

Testimony of Stephen Guertin
Deputy Director for Policy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and
Wildlife, regarding H.R. 2795, the “Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act” and H.R. 3742,
the “Recovering America’s Wildlife Act”

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Stephen Guertin, Deputy Director for Policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior (Department). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 2795, the “Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act” and H.R. 3742, the “Recovering America’s Wildlife Act.”

The Service’s mission is “working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.” The Service is the oldest Federal conservation agency, tracing its lineage back to 1871, and it is the only agency in the Federal government whose primary responsibility is the conservation of fish and wildlife resources for the American public. The Service’s work helps ensure a healthy environment, and provides affordable, accessible, and premier opportunities for Americans to enjoy outdoor recreation and our shared natural heritage. It is a priority of the Service and of this Administration to increase access to outdoor recreational opportunities, reduce the regulatory burden, modernize infrastructure, and recover imperiled species.

The Service is responsible for the conservation of wildlife resources, including endangered and threatened species, migratory birds, certain marine mammals, and certain native and interjurisdictional fish. The Service works closely with States, Tribes, other Federal agencies and private landowners through a variety of authorities to conserve fish, wildlife and plants and is committed to implementing proactive conservation measures in coordination with partners and stakeholders.

We appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in the Service’s important mission. We offer the following comments on H.R. 2795 and H.R. 3742, and look forward to discussing these views with the Subcommittee and the bills’ sponsors.

H.R. 2795, the “Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act”

H.R. 2795 would create a National Wildlife Corridor System on federal lands and waters that would be managed by the relevant Secretaries of jurisdiction, as well as a tribal wildlife corridor designation program that is voluntary for tribal participation. Under this bill, a grant program would be established to provide funding for wildlife corridor management on non-federal lands and waters to support movement of wildlife and habitat connectivity. The grant program would be administered by a newly created National Coordination Committee, with input and proposal submissions provided by newly created Regional Wildlife Movement Councils. To inform the current state of wildlife corridors nationwide, the bill would create a database on national

wildlife corridors. The database would include the best scientific data and information available and have requirements to ensure the protection of proprietary information.

Habitat loss and fragmentation are widely recognized as among the most important threats to biodiversity. The continued viability of many wildlife populations is dependent on populations' continual ability to move, including daily movements among local resources, migrations between seasonal ranges, long-range dispersal supporting gene flow, and species range shifts over time in response to changing conditions. In 2018 the Secretary of the Interior issued Secretarial Order 3362 (S.O. 3362, or Order) to improve habitat quality in western big game winter range and migration corridors for antelope, elk, and mule deer. S.O. 3362 was issued to foster improved collaboration with states and private landowners as well as facilitate the use of science to guide focused habitat conservation activities on the highest priority habitats within a respective state. Migration patterns of these species can cover hundreds of miles and cross all types of land, including federal, private, state, and tribal. S.O. 3362 seeks to help with many aspects of solving the challenges encountered along the pathways of these migratory routes.

The Service continues to support the collaborative work with state wildlife agencies. A limiting factor for many of the western state wildlife agencies is the lack of data, analysis, or mapping to identify the corridors. In the full spirit of collaboration, the Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are funding a second round of research proposals providing up to \$300,000 per state for the priority research projects submitted by the 11 states identified in the Order. Furthermore, the Service and BLM provide funding support for habitat conservation projects through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Migration Corridor grant program, which was established in 2018, as well as corridor and conservation projects on private land through the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) is working collaboratively with States and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and Department bureaus to facilitate data compilation and analyses necessary to map big game migration corridors across the West. This includes transfer of technical information to State wildlife agencies and other Federal biologists on the tools and methods available to analyze migration corridor data.

The implementation of the Order has increased awareness of the issues surrounding wildlife corridors, including highway-wildlife interactions. As wildlife move across landscapes, they intersect with human movements and development via roadways, train tracks, and other structures. Corridor improvement measures aimed at reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions and other road impacts on wildlife connectivity have proven an effective means of both protecting human safety and preventing wildlife mortality, while providing dispersal opportunities to a wide array of wildlife.

