

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AGENDA

For the Next Administration

2021–2025





DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

Defenders of Wildlife is a national, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities.

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Cover photo of bison in Yellowstone National Park © Jim Shane

A Call to Action

This is an historic moment for conservation and our country—perhaps the most critical one we have ever faced. Over the last four years, the Trump administration has recklessly and unapologetically ignored the loss of biodiversity, denied climate change and placed the power of the federal government at the disposal of those who seek to exploit and degrade our land, water, air and wildlife.

The next president must prioritize actions to undo the damage done. Defenders of Wildlife is committed to working with the new administration and offers this conservation agenda as a blueprint for engaging and investing in conservation to heal the nation's wounds and address the extraordinary challenges ahead.

1. Act now to stop biodiversity loss.

- Establish a national strategy to protect biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- Restore and strengthen the ESA.
- Refocus federal land management on conservation.
- Fully fund and expand private lands conservation programs.
- Improve implementation and enforcement of other laws that benefit wildlife and habitat conservation.
- Improve federal leadership and coordination of human-wildlife coexistence efforts.
- Aggressively combat invasive species.
- Increase conservation funding for states and tribes.

2. Address the threat of climate change.

- Return to the Paris Climate Agreement and implement a national strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions consistent with international goals.
- Commit to rapid build-out of wildlife-friendly renewable energy development.
- Work to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040.



Sandhill crane

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- Invest in adaptation and resilience for our nation's natural systems.
- Ensure that the implementation of federal laws is consistent with the goals of climate mitigation and adaptation, resilience and carbon storage.
- Increase the scientific capacity of federal agencies to understand and plan for the impacts of climate change.
- Expand Farm Bill conservation programs administered by USDA.

3. Protect public health and prevent pandemics.

- Strengthen efforts to combat wildlife trafficking.
- Work internationally to regulate wildlife trade and promote conservation of wildlife and habitat.
- Strengthen controls on the importation of risky wildlife.
- Recommit to America's historical role as a voice for international conservation.



Green sea turtle

4. Rebuild the nation's economy.

- Help put people back to work while investing in threatened and endangered species conservation.
- Create a green infrastructure and jobs initiative.
- Help support private landowners and conservation.
- Stimulate investment in infrastructure that improves connectivity for wildlife.
- Fund control of invasive species and restoration of native plants to create jobs.
- Fund jobs that restore coastal ecosystems for conservation and resiliency.

5. Promote racial justice and equity.

- Create an action plan for inclusive federal lands.
- Invest in a diverse and inclusive conservation jobs program.
- Recruit, hire and retain a diverse and inclusive federal workforce.
- Expand equitable access to nature.

- Prioritize consultation and collaboration with Native American tribes.
- Ensure that diverse and disadvantaged communities are welcome to participate in public processes and programs, particularly those that serve or affect them.

6. Rebuild the federal government.

- Restore transparency, accountability and the rule of law by directing federal officials to comply with all applicable environmental laws and ensure full and fair opportunity for public involvement in federal decision-making.
- Restore the integrity of government decision-making by emphasizing ethics compliance by all government officials.
- Restore the government's commitment to basing decisions on sound science.
- Rebuild agency structures and restore morale and professionalism among career staff.

Working together on these priorities and actions, we can ensure that our priceless natural legacy—our amazing abundance of wildlife and awe-inspiring landscapes—will endure.

The Conservation Challenges Confronting a New Administration

Life on Earth is at increasing and significant risk—because of us. Development, habitat loss, exploitation, pollution and invasive species now threaten as many as 1 million species with extinction. These threats are exacerbated by the daunting reality of climate change, which is increasingly impacting our planet. In the last four years, the Trump administration repudiated or ignored these looming crises, working instead to recklessly and unapologetically place the power of the federal government at the disposal of those who seek to exploit and degrade our land, water, air and wildlife. The failure to act decisively to counter biodiversity loss and climate change has given these crises unchecked momentum. In combination, they present the greatest threat to our planet's health in the history of humankind, threatening to unravel the rich, intricate tapestry of life on our planet.

To make matters worse, these crises are happening amid a period of unprecedented societal and economic upheaval. The new administration will be faced with ensuring public health is protected in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic; rebuilding the nation's economy; charting a path forward to address the systemic racism and environmental injustice that are deeply embedded in our society; and restoring the nation's confidence in the integrity of government and the rule of law after an administration that has undermined federal agencies and their career staff, ignored and ridiculed science and appointed unqualified and ideologically extreme people to leadership positions.

The next president must prioritize actions to solve these environmental crises and doing so will be a crucial part of healing our nation's wounds. But time is fast running out. Given the enormity of the current situation—and its effect on our livelihoods and the fabric of life around us—swift and decisive action is urgently needed to stem the loss of biodiversity, reduce carbon emissions and promote climate resiliency, and remedy the damage done to the institutions of governance over the last four years. This must include reinvigorating and enhancing our bedrock environmental laws and regulations, safeguarding public health and biodiversity to avoid another pandemic and firmly reinstating the role of sound science and rational discourse in decision-making.

However, ensuring lasting progress will require deeper organic change: the restoration and strengthening of our nation's environmental ethic. Over a long and distinguished history of committed conservationism, we have confronted environmental challenges that threatened our future before. Each time we have risen to the moment—establishing national parks and national forests to conserve our landscapes and natural resources against the threat of unbridled development; creating national wildlife refuges to safeguard and sustain our legacy of wildlife diversity; establishing powerful federal laws to protect our water, air and land from industrial pollution; and enacting the strongest wildlife conservation laws in the world, from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act to the Endangered Species Act.

We are at a similar moment of decision now. In the face of division and upheaval, it has never been more critical for our political leaders to sow unity, restore the public's faith in science and reinforce our connection to the natural world. Now is the time to bring together disparate and opposing groups focused on the creation of an updated conservation ethic for future generations. By working with urgency, intentionality and resolve and appointing dynamic thought leaders to key positions, the next administration can lead by example and work beyond ideological party lines to preserve the integrity of our natural world. When guided by strong and abiding leadership, the American people will again respond in kind, acting in one voice and rallying to protect our wildlife and special places.

This is an historic moment for conservation and our country—perhaps the most critical one we have ever faced. Our actions now will determine if our country will endure and our planet will sustain our priceless natural legacy—our amazing abundance of wildlife and awe-inspiring landscapes—for all generations.

In this report, Defenders of Wildlife lays out its vision for how a new administration should engage and invest in conservation as a central element in healing the nation's wounds and addressing the extraordinary challenges facing us in the decades ahead.

1 Act Now to Stop Biodiversity Loss

Last year, the global science community provided a stark update on the challenge we face in protecting biodiversity and ecosystem services: as many as 1 million species are now threatened with extinction and over 75% of terrestrial environments and 66% of marine environments have already been significantly altered by human activity.¹ If we do not act now, the consequences to our society from the loss of ecosystem services—such as the fertilization of crops valued at half a trillion dollars that pollinators provide—will be dire. We must immediately address the five root causes of biodiversity loss: (1) destruction of habitat from development; (2) overexploitation of wildlife; (3) climate change; (4) pollution; and (5) invasive alien species.

