

A photograph of two grey and white wolves standing on a dark, rocky outcrop. They are both howling upwards with their heads tilted back and mouths open. The background is a blurred forest of green and brown trees.

**Building
a Better
Future for**

**AMERICA'S
WILDLIFE**

2026–2030 STRATEGIC PLAN

For nearly 80 years, Defenders of Wildlife has worked to protect and restore America's wildlife at risk of extinction, advancing a vision of a future in which wildlife thrives, sustained by broad public support and a resilient network of healthy lands and waters. With a network of more than 2 million supporters, Defenders is an advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard wildlife for generations to come.



BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR AMERICA’S WILDLIFE

A Letter from the President and CEO

The United States is home to a breathtaking wealth of wild places and wildlife — a natural abundance few nations can match and an inheritance that has inspired decades of tremendous conservation achievements.

But that legacy is under serious threat.

The pace of species loss has reached crisis proportions. Scientists warn that wildlife is disappearing at a rate far exceeding anything that could be considered natural, driven by habitat destruction and fragmentation, unchecked development, resource extraction, invasive species and disease. Climate change compounds every one of these threats, accelerating habitat shifts and pushing already vulnerable species closer to the edge of extinction.

At the same time, the protection of nature has become the target of unrelenting political assault. At the federal level, agencies and wildlife protection programs are being hobbled and conservation laws and regulations dismantled. Imperiled species go ignored, while public lands and waters are being opened to harmful development at an unprecedented rate. Reputable scientists are too often absent from key policy discussions, while those with industry ties are increasingly filling leadership roles at the very agencies entrusted with protecting America’s natural resources.

With nearly 80 years of experience on the frontlines of wildlife conservation, Defenders of Wildlife is singularly positioned to confront these threats. Every day, our team of experts challenges destructive policies and advances recovery efforts on Capitol Hill, in the courts and through federal agency rulemaking. We are battle-tested and ready.

Defending the status quo, however, is no longer enough. Much like the conservation movement of the 1960s that led to the passage of the Endangered Species Act, we must now do more than hold the line — we must execute on a bold, new strategic plan that builds the next generation of wildlife protections and wildlife supporters. That means developing a modernized, scientifically grounded framework of federal and state laws, policies and incentives that can address the conservation challenges of this century.

It also means changing the political landscape. The persistent use of wildlife conservation as a culture war flashpoint will not be reversed without a deliberate, sustained effort to build broad public and political support. We believe wildlife conservation is a core, nonpartisan American



value, and the work of reinvigorating this shared commitment is now a fundamental priority of this organization, not an ancillary one.

In addition to addressing macro political and ecological trends, we must sharpen our applied, on-the-ground conservation efforts — a hallmark of our diversified approach to protecting and restoring wildlife. We are moving from spreading limited resources across many species to a targeted species portfolio supported by integrated conservation plans that bring our full organizational expertise to bear.

To power all this work, we also must invest in our staff and organizational capabilities like never before: we will continue to strengthen the internal cohesion, culture, systems and technologies needed to execute at the level this moment and the future demands.

With the commitment of our staff, partners, supporters and board, I am confident we can build a better future for America’s wildlife and ensure that the natural systems upon which they — and all of us — depend will endure for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Bowman".

Andrew Bowman
President and CEO



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WHO WE ARE



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At the heart of this strategic plan are Defenders’ mission, vision and values that define our aspirations, who we are and what we are working together to accomplish.

Our Mission

Our mission is clear and focused: **Defenders of Wildlife protects and restores America’s wildlife at risk of extinction.** This statement reflects the urgency of our work and the passion and commitment of our staff, while providing a clear guide for prioritization and strategic choices.

Vision

Our vision looks ahead to **a future in which wildlife thrives, sustained by broad public support and a resilient network of healthy lands and waters.** It recognizes that long-term conservation success depends not only on ecological outcomes but also on the engagement and commitment of people from all backgrounds.

Core Values

Our core values — **Honor, Empathy, Growth, Resilience, Connection and Hope** — speak to our organization’s character and spirit and how we show up in the world, both in tone and in action. They shape how we build culture and make decisions, and guide how staff interact with one another and with the communities, partners and policymakers we work alongside.

Our Core Values



HONOR

We honor our partners, our communities and the wildlife we protect by showing up with integrity, respect and responsibility. Honor means giving as much as we receive, building relationships that are genuine and mutual, and acting in ways that strengthen trust and reflect our best intentions. It embodies reciprocity, stewardship and a spirit of doing what is right.



