



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

ALASKA CHAPTER

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society strives to enhance the ability of wildlife professionals to conserve biological diversity, sustain productivity, and ensure responsible use of wildlife resources in Alaska for the benefit of society.



The Honorable Dan Sullivan
510 L Street, Suite 750
Anchorage, AK 99501

May 21, 2018

Greetings Senator Sullivan,

The Alaska Chapter of the Wildlife Society is writing to express concern over the de-prioritization of science and scientifically sound wildlife conservation and management programs within the Trump Administration's FY 2019 budget request.

The Wildlife Society, founded in 1937, is a non-profit professional society representing over 10,000 wildlife biologists and managers dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Our mission is to inspire, empower, and enable wildlife professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitat through science-based management and conservation.

Many conservation programs within the Departments of Interior and Agriculture assist state, federal, private, and non-profit biologists and managers in maintaining wildlife populations as a public trust resource for the benefit of all Alaskans as well as other Americans. Relative to the FY2019 budget request, of notable importance to our members are the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Cooperative Research Units (CRU) Program, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (STWG) Program, the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife Services - Wildlife Damage Management Program.

Without sufficient funding for these programs, applied science and monitoring programs will be lost, and practical, proactive conservation and management measures carried out by state, federal, tribal, and local partners will be impossible to implement. This will leave federal agencies with an irreversible knowledge gap and has the potential to cause costlier, reactive conservation measures, such as Endangered Species Act listings. Such listings can be a significant burden to private sector economic activity and lead to burdensome regulations at both state and federal levels.

USGS Cooperative Research Units (CRU) Program

The CRU, within the USGS Ecosystems Mission Area, is a true partnership among federal, state, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and academic institutions to provide applied science tailored to the needs of on-the-ground wildlife managers and helps develop the next generation of wildlife biologists and managers. These partnerships **leverage more than three dollars in external funds for every federal dollar invested.** The CRU at the University of Alaska is a collective endeavor and product of its cooperators, which include the university and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). An example of a valuable project at the Alaska CRU is one to develop an ecosystem model for Alaska and Northwest Canada. This model represents how animal habitat structure and function is influenced by changes in climate, disturbance regimes (such as wildfire and permafrost degradation), permafrost dynamics, and hydrology. These assessments are important to numerous stakeholders that rely on fish and wildlife in Alaska for subsistence and recreation because they inform land managers of options for adaptation strategies when managing natural resources in a changing climate.

Federal partners also greatly benefit from adequate funding of the CRUs. These agencies partner with the CRUs not only because they are highly responsive to their scientific needs and are composed of highly reputable, skilled researchers, but also because they are highly cost-effective. **Elimination of CRUs, as the Trump Administration budget requests, would have devastating impacts to the scientific capacity and science-based wildlife management decisions of the State of Alaska and the federal agencies within.**

USFWS National Wildlife Refuge System

The Administration's FY 2019 budget request for the National Wildlife Refuge System outlines an **\$11 million reduction and realignment of the accounts currently funded**. Today, the NWRS hosts 16 refuge units in Alaska, comprising over 76 million acres of land and water. While these units are essential to the conservation of native species for the enjoyment of Alaskans and all Americans, they are especially valuable for surrounding communities, generating both economic activity and critical subsistence resources.

A few examples: (1) The NWRS manages big game guiding through competitive award of exclusive guide-use areas. This system has been positively recognized by big game guides and the Alaska Professional Hunters Association because it results in a stable business environment, high quality experiences for hunters, reduces hunter conflicts, and ensures sustainable use of a renewable resource; (2) All refuges work closely with the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game to evaluate populations and ensure hunting harvest levels remain sustainable. The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society is concerned that reductions in Refuge funding will curtail opportunities for refuges to continue implementing a quality big game guide use permit program and hinder their ability to cooperate with ADF&G in gathering annual population survey data to ensure game population sustainability.

The Alaska Congressional Delegation has publicly stated the Cold Bay to King Cove access road through Izembek NWR, and the petroleum exploration and drilling in the Arctic NWR can be completed with minimum harm to the environment, including Alaska's world-class big game and fishery resources. For this to occur the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society believes the Refuge System in Alaska must be provided sufficient financial resources to ensure those priority projects can be undertaken in a careful and environmentally sensitive manner. The proposed cuts will make it nearly impossible for the agency to conduct effective permitting oversight, monitoring, and impact analysis on these projects.