The biodiversity crisis is not a faraway problem in Brazil or Madagascar: It is unfolding here and now in the U.S. We are losing habitat at an alarming rate; climate change is visibly harming natural systems; and pollution, invasive species and overexploitation are all taking their toll in serious and devastating ways. The U.S. has not developed a broad

strategic vision to tackle these challenges, despite overwhelming evidence of the profound impact they will collectively have on our nation. Decades of underfunding and stagnating policies have left many conservation needs unmet. For too long, we have treated wildlife and natural resources as if they were inexhaustible. Our account with nature is now overdrawn. For our own sake, the sake of future generations—and wildlife itself—it is time to pay our outstanding debt.

Fortunately, we have a strong foundation on which we can build. Robust federal laws protect wildlife, clean air and clean water. The Endangered Species Act (ESA), in particular, is widely regarded as the strongest imperiled species protection law in the world,² with almost every listed species still with us today and hundreds more on the path to recovery. Federal lands—national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges and other public tracts—constitute over one-quarter of the total acres of land in the U.S. and afford critical protections to many species and habitats. Farm Bill programs and land trusts help landowners manage, protect and restore

North Atlantic right whale and calf



FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION, TAKEN UNDER NOAA PERMIT 20556-01

wildlife habitat on the two-thirds of the Lower 48 that are privately owned. Human-wildlife coexistence programs are winning acceptance to reduce conflict between ranchers and farmers and predators. And critical tools are in place to ensure federal, state, tribal and nongovernmental parties can coordinate and cooperate.

Yet more can and must be done to protect biodiversity—and fast. The next administration must address the biodiversity crisis head-on by developing a comprehensive national strategy to protect and restore wildlife and its habitat. As part of this, we must commit to strengthening the ESA, deepening protection of biodiversity on federal lands, expanding private lands conservation programs, and encouraging collaboration among federal, state, tribal and private stakeholders. In doing so, we will protect our nation’s natural legacy for today and for future generations and reestablish the U.S. as a global conservation leader.

ACTIONS NEEDED

Establish a national strategy to protect biodiversity and ecosystem services.

The U.S. has myriad laws and policies to help advance conservation, yet we have no national strategy that ties all of the pieces together. To address the biodiversity crisis, ensure society’s security and reestablish the U.S. as a global leader in biodiversity conservation, the next president should issue an executive order setting a national policy of protecting biodiversity and directing federal agencies to use their authorities to advance this goal by preserving habitat; curbing overexploitation of wildlife; and addressing climate change, pollution and invasive species. The national policy should set a goal of protecting 30% of the nation’s lands and waters by 2030 to protect biodiversity and stabilize our climate (“30x30”).³ This goal will serve as a foundation for eventually protecting half of the nation’s lands and waters by 2050.

The executive order should establish a Presidential Task Force—led by the chair of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and including the secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Health and Human Services and State departments and the administrator of the



Gray wolf, Yellowstone National Park

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—to collaborate with states, tribes, nongovernmental organizations and private landowners in developing a national strategy for protecting biodiversity and ecosystem services within the first 18 months. The strategy should provide clear guidance on goal-setting, planning and taking collaborative action across boundaries to address threats to biodiversity and ecosystem services. To stop habitat fragmentation, a major cause of biodiversity loss, and support wildlife’s ability to move in response to climate change, this strategy should include a landscape-level initiative drawing together federal agencies, states, tribes, nongovernmental organizations, land trusts and private landowners to improve habitat connectivity. The next administration should work with Congress to legislatively establish the strategy and provide additional authorities that federal agencies may need to achieve the goals.

Restore and strengthen the ESA.

More than 45 years ago, Congress established a national goal of protecting all species and the ecosystems on which

they depend. To accomplish this, the ESA was developed as the nation's flagship law for protecting wildlife and plants from extinction and the cornerstone of our commitment to preserving life on Earth. Woeful underfunding and inconsistent implementation, unfortunately, have rendered it less effective than Congress envisioned. Even without adequate resources, however, this landmark law has been remarkably effective at protecting our nation's biodiversity: Almost every listed species is still with us today and hundreds are on the path of recovery. But there is so much more we can do.

To properly meet the threat of the looming biodiversity crisis, the new administration should direct the leaders of federal agencies with major ESA responsibilities to reverse harmful regulatory changes from the Trump administration and develop new regulations, policies and practices that will further the imperative of species conservation. Working with other federal agencies, the departments of Interior and Commerce should develop improved, recovery-focused regulations and policies, such as placing an emphasis on the affirmative recovery requirement of

section 7(a)(1) of the ESA. Federal land management agencies such as the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) should be directed to expand protections for listed species and prioritize their recovery.

The secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce and Defense departments should prioritize the conservation of listed species in their programs, such as Farm Bill conservation programs and Sentinel Landscapes. Other federal agencies, such as the EPA, should also adopt programs and policies that support species conservation in carrying out their own mandates.

The administration should also work with Congress to substantially increase funding for the ESA so that it can fulfill the nation's commitment to protecting and recovering imperiled species. The ESA has been severely underfunded for decades. More than \$1.5 billion per year is needed—from the federal government, states and nongovernmental sources—to recover ESA-listed species. The next administration should propose a budget that includes full funding of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) endangered species programs, full funding for the endangered species programs of other land management agencies, and dramatically expanded funding for state and private lands endangered species programs.

Greater sage-grouse



USFWS/STEPHEN TOBIT

Refocus federal land management on conservation.

The federal public lands systems are essential to conserving biodiversity and addressing the escalating climate crisis, but clear management direction to achieve these critical public goals is lacking. Urgent action is needed to refocus federal land management to address the biodiversity crisis and advance a national goal of protecting 30% of lands and waters for wildlife and climate by 2030.

First, the secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture should immediately revoke harmful Trump administration orders and policies. These include calling for increased logging on national forest land; the effort to repeal protections for roadless areas on the Tongass National Forest network; orders and policies enabling degradation of essential sagebrush, pinyon juniper and grassland habitat on BLM lands; rollbacks to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and



Brown bears, Tongass National Forest, Alaska

public engagement; and the sweeping and misguided “energy dominance” agenda that threatens wildlife and environmental values across vast areas on federal lands. The Trump administration’s effort to open Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development must be halted, with leasing and approvals for drilling suspended while permanent protections are restored. Protections must also be restored to Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and other special places on federal lands that lost protections under the Trump administration. Finally, the new administration should immediately halt construction of the wall that has severed ecological and human communities along our southern border. The administration should initiate a process, in consultation with communities, tribes, scientists and other environmental experts and stakeholders, to remediate the devastating environmental and societal damage caused by the wall, including removal or breach where needed to restore ecological connectivity.

Second, protecting biodiversity on federal lands will require the development of new rules and policies that prioritize management of public lands—including multiple-use

lands such as the national forest system and BLM lands—for wildlife conservation, climate change mitigation and connectivity. The administration should direct the Forest Service to permanently protect the mature and old-growth forests of the Tongass and Pacific Northwest and initiate rulemakings for the Forest Service and BLM to identify and protect areas on their lands essential for carbon storage, biodiversity and species recovery and climate adaptation, including designation of climate refugia and connecting landscapes. The administration should prioritize expanding the National Wildlife Refuge System to ensure that this network of lands dedicated to the protection of wildlife and habitats can sustain biodiversity in the face of climate change and other threats.

To implement these sweeping changes in conservation policy, the administration should establish key leadership positions and offices for biodiversity and climate change in the federal land management agencies and ensure the close engagement of the secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture. It should also direct all federal land management agencies to provide for robust public engagement in their decision-making and take actions to ensure just and equitable access to federal lands and resources.

