Laura Conlee, Chair

Testimony on behalf of the National Cooperators' Coalition: Supporting the USGS Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Program

U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Geological Survey: Ecosystem Mission Area: Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units Program

4 April 2025

From: National Cooperators' Coalition - Laura Conlee, Chair
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Re: FY26 Appropriations USGS Ecosystems Mission Area: Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units Program

Dear Appropriators:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to your FY2026 Appropriations process. Our coalition is requesting at least **$28.206 million be appropriated to the U.S. Geological Survey's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (CRU) program, which was the enacted FY24 budget**. While this amount is insufficient to fully meet the needs of the CRU Program, it will enable the program to continue at levels that occurred during FY24 and FY25.

The National Cooperators' Coalition (NCC) is an alliance of nonfederal cooperators, supporters, and beneficiaries of the USGS CRU program. Our members include state fish and wildlife agencies, universities, and other organizations dedicated to wildlife conservation and research. The CRU program is tremendously important to a variety of partner agencies and organizations and the NCC would appreciate recognition and consideration of their substantial value across the nation.

The CRU program plays a significant role in advancing applied scientific understanding and conservation efforts for addressing current real-world fish and wildlife management challenges across the United States. Cooperative Research Units are dynamic hubs for collaborative research that prioritize the needs of state fish and wildlife agencies and play a central role in training the next generation of conservation professionals. State fish and wildlife agencies rely on the CRU program to conduct critical research that is used to support state fish and wildlife agency decision making and is relevant across jurisdictions (e.g. research on chronic wasting disease, monarchs, and wildlife corridors).

The program's value is clear, as evidenced by its continuous growth from its inception in 1935 to its statutory recognition by Congress in 1960, to the present day where 43 units are located across 41 states. Further budgetary or staffing impacts to the CRU program will directly diminish the research capacity of state fish and wildlife agency and university partners while reducing

educational opportunities for students across the nation. With the administration's focus on efficiency, the CRU program is a fiscally responsible investment. The CRU program leverages about $3 nonfederal dollars for every $1 USGS. The CRU leverages a low overhead rate to increase the amount of research that can be accomplished. In FY 2024, CRUs generated $48 million in external funds and $22 million of in-kind support provided by universities.

The CRU program is supported by the USGS Ecosystems Mission Area. To empower the program to maintain its current level of progress and support, we, the National Cooperators' Coalition, urge the appropriation of at least $28.206 million, which is equal to the enacted budget in FY24. Again, this would allow the CRU program to maintain its current function but would not allow for additional staff or research capacity. Any additional appropriations would be highly encouraged and are justified below. By investing in the CRU program, you are investing in the future of wildlife conservation in the United States.

FY2026 Appropriations Request and Justification of Need Beyond This Request

The National Cooperators' Coalition is requesting a minimum of **$28.026 million in FY2026** for the USGS Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit program. *This request is equal to the amount that was enacted in the FY24 budget and will allow the CRU program to maintain base functionality, however, is inadequate to fully meet the emerging needs of the CRU Program and state fish and wildlife agency/university partners.* Below we account for what is truly needed to ensure the program has adequate funding to robustly implement its mission in support of partners and their fish and wildlife science needs. Our coalition has identified more than $41 million as the total funding need for the program and encourages appropriations as close to this level as possible should additional flexibilities within the budget exist. **Future coalition requests will identify the total funding needed for full CRU implementation and growth (see below).**

The USGS Cooperative Research Unit program facilitates action-oriented cooperation between the USGS, state fish and wildlife agencies, a host university, and the Wildlife Management Institute to advance fish and wildlife research, graduate education, and technical assistance to natural resource agencies. The National Cooperators' Coalition is an alliance of nonfederal cooperators, supporters, and beneficiaries of the USGS Cooperative Research Unit program.

Total funding needed for the USGS Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit program:

Scientist Staffing: $36 million
The core of the CRU program are the staff scientists. Each unit typically has 3 scientists, and there are >120 scientist positions across the program. Funds are needed to account for growth in existing staff salaries, fill existing and anticipated vacancies, and fill positions at newly established units to fulfil federal commitments to cooperators.

