

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 23, 2026

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

Dear Director Nesvik:

We write to follow up on our December 18, 2025, letter regarding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) worsening staffing crisis and the devastating impacts the staffing shortages are having on the National Wildlife Refuge System and the agency's ability to fulfill its core conservation mission. In our previous letter, we asked the Department of the Interior and FWS to provide Congress with your plan to address these staffing losses and ensure the Refuge System has the personnel and resources necessary to protect America's wildlife and public lands. Nine months later, we have still not received any response from the administration.

Since we sent our letter, new evidence has shown that the crisis is getting worse. According to an updated analysis released by the Center for Biological Diversity on September 2, FWS has lost 36 percent, or more than one-third, of its workforce since the beginning of the Trump administration.<sup>1</sup> This analysis was informed by documents from your own agency obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests.

The consequences of these losses are already having impacts on our wildlife populations and public lands. FWS employees are responsible for managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, protecting threatened and endangered species, responding to wildfires and other natural disasters on these lands, and carrying out the agency's responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). National wildlife refuges continue to be understaffed, with many refuges not having a single employee working on the refuge.<sup>2</sup> Many are being forced to rely on outside nongovernment organizations for support of critical functions. Making matters worse, on August 25, 2026, it was reported that you removed the 16-year-long Chief of the Refuge System from her post without explanation.<sup>3</sup> Further, there is currently a backlog of more than 400 species waiting for protection decisions, wasting critical time that could be used implementing species protection plans. Continued mismanagement and reductions to the workforce threaten FWS's ability to perform these vital functions and leave American wildlife and the public to bear the consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/us-fish-and-wildlife-service-lost-36-of-staff-since-2024-2026-09-02/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2026/6/hearing-examining-the-u-s-fish-and-wildlife-service-s-proposed-fiscal-year-2027-budget>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.notus.org/agencies/interior-reassigns-dozens-senior-staff-experts>

We are frustrated that, despite the severity of this situation, we have still not received a clear plan for addressing FWS's losses. During your testimony before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on June 10, 2026, you were asked when we could expect a response to our December letter concerning the staffing crisis. You answered: "I can't commit to you on a timeline when you'll receive a response."<sup>4</sup> This lack of responsiveness to the Article I branch of government demonstrates a startling lack of respect for the Constitution and the system of checks and balances established by our Framers. One-fifth of the Senate—including the ranking members of the authorizing committee and subcommittee with jurisdiction over your agency—is awaiting a response from you.

Further, also during your June 10 appearance before the Environment and Public Works Committee, you stated that you were "getting close to being wrapped up to where we can talk publicly" about the findings of the nationwide review of the Refuge System that you ordered on December 16, 2025.<sup>5</sup> Thus far, Congress has received very little information regarding this review. In the context of a 36-percent loss of agency staff, this review raises questions about possible closures of our nation's wildlife refuges.

The continued absence of responses to congressional inquiries regarding the agency's ability to protect wildlife and maintain refuges compounds our alarm that your agency does not intend to do anything to stop its own ongoing collapse. Accordingly, by October 7, 2026, we demand responses to the requests included in our December 18, 2025, letter as well as information on the conclusions of the nationwide Refuge System review that you stated was close to completion in June. Thank you.

Sincerely,



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



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

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2026/6/hearing-examining-the-u-s-fish-and-wildlife-service-s-proposed-fiscal-year-2027-budget>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/policy-library/do230>