Fully fund and expand private lands conservation programs.

Our nation cannot confront the biodiversity crisis and meet the 30x30 goal without enhancing wildlife conservation on private lands. More than two-thirds of the land in the Lower 48 is under private ownership, and more than 70% of federally listed species depend on private lands. Private lands support the last remnants of imperiled ecosystems, such as tallgrass and shortgrass prairies and longleaf pine and bottomland hardwood forests. Because only 3% of protected areas in the U.S. are on private lands, however, natural areas on private lands are disappearing quickly. From 2001 to 2017, more than 75% of the natural areas lost to development in the U.S. were on privately owned lands.⁴ In the last two decades, we have lost more than 45,000 square miles of farms, ranches and private working forests to urban sprawl, oil and gas extraction and other industrial uses.⁵ Habitat of threatened and endangered species is disappearing more than twice as quickly on unprotected private lands than on all federal lands.⁶ Agricultural activities, including pesticide use and conversion of habitat to row-crop production, have contributed to massive declines in pollinators.

To help address the biodiversity crisis on private lands, the next administration should work with Congress to dramatically increase federal funding for private lands conservation programs under the Farm Bill—the largest source of federal funding for wildlife conservation on private lands—and other authorities. These programs have made great strides in conserving wildlife on private lands⁷ but have been consistently underfunded and unable to meet public demand. Conservation programs administered by USDA, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and by the Department of the Interior, such as the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, should receive significantly increased investments. Multi-department programs such as Sentinel Landscapes, which supports and coordinates long-term conservation on private lands around Department of Defense (DOD) installations, should be given high priority for funding. This increased investment in private lands conservation programs should include additional direction

Black-footed ferret kits, National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center, Colorado



USFWS/RYAN MOERING



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Southern resident orca

and support for the agencies to monitor and evaluate their efficiency and effectiveness.

In addition to increased investment, the administration should ensure that private land conservation programs prioritize the conservation of at-risk wildlife. Practices funded by the Farm Bill should emphasize the conservation of federally protected species, candidate species, state-listed species and other priority species identified in State Wildlife Action Plans, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and other existing wildlife conservation plans. Additionally, nonlethal human-wildlife conflict reduction practices should be eligible for EQIP reimbursement. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should also update its policy to ensure that practices counted toward the 10% minimum that must benefit wildlife under EQIP are only those in which wildlife conservation is the original intent of implementing the practice.

The new administration should also incentivize the conservation of at-risk species by offering regulatory predictability and assurances for credible and transparent science-based initiatives. Incentives, such as regulatory certainty

offered by Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), can be effective for advancing imperiled species conservation. The incoming administration should ensure that the NRCS and FWS continue WLFW, expand this highly successful model to additional species and provide national-level funding for all WLFW species. To qualify for these incentives, these proactive initiatives must be rooted in science, fully transparent and verifiable.

Improve implementation and enforcement of other laws that benefit wildlife and habitat conservation.

The next administration should immediately reverse the Trump administration's regulatory rollbacks of critical environmental programs. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) is one of the nation's oldest conservation laws and the only one dedicated solely to the protection of migratory birds. Despite recent studies showing that North America has lost 3 billion birds since 1970, the Trump administration eviscerated the MBTA's protections against incidental take by industry. These protections must be restored. A new permit

program should also be developed to regulate and minimize incidental take by industries, providing clarity for businesses while promoting bird conservation.

Similarly, the Trump administration's regulations weakening federal agency consideration of environmental impacts under NEPA must be rescinded. Often described as the nation's environmental charter, NEPA plays a crucial role in ensuring federal agencies "look before they leap" by fully considering the consequences of their actions and programs. The Trump administration's revisions to CEQ's long-standing NEPA regulations undercut federal agencies' responsibility to consider the cumulative effects of their actions and sanctioned agencies to ignore global processes like climate change. These pernicious amendments must be revoked.

In addition to laws like the ESA and land management laws central to conservation, other environmental laws, such as the Clean Water Act (CWA), can improve conservation outcomes. To protect aquatic ecosystems, including highly biodiverse coastal ecosystems that help mitigate the impacts of climate change, the next administration should direct the EPA to revise or develop new implementing regulations,

policies and procedures to further the goals of the CWA. This would include repealing and replacing the Trump administration's inadequate Navigable Waters Protection Rule, revising the total maximum daily load (TMDL) regulations to require adaptive implementation and more proactive timetables for impaired waters restoration, and critically reviewing state National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting programs to ensure states are consistently enforcing permit compliance and the requirements of the CWA.

Federal agencies should also consider how to more explicitly include wildlife and habitat conservation protections in their administration of statutes like the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, the National Flood Insurance Program, the Federal Power Act and other relevant laws.

Improve federal leadership and coordination of human-wildlife coexistence efforts.

Decades of experience show that human-wildlife conflicts can be minimized and managed effectively, yet wildlife management still too often focuses on lethal removal of predators and other wildlife. To help ensure that people and wildlife can sustainably share the nation's landscapes, the next administration should work with federal agencies, states, tribes and private landowners to build greater understanding and acceptance of wildlife management approaches that promote human-wildlife coexistence. The secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture should issue directives that prioritize measures to reduce conflicts arising in or around grazing allotments, such as increasing flexibility in the timing of grazing and using range riders and other nonlethal tools. Wildlife Services should be directed to further prioritize and fund nonlethal methods in carrying out its mission. The directors of NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) should ensure that the Farm Bill conservation programs administered by their agencies provide financial and technical assistance for coexistence practices.

Aggressively combat invasive species.

Invasive species pose a major ecological and economic threat to our landscapes⁸ and are a major factor threatening the survival and recovery of ESA-listed species. To avoid the loss

California sea otter



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A Defenders coexistence expert installs electric fencing to protect a chicken coop on private property from bears.

of natural systems to invasive species, directors of federal land management agencies and outreach agencies (such as NRCS and FSA) should prioritize invasive species detection and management and promote the use of native species for all conservation practices. Further, the administration should work with Congress to significantly increase funding for invasive species programs across federal agencies. Priorities include fully funding the National Invasive Species Council and the BLM Plant Conservation Program to implement the National Seed Strategy developed and supported by 12 federal agencies and over 350 organizations to address the critical shortage of native plant material for restoring American landscapes on a large scale.

Increase conservation funding for states and tribes.

State fish and wildlife agencies have a vital role to play in the conservation of imperiled species. Yet, these agencies are almost exclusively funded by revenues from hunting and fishing licenses, with very little state funding dedicated to conserving

declining and nongame species. Tribes also play an essential role in wildlife conservation, with important responsibilities for wildlife on millions of acres of reservation lands and lands subject to treaty rights.

The next administration should work with Congress to significantly increase funding for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program and the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund. State wildlife grants advance projects that benefit species of greatest conservation need identified in State Wildlife Action Plans. Tribal wildlife grants provide funding to tribes to develop and implement programs for the benefit of wildlife and habitat, enabling tribes to develop increased management capacity, improve relationships with partners (including state agencies), address cultural and environmental priorities and interest young tribe members in fisheries, wildlife and related fields of study. The Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund established under Section 6 of the ESA provides grants to states and territories to fund conservation projects for candidate and proposed species.

