

February 24, 2021

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Senate Majority Leader  
Hart Senate Office Building, 322  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Minority Leader  
Russell Senate Office Building, 317  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
235 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
House Minority Leader  
326 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Leaders of Congress:

The undersigned organizations, representing a diverse coalition of natural resource conservation interests, write to wish you a warm welcome to the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. We look forward to your leadership as our nation seeks to unify following the recent unrest and overcome the continued challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We understand the significant task ahead of Congress to develop and enact policies and funding measures that empower the American people and energize our economy. In doing so, the value of investing in our most common goods—our land and water—cannot be overstated. Beyond the clear ecological value, investment in the outdoors provides jobs, energizes local economies, improves the resilience of our communities, and holds a lasting public benefit for generations. Born out of this recognition, our organizations representing a diversity of agricultural and water conservation, coastal resilience, and wildlife habitat interests, have worked in the last several months to develop consensus around the below priority areas. These priorities are not comprehensive to the interests of our individual organizations, but we are united in urging investment in conservation as part of the recovery of our nation. We believe the below priorities are well-suited for inclusion in a comprehensive economic and infrastructure legislative effort.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that, as we continue to craft the ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the immense value of conservation is realized as we look to put Americans back to work in 2021.

- **Investment in our nation's private lands.**

The suite of voluntary conservation programs administered by the USDA provide a value-add to rural America beyond their well-known ecological benefit. Incentives offered to landowners to optimize farm and forestry operations, incorporate resilience, conserve marginal acres, and hold risk management provide value at a time when the agricultural economy needs it most.

Among them, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) has proven that the partnership model of conservation can be extended to agriculture to address resource concerns at scale. Between Fiscal Years (FY) 2014-2018, the program empowered landowners, conservationists and state and local officials to leveraged \$100 million in annual appropriations to achieve \$2.4 billion in locally led conservation. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has been similarly successful, keeping acreage in production while assisting landowners to optimize operations and address resource concerns. To meet the demand of American farmers, Congress has grown program offerings and raised the EQIP budget authority by 1500 percent

since its inception in 1996. Still, 43 percent of applications go unfunded each year, leaving roughly 8.3 million acres of unmet need nationally. In addition to EQIP and RCPP, the full suite of farm bill conservation programs—including the Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Stewardship Program and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program—all provide needed risk management value to farmers and ranchers, and require significant investment to ensure they remain effective in protecting soil, water, wildlife, and landowners' bottom line. In particular, investments incentivizing enrollment in the CRP would improve the health of the program at a time that acreage levels in our most popular land conservation program are at a three-decade low.

Lastly, as Congress and the USDA incorporate climate into existing programs to give our nation's private landowners the tools they need to adapt to worsening challenges like heat, drought, and pests, the technical assistance capacity of the agency must keep pace. We urge Congress to double investment and significantly grow enrollment in the farm bill programs available to assist landowners in addressing natural resource challenges, and to provide the technical and financial assistance necessary to address the causes and impacts of climate change.

- **Improve the resilience of transportation infrastructure.**

In the 116th Congress, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee took significant steps to address climate threats to transportation systems by unanimously passing the America's Transportation Infrastructure Act of 2019 (ATIA). For the first time, the surface transportation reauthorization bill included an important climate title. We encourage Congress to build upon these important efforts and pass a surface transportation reauthorization bill that creates a new competitive grant program to fund important investments to enhance the resilience of critical transportation systems, including by using natural infrastructure approaches and relocating vulnerable assets out of flood-prone areas. The Senate-proposed Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) grant program would provide disaster-prone communities with grant opportunities for projects that improve the ability of transportation infrastructure to withstand the impacts of continued extreme weather events and natural disasters. Such projects provide quality jobs and opportunities for investment well beyond their completion and pay dividends to local taxpayers.

- **Invest in the value of clean water.**

Mechanisms for low-cost financing, such as the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) are proven tools for communities to overcome challenges to water quality and infrastructure. Since its inception in 1987, the CWSRF has provided often disadvantaged communities with over \$110 billion in financing for estuary protection, wastewater control and water treatment. These dollars carry a nearly 3:1 return on investment and have untold benefits to community and ecological health. Congress should provide robust funding to SRF programs and include a 15 percent set aside for the Green Project Reserve Program to encourage states to invest in energy and water efficiency upgrades, and natural and nature-based approaches for addressing local water quality challenges.

- **Support multi-benefit watershed management in the West.**

The challenges facing the management of water resources across the U.S. vary from the flood-prone upper Mississippi river basin to the water-scarce arid west. The WaterSMART Drought Response and Cooperative Watershed Management programs provide a federal cost-share for the development of local watershed management programs; improve water delivery, efficiency, and reliability; support multi-benefit projects; and reduce conflicts over water-use in the West. Like the rest of America's infrastructure, western water delivery systems are aging and struggling to adequately keep pace with the needs of growing communities and economies.

Similarly, Minute 323 of the 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty provides a continued framework for both nations to invest in the ecological restoration of the Colorado River delta. Agreed to in 2017, the nine-year agreement provides for the continued flow of water through the river system spanning the two nations, expands habitat restoration areas, and funds water-supply research throughout the region. We strongly support efforts to fund U.S. obligations under Minute 323, and look forward to the impact of its faithful implementation on the cooperative nature of water management between the U.S. and Mexico.

