



National Audubon Society

225 Varick Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10014

212.979.3196

www.audubon.org

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, United States Capitol
Washington DC, 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington DC 20515

March 18, 2020

Re: COVID-19 Stimulus Package

Dear Senate Majority Leader McConnell, Senate Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the National Audubon Society and its more than 1.7 million members, we are writing to thank you for your leadership on stimulus spending to address the economic impacts from the public health crisis created by the spread of COVID-19. As Congress identifies investments to be made through stimulus spending, we encourage you to ensure that job-creating investments also increase the resiliency and sustainability of critical infrastructure systems and focus on green and nature-based solutions for restoring watersheds and ecosystems, which provide important habitats for birds and other wildlife, flood protection for coastal communities, water quality improvements for impaired water bodies, and resilience in drought-stricken communities. Investment in healthy ecosystems creates a cascade of economic benefits through ecotourism and outdoor recreation, increased resiliency, and the creation of new jobs in local communities.

First, agencies receiving stimulus funding should be directed to give additional weight to projects that enhance and restore important ecosystems and habitats as well as natural and nature-based solutions for enhancing community resilience. Ecosystem restoration projects not only deliver important habitat benefits for birds and other wildlife, but they also support outdoor recreation, which is a huge contributor to the nation's economy (generating over \$156 billion annually).¹ Additionally, these types of investments are effective at creating jobs in a growing restoration sector that cannot be outsourced, as demonstrated by restoration investments made

¹ 2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation.

with funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) received \$167 million in ARRA funding, which was used to restore 25,584 acres of habitat, open 677 miles of stream for fish to reach spawning habitat, and remove more than 433,000 tons of debris from coastal habitats. These investments added \$143.7 million dollars in new or expanded economic activity nationwide and supported a total of 2,280 jobs (approximately 15 jobs per million dollars spent and 30 jobs for more labor-intensive restoration efforts, like building oyster reefs). Additionally, natural infrastructure solutions can provide a more cost-effective solution for managing stormwater, protecting coastal communities from more frequent and severe storms, and recharging groundwater aquifers in arid environments. NOAA estimates that natural infrastructure solutions provide more than \$23 billion in storm protection services every year,² while also delivering other environmental benefits, such as improved air and water quality, and habitats for birds and other wildlife.

Additionally, any stimulus package should ensure that investments are “future-proof,” meaning that investments in U.S. infrastructure systems should be designed to be resilient to increasing threats from climate impacts and to enhance efforts to reduce the emissions that contribute to climate change. Transportation and electricity systems contribute more than half of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions,³ and significant investments are needed to rapidly decarbonize both sectors in order to avoid catastrophic impacts to communities, ecosystems, and important biodiversity. Audubon’s recently published *Survival by Degrees* report⁴ demonstrates the significant threat that unmitigated climate change presents to birds, showing that two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk of extinction at 3 degrees C of warming. Stimulus investments should set the U.S. on a path toward net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, while simultaneously providing access to jobs, and to safe, affordable, clean and reliable transportation and energy options. In 2016, the wind and solar industries added 25,000 and 73,000 jobs, respectively, while 133,000 jobs were created in energy efficiency. The solar industry alone is responsible for about one in every 50 jobs created nationwide.⁵

Stimulus investments should be designed to help reduce risks to communities and infrastructure from sea level rise, more intense coastal storms, extreme rainfall events, and more intense and prolonged heatwaves. From 2016 to 2018 alone, six separate coastal storms (Matthew, Harvey, Irma, Maria, Florence, and Michael) caused an estimated \$329.9 billion in damages and over 3,000 fatalities; and the number of billion dollar disaster events affecting communities across the U.S. has doubled since the 1980’s.⁶ These events are already causing significant and costly impacts to communities and infrastructure systems across the U.S. For example, in 2012, Hurricane Sandy, flooded electric substations causing more than 8 million people to lose power, damaged wastewater treatment facilities causing the release of millions gallons of untreated wastewater into local waterways, and flooded tunnels and transit stations throughout New York City causing billions of dollars in damages to the region’s transportation system and prolonged closures of major transportation arteries. Risks to infrastructure systems will continue to increase as the climate changes, and research has shown that investments to

² National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Fast Facts: Natural Infrastructure.” Undated. <https://coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/natural-infrastructure.html>

³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>.

⁴ National Audubon Society, *Survival by Degrees: 389 Bird Species on the Brink*, <https://www.audubon.org/climate/survivalbydegrees>

⁵ U.S. Energy and Employment Report. United States Department of Energy. 2017. <https://www.energy.gov/downloads/2017-us-energy-and-employment-report>

⁶ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “2018’s Billion Dollar Disasters in Context.” February 7, 2019. <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2018s-billion-dollar-disasters-context>

mitigate impacts before they occur produce a \$6 return on investment for every dollar spent.⁷ Any stimulus funding should ensure that investments are designed to be resilient to changing environmental conditions and to help communities reduce their risks to climate impacts.