2 Address the Threat of Climate Change

The global and unequivocal scientific consensus is that human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, are rapidly warming the planet. If left unchecked, the consequences will be devastating for both humans and wildlife. The well-documented impacts of climate change to wildlife and ecosystems include the loss of important habitat in polar and high mountain ecosystems, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, increased incidence of drought and severe storms, warming of rivers and other waters, escalated threats from invasive species, and more frequent catastrophic fires.⁹ These impacts threaten the natural systems that support wildlife and provide communities with drinking water, flood protection, food, medicine, timber, recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, jobs and numerous other benefits. To reduce the effects of climate change on biodiversity, scientists and many policymakers agree that we must adopt a two-pronged approach: We need to rapidly reduce our greenhouse gas emissions to limit the magnitude of global warming, ideally to a level of 1.5°C to avoid the worst impacts,¹⁰ and we must support natural systems in adapting to current and future effects of warming.

Wildfires linked to climate change are increasing in frequency and difficult to contain.



USFS

Even with the scientific and visible evidence to the contrary, the U.S. has recklessly moved in the wrong direction over the past four years. The Trump administration has withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement and has worked zealously to weaken emissions standards, prop up the coal industry and eliminate requirements that federal projects consider their emissions and climate change effects in planning and projects. In a dangerously myopic pursuit of “energy dominance,” the administration laid the groundwork for drilling or mining our precious remaining landscapes from the Sagebrush Sea to Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Meanwhile, the past five years have all been among the hottest on record,¹¹ and 2020 is the sixth consecutive year in which the U.S. has suffered 10 or more billion-dollar climate and weather disasters.¹²

A key priority for the next four years is for the president to reclaim the mantle of climate leadership, set the U.S. firmly on a path to a clean energy future and protect our natural legacy from the climate threats already upon us.

ACTIONS NEEDED

Return to the Paris Climate Agreement and implement a national strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions consistent with international goals.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), composed of the world’s leading scientists, has concluded that it is vital that we work to limit warming to 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average. To do so, global emissions must be rapidly reduced and reach net zero by 2050.¹³ The U.S. must first demonstrate its willingness to be part of the global climate solution by recommitting to the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement. But we need much more than that symbolic gesture: We must also commit to the hard work of significantly reducing our emissions through the expansion of renewable energy, investment in energy efficiency, reduction of transportation emissions, development of new and improved technologies, and protection and restoration of ecosystems that store carbon. The next president should work with Congress to enact a suite of policies to ensure a clean energy future¹⁴ and provide leadership to ensure that federal



Wind turbines on public land in California

agencies take steps within their existing authorities to ensure emissions reductions.

Commit to rapid build-out of wildlife-friendly renewable energy development.

To meet the nation's climate goals, we must transition quickly from dependence on fossil fuels, with their heavy carbon emissions, to clean renewable energy. Our public lands and waters can be an important part of this transition from oil, gas and coal production to well-sited solar- and wind-power projects. The rapid build-out of these new energy technologies, both onshore and offshore, needs to be done with careful consideration of potential impacts on wildlife, avoiding conflict with sensitive species and high-value habitat. The administration should advance renewable energy development and associated transmission that 1) encourages early planning at the landscape-level to identify low-impact areas for development; 2) requires up-front analysis of potential impacts of projects—including their cumulative environmental impacts—and a robust analysis of alternatives to determine the best option for development; 3) follows the “mitigation hierarchy,” first seeking to avoid and then minimize impacts

to wildlife and important natural resources, then offsetting unavoidable impacts with effective mitigation measures; 4) encourages early engagement by all stakeholders; and 5) employs workable and efficient permitting policies to meet aggressive renewable energy buildout.

Work to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040.

To avert the worst of the climate crisis, much of the fossil fuel deposits under federal management must be left in place, since we cannot achieve necessary carbon emission reductions if we continue to extract and burn them. The new administration should impose an immediate moratorium on new leasing of fossil fuels and direct federal land and ocean management agencies to work toward permanently phasing out new federal leasing for oil, gas and coal. The administration should also direct agencies to improve carbon sequestration on public lands and waters, consistent with biodiversity and 30x30 goals, by protecting mature and old-growth forests and other carbon strongholds, engaging in ecologically appropriate reforestation and afforestation, maximizing carbon storage in grasslands and arid lands, as well as protection and restoration of wetlands and estuaries (“blue carbon”).



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Proxy Falls, Willamette National Forest, Oregon

Invest in adaptation and resilience for our nation's natural systems.

Protecting America's lands and wildlife in the face of climate change and other threats will require unprecedented engagement in science, planning, and management and protection of habitats nationwide. The national 30x30 strategy is an essential part of that effort, ensuring that resilient, connected habitat can support functioning watersheds and ecosystems, biodiversity and species movement in response to climate change. The administration should also recommit to the updating and implementation of the 2012 *National Fish, Wildlife and Plants Climate Adaptation Strategy*,¹⁵ the 2011 *Freshwater Action Plan*,¹⁶ and the 2013 *National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan*,¹⁷ and climate adaptation actions within the Strategic Sustainability Performance Plans for all federal agencies.

Ensure that the implementation of federal laws is consistent with the goals of climate mitigation and adaptation, resilience and carbon storage.

Even in the absence of additional direction from Congress, the administration should use existing authorities—such as the Clean Air Act and the various agencies' organic acts—to achieve climate change mitigation and adaptation goals. FWS and NMFS, in particular, should take steps to improve implementation of the ESA by 1) considering climate change appropriately as a factor in listing and delisting decisions and in five-year species status reviews; 2) incorporating climate change into ESA consultations

and other decisions, by using modeling to determine how suitable habitat conditions will evolve over time, for example; and 3) addressing the threat of climate change in critical habitat designations and recovery actions. The administration should also reinstate robust and complete analyses under NEPA to ensure that all projects fully account for greenhouse gas emissions as well as climate change impacts on the proposed project and the affected environment.

Increase the scientific capacity of federal agencies to understand and plan for the impacts of climate change.

To better understand how climate change will impact natural systems, the administration should support entities that are developing and delivering actionable science to help understand and combat the various threats to natural resources around the country. These include the U.S. Global Change Research Program; the National Science Foundation's Long-term Ecological Research Network; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate Program Office and Regional Climate Services Directorates, Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and Regional Integrated Science and Assessment teams; U.S. Geologic Survey Climate Adaptation Science Centers; and USDA Climate Hubs and Forest Service Research Stations.

Expand Farm Bill conservation programs administered by USDA.

By expanding Farm Bill conservation programs, the administration can help farmers, ranchers and forest landowners pursue climate-friendly agricultural practices that contribute to the goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector 50% by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Agricultural production is responsible for more than 9% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., making the agricultural sector an important part of the solution to climate change. The administration should increase incentives, payments and support for climate-friendly crop practices, agroforestry, advanced grazing management and other practices that reduce emissions, sequester carbon and mitigate climate change.

3 Protect public health and prevent pandemics

Biodiversity is the foundation of human health. We depend on the indispensable ecosystem services that a healthy natural environment provides, such as the pollination of crops, diverse food products and the filtration of pollution from our water, air and soil.¹⁸ Moreover, exposure to nature reduces obesity, depression, stress and medical recovery time and results in people living longer, healthier lives.¹⁹ The loss of biodiversity therefore has grave consequences for public health, including eroded ecosystem services, compounded climate change effects and the spread of infectious disease.

