters have impacted approximately 90 refuges since 2023, and many impacted refuges remain closed to the public to prioritize the needs of surrounding communities. The letter points to needs like debris and hazardous materials removal, facilities repair, and rehabilitation of damaged habitats, all of which must be accomplished if refuges are to achieve their wildlife conservation purposes.

**Activity picks up on Capitol Hill as we approach the end of the 118th Congress –** There is a flurry of activity on Capitol Hill to wrap up several must-pass bills and strongly supported bipartisan legislative packages of relevance to the conservation community. While some items below remain outstanding, others are on their way to the President's desk:

- The **Fiscal Year 2025 Federal Budget** is operating on a continuing resolution (CR) until December 20th. With days left on the current CR, we expect Congress to vote for another extension with a timeframe TBD (January 20th or March 20th are both in play).
- A **Farm Bill** extension is likely, but it may not ensure that nearly \$14.5B in climate-smart agriculture funding from the Inflation Reduction Act is shifted to the Farm Bill's Conservation Title to increase baseline funding levels. If a deal isn't cut in the days ahead to make this shift, this funding may disappear given Republican intentions to cut IRA programs in support of a future budget reconciliation package.
- The **Wildlife Innovation and Longevity Driver (WILD) Act** ([H.R. 5009](#)) was approved by the Senate in September and is now slated for final House approval. It may become the vehicle upon which the National Defense Authorization Act is attached (see below). We expect this legislation will soon be sent to the President's desk for signature. This legislation reauthorizes important wildlife conservation programs including the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and several multinational species programs to protect tigers, elephants, sea turtles, and other iconic species.
- The **America's Conservation Enhancement (ACE) Reauthorization Act of 2024** ([H.R. 8811](#)) passed the U.S. House of Representatives with bipartisan support in early December. The bill would reauthorize funding for several critical conservation programs, including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the North American

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Wetlands Conservation Act. The U.S. Senate passed a different version of the legislation earlier in the year by unanimous consent, and will now decide whether or not to pass the House's version of the bill.

- The **Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act** ([S. 2781](#); [H.R. 7779](#)) was approved on December 10<sup>th</sup> in the House by suspension and now moves to the President for signature. This is seen as a major win for the conservation community, where efforts to clean up abandoned hardrock mine sites have been a focus for nearly 25 years. The legislation will serve as an initial pilot program for a to-be-determined 15 mine sites, with multiple co-benefits for fish and wildlife, water quality, and drinking water.
- The **Thomas R. Carper Water Resources Development Act** (WRDA 2024) compromise package was recently approved by the House of Representatives by a vote of 399-18 and is now slated for Senate approval. The WRDA package would authorize a range of flood protection, navigation, and restoration projects and studies, and would direct the Army Corps of Engineers to make major policy changes with important language included to advance nature-based solutions.
- While a significant **public lands package** is under consideration, the expectation is this package will be kicked to the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress. Similarly, there is a great deal of focus on a permitting package championed by Senators Barrasso and Manchin and Congressmen Westerman and Graves. The final status of this package is unclear and may also be kicked to the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress.
- The **National Defense Authorization Act** is expected to be completed imminently. This package authorizes major U.S. defense programs and in recent years has been "must-pass" legislation that carries forward other priorities (such as annual appropriations bills, WRDA packages, etc.). In an interesting twist, it appears the WILD Act will be carrying the NDAA package forward this year. We are keeping a close eye on NDAA to see what if anything is also included in this major legislative vehicle that would benefit fish and wildlife conservation.
- The Trump II Administration transition team is gearing up and beginning to engage with department and agency career staff as DC heads toward a change of administration on January 20<sup>th</sup>. President-elect Trump has announced nominations for all federal departments and we expect several **important agency nominations** to be forthcoming including Director nominees for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and Bureau of Land Management, and Chiefs for the U.S. Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Starting in January and continuing through March, the Senate will deliberate the nearly 1,200 federal political positions that require Senate confirmation.
- Finally, we expect the **FY26 Federal Budget** to be delayed this coming year with a tentative release day of April 2025.

