

Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council

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December 15, 2023

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Haaland and Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you on behalf of the membership of the Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council. As part of our on-going efforts to recommend actions that support the conservation of wildlife and their habitats, as well as wildlife-based recreational opportunities such as hunting, the Council recommends that you advocate within the Administration for the establishment of a national “net gain” of wetlands goal. This policy would be fitting given the administration’s strong commitment to the conservation of lands, waters, and wildlife.

Loss of wetlands habitats, such as those in the Prairie Pothole Region and the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, have led to declines in wildlife populations and has hindered access to recreational opportunities. Wetlands provide critical habitat for both commercially and recreationally important wildlife and threatened and endangered species. The continental United States has already lost over half of its wetlands, 110 million acres, and proactive efforts are needed to combat this loss. Wetlands provide critical services for communities such as: water purification, water storage, flood control, resiliency, biodiversity and climate change mitigation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

A “no-net-loss” or administrative-wide mandate to protect wetlands across our country was first adopted by President Jimmy Carter in 1977 and endorsed by presidents like President George H.W. Bush in 1989 at the Sixth International Waterfowl Symposium, in collaboration with conservation organizations at the time. An interagency task force to support this mandate was maintained through all presidential administrations until 2016. The Council recommends that the administration go beyond a no-net-loss and establish a national “net gain” wetlands goal as a complementary effort to the America the Beautiful initiative, which would conserve remaining wetlands and help to regain those wetlands already lost.

A new wetlands goal would set the stage for a national strategy to conserve and restore the nation’s wetlands, in partnership with private landowners, conservation experts, sporting and wildlife groups, state and local governments, and Tribal nations. This can be

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done in a manner that fully respects private property rights, rewards stewardship and provides myriad outcomes for the American public and especially hunters and anglers. The Council is committed to working with the Administration to advance priorities and to work with you to identify voluntary and incentive-based programs conserving and protecting wetlands into the future.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendation. Should you have questions or need more information regarding this matter, please contact Doug Hobbs, the Council's Designated Federal Officer, at doug_hobbs@fws.gov or (703) 358-2336.

Sincerely,



Collin O'Mara
Chair



John Devney
Vice Chair

Cc: HWCC members
Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary – Farm Production and Conservation, Department of Agriculture
Matt Strickler, Deputy Assistant Secretary – Department of the Interior
Martha Williams, Director – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Cynthia Martinez, Chief – National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service