- **Strengthen America’s coastlines and restore iconic ecosystems.**

Our coastal wetlands, marshes, river systems, and floodplains serve an outsized role in minimizing the impacts of extreme weather events. Congress should support the conservation and restoration of these systems by funding Title IX National Oceans and Coastal Security Fund (administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation as the National Coastal Resilience Fund) or direct funding to projects in existing, publicly vetted coastal or watershed restoration plans. The House Natural Resource Committee also introduced legislation in the last Congress that would create a new program within NOAA to fund coastal restoration and fisheries management initiatives to support economic recovery for COVID-19, similar to the investments that were supported by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The “NOAA shovel-ready grant program” is another vehicle Congress could consider for investing in coastal restoration and resilience to support economic recovery in tourism- and fisheries-dependent communities that have been hard hit by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Funding restoration and resilience initiatives will not only ensure the functionality of important coastal ecosystems for years to come, they will also enhance natural flood buffers, protect critical infrastructure and communities, improve water quality, and support growing recreational economies. In the Gulf of Mexico, wildlife tourism alone supports \$19 billion in annual spending and supports over half a million jobs, but the region is also incredibly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Mississippi River Delta, an iconic landscape that supports much of this economic activity, has lost over 2,000 square miles of land since the 1930s and continues to lose a football field of wetlands every 100 minutes. Restoration and conservation of the Mississippi River Delta and various lands and water that support tourism in the Gulf of Mexico will have positive ripple effects for thousands of small businesses for years to come.

- **Invest in pre-disaster mitigation.**

Funding for pre-disaster mitigation grant programs, such as the Building Resilient Infrastructure in Communities (BRIC) program, provides communities that have experienced major disaster declarations with matching funds to identify existing infrastructure vulnerabilities and develop innovative, nature-based solutions that lessen the impacts of future disasters to life and property. Investments in such risk reduction supports the efforts of communities across the country experiencing the effects of severe weather in increasing frequency. Reports as recently as 2019 have indicated that hazard mitigation grants demonstrate a benefit-cost ratio of 6:1 for every federal dollar invested. To ensure that grantees are fully considering nature-based mitigation projects that deliver multiple benefits in communities, we encourage Congress to set aside 15 percent of funds to “green projects” – such as natural and nature-based approaches for reducing risks from future disasters. This approach would build the capacity of federal, state, and local decisionmakers to deploy innovative nature-based solutions and would help build our understanding of the effectiveness of these types of approaches. This method would replicate the approach Congress has taken to encourage green projects through appropriations to Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which have successfully been used to encourage state investments in natural and nature-based approaches for addressing water pollution.

Additionally, funding for Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) programs administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) will provide much needed support for resilience investments in low- and moderate-income communities. Congress should appropriate funding to the CDBG-DR program, include specific set asides to encourage investments in nature-based hazard-mitigation approaches, and adopt legislation permanently authorizing the CDBG-DR program at HUD. HUD has prioritized investments in nature-based solutions and required that projects account for future climate risks in administering these funds. HUD also has additional capacity to get money out the door quickly and has a focus on low- and moderate-income communities that have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. By permanently authorizing the CDBG-DR program, Congress can ensure that HUD can more quickly get funds out to communities that face the greatest threats from extreme weather.

- **Prioritize wetland restoration.**

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) has proven to be our nation's most effective program at protecting, restoring and enhancing wetlands and waterfowl habitat. Since 1990, the program has provided flood control, protected water quality, improved ecosystem function and ensured recreational access on over 30 million acres of wetlands. The NAWCA partnership model surpasses a 3:1 return on the federal dollar through private investment and generates roughly 7,500 jobs and supports over \$200 million in salary annually. We strongly encourage Congress to fully fund the NAWCA program at its authorized amount through FY2024.

- **Invest in Army Corps ecosystem restoration projects.**

The Army Corps has tens of billions of dollars of authorized ecosystem restoration projects that could be funded by Congress to quickly put people to work and restore iconic watershed around the nation. We were pleased to see passage of WRDA late in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress and look forward to working with you and the Corps to implement and build upon the important natural infrastructure and climate resiliency aspects of the legislation as Congress considers future investment in water infrastructure.

Beyond its tremendous toll on human life, Covid-19 has caused over 20 million Americans to lose their jobs in the last year. At the same time, families and individuals sought refuge in our great outdoors in record numbers. As conservation organizations, seeing so many Americans take to our lands and waters has been a source of inspiration through a difficult year. Labor estimates have calculated that between 17 to 31 jobs are created via every million in federal conservation investment, however, in the context of this past year, the inherent benefit to ecological and public health seems invaluable. We see investment in conservation as an economic opportunity as well as a chance to make a down payment on the conservation of these resources for generations to come.

It is with that in mind, that our groups humbly submit the preceding list of priorities as a starting point for conservation as you develop legislation that will energize the American economy and put Americans back to work.

Sincerely,

American Sportfishing Association  
The Audubon Society  
Ducks Unlimited  
Environmental Defense Fund  
National Marine Manufacturers Association

National Wildlife Federation  
Pheasants Forever  
Quail Forever  
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership  
Trout Unlimited