EMPATHY

We listen with openness, assume good intentions and engage with honesty and curiosity to build deeper understanding. Empathy strengthens our relationships, enriches our partnerships and reminds us that meaningful change grows out of compassion, caring and fellowship.



GROWTH

We believe in continual learning, creativity and innovation. Growth means encouraging new ideas, empowering people to explore what is possible and being willing to question the status quo — all while upholding the integrity of science. We stretch into new possibilities and pursue solutions that help our people, our partners and the wildlife and wild places we work to protect.



RESILIENCE

We persevere through challenges with adaptability, grit and purpose. Resilience reflects our capacity to navigate uncertainty, recalibrate when needed and stay rooted in our mission during pivotal moments. It is both an individual strength and collective practice.



CONNECTION

We build strong and enduring relationships that make our collective work possible. Connection reflects our commitment to partnership, collaboration and shared purpose. We show up fully for one another and recognize that our greatest impact comes from working together.



HOPE

We believe in the possibility of a better future and act in ways that help bring that future to life. Hope fuels our resolve, inspires creativity and keeps us focused on what is possible rather than what is present. It motivates us to take meaningful steps toward long-term impact.

Our Values in Action: Honoring Tribal Partners

Defenders respects Indigenous Peoples as the original stewards of the land, waters and wildlife of North America. We endeavor to be allies and partners to the Tribes and Tribal members with whom we work and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into our work in a fair and responsible manner.

A prime example of this in action is the leadership role we have played in the Yellowstone Bison Conservation Transfer Program, through which we help relocate bison to Tribes and First Nations across North America. Known as “buffalo” by Indigenous communities, bison are far more than a wildlife species — they are a cornerstone of cultural identity, spiritual practice, and economic and ecological renewal, and their restoration to Tribal lands is an act of healing with significance that extends well beyond conservation.

Under the conservation strategy outlined in this plan, bison will be a priority species for Defenders and, accordingly, we will endeavor to expand our partnership with the InterTribal Buffalo Council to help more Tribes and First Nations establish or bolster their bison herds through the Yellowstone Bison Conservation Transfer program.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE



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This is a time of profound disruption for America’s wildlife, politics and society — and the consequences will be lasting.

Ecologically, the pressures are relentless. Habitats are eroding and shrinking, species are disappearing at alarming rates and climate change is accelerating. What was once a manageable set of individual threats has become an interconnected crisis. Expected demands for natural resources and climate forecasts make clear that these pressures will only intensify in the decades ahead, requiring conservation strategies to evolve in response.

The policy and legal framework that has long protected wildlife was not built to address the full scope of today’s challenges. Core protections like the federal Endangered Species Act are being weakened, science is being sidelined and the ranks of agency staff and elected champions for wildlife are dwindling. The very institutions and systems built to

safeguard America’s natural heritage are being hollowed out at a time when they are needed most.

The challenge runs deeper still at the societal level. Wildlife conservation has been politicized and cast as “anti-growth” — and, more recently, as “anti-abundance.” At the same time, conservation efforts across organizations and geographies remain insufficiently aligned to address threats that are increasingly systemic and widespread.

Relying on past approaches will not be enough to meet today’s challenges or those to come. Confronting them will require broader public support and political will, stronger and more diverse partnerships, and organizations equipped to operate at the complexity, pace and scale the moment demands. Defenders is committed to applying all its expertise and experience to this challenge — and this strategic plan defines the focused, urgent work ahead.

WHY DEFENDERS



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As a **wildlife-first organization** — prioritizing non-game species at risk of extinction and the habitats they need to survive and recover — Defenders plays a distinctive role in the conservation sector.