COVID-19, the latest in an onslaught of deadly zoonotic diseases, has caused over half a million human fatalities globally as of summer 2020. Increasing habitat fragmentation, human-livestock-wildlife interactions and wildlife trade are three primary factors that led to COVID-19 and enable the spread of zoonotic diseases at large. Nearly half of all infectious diseases originate in wildlife,²⁰ and direct contact between wildlife, domestic animals and people is increasing due to habitat degradation and the demand for wildlife. In many countries, animals from the wild are slaughtered or

traded live at markets to supply restaurants and to meet the vast and expanding international demand for exotic pets and wildlife parts and products. These wildlife markets play a key role in enabling viruses like COVID-19, Ebola, SERS and MERS to jump between species and then spread from rural communities to the human population worldwide.

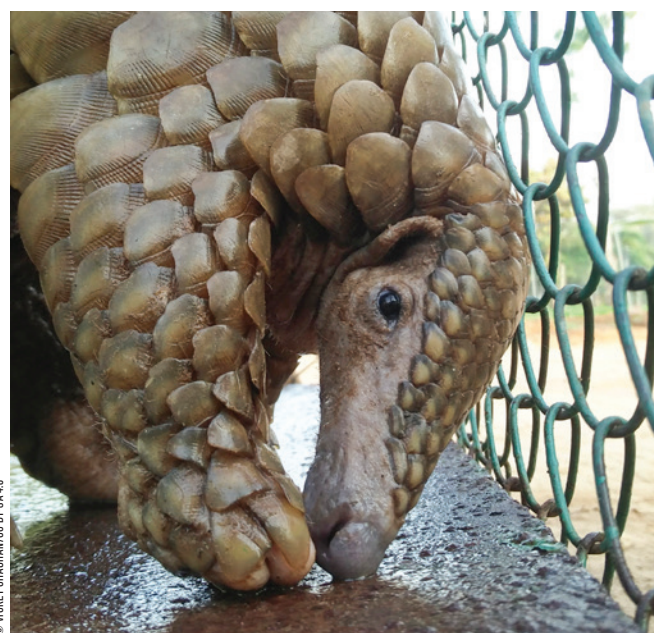
Global pandemics like COVID-19 are a wakeup call. The next administration must work to implement the “transformational change” called for in the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Global Assessment to restore and protect nature and prevent future threats to public health and the global economy. Making this investment now is essential. Estimates suggest that the overall cost over the next decade to protect wildlife and forests with the goal of preventing another global pandemic would be just 2% of the overall financial damage caused by COVID-19.²¹

ACTIONS NEEDED

Strengthen efforts to combat wildlife trafficking.

FWS is charged with monitoring imported shipments for legal and illegal wildlife products and implementing regulations and laws addressing wildlife trafficking in coordination with other countries. The next administration should significantly increase federal funding for Law Enforcement and International Affairs to ensure FWS has adequate resources to protect wildlife at home and abroad. Particular attention should be focused on improving the capacity of FWS to detect illegal shipments through the use of training and evidence-based approaches and technology and on reducing illegal shipments from Latin America, a major source of wildlife products trafficked to the U.S.²² Education and awareness programs to inform U.S. residents of the dangers of illegal wildlife trade and to reduce the demand for wildlife in the U.S. must also be developed. The administration should also expand the mandate of the Presidential Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking to address the linkage between wildlife trade and trafficking and zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 and work with Congress to reauthorize the Eliminate, Neutralize and Disrupt (END) Wildlife Trafficking Act.

The pangolin is a popular live market animal in China and a potential intermediate host of novel corona virus.



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Work internationally to regulate wildlife trade and promote conservation of wildlife and habitat.

The conditions of many live wildlife markets in Latin America, Asia and other regions—where animals are often stressed and crowded into small cages—are inhumane and ripe for transmission of zoonotic diseases to humans. Because wildlife markets have been associated with the transmission of infectious diseases like COVID-19, top priorities for protecting public health include closing live wildlife markets and phasing out and ultimately ending live trade in wildlife and commercial trade in wildlife products. These steps also apply to the U.S., where many of the 200 million live animals imported each year enter without disease screening despite the impact of invasive diseases like chytrid fungus and bird flu, which cause mass declines in American wildlife, and the risk of importation of invasive species like Bsal fungus (*Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans*), which wreaks havoc in export countries. Wildlife imports used for food consumption or the pet trade can also serve as a source of zoonotic diseases. To address risks to public health and biodiversity in the U.S., the next administration should tighten restrictions on the import of live animals²³ and wildlife products and work, in concert with the international community, to eliminate such trade.

Strengthen controls on the importation of risky wildlife.

Following the 2003 monkeypox virus outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published an order in the *Federal Register* for wildlife imports, calling for broad categorical import bans of risky wildlife and comprehensive health measure requirements such as health certificates, tests, quarantine and disease risk assessments prior to import. The president should immediately implement these recommendations and require the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to regulate animals that are pest or disease carriers to reduce threats to people, agriculture and biodiversity. Stopping injurious species before they reach U.S. soil, by working with partner countries to reduce the risk of shipments containing zoonotic diseases before they leave the exporting country, is key. Surveillance of pathogens in wildlife at the U.S. border should also be



USFWS/CATHERINE J. HUBBARD

FWS inspector examines illegally traded pelts from shipments seized by federal agents.

strengthened through facilitating greater collaboration between FWS, APHIS and CDC. The president should also enhance legislative authority under the Lacey Act to regulate importation and commerce in wildlife that poses public health risks. Finally, the administration should initiate, prioritize and fund basic and applied research in the medical, public health, ecology and other science fields to strengthen our understanding of emerging infectious diseases, human behavior and ties to drivers of biodiversity loss such as habitat fragmentation and wildlife trade.

Recommit to America's historical role as a voice for international conservation.

The administration should demonstrate strong leadership on conserving wildlife through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and other international agreements. The U.S. should work with other nations on animal health and welfare issues, including the need to monitor the health of traded wildlife that could serve as potential disease vectors, through the World Animal Health Organisation. The next administration should also rejoin the World Health Organization and use its membership to develop policies that protect the health of people and biodiversity. Finally, the new administration should work with the U.S. Senate to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity, joining other world leaders in shaping and fulfilling commitments to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which include targets for public and ecosystem health. The administration should honor the Berlin Principles and adopt One Health standards to guide the approach of the U.S. to risks to human and animal health and ecosystem health as a whole.

4 Rebuild the Nation's Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating economic impact on individuals, families and communities. As the new administration works to recover the nation's economic health, the creation of sustainable green jobs focused on restoring our natural systems can be a vital element of economic recovery efforts while also helping to address the biodiversity and climate crises.

For example, analyses have shown that every dollar appropriated to the National Wildlife Refuge System produces an average return of \$4.87, a 387% rate of return on investment.²⁴ Moreover, every dollar FWS spends on maintenance and construction generates \$3.12 for local and state economies and supports nearly 18 private sector jobs.²⁵ In addition, investments in watershed restoration and community wildfire protection activities on our national forests could directly create more than 40,000 new jobs, many in rural communities.²⁶ Finally, an analysis of \$167 million in funding received by NOAA under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) found that these investments had broad benefits that included supporting 2,280 jobs while restoring 25,584 acres of habitat, opening 677 miles of stream for fish, and removing 433,397 tons of debris from coastal habitats.²⁷

ACTIONS NEEDED

Help put people back to work while investing in threatened and endangered species conservation.

