

**Testimony of Stephen Guertin
Deputy Director for Policy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs regarding
S. 2891, Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act of 2019**

March 4, 2020

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee. I am Stephen Guertin, Deputy Director for Policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior (Department). I appreciate the opportunity to present the Department's views on S. 2891, the Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act of 2019.

The Service's mission is "working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." The Service is the only agency in the Federal government whose primary responsibility is the conservation of fish and wildlife resources for the American public. The Service's work helps ensure a healthy environment, and provides affordable, accessible, and premier opportunities for Americans to enjoy outdoor recreation and our shared natural heritage. It is a priority of the Service and of this Administration to increase access to outdoor recreational opportunities, reduce regulatory burdens, recover imperiled species, and ensure that Tribal sovereignty is respected.

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

Habitat loss and fragmentation are widely recognized as among the most significant threats to biodiversity. The viability of many wildlife populations is dependent on the ability to move, including daily movements for resources, migrations between seasonal ranges, long-range gene dispersal, and range shifts over time in response to changing conditions. Migration patterns for some species can cover hundreds of miles and cross Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands. Tribal lands span 56 million acres in the continental United States, representing a significant land base. Tribes are important conservation partners, and the Service recognizes the valuable role they play in efforts to conserve our nation's wildlife and the habitat upon which they depend.

We appreciate the Committee's interest in wildlife conservation. We offer the following comments on S. 2891 and look forward to discussing these views with the Committee.

S. 2891, Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act of 2019

S. 2891 would allow federally recognized Tribes to nominate a habitat corridor for fish, wildlife, or plants on Indian land to be designated by the Service, in consultation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as a "Tribal Wildlife Corridor." In S. 2891, this designation would further enable Tribes to consult with the Department and coordinate with the U.S. Forest Service to improve

habitat connectivity between the Tribal Wildlife Corridor and public lands. S. 2891 authorizes the U.S. Department of Agriculture to prioritize expansion of a Tribal Wildlife Corridor onto private lands under certain Farm Bill conservation programs. The legislation also requires the Service to provide technical assistance to Tribes and to establish a grant program to support Tribal Wildlife Corridors.

The Department supports the intent of S. 2891 to improve coordination between Tribes and federal agencies in efforts to conserve wildlife. Conserving wildlife corridors using a voluntary and non-regulatory approach is a priority for this Administration. For example, in 2018, the Secretary of the Interior issued Secretarial Order 3362 (S.O. 3362) to improve habitat quality in western big game winter range and migration corridors for pronghorn, elk, and mule deer.

While Tribes are not specifically mentioned in S.O. 3362, the Department is supporting projects and providing technical assistance to several Tribes. For example, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is leading a Corridor Mapping Team that is working with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and Jicarilla Apache Nation to map GPS collar data collected by the Tribes from deer and elk in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. USGS is also conducting a GPS collar tracking study on deer and elk migrations across the Wind River Reservation. The project is a collaboration with the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribal Game and Fish Department, the Service, and The Nature Conservancy. Additionally, through a partnership among the Department, industry, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), and others, Tribes are eligible to apply for funding for projects, or for projects to be conducted on their land in support of S.O. 3362. In the first grant cycle, NFWF funded a project in the San Juan Basin of Colorado to facilitate safe movement of deer and elk to access summer and winter range habitat on the Southern Ute Indian, Federal, State, and private lands via two newly constructed overpass and underpass structures.

The Service's Native American Program (Program) works to enhance Government-to-Government relations with federally recognized Indian Tribal governments by coordinating the consultation process between the Service and Tribes, ensuring that Native American interests are considered in project planning and implementation, and that national plans and actions implement the Service's Native American Policy. The Program supports training for Service employees to address Tribal trust responsibilities, and coordinates and supports workshop and training opportunities for Tribal members on the preparation of grant applications and other topics. The Program also administers the Tribal Wildlife Grants (TWG) Program, which provides competitive grant awards to Tribes for projects that benefit fish, wildlife, and habitat of cultural or traditional importance. Since its inception in 2003, the TWG Program has awarded more than \$94 million to Federally recognized Native American Tribes, supporting more than 456 conservation projects, many of which address fish and wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity.

For example, the Service awarded a grant to the Penobscot Nation in Maine to protect and restore its historic sustenance fisheries, including endangered Atlantic salmon, within the Penobscot River watershed. The project involved population and habitat surveys, planting of eggs and stocking of adult fish, and removal of barriers to fish passage on Tribal lands, among other activities. These are just a sample of the many grants the Service has awarded to Tribes

across the country through the Tribal Wildlife Grants Program to address fish and wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity.

Conclusion

The Service appreciates the Committee’s interest in and support of wildlife conservation on Tribal lands. Habitat loss and fragmentation are among the most important threats to biodiversity, and the viability of many wildlife populations is dependent on the ability to migrate. Tribes are important conservation partners, and the Service recognizes the valuable role they play in efforts to conserve our nation’s fish and wildlife and the habitat upon which they depend. The Administration is providing technical and financial support for the conservation of fish and wildlife and habitat, including corridors on Tribal lands. We support the intent of S. 2891 and welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to ensure any corridor legislation complements, and does not deter, the existing work of the Administration as we continue to work with States, Tribes, and other partners to improve the habitat conditions in migration corridors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 2891, the Tribal Wildlife Corridors Act of 2019.