Specifically, Audubon encourages Congress to direct stimulus funding to the following priority programs that will help restore important ecosystems, while also creating restoration jobs in tourism-dependent communities that will be adversely affected by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 public health crisis:

- ***U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Construction for Ecosystem Restoration*** (\$500 million to \$1 billion): There are significant infrastructure needs under the Corps' ecosystem restoration mission, including projects in the Everglades, Great Lakes and those spanning the Upper Mississippi River to the Mississippi River Delta. Many of these projects are “shovel ready” and their associated economic benefits could advance quickly with an influx of additional funding. Everglades restoration alone is estimated to produce a \$4 return on investment for every \$1 spent and create more than 440,000 jobs that range from the construction industry to the hard-hit tourism industry. Additionally, Congress should also provide \$16 million in funding for the Army Corps Beneficial Use of Dredge Material (BUDM) pilot projects authorized by the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act. This pilot program helps deploy valuable sediments that are excavated when waterways are dredged to environmentally beneficial projects that restore habitats and enhance flood protections for coastal communities.
- ***US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Operations, Research and Facilities - National Oceans and Coastal Security Fund (Title IX Fund grants) are administered in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife through National Coastal Resilience Fund (NCRF)*** (\$70 million): The National Coastal Resilience Fund provides important funding for enhancing the resilience of coastal ecosystems – such as marshes, wetlands, dunes, and reefs – that provide economically important habitats and also reduce flood risks for coastal communities. By providing funding to the NCRF, NOAA and NFWF can quickly advance “shovel-ready” projects that will bolster local and regional tourist-dependent economies, which will be hardest hit by the current economic crisis. In FY20, NFWF received 170 pre-proposals requesting almost \$100 million in funding, but only had budget to provide \$33 million in grants.
- ***U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Drought response programs and projects*** (\$300 million): Projects and programs that address drought in the West, including those needed to meet the requirements of the Drought Contingency Plan and Minute 323 agreements, can improve the efficiency of Colorado River water use and result in conserved water savings that benefit all Colorado River water users. \$50 million of this funding should be allocated to natural infrastructure projects that support water supply and habitat improvements.
- ***U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service***: Protection and restoration of our public lands and waters stewarded through these programs will create jobs, improve public safety

⁷ National Institute of Building Sciences, The Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: 2017 Interim Report

and increase resilience in a changing climate. The significant backlog in infrastructure and maintenance on the public facilities as well as restoration needs for lands managed and operated by these agencies could be addressed in a stimulus package, creating new jobs and economic opportunities across the U.S.

- **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention** (\$200 million): Projects funding through this program can provide cost-effective benefits to public safety, flood protection, economic, and environmental benefits.
- **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**: Funding from EQIP and RCPP can benefit the agricultural industry and local economies and communities across the U.S.
- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**: Audubon also supports funding to benefit the National Estuary Programs and Geographic Programs for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, projects to restore the Chesapeake Bay, Lake Pontchartrain Basin, Puget Sound, Long Island Sound, the San Francisco Bay, and the Columbia River Basin. These watersheds provide important ecosystem services, create habitats for birds and other wildlife, support economically important fisheries, and generate billions of dollars in tourism revenues for the country.
- **Invest in renewable energy and energy efficiency, including through the extension of tax credits** (five-year extension): Stimulus funding should prioritize investments to build out renewable and clean energy sources, modernize electric grid infrastructure and transportation systems, and increase the energy efficiency of buildings through a five-year extension and expansion of clean energy tax credits. These credits support technologies like energy storage, solar, onshore and offshore wind, geothermal, carbon capture, and electric vehicles. Supporting renewable energy and energy efficiency is important for driving economic growth and creating local jobs in every state, and particularly in rural areas. Modernization of the electric grid, including through the integration of more energy storage, will be important for integrating more renewable energy, and increasing the efficiency and resilience of the grid. Clean energy tax credits have a proven history of supporting an industry critical to combatting climate change while also creating jobs. These tax credits are increasingly important as renewable energy projects have been slowed down due to supply chain delays and uncertainty, and may miss important deadlines for expiring tax credits.

We also urge Congress to reject attempts to weaken environmental review of infrastructure projects. Although Audubon supports timely approval of projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), projects need to be carefully vetted to ensure that environmental effects are considered and agencies have an opportunity to minimize or mitigate those effects, including by considering alternatives. NEPA provides an important tool for helping agencies consider and mitigate impacts to birds, habitats, and other species, and speedy project delivery should not come at the expense of robust environmental review of projects. Rather than set arbitrary timelines or waive environmental review, a stimulus package could include funding to ensure that agencies have sufficient staff to complete environmental review, consultation, and permitting so that they can expedite project delivery and improve environmental outcomes.

Finally, as an organization that operates centers and sanctuaries across the U.S., Audubon understands the financial impacts facing small businesses that are temporarily closed to the public. We encourage efforts that help small businesses, including ecotourism operations that serve as good stewards of natural resources, to recover from these unprecedented and uncertain impacts.

By prioritizing the above investments, Congress can help communities and states recover from the economic devastation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, while also creating jobs for the 21st century economy and enhancing and restoring important ecosystems that drive local economies that will be greatly affected by the economic downturn. These types of investments will provide multiple benefits at the federal, state, and local levels, including creating jobs, saving taxpayer dollars by avoiding disaster-related expenditures, enhancing public safety, and providing environmental benefits. On behalf of the National Audubon Society's more than 1.7 million members, we encourage you to invest in efforts to restore and improve the environment and to ensure that stimulus funding is used in ways that "future proof" important infrastructure assets.

We ask for your consideration of these priorities as you work to craft a stimulus package that stimulates the economy while protecting both communities and birds and the places they need. Please see us as a trusted resource moving forward on this and other issues where healthy communities, economies, and wildlife can overlap.

Sincerely,

Sarah Greenberger
Senior Vice President, Conservation Policy
National Audubon Society

CC: The Honorable Steny Hoyer, House Majority Leader