

June 3, 2021

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
Senate Environment & Public Works Committee
456 Dirksen SOB
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Ranking Member Capito,

The undersigned West Virginia and national organizations are comprised of millions of Americans who hunt, fish, camp, hike, paddle, and enjoy our great outdoors. We greatly appreciate your leadership in advancing key conservation priorities last Congress—including the *Great American Outdoors Act* and the *America's Conservation Enhancement Act*—and we are grateful for the work done by you and your staff this Congress to ensure critical provisions and increased funding for the development of wildlife crossings were included in the surface transportation reauthorization legislation. Your continued perseverance in tackling serious issues facing our nation's waterways and wildlife through bipartisan legislation is appreciated.

In particular, we were encouraged by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee's recent hearing on biodiversity loss. As was noted by multiple witnesses throughout the hearing, our nation's fish and wildlife are in crisis, and we don't have a moment to waste. Fortunately, there is bipartisan legislation that offers a solution to the crisis facing our nation's – and West Virginia's – fish, wildlife, and degraded lands and waters. The *Recovering America's Wildlife Act (H.R. 2773)* represents a pragmatic, state-focused investment that can prevent one-third of our nation's fish and wildlife from becoming threatened or endangered while creating a significant number of jobs that support the outdoor economy and other key sectors, such as agriculture, and forestry.

The U.S. and West Virginia are lucky to have an incredible amount of fish and wildlife species, many of which are thriving because of the foresight hunters and anglers had over a century ago to bring prized game species back from the brink of extinction through professional, collaborative wildlife management. However, today an increasing number of species are in steep decline – increasing their possibility of becoming endangered. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) alone has identified more than 1,200 species in need of proactive conservation. In total, state fish and wildlife agencies have identified 12,000 species that need proactive funding nationwide before more costly measures are necessary.

The *Recovering America's Wildlife Act* will address this crisis by providing \$1.3 billion for states and territories and \$97.5 million to tribal nations annually for proactive, on-the-ground conservation projects outlined in the Congressionally mandated but severely underfunded State Wildlife Action Plans. This legislation would provide the WVDNR more than \$12 million each

year to implement habitat restoration, wildlife management, research, and projects that support outdoor recreation – as outlined in the West Virginia plan that was developed collaboratively with sportsmen, industry groups, universities, and conservation organizations. These plans allow communities to have input on how their natural resources are managed, and ensure the conservation projects being executed are collaborative and locally-driven.

West Virginia’s economy would directly benefit from passage of this legislation. Sixty-seven percent of West Virginians participate in outdoor recreation, generating 91,000 direct jobs and \$9 billion in consumer spending. In 2018, West Virginia sold more than 800,000 hunting and fishing licenses, which created more than \$40 million in state revenue. A 2011 national survey reported that state residents and nonresidents spent \$1.2 billion on wildlife recreation in West Virginia. Investments in wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation infrastructure will support and expand this burgeoning industry.

Wildlife and healthy habitats are also essential to our nation’s \$788 billion outdoor economy – an economy that provides 5.2 million jobs, and represents 2.2 percent of the gross national product. The outdoor recreation economy historically shows higher increases in real gross output, compensation, and employment than the national economy. Every million dollars invested in species and habitat restoration creates between 17-33 jobs. The *Recovering America’s Wildlife Act* has the potential to create between an estimated 33,600 jobs every year, while adding 3.36 billion of national economic output.

This proactive approach to conservation will also save taxpayers money because it invests in upstream solutions that reduce the need for regulation, and sometimes litigation, under the Endangered Species Act. By investing in collaborative partnerships in West Virginia—and in every state and territory and on tribal lands—we can save at-risk species at the local level, preventing them from needing federal intervention and “emergency room” measures. Numerous industries in West Virginia (mining, forestry, home builders, and others) will benefit from the increased regulatory certainty this approach can provide. Additionally, accelerating the recovery of the 30 species in West Virginia already listed under the *Endangered Species Act* and preventing more species from requiring listing will reduce both current and future regulatory challenges companies face – especially as they work to comply with regulations resulting from some recent listing of species of crayfish and freshwater mussels.

The bipartisan *Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*, recently reintroduced by Reps. Dingell (D-MI) and Fortenberry (R-NE), has achieved incredible momentum bringing 185 bipartisan Members of Congress together as cosponsors and receiving strong bipartisan support when it was reported out of the House Natural Resources Committee by a vote of 26-6 last Congress. It ultimately passed the House as an amendment to H.R. 2, the *Moving Forward Act*, because of its strong connection to natural resources infrastructure and community resilience. We hope that the House and Senate will both recognize the importance of including this pragmatic legislation in infrastructure packages this year. This crisis demands a legislative solution that meets the scope of the challenge, and one that brings people together.

We know the conservation model utilized in the *Recovering America's Wildlife Act* works. As highlighted by the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation at the biodiversity hearing, dedicated funding generated through excise taxes on firearms has facilitated the recovery of wild turkeys, deer, elk, and bears in West Virginia, and now we need to do the same for all at-risk species. This legislation will create near-immediate jobs; support our nation's fish, wildlife, and outdoor economy; and reduce long-term wildlife and habitat management costs. Importantly, it will also ensure future generations have the same outdoor opportunities as the generations before.

We would welcome the opportunity to talk to you about the *Recovering America's Wildlife Act*, and stand ready to help you and the committee address the biodiversity crisis through bipartisan legislative solutions.

Sincerely,

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

National Association of State Foresters

National Wildlife Federation

The Conservation Fund, West Virginia State Program

The Nature Conservancy, West Virginia

Trout Unlimited

West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Section

West Virginia State Chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation

West Virginia Wildlife Federation