Prioritizing stimulus funding for work that advances the recovery of the 1,666 U.S. species listed under the ESA can simultaneously stimulate the economy, help make up for historical recovery funding shortfalls²⁸ and help agencies—including land management agencies on which many species depend—meet their statutory responsibilities under the ESA. The incoming administration can ensure that these new hands-on jobs will not only advance vital species recovery work, but also develop restoration expertise within the workforce that will benefit conservation in the long-term. In addition to stimulus spending for recovery actions, the incoming administration should prioritize funding for updating the federal information technology (IT) infrastructure for conservation, in particular ESA implementation.²⁹ For example, FWS has a roadmap for advancing their IT systems to make ESA implementation more efficient;³⁰ other agencies need similar systems that are interoperable among agencies to ensure coordinated and efficient recovery efforts. Investing

Partners in the Southeast Hellbender Conservation Initiative, an effort spearheaded by Defenders, survey an eroded streambank slated for restoration to improve aquatic habitat for the imperiled salamander.



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The endangered Florida panther needs wildlife underpasses and other collision prevention measures to safely cross highways.

heavily in the federal conservation IT infrastructure can help address unemployment in the tech sector and create tools for efficient and effective conservation in the future.

Create a green infrastructure and jobs initiative.

Our federal public lands system is the backbone of biodiversity protection in the U.S., with vast potential for the development of sustainable green jobs. Conservation investments in federal lands protect biodiversity, increase climate resiliency and pay dividends to America's communities in the form of clean water, healthy habitats, carbon storage, education, cultural heritage protection, recreation and tourism. Despite their importance, funding for conservation and restoration programs on our federal lands has been chronically and grossly inadequate. The next administration can address this need while also creating jobs by developing a green infrastructure initiative to stimulate the development of sustainable conservation, restoration, recreation and green infrastructure-based employment across the federal land management systems where opportunities abound. For example:

- On national wildlife refuges, habitat restoration of upland, wetland and coastal areas is labor-intensive and “shovel ready.” Funding is also needed for the rehabilitation or development of infrastructure to manage water systems on refuge lands effectively. In addition, investments in education programs, as well as deferred maintenance and capital improvement projects for urban refuges, are particularly

important given the amount of public value that is provided by these natural havens.

- On our national forests, which provide roughly one-fifth of the drinking water to U.S. communities, funding is needed for the implementation of Watershed Restoration Action Plans which integrate a variety of labor-intensive and “shovel ready” actions.³¹ Investments are needed in Forest Service programs that protect communities from wildfire and promote clean water. These include investing in prescribed and managed wildfire and removing costly unneeded and polluting roads.
- Lands managed by BLM are particularly susceptible to invasive plants and soil damage. They need restoration projects that remove invasives, stabilize gullies and repair degraded riparian ecosystems. These same lands are vital for the conservation and recovery of the sage-grouse, which would benefit from the removal of unnecessary old structures, roads and fences and the conversion of barbed wire fences to wildlife-friendly alternatives.
- Funding for habitat restoration is needed, especially for ESA-listed species on DOD installations and adjacent lands and waters. This can be accomplished under the Sentinel Landscapes program,³² or through programs that advance recovery of listed species as detailed in installation Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans and

those that involve decommissioning existing infrastructure or carrying out restoration and habitat enhancement on Sentinel Landscapes.

A green infrastructure and jobs initiative should include a review of the status of infrastructure across the federal land systems and identify priority actions necessary to ensure that these structures can withstand increasingly intense storms while safeguarding our imperiled fish and wildlife and facilitating outdoor recreation. Antiquated infrastructure should be prioritized for removal or improvement.

Help support private landowners and conservation.

USDA provides substantial voluntary technical and financial assistance to private landowners to carry out conservation activities on working lands, yet these programs (WLFW, EQIP, CSP, RCCP, HFRP, CRP, ACEP and others) are chronically underfunded. In addition to pursuing long-term funding increases, the incoming administration should work with Congress to dramatically boost investment in key USDA programs that fund needed work—from installing livestock waterers to keep cattle out of streams to fuels management to create habitat for gopher tortoises—that benefit local workers, farmers and ranchers and the wildlife.

Stimulate investment in infrastructure that improves connectivity for wildlife.

Wildlife connectivity infrastructure projects offer tremendous returns on investment, quick investment recapitalization and the opportunity to create significant short-term and long-term jobs. The Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act would create jobs and stimulate economies in rural, historically impoverished areas and in parts of the country with communities such as tribes and private landowners that other stimulus programs do not reach. Dozens of shovel-ready connectivity projects already identified around the country could put people back to work and benefit many sectors of the economy. Significant and rapid ramp-ups in wildlife-related infrastructure projects would improve habitat connectivity by facilitating migration routes and enhancing wildlife adaptation in the face of development, habitat loss and climate change.

Fund control of invasive species and restoration of native plants to create jobs.

Invasive species pose a major ecological and economic threat to our landscapes. When opportunistic weeds and exotic animals invade, native ecosystems are more vulnerable to storms, wildfire, climate change. The resulting loss of biodiversity has serious consequences for pollinators, our food systems and communities. For many endangered species, invasives are a main factor driving populations toward local or global extinction. Combating invasive species requires early detection and rapid response, a high level of botanical expertise, and aggressively scaled-up production of genetically appropriate native seeds and plants. Integral to restoring native ecosystems and the benefits they provide is the National Seed Strategy developed and supported by 12 federal agencies and over 350 organizations to address the critical shortage of native seed needed for large-scale restoration of U.S. landscapes. A significant infusion of funding to the federal land management agencies to implement this strategy would create locally based sustainable eco-jobs for botanists, seed growers, collectors and cultivators and conserve native ecosystems.

Fund jobs that restore coastal ecosystems for conservation and resiliency.

NOAA has a proven track record of using ARRA investments to restore habitats and stimulate economic growth by supporting shovel-ready projects and putting people back to work. Its Habitat Restoration Center has billions of dollars in projects that could be started immediately. Coastal restoration is a significant source of jobs. It requires a diverse set of skills and materials that directly and indirectly employ a wide variety of people, including construction workers, engineers, ecologists, project managers and heavy-equipment operators. On-the-ground restoration projects under ARRA have opened historical river habitat, removed marine debris, reconnected tidal wetlands and restored shellfish and coral reefs. Typical species that benefited include flounder, perch, groundfish and salmon. The projects also enhanced a sense of community-level stewardship toward the restored habitats.³³

5 Promote Racial Justice and Equity

Racism is a corrosive force that continues to stifle the lives and aspirations of people of color and indigenous peoples in America. The new administration should lead the federal government in a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which racism is embedded in national policies, in the workforce of federal agencies and in the access that marginalized communities have to nature. Charting the course forward must integrate diversity, equity, inclusion and justice into all government policies and practices, identify specific policy actions to redress past harms and welcome historically excluded Americans into nature and conservation.

Historically disadvantaged communities, communities of color and urban populations have borne the brunt of industrial-scale air, water and chemical pollution. Many of these same communities also face elevated risks from the effects of climate change such as flooding and extreme heat. The new administration must ensure that the effects of federal actions on the quality of the environment and on public health in such communities are fully evaluated, disclosed to

the public and considered in federal decision making, and that government decision processes are open and accessible to everyone. This includes restoring government transparency and laws that give voice to the concerns of diverse and disadvantaged communities, including the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), NEPA, Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) and citizen suit provisions in our environmental laws.