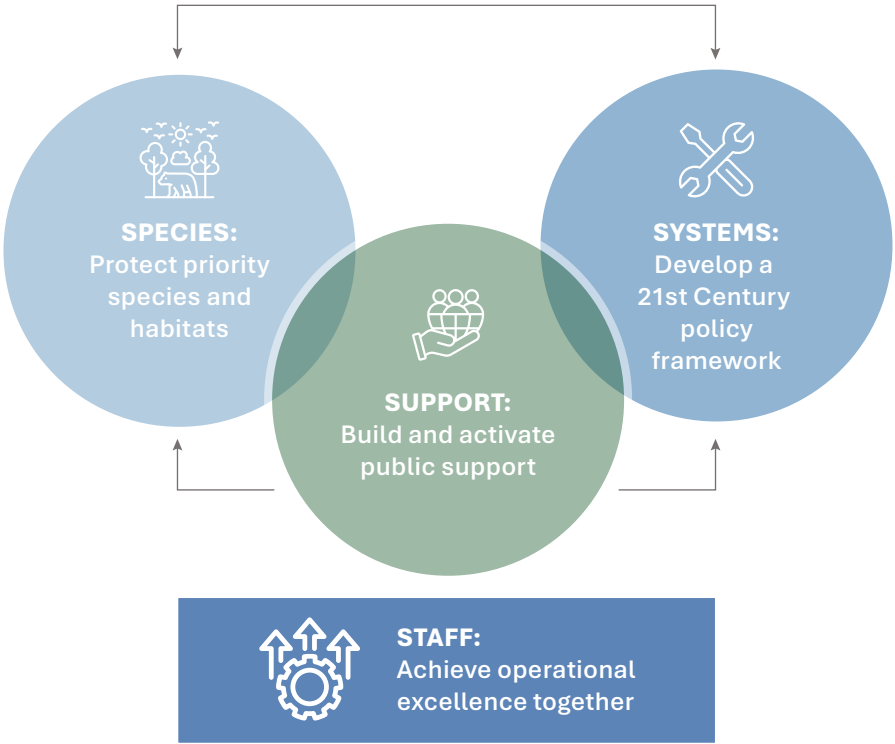
What sets us apart is not any one capability but the strength of our **multifaceted approach**, integrating science, policy advocacy, strategic litigation and on-the-ground action into comprehensive strategies for wildlife. We are widely recognized as a **credible and pragmatic voice** with a track record of leading on key wildlife issues, working across differences and engaging in genuine partnerships — collaborating with Tribes, local communities, federal and state agencies, policymakers and other organizations — to co-create inclusive and lasting solutions.

Our **robust advocacy** operation is active on Capitol Hill and with federal agencies, and our legal team pursues **strategic litigation**, reserving the courts for high-impact opportunities. Our field staff undertake **applied, hands-on interventions** to protect and enhance wildlife habitat while encouraging coexistence between landowners and wildlife. And, increasingly, the **cultivation and mobilization of broad public support** through a narrative that invites people from all backgrounds to recognize the inherent value of wildlife and wild places is at the center of our work.

Defenders is uniquely positioned to shape the future of wildlife protection in the U.S. Our approach — grounded in science, strengthened by diverse alliances and driven by measurable results — enables us to deliver on the four goals that define this plan and advance solutions that are both effective and built to last.

OUR GOALS AND HOW WE WILL ACHIEVE THEM

Defenders’ strategy is organized around four interconnected goals that together drive conservation outcomes across species, systems, public support and organizational effectiveness. These goals are mutually reinforcing — progress in one area accelerates progress in the others.



SPECIES GOAL: Protect imperiled species and habitats with the potential to generate outsized benefits for wildlife in America

A focused and intentional conservation strategy is the centerpiece of this plan and is grounded in a powerful premise:

By deliberately selecting species where Defenders’ expertise and efforts can materially alter their trajectory away from extinction, the organization will maximize its

impact, advancing protection and recovery efforts that cascade and benefit biodiversity more broadly.

This strategy builds on our history as a highly effective, species-driven organization while acknowledging the increasing scale and complexity of modern-day conservation challenges — among them, growing human pressures on wildlife habitat and a climate crisis whose full consequences are still unfolding. Our work will be guided by the best available science, including the latest climate projections, ensuring that our priorities reflect not only

where species stand today but also where they will need to be to survive the decades ahead.

PRIORITIZING SPECIES AND HABITATS

Apply a rigorous, science-based process — one that incorporates cutting-edge climate science to account for shifting ranges and long-term habitat viability — to identify priority species and define the habitats most essential to their recovery.

IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED CONSERVATION PLANS

Develop and execute species-specific plans that align science, policy, advocacy, communications and field work around shared priorities. The expertise of staff across the organization

will inform these efforts, bringing the full range of Defenders’ capabilities to bear for each priority species.

DRIVING A NATIONAL CONSERVATION AGENDA

Synthesize individual plans into a coordinated national approach that informs decision-making, partnerships and resource allocation.

