



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Washington D.C. 20240



Mr. Collin O'Mara, Chair
Mr. John Devney, Vice Chair
Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council
c/o Doug Hobbs, Designated Federal Officer
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
5275 Leesburg Pike, MS: OC
Falls Church, Virginia 22041

Dear Mr. O'Mara and Mr. Devney:

Thank you for your December 15, 2023 letter from the Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council (Council) to Secretary Haaland regarding the Council's recommendation that the Department of the Interior (Department) advocate within the Administration for the establishment of a national "net gain" of wetlands goal. Secretary Haaland has asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to respond on her behalf.

As you state in your recommendation letter, wetland habitats provide critical services for communities such as: water purification, water storage, flood control, resiliency, biodiversity and climate change mitigation. Wetlands also are critical habitats for waterfowl and other migratory birds, and many other terrestrial and aquatic wildlife species.

The Administration shares your concern that the United States continues to lose wetlands at an increasing rate. We are particularly concerned with the loss of vegetated wetlands, such as marshes and swamps. About 50% of threatened and endangered species are wetland-dependent during part or all of their lifecycles. Wetlands provide stopover and wintering habitats for more than 4 billion birds from Canada as well as breeding habitats for nearly 5 billion migratory birds in route to the tropics. Wetlands also provide shelter and vital nursery habitat for many species of fish and are an important cultural resource for Native Americans.

The Service recently highlighted the status of wetlands across the United States through the release of our 2019 National Wetlands Status and Trends Report to Congress. These periodic reports on the status and trends of wetlands across the nation reveal that despite landmark environmental laws, Executive Orders, and policies pledging no net loss of wetlands, as a nation, we are failing to sufficiently protect our wetlands. The 2019 report indicates that wetland loss rates have increased by 50% over the last decade and that without additional conservation actions taken to protect these ecosystems, wetland loss will likely continue, reducing ecosystem benefits for people and habitat for fish, wildlife, and plants.

The important scientific information in this report is a call to action and provides an opportunity for the country to work together in response. To achieve no net loss of all wetlands, including vegetated wetlands, the report concludes that a strategic update is needed to America's approach to wetland conservation. The health of our nation requires stronger wetlands conservation legislation, executive action, and partnerships. Federal agencies, Tribes, States, and landowners must work together now to protect and restore wetlands for the health of our communities, today and into the future. Conserving and restoring vegetated wetlands will be critical to addressing climate change and other threats to biodiversity.

The Service appreciates your efforts to help shape America's conservation future through the work of the Council. We look forward to further discussing the report and the Council's ideas for how to increase the conservation of existing wetlands, restoration of degraded wetlands, and the creation of new wetlands to halt their precipitous decline, nationally, at a future meeting. If you have questions or need more information regarding this matter, please contact Gina Shultz, Acting Assistant Director, Ecological Services, at Gina_Shultz@fws.gov.

Sincerely,

Martha Williams
Director