

S. 18

To work closely with local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies to safeguard our forests, wetlands, and other vital habitats.

IN THE SENATE
August 31, 2023

Mrs. Dawson-Lockhart (for herself,) introduced the following bill, on behalf of the Rosen Administration, as authored by President Rosen;

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

A BILL

1. SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the ‘Community-Based Habitat Conservation Act of 2023’.

2. SEC. 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSES.

2.1. FINDINGS.—Congress finds the following:

- (1) Forests, wetlands, and other vital habitats are essential for the survival of numerous species of flora and fauna.
- (2) These habitats provide essential ecosystem services, including water purification, carbon sequestration, and flood control.
- (3) Local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies have unique knowledge and resources that can be leveraged to protect and restore these habitats.
- (4) Collaborative, community-based approaches to habitat conservation are often more effective and sustainable than top-down, centralized approaches.

2.2. PURPOSES.—The purposes of this Act are—

- (1) to encourage collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies in the conservation and restoration of forests, wetlands, and other vital habitats;
- (2) to provide financial and technical assistance to support community-based habitat conservation initiatives;
- (3) to promote the use of best practices in habitat conservation and restoration.

3. SEC. 3. DEFINITIONS.

For the purposes of this Act:

- (1) The term 'local community' means any municipality, town, village, or other local government entity, as well as any local community organization or group.
- (2) The term 'conservation organization' means any non-profit organization whose primary mission is the conservation of natural habitats and biodiversity.
- (3) The term 'government agency' means any federal, state, or local government agency or department responsible for the management and conservation of natural resources.

4. SEC. 4. COMMUNITY-BASED HABITAT CONSERVATION GRANT PROGRAM.

4.1. ESTABLISHMENT.—The Secretary of the Interior shall establish a grant program to provide financial assistance to local

communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies for the implementation of community-based habitat conservation initiatives. The program shall include separate funding categories for (1) forests, (2) wetlands, and (3) other vital habitats.

5. SEC. 5. FOREST CONSERVATION.

5.1. ELIGIBLE PROJECTS.—To be eligible for funding under the forest conservation category, a project must:

- (1) involve the conservation or restoration of forest habitats;
- (2) be based on sound scientific principles and best practices in forest conservation and restoration;
- (3) involve collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies;
- (4) include a monitoring and evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the conservation or restoration activities.

5.2. APPLICATION PROCESS.—To apply for funding under the forest conservation category, an applicant must submit an application to the Secretary of the Interior in such form and manner as the Secretary may prescribe. The application must include:

- (1) a detailed description of the proposed conservation or restoration activities related to forest habitats;
- (2) an explanation of how the proposed activities will contribute to the conservation or restoration of forest habitats;
- (3) a description of the collaborative efforts between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) a detailed budget and timeline for the proposed activities.

5.3. SELECTION CRITERIA.—In selecting projects for funding under the forest conservation category, the Secretary of the Interior shall consider the following criteria:

- (1) the ecological significance of the forest area to be conserved or restored;
- (2) the likelihood of success of the proposed conservation or restoration activities;
- (3) the level of collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) the potential for the project to serve as a model for other community-based forest conservation initiatives.

6. SEC. 6. WETLAND CONSERVATION.

6.1. ELIGIBLE PROJECTS.—To be eligible for funding under the wetland conservation category, a project must:

- (1) involve the conservation or restoration of wetland habitats;
- (2) be based on sound scientific principles and best practices in wetland conservation and restoration;
- (3) involve collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies;
- (4) include a monitoring and evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the conservation or restoration activities.

6.2. APPLICATION PROCESS.—To apply for funding under the wetland conservation category, an applicant must submit an application to the Secretary of the Interior in such form and manner as the Secretary may prescribe. The application must include:

- (1) a detailed description of the proposed conservation or restoration activities related to wetland habitats;
- (2) an explanation of how the proposed activities will contribute to the conservation or restoration of wetland habitats;
- (3) a description of the collaborative efforts between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) a detailed budget and timeline for the proposed activities.

6.3. SELECTION CRITERIA.—In selecting projects for funding under the wetland conservation category, the Secretary of the Interior shall consider the following criteria:

- (1) the ecological significance of the wetland area to be conserved or restored;
- (2) the likelihood of success of the proposed conservation or restoration activities;
- (3) the level of collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) the potential for the project to serve as a model for other community-based wetland conservation initiatives.