EXPANDING AND ADAPTING OVER TIME

Evolve the targeted species portfolio to address priority habitats and wildlife corridors, key threats and coexistence strategies — adapting as climate science and on-the-ground conditions reveal new risks and opportunities.

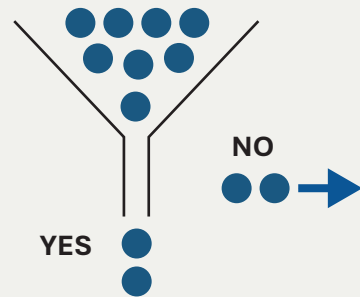


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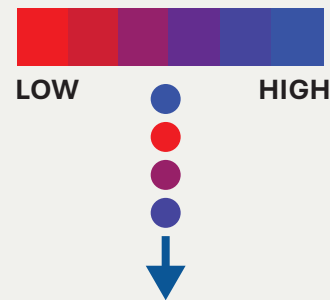
Species Prioritization Framework

STEP ONE:
Is the species
imperiled?



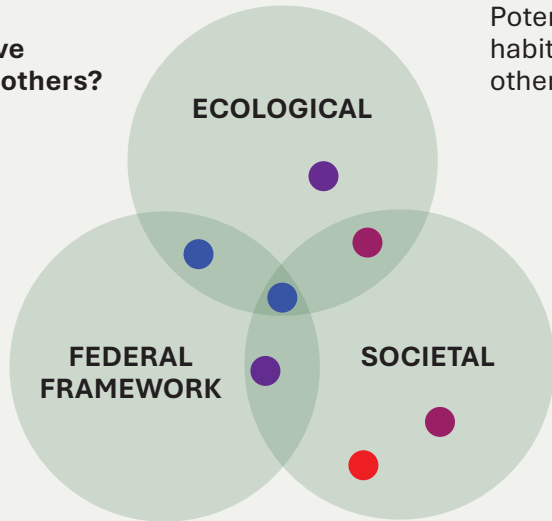
STEP TWO:
What is Defenders' likelihood
of recovering the species?

- Climate change
- Other threats
- Defenders' capabilities



STEP THREE:
Can the species improve
conservation for many others?

Potential to strengthen
the conservation
framework (i.e., new
legal precedent,
policies or programs)



Potential to protect
habitat utilized by many
other imperiled species

Potential to
increase public and
political support
for conservation

A Targeted Portfolio of Priority Species

Defenders' priority species portfolio is actively taking shape based on a rigorous application of science, climate data and expertise from across the organization (see Species Prioritization Framework on the facing page). Integrated conservation plans that will identify what it will take to materially alter the trajectory of these species are in development.

Three examples illustrate the breadth and intentionality of Defenders' new conservation approach to species conservation: the **gray wolf**, a vital keystone predator essential to maintaining ecosystem health, has been central to Defenders' work for decades and exemplifies how a single species can anchor broader conservation gains. The **eastern hellbender**, America's largest salamander, serves as an umbrella species for southern Appalachian aquatic biodiversity and is a critical indicator of water quality — a reminder that charismatic conservation extends well beyond mammals. And the **southwestern willow flycatcher**, a key indicator of healthy riparian ecosystems in the Southwest, illustrates how bird species can lead to habitat protection efforts that benefit entire communities of imperiled wildlife.



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SYSTEMS GOAL: Develop a 21st-century policy framework for wildlife conservation in America

The laws and regulations that have long protected wildlife are under sustained attack, and the response must go well beyond traditional approaches. Defenders is committed to preserving these essential protections while also envisioning a more ambitious framework that can meet current and future challenges. By shaping the next generation of conservation laws and policies — and building the coalitions needed to advance them — we can create a system that safeguards wildlife for decades to come.

BUILDING A NEXT-GENERATION CONSERVATION FRAMEWORK

Develop and advance a forward-looking conservation framework that brings together new and existing alliances to strengthen, legitimize and implement conservation at scale. Achieving this will require working in new ways with a broader and more diverse spectrum of partners – building coalitions across the conservation community, Congressional offices of both parties, Indigenous communities, public and private landowners, and regulated industries.

Working with these partners, we will define a clear vision for the framework that anticipates ecological change and responds to accelerating threats. We will pursue institutional and policy reforms that strengthen the capacity of federal wildlife and land management agencies, and secure reliable funding and incentive structures across federal, state, Tribal and private lands. We will also advance targeted legislation to close persistent gaps in habitat and species conservation and apply new technologies to address conservation challenges such as inadequate monitoring of habitat conditions.