Working respectfully with full recognition of the states' authority to manage elk, deer, and pronghorn has resulted in strong support of S.O. 3362 by state wildlife agencies. For example, the Western Governors Association passed a policy resolution on "Wildlife Migration Corridors and Habitat" that specifically references S.O. 3362, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recently established a "Migration Workgroup" that specifically recognizes S.O. 3362, and State fish and wildlife agencies are diligently working on compiling information and data for the development of a second iteration of the S.O. 3362 State Action Plans. The Service, BLM,

and U.S. Geological Survey continue the focused implementation of the Order to help the states identify priority corridors, and to focus limited habitat conservation dollars on the most important areas within a respective state.

Voluntary and non-regulatory landscape conservation has been a successful approach across the country. Several provisions in H.R. 2795 emphasize this collaborative approach, including: the Wildlife Movement Grant Program; the Wildlife Corridors Stewardship Fund – though the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation currently serves that role well; and the Tribal Wildlife Corridor initiative. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Subcommittee to ensure any corridor legislation complements and does not deter the existing work of the Service and our sister bureaus as we continue to work with states and other partners to improve the habitat conditions in migration corridors.

H.R. 3742, the “Recovering America’s Wildlife Act”

H.R. 3742 proposes to redirect \$1.3 billion annually from existing revenue in the general treasury fund to States and Territories for fish and wildlife conservation, and \$97.5 million for Tribal fish and wildlife conservation. The funding would provide States and Territories with critical resources necessary to implement their wildlife action plans—which all 50 States and six territories have developed—to support species of greatest conservation need identified in these plans. Tribes would also be provided critical funding to develop, implement or enhance Tribal fish and wildlife conservation programs to manage Tribal species of greatest conservation need.

The bill would apportion the revenues to States, Territories, and Tribes to support continued wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, to recover endangered and threatened species, to reduce the future need to list species as threatened or endangered, and to bolster collaborative, proactive fish and wildlife conservation activities, among other purposes. The Service would administer the Act through an annual apportionment of 1.85 percent, or roughly \$24 million, in administrative funding.

The Service applauds and supports State and Territory conservation efforts. As a critical partner in the effort to conserve our nation’s natural resources, State and Territory fish and wildlife agencies develop State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP), which provide a roadmap for conservation within their jurisdiction. SWAPs were developed as a requirement of two programs created by Congress: the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and the State Wildlife Grant program. Both programs provide federal funding for conserving wildlife and their habitats before they become too rare or costly to restore, and identifying their Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

The Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program, which H.R. 3742 would amend, was enacted as an amendment to the landmark Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act. The State Wildlife Grant program was created through the congressional appropriations process. Under both programs, the Service distributes funds to State fish and wildlife agencies based on each state’s population and land area. The federal funds must be matched by funding from state or other nonfederal sources. Although the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program was authorized as a permanent program, funding was only provided for the first year, while federal funding has continued to be appropriated to the State Wildlife Grants program.

Including the State Wildlife Grant program, the Service provides a variety of financial assistance to our State and Tribal partners and continues to be supportive of efforts to enhance their ability to address pressing conservation issues. The funding provided through the Recovering America's Wildlife Act allows for increased opportunities to engage in non-consumptive wildlife dependent recreation by focusing conservation efforts on Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Wildlife watching and wildlife photography is a critical component of our national economy. In 2016, participants in wildlife watching activities spent a total of \$75.9 billion, with \$11.6 billion spent on food, lodging, transportation and other trip costs, and \$55.1 billion spent on equipment purchases. By investing in reducing threats to species and their habitats before they become critically imperiled, future conservation efforts are likely to be less costly, more flexible, and more likely to result in successful conservation over time. Given the changes in revenue sourcing from the previous versions of the bill, along with the inclusion of dedicated Tribal funding, and a focused effort on addressing threatened and endangered species, the Service supports the intent of the Recovering America's Wildlife Act and notes the potential budgetary impacts of the bill would require further analysis.

Conclusion

The Service appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in wildlife conservation and management. Fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats, face many stressors and threats across the nation and around the globe. Over more than a century, Congress has provided broad authorities to the Service to conserve and manage species at home and abroad; and these authorities have been successful in ensuring that robust populations of many species exist for the benefit of our citizens, and that the decline of other species is limited and recovery is promoted. The Service is committed to accomplishing its mission, in accordance with our statutory mandates and through science driven decision making, on behalf of current and future generations of Americans. We stand ready to work with the Subcommittee as you consider these and other fish and wildlife conservation and management bills.