

February 22, 2021

Scott de la Vega, Acting Secretary of the Interior
Department of Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Acting Secretary de la Vega,

We, the undersigned hunting and fishing conservation organizations, representing America's 40 million hunters and anglers, are writing to support continuation of the Department of the Interior's (DOI) efforts to maintain, conserve, and enhance big game migration corridors between seasonal ranges across the West. The current effort has widespread support from state wildlife agencies, and a wide diversity of both hunting and non-hunting based non-governmental conservation organizations. As you work to implement the priorities of the Biden Administration, we strongly encourage you to review this initiative's progress and take steps to expand and further institutionalize this highly successful program that supports biodiversity and the resilience of these ecologically- and economically important wildlife species and their habitats.

It is well documented that many big game populations across North America move between seasonal habitats. The quality of habitat and the ability to move between seasonal ranges unimpeded is a fundamental element in the ecology and management of mule deer, pronghorn, elk, bighorn sheep, moose, and other species. Measures to conserve migration corridors and seasonal ranges not only facilitate unobstructed movement to access forage and other resources, but also contribute to overall habitat resiliency to climate change across a wide range of ecological systems and contribute to larger-scale efforts to increase connectivity for numerous species.

Recent technological advancements have allowed researchers to identify specific locations of big game migrations across the West, and how animals use these corridors and seasonal habitats. Simultaneously, an increasing human population across the western U.S. has expanded the human footprint across the landscape and is now interposed with important seasonal habitats and migratory corridors increasing the potential for conflict. For example, increased vehicle traffic has accelerated wildlife-vehicle collisions and direct mortality of big game along traditional migration corridors. Finally, habitat quality on many seasonal ranges has deteriorated because of invasive species, fire suppression, increased frequency of wildfires, overgrowth of undesirable vegetation, and other issues, which has ultimately led to a decline in both game and non-game wildlife populations.

Migration corridors and big game habitat – notably winter range – have received much needed policy and management attention in recent years. Signed in February 2018, DOI's Secretarial Order 3362 (SO 3362), has been successful in broadening engagement and focus on the challenges associated with conserving big game migration corridors and seasonal habitats. States such as Colorado and Wyoming have enacted Executive Orders directing state agencies to

prioritize conservation of big game migration corridors and habitat. Additionally, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) passed a resolution in June 2019 (revised and passed again in 2021) supporting conservation and state-led management of wildlife migration corridors. This WGA resolution also calls on federal agencies to support locally developed initiatives to conserve migration corridors and habitat.

Both state and federal governments recognize the need and the challenges of conserving big game migration corridors across the West. Indeed, through effective coordination and implementation, DOI's efforts have created strong collaborative partnerships between 11 western states and multiple federal agencies. Further, SO 3362 has provided a critical infusion of resources for states to gather additional information on big game migration, and implement measures designed to conserve migratory corridors and improve winter range condition. In just the first two years of implementation, DOI provided a total of \$6.4 million to western states for 41 different research projects, and the USGS provided over \$1 million in funding for technical and mapping support.

Also, federal funding has been leveraged for habitat restoration in migration corridors and seasonal ranges identified in the SO 3362-driven State Action Plans. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program provided nearly \$10 million that was matched with more than \$30 million for habitat conservation, restoration, and enhancement in the 11 western states encompassed by SO 3362. Indeed, the implementation of SO 3362 has been a coordinated, landscape-scale approach to integrating research and management to achieve conservation outcomes - identify priority areas and direct funding to those specific locations.

As DOI reviews existing policies and assesses future needs, we believe the new Administration has an opportunity to build on this popular initiative and recommendations set forth by SO 3362, the WGA resolution, and other state policies. This includes substantive funding and continued coordination between federal land management agencies, state wildlife agencies and stakeholders to actively restore and conserve vital migration corridors and seasonal habitats.

Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. Establish a permanent big game migration conservation program, with assigned staff and adequate funding for research and implementation by Federal, State, and Tribal agencies. This should include:
 - a. Retaining current funding sources and levels within DOI and expand these sources and levels as needed to meet program goals and objectives.
 - b. Finalizing revisions to existing regulations, orders, guidance documents, policy manuals, directives, land-use plans, and other policy documents as needed for consistency with program goals and objectives.
2. Retain existing national and regional coordinating staff to ensure continuity and effectiveness of the program.
3. Expand this program to include wild sheep and moose, and summer range as priorities.

4. Work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop a companion effort to further engage the U.S. Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service.
5. Expand collaboration efforts with private landowners, tribal governments, and state and local governments to improve communication, broaden support and increase voluntary conservation efforts and overall program effectiveness.
6. Encourage Congress to establish a grant program to provide matching funds for states and tribes to voluntarily re-connect wildlife corridors through partnerships with private landowners, producers, and other stakeholders.

Strongly supported by conservation groups throughout the West, we believe this important initiative is vital for achieving long-range DOI conservation goals and objectives for both game and non-game species alike, while enhancing resiliency to the impacts of climate change. We thank you for considering our request and recommendations and look forward to working with DOI to achieve great things for wild things and wild places.

Sincerely,

American Woodcock Society
Archery Trade Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Boone and Crockett Club
Bear Trust International
California Waterfowl Association
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Conservation Force
Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports
Dallas Safari Club
Delta Waterfowl
Houston Safari Club
Izaak Walton League of America
Masters of Foxhounds Association
Mule Deer Foundation
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Deer Association
National Shooting Sports Foundation
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
North American Falconers Association
North American Grouse Partnership
Orion: The Hunter's Institute
Pheasants Forever
Pope and Young Club
Public Lands Foundation

Quail Forever
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Ruffed Grouse Society
Safari Club International
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Whitetails Unlimited
Wild Sheep Foundation
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute