TESTIMONY OF ROWAN GOULD, ACTING DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE ON H.R. 556, THE SOUTHERN SEA OTTER RECOVERY AND RESEARCH ACT; H.R. 1454, THE MULTINATIONAL SPECIES CONSERVATION FUNDS SEMIPOSTAL STAMP ACT OF 2009; AND H.R. 509, THE MARINE TURTLE CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2009

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Chairwoman Bordallo and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Rowan Gould, Acting Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify on H.R. 556, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act; H.R. 1454, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act of 2009; and H.R. 509, the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2009. The Service appreciates the Subcommittee's leadership and support of these issues.

H.R. 556, the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act

The Service greatly appreciates the continued efforts of Congressman Farr and the Subcommittee to further southern sea otter recovery and research and recognizes the changes that have been made to the bill. This Department understands how especially important the southern sea otter is to the people along the central coast of California. The Department supports the intent of H.R. 556, as it would strengthen the Service's capacity to address the recovery of the southern sea otters. However, the Service remains concerned that a financial allocation of this magnitude has the potential to divert funds from other high priority recovery actions for threatened and endangered species in California.

Background

Historically, sea otters ranged along the North Pacific rim from the northern Japanese islands to mid-Baja California, Mexico. The California population prior to exploitation is thought to have numbered about 16,000 animals. During the 18th and 19th centuries, sea otters were hunted for their fur, and by the early 1900s, the species was believed to be extinct in California. Southern (California) sea otters are descended from a small colony that survived along the Big Sur coast and became generally known to the public in 1938.

The southern sea otter was listed as threatened in 1977 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Reduced range and population size, vulnerability to oil spills, and the oil spill risk from coastal tanker traffic were the primary threats that led to the listing of the southern sea otter as a threatened species. As a consequence of its threatened status, it is also recognized as a depleted stock pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The southern sea otter population contains about 2,800 individuals and ranges from San Mateo County south to Santa Barbara County, California. Approximately 40 sea otters, including pups, exist at San Nicolas Island as a result of translocation efforts to establish an experimental population.

While the southern sea otter population has increased, the maximum growth rates seen in southern sea otters (5-6 percent per year) are much lower than those seen in other recovering sea otter populations (up to 17-20 percent per year). High mortality appears to be responsible for the slow overall growth and for periods of decline in southern sea otters, and death of prime-age animals is of particular concern. Disease and predation, food limitation, nutritional deficiencies, and exposure to chemical contaminants are all stressors that may be influencing mortality patterns. An additional concern is the impact climate change may have on southern sea otters and the California coastal ecosystem.

Recovery of the southern sea otter presents many challenges. Our efforts are benefiting from collaboration with our partners in sea otter recovery, including the U.S. Geological Survey; California Department of Fish and Game; Monterey Bay Aquarium; University of California, Santa Cruz; University of California, Davis; The Marine Mammal Center; Defenders of Wildlife; and others. The Service and our partners are currently directing recovery efforts toward determining why southern sea otter population numbers remain depressed. Research is critical to a better understanding of current and future threats to southern sea otters. Baseline data are particularly important in tracking impacts over time. It is imperative that the Service have access to high quality data from consistent monitoring of southern sea otter abundance and studies aimed at understanding sea otter mortality.

Comments on H.R. 556

The Department supports the intent of H.R. 556 as it will enable the Service to build upon the current recovery and research efforts, strengthen existing partnerships, and enable new collaborative efforts for sea otter recovery and research. However, as previously mentioned the Service has concerns that H.R. 556 could divert funds from other high priority recovery actions for threatened and endangered species in California.

Section 2 of H.R. 556 directs the Service to carry out a recovery and research program for the southern sea otter. H.R. 556 would require the establishment of a peer-reviewed, merit-based process to award competitive grants for southern sea otter research and recovery. The Service supports the potential research areas outlined in H.R. 556 and the flexibility built into the program.

Section 3 of the legislation establishes a Southern Sea Otter Recovery Scientific Advisory Committee to advise the Secretary of the Interior on research goals and priorities, recovery actions, and the scientific merit of research proposals. The Service recognizes the value of outside expertise to provide guidance on southern sea otter recovery and research.

Section 5 of H.R. 556 authorizes appropriations to carry out the Act through 2015. In the course of the development of the President's budget, we will determine whether to request appropriations under this authority when we look at the funding available for threatened and endangered species and the relative needs of the program.

