May 5, 2020

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairwoman
Senate Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
131 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Udall
Ranking Member
Senate Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Betty McCollum
Chairwoman
House Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski, Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Udall, and Ranking Member Joyce,

I am writing to urge you to include $15,000,000 in any upcoming COVID-19 relief legislation package to provide critically needed funding for zoos and aquariums that are accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) for the daily care and maintenance of: 1) animals rescued from the wild or confiscated at U.S. ports or borders for critical care, rehabilitation and/or reintroduction; 2) breeding populations of species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for conservation purposes; and 3) animals that are owned by the Federal government. These funds would be used during the current COVID-19 pandemic when most of AZA’s accredited zoos and aquariums are closed but still providing high-level professional care for these animals on a daily basis without the benefit of revenue from gate receipts.

AZA is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of accredited zoos and aquariums in the areas of animal care and husbandry, conservation, education, science, and recreation. AZA’s 240 accredited aquariums, nature centers, science centers and zoos annually host more than 200 million visitors, collectively generate more than $22 billion in annual economic activity, and support more than 210,000 jobs across the country. In 2018, AZA-accredited facilities spent over $230 million on field conservation in over 130 countries benefiting over 880 species and subspecies. The expertise of AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos in scientific research, conservation breeding, and wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is supported by their premier role in conservation education.

Hundreds of U.S. species listed under the ESA are held by AZA-accredited facilities for captive propagation to support recovery and reintroduction efforts. For example, across eleven taxa (California condor, black footed ferret, red wolf, Mexican wolf, Florida panther, manatee, Northern and Southern sea otters, polar bear, sturgeons, silvery minnow), 207 zoos,
aquariums, and similar institutions are supporting recovery and reintroduction efforts. For species such as American burying beetle, Wyoming toad, whooping crane, Attwater’s prairie chicken, Louisiana pine snake, Massasauga rattlesnake, hellbender, Florida grasshopper sparrow, Steller’s eider, gopher tortoise, desert tortoise, eastern indigo snake, freshwater mussels, and Guam kingfisher, nationally recognized zoos and aquariums offer the only support.

Most AZA-accredited facilities remain closed or are operating at limited capacity to help minimize the spread of COVID-19. However, they have been providing daily care to their animal populations while making difficult staffing and operational decisions. Normally, funding from gate receipts is used to support these facilities’ participation in recovery and reintroduction efforts, eliminating or minimizing the need for federal support. However, with the recent, drastic loss of revenue, these organizations may soon not be able to fund animal care, life support systems, maintenance operations, or any other costs associated with these efforts.

In consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we estimate that $2.5 million per month for the next six months is needed to maintain operations at these facilities related to ESA-listed U.S. species, rescued and confiscated wildlife, and other Federally-owned animals. Without adequate supplemental funding, facilities may be forced to discontinue their participation in these recovery activities that they have, to date, largely provided as a community service, and may need to relocate the animals in their care immediately. Interruption in the care of these animals and the loss of these partnerships would drastically impede, or entirely derail, progress in meeting the Service’s priorities of delisting and down-listing ESA-listed species.

As you consider economic stimulus and relief legislation to address the COVID-19 crisis, I strongly urge you to ensure that AZA-accredited facilities can continue their critical role in the recovery of ESA-listed species and other support to the Service. I look forward to working with you in the coming months as we collectively work to ensure that our nation emerges from this crisis.

Sincerely,

Dan Ashe
President and CEO
Association of Zoos & Aquariums