DEFENDING CORE WILDLIFE PROTECTIONS

Protect and uphold existing federal and state laws by opposing efforts to weaken them, safeguarding funding and preventing erosion of key conservation programs at both the federal and state levels. This is active, ongoing work – challenging harmful implementation, preventing legislation that undermines wildlife and habitat conservation laws, protecting and restoring baseline funding to federal agencies and programs, and defending non-game species protections in states that are a priority for Defenders.

IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Strengthen how laws function in practice through new policies, litigation, increased habitat protections on federal lands and waters, and improved wildlife conservation on state and private lands. Defenders also works to mitigate the effects of energy development on imperiled species and actively supports renewable energy projects with minimal impacts on those species.

SUPPORT GOAL: Build and activate public support for wildlife protection as a national priority

Wildlife has long been a central part of America’s identity and natural heritage, and respect for it remains a widely shared value. Yet the protection of wildlife is often overlooked and, in recent years, has become increasingly politicized. Defenders seeks to elevate wildlife conservation as a unifying national priority that endures across generations — and by building broader and more sustained public commitment, we can secure lasting protections and strengthen the future of America’s wildlife.

EXPANDING AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Lead a national campaign that reframes wildlife conservation as a unifying value, engages diverse communities and is amplified by trusted voices to inspire broader participation.

STRENGTHENING BRAND AND VOICE

Modernize Defenders’ brand, messaging and visual identity to sharpen its position as a leading wildlife authority and increase relevance, trust and recognition across key audiences.

GROWING AND DIVERSIFYING THE COMMUNITY

Use data, partnerships and meaningful experiences to attract new audiences and foster long-term connection and commitment among supporters, advocates and donors.

MOBILIZING ADVOCACY AND ACTION

Expand participation and equip staff and supporters to drive advocacy efforts that advance conservation priorities and demonstrate the breadth and depth of public commitment to wildlife.

We Are Closer Than You Think

A flagship element of this strategic plan and its Support Goal is an integrated, multi-channel outreach campaign entitled *We Are Closer Than You Think* that is built on a simple yet powerful idea: despite increased polarization in the U.S., a love for wildlife and the outdoors is something people share broadly. Whether fishing the same waters, exploring open lands or raising families connected to nature, Americans are united by these experiences.

We Are Closer Than You Think emphasizes that protecting wildlife is not about “left vs. right,” but about “right vs. wrong” — a moral imperative to preserve what belongs to everyone. Using the power of storytelling and integrated media, the campaign mobilizes public support, shifts perceptions and inspires collective responsibility for wildlife and wild places through public service announcements, paid media across digital and broadcast channels, influencer partnerships, and earned media — meeting people where they are and inviting them to look beyond differences in service of the natural heritage we all share.



STAFF GOAL: Foster a collaborative workplace where people can do their best work, supported by strong systems and processes, and a culture of accountability, pride, and belonging

Defenders has taken important steps to strengthen its workplace culture and improve the systems that support staff. These gains matter — but more is needed, and every staff member has an important role to play. With the stakes for wildlife higher than ever, delivering on



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this strategy requires an organization where staff are equipped, supported and working together on shared priorities. Defenders will strengthen coordination, decision-making and the conditions for staff to do their best work, while investing in their growth as leaders and professionals.

IMPROVING COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Establish consistent practices that strengthen communication, knowledge sharing and coordination across teams and geographies, reinforced by shared expectations for collaboration and inclusive leadership.

MODERNIZING SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

Streamline workflows and invest in integrated systems that reduce administrative burdens, improve access to information and enable staff to focus their time on mission-critical work.

ALIGNING ROLES, WORK AND PERFORMANCE

Clarify expectations and decision-making authority while aligning workplans, budgets and performance with strategic priorities across the organization. Invest in staff training and development to help them reach their full potential.

STRENGTHENING CULTURE AND BELONGING

Embed values in daily practice, recognize and reward staff contributions and create opportunities for staff connection, growth and the sharing of perspectives and feedback.

WHAT IS CHANGING IN HOW DEFENDERS WORKS

The goals above reflect a set of deliberate shifts in how Defenders operates, prioritizes its work and delivers results. The table below captures where we are today and how we are evolving the way we work to execute this ambitious agenda.