7. SEC. 7. OTHER VITAL HABITATS CONSERVATION.

7.1. ELIGIBLE PROJECTS.—To be eligible for funding under the other vital habitats conservation category, a project must:

- (1) involve the conservation or restoration of habitats other than forests and wetlands;
- (2) be based on sound scientific principles and best practices in habitat conservation and restoration;

- (3) involve collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies;
- (4) include a monitoring and evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the conservation or restoration activities.

7.2. APPLICATION PROCESS.—To apply for funding under the other vital habitats conservation category, an applicant must submit an application to the Secretary of the Interior in such form and manner as the Secretary may prescribe. The application must include:

- (1) a detailed description of the proposed conservation or restoration activities related to the specified habitat;
- (2) an explanation of how the proposed activities will contribute to the conservation or restoration of the specified habitat;
- (3) a description of the collaborative efforts between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) a detailed budget and timeline for the proposed activities.

7.3. SELECTION CRITERIA.—In selecting projects for funding under the other vital habitats conservation category, the Secretary of the Interior shall consider the following criteria:

- (1) the ecological significance of the area to be conserved or restored;
- (2) the likelihood of success of the proposed conservation or restoration activities;
- (3) the level of collaboration between local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies involved in the project;
- (4) the potential for the project to serve as a model for other community-based habitat conservation initiatives.

8. SEC. 8. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.

8.1. PROVISION OF ASSISTANCE.—The Secretary of the Interior shall provide technical assistance to local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies for the planning and implementation of community-based habitat conservation initiatives. This technical assistance may include, but is not limited to:

- (1) BEST PRACTICES GUIDES.—The provision of guides that outline best practices in habitat conservation and restoration, including techniques for ecosystem restoration, invasive species control, and wildlife habitat enhancement.

- (2) TRAINING PROGRAMS.—The organization and delivery of training programs on topics relevant to habitat conservation and restoration, including land management, ecological monitoring, and community engagement.
 - (3) EXPERT ADVICE.—The provision of expert advice on the design and implementation of habitat conservation and restoration projects, including site assessment, project planning, and monitoring and evaluation.
 - (4) TECHNICAL RESOURCES.—The provision of technical resources, such as GIS data, ecological models, and monitoring protocols, that can support the planning and implementation of habitat conservation and restoration projects.
- 8.2. COLLABORATION.—In providing technical assistance under this section, the Secretary of the Interior shall collaborate with other federal agencies, state and local governments, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations that have expertise in habitat conservation and restoration.
- 8.3. PRIORITY.—In providing technical assistance under this section, the Secretary of the Interior shall give priority to projects that:
- (1) are located in areas of high ecological significance;
 - (2) involve collaboration between multiple stakeholders, including local communities, conservation organizations, and government agencies;
 - (3) have the potential to serve as models for other community-based habitat conservation initiatives.

9. SEC. 9. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS.

- 9.1. GRANT RECIPIENTS.—Each recipient of a grant under the Community-Based Habitat Conservation Grant Program shall submit an annual report to the Secretary of the Interior that includes:
- (1) a summary of the conservation or restoration activities carried out with the grant funds;
 - (2) an assessment of the effectiveness of these activities in conserving or restoring forests, wetlands, or other vital habitats;
 - (3) a description of any challenges encountered during the implementation of the project and how these challenges were addressed.
- 9.2. SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR.—The Secretary of the Interior shall submit an annual report to Congress that includes:

- (1) a summary of the grants awarded under the Community-Based Habitat Conservation Grant Program;
- (2) an assessment of the overall effectiveness of the program in promoting community-based habitat conservation initiatives.

10. SEC. 10. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.

There is authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary of the Interior \$50,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2024 through 2028 to carry out this Act.

11. SEC. 11. SEVERABILITY.

SEVERABILITY.— Should any one or more provision, section, subsection, sentence, clause, phrase, word, application of this Act be deemed invalid or unconstitutional for any reason in a court with relevant jurisdiction, the rest of the Act, and the application of the remaining provisions, shall not be affected.

12. SEC. 12. EFFECTIVE DATE.

Except if otherwise provided in this Act, this Act shall take effect on the date that is 90 days after the date of enactment of this Act.