As America struggles with its legacy of racism and exclusion, the importance of ensuring that all Americans enjoy equal access to nature and to wildlife has taken on greater urgency. Many communities lack access to nature, whether it is a local park or federally supported public land such as a national park or wildlife refuges. It is time to ensure that historically disadvantaged communities are welcome in our natural public spaces, whether they want to exercise, birdwatch, picnic with family or experience wildlife and natural landscapes in their own personal ways. Any new park and recreation opportunities should be developed with their needs in mind.

Field trip, San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge



ACTIONS NEEDED

Create an action plan for inclusive federal lands.

Federal agencies that manage lands and facilities open to the public should develop action plans to address key barriers for systematically and deliberately overlooked populations such as people of color, people with disabilities and low-income communities. This would remove obstacles and allow underserved constituencies to experience and enjoy public lands and waters and cultural and historic sites and to participate in the protection and management of these public resources. These action plans should be developed with robust public input from affected communities.

Invest in a diverse and inclusive conservation jobs program.

The president's budget and proposed stimulus program should invest heavily in programs that put people to work restoring natural resources and wildlife habitat, rebuilding our parks and recreation economy, expanding responsible access to nature and protecting communities from natural disasters and pollution. The president should propose a robust conservation jobs package that creates durable work in communities suffering disproportionately from the economic toll of the pandemic.

Recruit, hire and retain a diverse and inclusive federal workforce.

Federal agencies that have responsibilities for federal lands and natural resources should prioritize recruiting interns and job applicants from diverse communities and institutions. It is especially important to employ individuals from communities that are under-represented in the field such as Native Americans and people in areas with legacy pollution or infrastructure challenges.

Expand equitable access to nature.

Federal agencies with land management responsibilities should survey the lands within their control and make

proposals for targeted expansion of their holdings and their programming that specifically help redress the inequities in access to nature. Federal funding can also assist states and localities in addressing these disparities by creating new green spaces or restoring landscapes close to communities that need them. Affected communities and stakeholders must be central to the planning and implementation of new land designations and management decisions. Agencies should expand educational and recreational programs to help connect children to natural areas and wildlife across the nation.

Prioritize consultation and collaboration with Native American tribes.

The federal government should build respectful and collaborative relationships with tribes regarding the management of natural resources, lands and wildlife. True government to government consultation must be the foundation for these relationships. Federal land management agencies should work with interested tribes to expand opportunities for collaboration in the management of shared resources and respect and accommodate tribal treaty rights and cultural and historic interests.

Ensure that diverse and disadvantaged communities are welcome to participate in public processes and programs, particularly those that serve or affect them.

Federal agencies with responsibilities for federal lands and natural resources should be committed to transparency, robust and diverse public input, and equal access to the benefits, processes and programs of the federal government. The president and relevant agency officials should affirm respect for transparency, public process and inclusion of the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders. As further described in the next section, laws that promote access to government information and involvement by the public in government decision-making, including FOIA, NEPA, EAJA, the Administrative Procedures Act and citizen suit provisions in major environmental laws such as the CWA should be reinvigorated.

6 Rebuild the Federal Government

To meet the urgent challenges the nation faces, the new administration must rebuild the federal government itself. The Trump administration's disregard for transparency and the rule of law, repudiation of sound science and facts, contempt for career government employees and disruption of agencies' organizational structures and capabilities have left federal institutions of governance weakened, distrusted and demoralized. To restore public confidence in the integrity of government decision-making, the new administration must strongly affirm its adherence to the rule of law, transparency and accountability, sound science and the highest ethical standards. It must also take immediate action to rebuild the morale of federal career employees and to restore damaged agency structures and capabilities.

ACTIONS NEEDED

Restore transparency, accountability and the rule of law by directing federal officials to comply with all applicable environmental laws and ensure full and fair opportunity for public involvement in federal decision-making.

The Trump administration lost the public's trust by failing to enforce bedrock environmental statutes, while weakening public participation processes and operating in the shadows. To restore public confidence in government, the next administration must strongly affirm its commitment to transparency, public involvement, good governance, and proper implementation of environmental laws. The president should direct federal agencies and officials to comply with applicable laws and rescind the waivers that purport to authorize federal agencies to ignore environmental and other laws in constructing the border wall.

The White House should issue Cabinet-wide FOIA guidance, directing agencies to review and respond to outstanding requests, reexamine their FOIA policies and address any shortcomings, such as capacity, web access and legal support to facilitate transparency. The CEQ should reassess the Trump administration's amendments to its NEPA regulations and reverse changes that were detrimental to sound

environmental review of federal actions, including changes to the NEPA regulations that prohibit or impede full consideration of cumulative effects and of climate change. CEQ should work with federal agencies to assess environmental reviews for major federal actions begun or completed under the Trump administration to ensure that federal actions receive thorough and appropriate review under NEPA.

The next administration should review secretarial orders and agency guidance of the previous administration pertaining to public participation to determine if they exceed authorities or undercut the public's role under the Administrative Procedure Act. The new administration should issue guidance to federal agencies to ensure that federal advisory committees operate transparently and are accountable under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. The Department of Justice should reexamine litigation policies and practices, such as the assertion of standing and ripeness defenses, that create barriers for those seeking justice in the courts; ensure that litigants entitled to attorneys' fees under citizen suit provisions or the Equal Access to Justice Act receive full and fair reimbursement; and support the ability of the public to bring citizen suits to enforce our nation's environmental laws.

Restore the integrity of government decision-making by emphasizing ethics compliance by all government officials.

The Trump administration further eroded public trust in government with its open disregard for fundamental ethics principles that guard against public officials using high office for personal gain. President Trump himself was repeatedly accused of profiting unconstitutionally from his businesses. He appointed persons to high public office who had ongoing relationships with business interests they were supposed to regulate or who held ideological beliefs opposed to the public missions of the agencies they were chosen to lead. The Trump administration routinely refused to disclose appointment calendars showing meetings between high officials and business interests. Public confidence in the integrity of government decision-making reached new lows.



People's Climate March, April 29, 2017, Washington, D.C.

The next president must act immediately to restore public trust. He should issue a presidential statement on the importance of ethics and transparency and avoiding conflicts of interest and establish exacting ethical and transparency standards for all political appointees. These standards should cover qualifications requirements, vetting, ethics pledges, financial disclosures, recusal agreements to avoid conflict of interest, and mandatory ethics training. The president should direct Cabinet secretaries and other sub-cabinet officials to issue similar statements affirming commitment to the rule of law, transparency, and high ethical standards.

The president should promptly appoint a strong leader to the Office of Government Ethics (OGE) and rebuild its staff capacity and expertise. He should direct all Cabinet-level and related agencies to promptly take necessary actions to rebuild the staff capacity and expertise of their ethics offices, including appointing a chief ethics officer for each department. He should direct all White House personnel and political appointees to comply fully with OGE regulations and guidance.

Finally, the new administration should support passage of legislation to protect the independence of inspectors

general by establishing set terms for their service and barring their dismissal for political reasons. It should support legislation codifying high ethical standards regarding conflicts of interest, required disclosures, nepotism controls and transparency for president and vice president, executive branch officials and Congress.