H.R. 1454, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act

The Department would like to express its support for the intent of H.R. 1454, the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Act. Wildlife and natural resources are under pressure from growing human populations and corresponding changes in land use, pollution, and consumption of natural resources. The complexity and diversity of these challenges require internationally coordinated actions. H.R. 1454 recognizes and supports the crucial role that the United States plays in the conservation of wildlife and natural resources around the globe.

Background

The Service has a long history of proactive programs addressing international wildlife species conservation. As a Party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the Convention on Nature Protection and Wild Life Preservation in the Western Hemisphere, and other international conservation agreements, the United States shares responsibility for supporting and implementing measures to provide for the conservation of hundreds of species of plants and animals both here and abroad. The Service works with private citizens, local communities, state and federal agencies, foreign governments, native peoples and nongovernmental organizations, to promote a coordinated domestic and international strategy to protect, restore, and enhance the world's diverse wildlife and habitats.

The Service currently administers several successful Multinational Species Conservation Funds under the African Elephant Conservation Act, the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act, the Asian Elephant Conservation Act, the Great Apes Conservation Act, and the Marine Turtle Conservation Act. The Multinational Species Conservation Funds encourage and assist efforts to conserve some of the world's most ecologically and sociologically important wildlife species through on-the-ground actions and other related conservation measures. The grants supported by these Funds provide technical and cost-sharing assistance to range countries for conservation of their species and habitats. The projects funded represent cooperative efforts involving local governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. These Funds reflect our strong national commitment to help support conservation programs of the target species in the wild.

To date, the Service has funded 1,371 conservation grants in 75 countries. Approximately $57 million in funds appropriated have leveraged more than $140 million in matching and in-kind contributions from more than 500 partner organizations, thereby greatly expanding our on-the-ground conservation efforts.

Comments on H.R. 1454

The U.S. Postal Service's Semipostal Program provides an opportunity to generate awareness and revenue for specific approved causes. Since the program's inception in 1997, there have been three semipostal stamps, generating a total of approximately $80 million in revenue for the three causes. H.R. 1454 would create a convenient way for the public to support the conservation efforts of the Multinational Species Conservation Funds by creating a Multinational Species Conservation Semipostal Stamp.

H.R. 1454 creates a semipostal stamp which would be offered at the rate for mailing a letter weighing one ounce or less, plus a differential of not less than 25 percent, for a period of at least five years. Stamps issued under the Act would depict images of the flagship species that will be supported by the proceeds, including elephants, rhinoceros, tigers, marine turtles, and great apes. Proceeds from the sale of this stamp would be divided equally among the African Elephant Conservation Fund, the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund, the Great Ape Conservation Fund, the Marine Turtle Conservation Fund, and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund. The Service recommends that language be added to H.R. 1454 to ensure that any additional Multinational Species Conservation Fund legislation that is passed in the future receive an equal share of the revenues.

A semipostal stamp would not only raise new dollars for the Multinational Species Conservation Funds, but would also generate greater public awareness of international wildlife conservation issues and endangered species. Constituencies for the stamp include: animal lovers, conservation-oriented individuals and organizations, stamp collectors, and international tourists. This Act would also help increase awareness of the Multinational Species Conservation Funds, and provide supplemental funding for wildlife conservation projects that would not have been possible without the revenue generated by the stamps. For these reasons, the Department supports the intent of this legislation. However, since this legislation has ramifications for the U.S. Postal Service, we recommend that the Subcommittee solicit their views on this legislation.

H.R. 509, the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2009

The Department would also like to express its support for H.R. 509, the Marine Turtle Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2009, which addresses some of the most urgent conservation issues regarding marine turtles. As mentioned above, the Service has a long history of proactive programs addressing international wildlife species conservation. Our experience has shown that relatively modest sums, if judiciously applied to well-designed and implemented projects, can leverage considerable resources and, just as importantly, the interest of communities, governments, and the world. Working with our international partners, we see clear signs of the effectiveness of our combined efforts.

Background

Marine turtles disperse and migrate throughout the world's oceans, and as a result, they are important indicators of coastal and marine environmental health on local, regional and global scales. Less than 60 years ago, marine turtles were abundant, and widespread nesting on beaches was common. Today however, six of the seven marine turtle species—the Kemp's ridley, the Olive ridley, the Loggerhead, the Leatherback, the Hawksbill, and the Green turtle—are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). All seven species are included in Appendix 1 of CITES. Threats facing marine turtles continue to include overexploitation of eggs and turtles, trade in turtle parts, bycatch mortality, and loss of habitat. Overall, nesting populations for most species have declined worldwide with a few exceptions. For example, surveys of the Kemp's ridley turtles on a nesting beach in northeastern Mexico showed a drop from more than 40,000 nesting females estimated on one day in 1947 to fewer than 270 nesting females for the entire nesting season in 1985.

