

**STATEMENT OF
DAN ASHE, DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE,
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, POWER AND OCEANS
REGARDING THE FISCAL YEAR 2016 BUDGET**

March 19, 2015

Good morning Chairman McClintock, Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Tsongas, and Ranking Member Huffman and Members of both Subcommittees. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Fiscal Year 2016 budget request. I look forward to working with you in the new Congress to conserve the Nation's fish and wildlife resources for the benefit of the American people.

As Americans, we want to provide places where citizens of all ages can enjoy and appreciate the outdoors. We want future generations to be able to go hunting, fishing, biking, camping, boating and wildlife viewing. We want our children to inherit a sense of wonder and the sheer joy of being in the outdoors. We also want to preserve its other benefits to humans -- clean water, clean air, wetlands and native upland plants to help prevent erosion, and pollinators for our food supply.

At the same time we recognize life is about balance. We need the outdoors for relaxation and recreation, but we also need places to work and live, we need places to shop and to make the products that we depend on.

The Service recognizes the need for this balance and is actively pursuing conservation to foster and support the Nation's growing economy and human population. We proposed a budget that is strategically crafted to help us with this task.

We are investing in the conservation of our wildlife and habitat to provide those myriad health and economic benefits to U.S. communities. Investing in the next generation of Americans is also critical, so we are creating new ways to engage young audiences in outdoor experiences, both on wildlife refuges and partner lands. With 80 percent of the U.S. population currently residing in urban

communities, helping urban dwellers rediscover the outdoors is a priority for the Service.

The President's Fiscal Year 2016 discretionary budget request supports \$1.6 billion in programs for the Service, an increase of \$130.7 million over the 2015 enacted level to fund the agency's high-priority needs. The budget also contains an additional \$1.4 billion available under permanent appropriations, most of which will be provided directly to States for fish and wildlife restoration and conservation.

This budget invests in science-based conservation and restoration of our land, water, and native species on a landscape scale, considering the impacts of landscape-level changes like a changing climate; expansion and improvement of recreational opportunities — such as hunting, fishing and wildlife watching — for all Americans, including urban populations; increased efforts to combat illegal wildlife trafficking, which is an international crisis; and the operation and maintenance of our public lands.

America's Great Outdoors – This initiative, a Service priority, seeks to empower all Americans to share the benefits of the outdoors, and leave a healthy, vibrant outdoor legacy for generations to come. A critical component of America's Great Outdoors is the National Wildlife Refuge System, which offers rewarding and convenient outdoor adventures to an increasingly urban society. Funding for the operation and maintenance of the Refuge System is requested at \$508.2 million, an increase of \$34.0 million above the 2015 enacted level. Included in that increase is \$5.0 million for the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, which will extend opportunities to engage more urban youth and adults.

The budget also requests \$108.3 million for grant programs administered by the Service that support America's Great Outdoors goals. Programs such as the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants are an important source of funds for the conservation and improvement of a range of wildlife and the landscapes on which they depend.

Wildlife Trafficking – Wildlife trafficking has emerged as an international crisis, imperiling some of the world's most recognized and beloved species as well as global security. The poaching of African elephants and rhinos for ivory and horn stands at unprecedented levels, and illegal trade is undermining the conservation of scores of other species. The President is requesting an increase of \$4.0 million for the Service to combat expanding illegal wildlife trafficking and support conservation efforts on the ground in Africa and across the globe, an additional

\$4.0 million to expand the Service's wildlife forensics capability to provide the evidence needed for investigating and prosecuting wildlife crimes, and an additional \$2.0 million for the African Elephant and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Funds.

Ecological Services – The budget includes \$258.2 million to conserve, protect and enhance listed and at-risk wildlife and their habitats, an increase of \$32.3 million compared with the 2015 enacted level. The budget includes program increases of \$2.3 million for listing activities, \$10.4 million for consultation and planning activities including those supporting renewable energy development, and \$18.3 million to support species conservation and restoration actions. These increases include a \$4.0 million program increase to support conservation of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem, which extends across 11 States in the intermountain West. Conservation of this vast area requires a collaborative effort unprecedented in geographic scope and magnitude. To achieve sustainable conservation success for this ecosystem, the Service identified priority needs for basic scientific expertise, technical assistance for on-the-ground support, and internal and external coordination and partnership building with western States, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and other partners.

Additionally, the budget request contains a \$4.0 million increase to ensure appropriate design and quick approval of important restoration projects the Federal government, States, counties, parishes, and other entities will be pursuing in the Gulf of Mexico States in the near future. The Gulf of Mexico Watershed spans 31 States and is critical to the health and vitality of our Nation's natural and economic resources. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill dramatically increased the urgency of the Service's work in the Gulf region and our leadership responsibilities. Over the course of the next decade, billions of dollars in settlement funds, Clean Water Act penalties and Natural Resource Damage Assessment restitution will be directed toward projects to study and restore wildlife habitat in the Gulf of Mexico region. In addition to being in high demand for the technical assistance it can provide, the Service will be a key player in ensuring beneficial projects receive environmental clearances. By providing this additional funding, the Service will be better equipped to meet this demand, resulting in the realization of ecological and economic benefits to the Gulf States—and the Nation—sooner.