SHIFT	FROM	TO
We are becoming more selective in how we work and allocate resources	a broad and often opportunistic approach	a targeted portfolio of priority species and habitats where we can most effectively influence outcomes
We are evolving our role in conservation policy	primarily defending existing wildlife laws and protections	both protecting current safeguards and shaping a forward-looking conservation framework that addresses modern threats
We are elevating and expanding public engagement as a core driver of success	a support function focused primarily on existing supporters	a central component of long-term conservation success with a focus on engaging both new and existing audiences
We are strengthening how we work as an organization and support our staff	lack of a clearly defined and shared strategy, fragmented systems, and inadequate internal investments	clearer priorities, stronger collaboration between departments, and improved accountability supported by stronger systems and processes
We are embedding strategy into how work gets done day-to-day	limited connection between the strategic plan and organizational priorities	a clear through-line from goals to work plans, budgets and performance

Strategic Framework Summary

Our Core Hypothesis: By prioritizing species where Defenders’ efforts and expertise can materially alter their trajectory away from extinction, the organization will maximize its impact, advancing protection and recovery efforts that cascade and benefit biodiversity more broadly.

THE MOMENT:

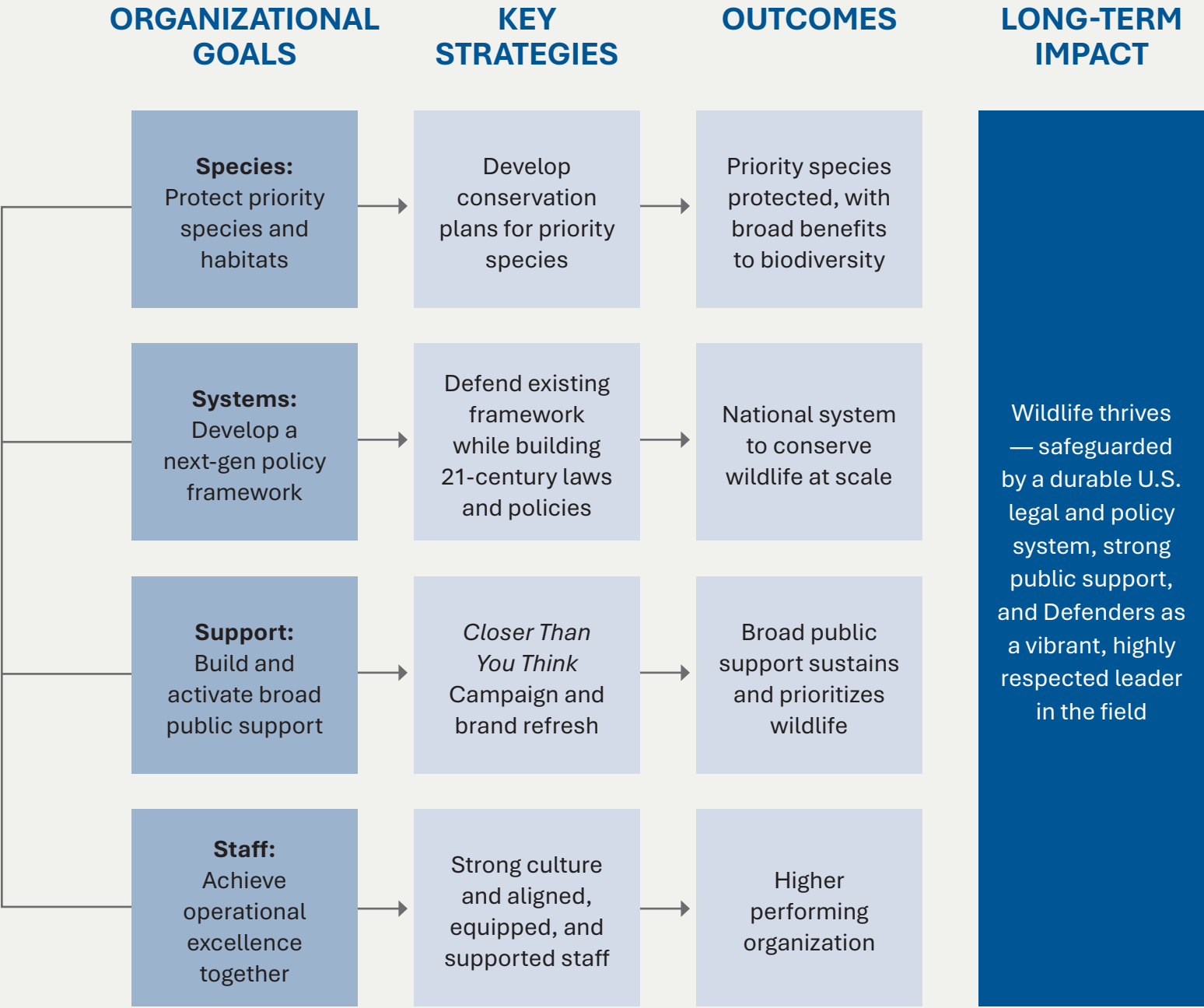
- **Ecological:** Habitats are eroding and shrinking, species are disappearing at alarming rates, and climate change is accelerating
- **Political:** Core protections are under attack, science is sidelined, and agency capacity and champions for wildlife are dwindling
- **Societal:** Wildlife conservation has been politicized, cast as “anti-growth” or “anti-abundance,” while competition for funding intensifies