Restore the government's commitment to basing decisions on sound science.

Sound science is a cornerstone of effective governance, providing policymakers with facts essential to evaluate options and form reasoned decisions. It is at the center of essential conservation laws such as the ESA. Yet the role of science in federal agencies has been steadily eroded, and the government's science capacity has suffered a long-term budgetary decline since the late 1990s.³⁴ The Trump administration openly attacked and disparaged the role of science in government decision-making, from dismissing the reality of climate change to disregarding scientific advice in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and undermined sound science in numerous regulatory actions, from narrowly defining *foreseeable future* in the ESA to the distortion of science in the Navigable Waters Protection Rule under the CWA.³⁵ Today, the role of science in federal governance—particularly in conservation—is at its nadir.

The next president should issue an executive order declaring the fundamental importance of science in government policymaking and directing federal agencies to work in collaboration with the White House science advisor to take appropriate actions to restore the integrity of science in federal decision-making. This includes the establishment of scientific integrity panels and processes and rebuilding and enhancing federal scientific capabilities. The president should direct federal agencies to promote scientific integrity and science-based decision-making, respect the role of sound science and expertise in carrying out the functions of government, and advance the public communication of scientific facts as part of government decision-making. The order should direct federal agencies to rebuild the government's scientific human capital, including nominating and appointing highly qualified individuals to scientific leadership positions, recruiting the

next generation of scientists to federal service, and restoring and expanding nonfederal scientific and expert advisory committees. The order should also emphasize the importance of achieving greater diversity in the federal government's scientific programs; appropriately incorporating demographic, socioeconomic and other dimensions of diversity into federal research programs; and giving consideration to relevant indigenous and traditional knowledge in science-based decisions and policymaking. Since this issue is of such overarching importance, we call upon the incoming president to discuss the importance of restoring sound science and rebuilding the federal government's scientific capacity in the inaugural address.

Rebuild agency structures and restore morale and professionalism among career staff.

The backbone of the federal government is its dedicated career staff, who provide the technical expertise, management skills, and experience in administering government programs that enable federal agencies to carry out their vital missions for the American people. The Trump administration's contempt for career federal employees and the missions of their agencies, its widespread political interference in agency decision making, and its actions dismantling and relocating key federal agencies have deeply damaged the morale of federal agency staff and disrupted the functional capability of their agencies. President Trump's reckless deregulatory agenda was openly based on a pervasive distrust of government and the public missions that federal agencies serve. His administration's efforts to dismantle regulatory structures that protect the public and undercut administration of the ESA, NEPA, CWA and other bedrock environmental laws undermined morale among career staff committed to their agencies' missions. These deregulating and streamlining agendas were vigorously advanced by political appointees, often serving in acting capacity without Congressional approval, leaving career staff continually fearing political interference.

These impacts on career staff morale were compounded by the Trump administration's cavalier disregard of employees' welfare in forcing relocations and reorganizing agencies. In its first year, the administration abruptly and without

explanation transferred and relocated senior executives in the FWS and across the Department of the Interior, prompting retirements among the agency's leadership and raising lasting fears among career managers of politically motivated retaliation. The administration followed by announcing a sweeping reorganization of the Interior Department, modeled by then-Secretary Zinke along military lines, that imposed an arbitrary regional structure on many Interior agencies, disrupting existing agency leadership structures and relationships with states and other stakeholders.

Ultimately, hundreds of career BLM employees were given one month to decide whether they would relocate to a new agency headquarters in Grand Junction, Colorado (in a building owned by a major oil company) or lose their jobs. Career staff of two USDA research agencies, the Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, were similarly ordered to move to the Kansas City area, prompting hundreds of resignations. These forced relocations disrupted federal workers' personal lives; undercut the ability of these agencies to communicate effectively with Congress, their own departments and other federal agencies; and raised concerns that Trump administration's actions were motivated in part by a desire to drive out experienced staff and consolidate power for political appointees.

The new administration must heal these wounds within the federal workforce by reaffirming the importance of the public service career civil servants provide and taking vigorous steps to rebuild federal agency morale and capacity. The president should issue a presidential statement honoring federal career employees for their public service and emphasizing the importance of their agencies' missions. He should direct all Cabinet officers to similarly affirm the value of their employees' service and take concrete steps to rebuild morale and trust among the federal workforce. The president should direct the secretaries of the Interior and of Agriculture to reexamine the reorganizations that have disrupted BLM and the USDA's research agencies and take actions to redress the impacts of those reorganizations on agency capability—including, if warranted, returning the transferred functions and staff to Washington, D.C.

Now or Never

Although the next president will face many challenges, none are more urgent than the threats posed by climate change and the biodiversity crisis. Our country and our planet cannot afford further delay in addressing these threats. It is literally now or never. With the leadership and commitment of a new administration—and the fresh ideas, innovation and hope change brings—we can rise to meet the perils posed by climate change and species extinction even as we rebuild the economy, protect public health and address systemic racism and inequality.

We know that addressing climate change and turning the tide on biodiversity loss will not be easy. Neither will rebuilding the economy, warding off future pandemics,

confronting and remedying racism and injustice or restoring the integrity of the federal government itself. But our path forward as a nation depends on our next president taking on these tasks. We hope our recommendations help provide the new administration with a roadmap for a way forward.

Preserving our wildlife and the wild places they call home is a responsibility that transcends our lifetimes. Our future depends on the actions we take now to repair the fabric of life. Defenders of Wildlife pledges to work with the new administration on the priorities and actions proposed in this conservation agenda. Together we can meet the challenges ahead, create opportunities and ensure that America's extraordinary conservation legacy endures.

With the sea ice it needs to survive rapidly disappearing, the polar bear has become a symbol of climate change.



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- ²⁶ Ryan Richards, Center for American Progress. 2017. *Restoring Our Investment in America's Forests: How the 2018 Farm Bill Can Create New Jobs for Rural America*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2017/10/17/440816/restoring-investment-americas-forests/> According to this report, "As an industry, ecological restoration already generates \$24.5 billion in economic activity and directly provides 126,000 jobs in the United States. For every \$1 million invested in restoration, between 12 to 30 jobs are created, depending on the level of mechanization used on-site."
- ²⁷ See <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15030>
- ²⁸ Gerber LR. 2016. Conservation triage or injurious neglect in endangered species recovery. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 113:3563–3566.
- ²⁹ Defenders of Wildlife. 2020. FY2021 Interior and Related Agencies budget testimony. Available at: https://defenders-cci.org/files/Malcom_House_Testimony_FY_2021.pdf
- ³⁰ Available at: <https://ecos.fws.gov/ipac/>
- ³¹ The Forest Service attempts to manage 375,000 miles of roads, many of which degrade watershed conditions and pose a risk to clean water. Other roads are essential for public access and management and must be diligently maintained.
- ³² See <https://sentinellandscapes.org/>
- ³³ See <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15030>
- ³⁴ Hourihan, M. & Parkes, D. (n.d.). *Federal R&D Budget Trends: A Short Summary*. American Association for the Advancement of Science. Available at: <https://bit.ly/AAAS-federal-RD>
- ³⁵ Sullivan, S.M.P., Rains, M.C., Rodewald, A.D., Buzbee, W.W. & Rosemond, A.D. (2020). Distorting science, putting water at risk. *Science*, 369, 766–768.



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