Fortunately, the dual approach of long-term nest protection measures implemented in Mexico in the late 1960s and binationally with the Service since 1978 along with the Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) requirements in the 1990's has reversed this trend. During the mid 1990's, surveys showed sustained increases in the number of recorded Kemp's ridley nests. More recently, in 2008 approximately 18,000 nests were recorded in Mexico. Females nest approximately every other year and lay 2.4 nests per season, equating to 7,500 nesting females annually. This success story demonstrates our capacity to recover depleted Kemp's ridley and other sea turtle populations with sustained long-term international efforts.

In addition, the Service has recorded increases in hawksbill nesting populations in the Wider Caribbean since the total ban on legal international trade in hawksbill products and the implementation of long-term nesting beach conservation projects in Mexico, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Barbados and other important nesting sites. Unfortunately we are also witnessing the collapse of the Pacific leatherback populations from years of overexploitation on the nesting beaches of Mexico and the West Pacific and the high bycatch mortality of leatherbacks from long line and gill net fisheries. In the early 1980's, for example, during a single nesting season the total estimated number of leatherback nests was more than 150,000 on East Pacific Mexico beaches. In recent years, by comparison, fewer than 1,000 nests were recorded.

The Marine Turtle Conservation Act has enabled the Service to support intensified nesting beach conservation on critical leatherback beaches in Mexico, Costa Rica, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. It is also playing a vital role in preventing a similar population crash of the West Africa leatherback nesting population. Based on an initiative in Gabon in 2005, the Service has helped organize governments and partners to work more closely together on nesting beaches, including nest protection on the key nesting beaches in Gabon and Congo subject to heavy exploitation. The Service has also helped establish community-based conservation programs with partners on remnant nesting populations in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Under the Marine Turtle Conservation Act, for fiscal years 2005 through 2008, the Service funded 78 conservation grants and approximately $2.4 million in funds appropriated leveraged roughly $3.7 million in matching and in-kind contributions from partner organizations to support the conservation of marine turtles.

Comments on H.R. 509

Implementation of the Marine Turtle Conservation Act by the Service is based on the pattern established in the previous Multinational Species Conservation Act initiatives. Through the Act, the Service has implemented a streamlined process that allows for timely approval of projects, and quick action in emergency situations. Each project funded is a cooperative effort with foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, or private sector entities. No in-country project is approved unless it has the full support of in-country government officials, and has been identified as a project that will address the country's conservation priorities. H.R. 509 would enable the Service to continue in its role as a provider of dedicated funding for comprehensive, global coordination and collaboration in developing countries where resources and capacity for marine turtle conservation are limited. Therefore, the Department supports H.R. 509.

The Department does, however, have one area of concern with the legislation. Recently amended Multinational Species Conservation Acts recognize the increased administrative responsibilities to deliver conservation worldwide while avoiding waste, fraud and abuse. More specifically, recent reauthorizations have included an increase in the limit on administrative expenses to "3 percent or $100,000, whichever is greater." The language currently written into the Marine Turtle Conservation Act sets a limit of "3 percent or $80,000, whichever is greater." Administrative responsibilities of the Service include oversight, technical support and evaluation of the large number of grants awarded in developing countries throughout the world. We recommend that the legislation be changed to reflect administrative funding levels on par with the reauthorizations of the other Multinational Species Conservation Acts.

Marine turtles are model "flagship species" for both local and international coastal conservation. Because marine turtles circumnavigate the world's oceans to reach their nesting beaches, their conservation must be addressed through global efforts. By focusing on these species and their habitats, it is likely that ecologically critical areas of the planet will be considered and managed more adequately. We welcome the opportunity to continue our cooperation and work with other countries and partners to conserve the world's magnificent marine turtles, particularly in light of the challenges climate change may pose.

Conclusion

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 556, H.R. 1454, and H.R. 509. We look forward to continuing to work with the Members of the Subcommittee on these important issues. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank Mr. Brown for introducing H.R. 509 and H.R. 1454. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions.