

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 18, 2025

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Mr. Brian Nesvik
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum and Director Nesvik:

We write to sound the alarm on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) staffing crisis, which is causing particular harm to the National Wildlife Refuge System. A startling amount of staff and expertise needed to manage the Refuge System and protect America's wildlife have been lost due to the administration's firings, early retirement programs, and other efforts to push staff out of FWS. The agency is losing the capacity to manage America's wildlife refuges and struggling to even keep them open. We ask that you provide Congress with your plan to address FWS's staffing crisis and immediately act to ensure that FWS and the Refuge System have the staff and resources needed to guarantee a safe, quality experience for visitors to the Refuge System and to protect the invaluable wildlife species under the agency's care.

Americans of all backgrounds love their public lands, and protecting wildlife refuges is a bipartisan cause that brings together environmentalists, sportsmen, and all who enjoy the outdoor recreation opportunities provided by America's National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge System is the only federal network of public lands that is primarily dedicated to the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant species and their habitats. There are 573 national wildlife refuges across the country, with a footprint in every state. The Refuge System also utilizes a unique conservation approach through community-based initiatives that provide recreational and sporting opportunities and other localized needs.¹ According to FWS, wildlife refuge recreation generates \$3.2 billion in local economic activity each year. Every dollar that is invested in the Refuge System generates \$3.12 in U.S. economic activity, a tremendous return on investment for the American taxpayer.²

However, according to recently released internal agency documents, almost 60 percent of the nation's wildlife refuges lack the resources and staff needed to fulfill their missions.³ FWS has experienced a staggering 29 percent loss of employees who work for the Refuge System. This downward trend did not begin under the Trump administration. Yet the current administration has not only shown an unwillingness to address the problem—it has made the situation far worse. The President's Fiscal Year 26 budget request slashed funding for FWS's overall Resource Management account, which included a proposed 22 percent cut to the National

¹ U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, *National Wildlife Refuge System*, <https://www.fws.gov/program/national-wildlife-refuge-system>

² <https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-12/2024-12-17-state-of-the-nwrs-hwcc-martinez-final.pdf>

³ <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2025/11/25/wildlife-refuge-managers-reveal-staffing-struggles-00667141>

Wildlife Refuge System. Moreover, the administration has indicated that it is planning more firings for public land agencies.⁴

Staffing reductions have negatively impacted national wildlife refuges across the country, forcing multiple wildlife refuges to operate with few or no employees. FWS's internal estimates indicate that 9 percent of wildlife refuges are now classified as "shuttered." It appears that FWS has abandoned these refuges, as there may not be a single employee on the ground to manage the refuge.

The consequences of slashing the FWS workforce are already being felt across the nation. The collapse of staffing capacity within the Refuge System leaves refuges open to damage, vandalism, flooding, fire, and loss of protection and conservation measures for threatened and endangered wildlife species who rely on these refuges for survival. FWS staffing losses also hurt resilience because FWS employees carry out projects to control flooding and prevent catastrophic wildfires.

It has also become more difficult for the agency to meet deadlines to list species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, an already challenging but essential obligation. This delay in work pushes endangered species closer to extinction and prevents infrastructure projects from moving forward, as they may encounter difficulties with acquiring needed permits amid such regulatory uncertainty.⁵

Considering the alarming scale of FWS's staffing crisis, we request answers to the following by January 2, 2026:

1. Will you commit to reversing the staffing losses at FWS? What is your plan to address FWS's debilitating loss in capacity?
2. Has the Administration considered the impact of decimating the FWS workforce on the economics of gateway communities?
3. Does the Administration still plan on moving forward with firing more FWS employees, even as those firings are being stopped by federal courts?
4. How is FWS planning to meet deadlines to list species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act?

Protecting natural resources for Americans has always been a bipartisan effort and it is important that FWS has the workforce required to meet its core mandates. Thank you, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

⁴ Eric Katz, *See where Interior is planning to lay off 2,000 employees*, Government Executive (October 20, 2025), <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/10/see-where-interior-planning-lay-2000-employees/408913/>

⁵ Taylor Mills, *Deep Staffing Cuts Spark Concerns Over Endangered Species Delays*, Bloomberg Law (August 28, 2025), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/deep-staffing-cuts-spark-concerns-over-endangered-species-delays>



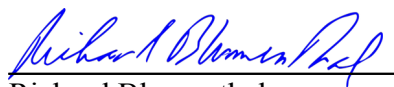
Adam B. Schiff
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Fisheries,
Water, and Wildlife



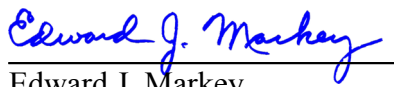
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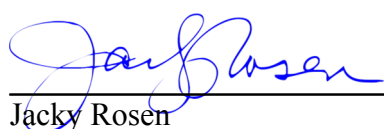
Peter Welch
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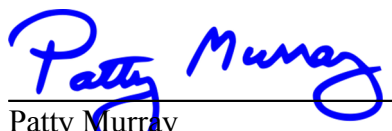
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment
and Public Works

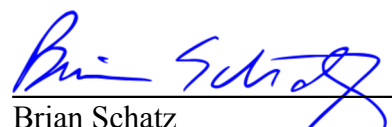



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Jacky Rosen
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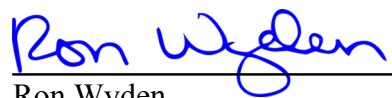

Patty Murray
United States Senator

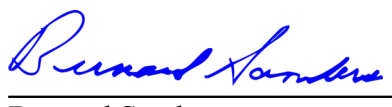

Brian Schatz
United States Senator

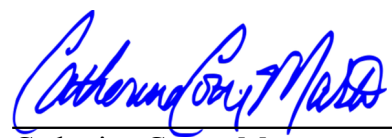

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