MISSION & VISION:

Defenders of Wildlife protects and restores America’s wildlife at risk of extinction, advancing a vision of a future in which wildlife thrives, sustained by broad public support and a resilient network of healthy lands and waters.

CORE CAPABILITIES:

- Science
- Policy advocacy
- Strategic litigation
- On-the-ground conservation
- Public narrative and mobilization



WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Long-term success for Defenders will be measured by meaningful, lasting outcomes for wildlife — sustained by strong policy, broad public support and a high-performing organization. Through 2030, we will track progress against a set of key metrics for protecting priority species, strengthening conservation systems, expanding public support and building an organization equipped to deliver — with the recognition that the work these goals represent will extend well beyond this planning period.



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SPECIES GOAL: Protect imperiled species and habitats with the potential to generate outsized benefits for wildlife in America	
Aspirational 2030 Outcomes	Key Metrics
- Improved status for priority species - Improved habitats and ecosystems achieved through species conservation efforts - Improved and more effective conservation practices, laws and policies - Increased wildlife conservation funding, public support and partnerships	# or level of threats to priority species eliminated or reduced # of strategies or actions proven to effectively conserve priority species and habitats # of priority species populations maintained or increased - Amount of priority species’ habitat protected or restored
SYSTEMS GOAL: Develop a 21st-century policy framework for wildlife conservation in America	
Aspirational 2030 Outcomes	Key Metrics
- A coherent next-generation framework established and advanced - Public agencies operating with stronger mandates, tools and resources to manage lands and waters for imperiled wildlife - Existing wildlife protections maintained and strengthened	# of organizations (e.g., eNGOs, agencies, regulated community) and Congressional offices active on imperiled species policy familiar with or engaged with framework contents # of framework priorities reflected in policy proposals, including proposed rules, practices, legislation or budget improvements # of federal rules or bills harmful to imperiled species conservation that have failed or been amended favorably # of partnerships and policies created to improve implementation of existing imperiled species laws, including through lands and water conservation - Amount of funding increased for imperiled species/habitat conservation, including through habitat protections

SUPPORT GOAL: Build and activate public support for wildlife protection as a national priority	
Aspirational 2030 Outcomes	Key Metrics
- Increased recognition of Defenders as a trusted national leader in wildlife conservation - A larger, more diverse public actively engaged with Defenders - Stronger retention and long-term commitment among advocates and donors	% year-over-year growth in media presence and share of voice % growth in aided brand awareness by 2030 % year-over-year growth in active new supporters and advocates % growth in new, digital donor base by 2030 % year-over-year increase in advocacy actions taken
STAFF GOAL: Foster a collaborative workplace where people can do their best work, supported by strong systems and processes and a culture of accountability, pride, and belonging	
Aspirational 2030 Outcomes	Key Metrics
- Clear and aligned priorities guide day-to-day work and decision-making - Administrative burdens are reduced through streamlined systems and processes - Roles and responsibilities are clearly understood by staff - Internal communication is consistent, transparent and enables feedback - Staff feel engaged, valued and motivated to stay, grow and contribute	% of staff who agree that organizational priorities are clear and guide their work % of staff who report that systems and processes enable them to work efficiently % of staff who report clarity of their roles and responsibilities % of staff who are satisfied with internal communications and feel they have the information they need to do their job well % of staff engagement % of voluntary retention year over year



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