New Administrative Support: +$300,000
Units are supported by regional administrators. With the addition of 3 new units in the past three years, more administrative support is needed to guide the establishment of new units and enhance the partnerships established with each unit. Additionally, a new regional administrator in the Midwest will help align the Units with the regional associations of state fish and wildlife agencies, helping ensure greater levels of coordination and engagement with this key cooperator.

Vehicles and Equipment: $2 million
The program currently maintains a fleet of approximately 300 vehicles plus other equipment (e.g., boats, ATVs, etc.) to support its research and operations. A substantial proportion of the fleet is more than 15 years old and needs to be replaced. The coalition recommends funding that supports replacing vehicles and other key equipment at least once every 10 years in order to minimize maintenance costs and reduce safety concerns for CRU students and staff.

Operating Expenses: $1.5 million
As part of the Department of the Interior, the CRU program has associated operating expenses to support the larger department. This includes costs for facilities, IT support, internal peer reviews, and other general programmatic costs.

Program Expansion: +$1.2 million each
Several states and territories have expressed an interest in establishing a new Unit in their borders to meet their own fish and wildlife science needs. This desire is indicative of the program's value to cooperators and partners. It takes $1.2 million to establish a new unit during its first fiscal year; future costs amount to approx. $700,000 per year to maintain that unit.

TOTAL NEED FOR FULL PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND GROWTH: >$41 million

FY2024 Enacted Level: $28.206 million

FY2026 Request: $28.206 million which would minimally meet the current needs of the CRU Program but would not allow for expansion of the CRU's mission.

Additional Information Regarding USGS Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units

The Cooperative Research Units program was established in 1935 with the mission to:

1. Support the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation through disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transboundary **applied research** of natural systems and related socioecological processes.
2. Develop future natural-resource managers and researchers through **graduate education** in wildlife and fisheries sciences.
3. Enhance cooperator capabilities through **technical assistance** in the use and application of state-of- the-art science practices.

Each Unit is a unique **partnership** among the U.S. Geological Survey, a host university, one or more State fish and wildlife agencies, the Wildlife Management Institute, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In fiscal year 2024, there were 43 CRUs located in 41 States at 44 host universities. The national office is in the Ecosystems mission area at the USGS HQ in Reston, Virginia.

The program's success stems from collaboration and leveraging limited research funds to solve challenges facing state and federal wildlife and fisheries managers, including reduced (often zero) University overhead as part of the CRU agreement. **Leveraging USGS funding for scientists with funding from cooperators and stakeholders (1:3) over the last 10 years.** On average,

these leveraged funds supported 31 non-federal positions annually at each host university, including graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and research technicians, ultimately creating more than 1,000 jobs annually. Additionally, Scientists, research staff, and students in the Cooperative Research Units program are highly productive. Each year the program staff collectively provided on average the following products: 443 scientific papers published, 108 technical assistance actions enacted, 80 university courses taught, 58 invited public speaking engagements delivered, and 24 workshops or short courses provided to cooperators and stakeholders.

The CRU program has been responsible for **significant advances in management and conservation of fish and wildlife resources** in the US and beyond. Unit scientists provide critical insight and guidance to managers facing complex conservation challenges, ensuring that science directly informs decision-making at state, regional, and national levels.

With approximately 700 research projects underway in fiscal year 2025, Unit scientists are addressing pressing ecological issues and delivering applied solutions that enhance resource management. As decisions are being made within USDOI and USGS, considerations for the investments that state fish and wildlife agencies currently have in ongoing research through Units for ongoing projects must be considered.

The Cooperative Research Units are highly leveraged, add value for both the federal government and states, and reflect the power of partnerships and collaboration which provides an example of efficient, effective and impactful federal programs. State fish and wildlife agencies and Universities are concerned that decisions about the Unit program are not being made with inclusion of this information, creating a high risk for stranded state investments in needed fish and wildlife research.