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes Endangered Species Act listing for the monarch butterfly and eastern hellbender** – On December 12 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) [announced](#) the start of a 90-day comment period on its proposed listing and

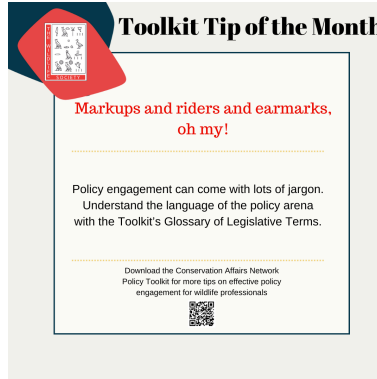
designation of critical habitat for the monarch butterfly under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). The USFWS is proposing threatened status for what it calls “one of the nation’s most beloved species”, noting an 80% decline in the eastern migratory population of the species and more than 95% decline in the western migratory population since the 1980’s. The probability of extinction by 2080 for the western migratory population is more than 99%. Primary threats to the species include habitat loss, exposure to insecticides, and climate change. Comments from the public on the listing proposal will be accepted through March 12, 2025.

On December 13 the USFWS published its [proposal](#) to list the eastern hellbender, one of two subspecies of the hellbender, as endangered under the ESA. The USFWS has determined that the designation of critical habitat for the subspecies is not prudent at this time; the eastern hellbender is threatened by illegal collection, a threat which could be exacerbated by the public designation of critical habitat. Members of the public have until February 11, 2025 to provide comments on the listing proposal.

**Revised critical habitat proposed for Canada lynx along with release of final recovery plan** – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is [proposing](#) approximately 19,112 square miles across Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Washington, and Wyoming to be designated as critical habitat for the Canada lynx (the proposal does not affect existing critical habitat for the species in Maine and Minnesota). USFWS noted that the proposal “reflects the current science on lynx habitat needs, balancing conservation with land-use priorities”. The announcement coincided with the release of the final recovery plan for the species, which is intended to support the long-term conservation of Canada lynx in the face of threats like global climate warming and loss of boreal forest habitats. Comments on the critical habitat proposal will be received through January 28, 2025.

**Biden administration releases Record of Decision on Arctic National Wildlife Refuge leasing program** – The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) published its [Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program Record of Decision](#) in early December and announced the second lease sale on approximately 1.6 million acres of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Oil and gas exploration and extraction in the ANWR has long been a topic of contention in the conservation community. In 2023 the Biden administration [cancelled](#) the last of 7 oil and gas leases sold by the Trump administration in 2021. This decision was supported by organizations including the [Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society](#) (ACTWS). ACTWS provided extensive [technical comments](#) on the impacts of actions in the Proposed Environmental Impact Statement for the leasing program on Alaska’s wildlife and their habitats.

*Questions on any items covered in this month’s Federal Updates can be sent to [Kelly O’Connor](#)*



## Updates from Headquarters

**TWS annual members meeting recording now available** – The Wildlife Society's Annual Members Meeting took place on Tuesday, Dec. 3. A recording is available [here](#) and may be accessed using the password sE6=17N6. Please note, the recording will be available through Jan. 5, 2025.

**Support your society with TWS merchandise** – You can now showcase your membership wherever you go with our brand-new T-shirts and sweatshirts [available for purchase online](#).

We're also bringing back the TWS2024 conference shirts for a limited time and in new styles! Adorned with the TWS2024 logo, this apparel pays homage to the Chesapeake Bay, showcasing the great blue heron, river otter, diamondback terrapin and blue crab—species vital to the region's food web.

*Do you want assistance with a wildlife conservation policy issue? Curious as to the various ways your organization unit can support federal efforts by TWS or engage on local level issues? Contact [policy@wildlife.org](mailto:policy@wildlife.org)*