Incremental reductions in funding levels in recent fiscal years, have resulted in many positions left vacant or even eliminated. This has reduced the ability of Refuges to provide for basic visitor services and work with collaborators like ADF&G to ensure sustainable wildlife and fish harvests on Alaska refuges.

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants

The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program, within the USFWS budget, is the nation's only program that directly supports developing and implementing State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs), which are fundamental to preventing the listing of more species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This program empowers Alaska and its partners to proactively and cost-effectively conserve fish and wildlife resources. This funding is critical for proactively conserving species deemed at-risk of decline or in need of additional monitoring efforts to determine their status, distribution, and trends in populations; critical information to avoid reactive ESA listings. **The FY 2019 budget request proposes a 50% reduction in this program**, unraveling years of work to conserve species before they become threatened or endangered.

Current funding levels, despite being well below the level required to implement the critical conservation actions identified in SWAPs, have assisted in ESA delistings, downlistings, and unwarranted decisions for many previously at-risk species. These efforts not only included habitat conservation and management, but also monitoring that provided the data necessary for population management. A recent, high profile success for the State Wildlife Grant program in Alaska has been the reintroduction of wood bison near the Innoko River in southwest Alaska. This subspecies of bison was once common in Alaska's boreal forests but was extirpated in the 1800s. Other examples of recent successes include delisting the Eastern Distinct Population Segment of the Steller sea lion, avoiding listing of the Kittlitz's murrelet; and avoiding listing of yellow-billed loons.

Examples of Tribal Grant projects include: the Native Village of Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow) was able to monitor walrus, polar bears and eiders near their community; the Native Village of Eyak helped to increase the overall population and genetic diversity of moose around Cordova; and, the Native Village of Old Harbor developed and implemented a plan to improve safety and reduce conflict with brown bears around their community.

Alaska's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs)

The President's FY19 budget eliminates all funding for the five Landscape Conservation Cooperatives in Alaska, and the USFWS has indicated they will no longer provide staff or funding support to the LCCs. The Alaska Chapter has found that collaborations initiated by the Alaska LCCs have brought together federal, state, tribal, and local governments, along with industry, and other stakeholders to engage on shared wildlife and habitat issues. These cooperatives have augmented and leveraged the science capability of all participating agencies to better understand and respond to the environmental climate change effects that are rapidly becoming significant to Alaska. Further, these collaboratives have made significant progress bringing together divergent stakeholder groups to iron out strategies so that business ventures may be less impactful to long term renewable resource sustainability, while helping to meet industry goals. One noteworthy example is work completed by the Aleutian and Bering Sea Islands LCC (ABSI) and shipping companies to alter maritime traffic routes, which has reduced spill contamination risk, and therefore insurance costs. Another example is proactive resource planning work done by the Northwest Boreal LCC on transboundary watersheds with Canada. The Western Alaska LCC and ABSI LCC, together with the Aleutian & Pribilof Islands Association, sponsored and led coastal resilience and adaptation workshops along Alaska's west coast. In all three examples, when stakeholders come to the table early, allocation and business/conservation conflicts, or climate change adaptation planning can often be worked out, with less overall cost and delay. Ensuring these partnerships continue also provides established and effective opportunities for the Governor's Climate Change Task Force to develop collaborative solutions for climate adaptation.

USDA APHIS Wildlife Services - Wildlife Damage Management Program

Wildlife Services' Wildlife Damage Management program would see a **45% reduction in funding under the FY2019 budget proposal**. Aviation is essential to all Alaskan communities and depends on a few hub airports in larger cities. The Wildlife Damage Management program within USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services provides expertise and management assistance to operators of these airports to limit bird strikes and other wildlife conflicts impacting aircraft, thereby significantly contributing to human safety and reduced expense of aircraft maintenance.

The Need for Conservation Funding

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, the primary basis of our country's success in wildlife management and conservation, stresses science as the appropriate mechanism to guide wildlife policy. Historically, this has been understood by multiple administrations beginning with President Theodore Roosevelt who initially harnessed this idea. Today, the generation and application of science is still understood to be the root of all effective natural resource policies, regulations, and management. Without an investment in these programs, the policies by which we govern our natural resources will suffer due to a lack of current and unbiased information. This is not only bad policy, but as noted above it has the potential to be financially cost-intensive. The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society urges Congress to carefully consider the consequences of any proposed reductions in funding to programs supporting science-based wildlife conservation and management including the CRUs, the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program, the NWRS, the LCCs, and the USDA Wildlife Services-Wildlife Damage Management Program. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Nathan Svoboda
President, Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society