Fish and Aquatic Conservation – The budget request includes a total of \$147.5 million for Fish and Aquatic Conservation, a program increase of \$4.9 million from the 2015 enacted level. Within its fisheries program, the Service is

requesting an additional \$1.0 million for fish passage improvements to help make human communities and natural resources more resilient to extreme weather events by restoring natural stream channels, which helps alleviate flood concerns. This partnership program also generates revenue and jobs for local communities. The Service is also requesting an additional \$2.4 million for efforts to control the spread of invasive Asian carp. This budget maintains the funding increase provided to the National Fish Hatchery System by Congress in the 2015 appropriations bill, which will allow the Service to continue hatchery operations, working with States, Tribes and other partners and stakeholders to chart a financially sound course forward to conserve our Nation's fish and aquatic species.

Land Acquisition – The 2016 Federal Land Acquisition program builds on efforts started in 2011 to strategically invest in the highest priority conservation areas through better coordination among Department of the Interior agencies and the U.S. Forest Service. This budget includes \$164.8 million for Federal land acquisition, composed of \$58.5 million in current funding and \$106.3 million in proposed permanent funding. The budget provides an overall increase of \$117.2 million above the 2015 enacted level. An emphasis on the use of these funds is to work with willing landowners to secure public access to places to recreate, hunt and fish.

Powering Our Future – The Service continues to support the Administration's "all-of-the-above" energy strategy by engaging in early planning, thoughtful mitigation and the application of sound science not only for traditional sources of energy but also in the development of new, cleaner energy to help mitigate the causes of climate change. The budget proposes \$16.8 million, an increase of \$2.6 million, for environmental clearances and other activities associated with energy development.

Landscape Level Understanding – The budget request includes \$69.7 million, an increase of \$12.2 million above the 2015 enacted level, for landscape level science and conservation. Global and national conservation challenges such as development pressure, climate change, resource extraction, wildfire, drought, invasive species and changing ocean conditions require an unprecedented effort to better understand threats and inspire coordinated action to address them.

The President's request for the Service includes an important increase for Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, otherwise known as LCCs. The budget requests an increase of about \$8 million for LCCs and Adaptive Science over the fiscal year 2015 appropriation. LCCs are at their core voluntary, non-regulatory

collaborations with States, Tribes, and others stakeholders. Together, we work at the large landscape scale, identify common priorities, invest in the science needed to make smart conservation decisions, and then work together to meet our shared goals. The growing commitment to the LCCs by our partners is demonstrated by the formal participation of over 270 organizations on LCC committees and the increasing leveraging of resources.

Partners are now calling upon LCCs to take on larger roles. For example, LCCs are working with 15 Southeastern States to facilitate the development of a shared conservation vision. The effort is identifying the areas that are most important for wildlife in the Southeastern U.S., allowing all partners to coordinate conservation investments and leverage resources into the future. Similarly, at the request of Northeastern States, LCCs are knitting together multiple State wildlife action plans into a single regional conservation strategy. LCC investments are also prioritizing fish passage projects across the Great Lakes, ensuring native fish can move into historical spawning grounds while minimizing the likelihood invasive species expand their range. In addition, LCCs are working with partners in the West to understand the impacts of invasive species and fire management on wildlife and develop strategies to keep native wildlife healthy. Providing funding at the fiscal year 2016 request level will position LCCs to meet these conservation priorities and many others identified collaboratively with our partners.

Cooperative Recovery – Species recovery is another important Service priority addressed in this budget. For 2016, the President requests a total of \$10.7 million, an increase of \$4.8 million over the 2015 enacted level, for cooperative recovery. The focus will be on implementing recovery actions for species nearing delisting or reclassification from endangered to threatened, and actions that are urgently needed for critically endangered species.

Legislative Proposals

In addition to our funding requests, the Service is proposing three legislative changes to reduce costs and enhance State and Federal conservation programs. First, the Service is requesting authority similar to the National Park Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which would allow us to seek compensation from responsible parties who injure or destroy Refuge System or other Service resources. Today, when system resources are injured or destroyed, the costs of repair and restoration falls upon our appropriated budget for the affected refuge, often at the expense of other refuge programs. In 2013,

refuges reported seven cases of arson and 2,300 vandalism offenses. Monetary losses from these cases totaled \$1.1 million dollars.

We are also supporting the extension of the authority that provides Pittman-Robertson fund interest to the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). Unless the Act is amended, interest generated will return to the Wildlife Restoration Fund. Interest from the Pittman-Robertson fund is a critical source of income for NAWCA contributing to stabilizing waterfowl populations on the continent and enhancing hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation. Since 1994, the fund has generated \$348 million for NAWCA which our partners have matched by more than 2:1.

Last, we appreciate Congressional approval last year of the first increase to the cost of a Duck Stamp in many years, and request language that will provide stability to the purchasing power of the Federal Duck Stamp. We request limited authority for the Secretary of the Interior, with the approval of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, to increase the price of the Federal Duck Stamp, which will allow fees to keep up with inflation.

Conclusion

The actions we take today will have repercussions for generations of Americans to come. The native species and ecosystems of our planet support billions of people and help drive the world's economy. Despite the challenges we face, I am incredibly optimistic about the future. With the President's budget request we can help preserve the values Americans support, leave a legacy to our children and grandchildren, and sustain species and habitat. Thank you again for inviting me to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.