



August 24, 2009

Sam D. Hamilton, Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW, Room 3238
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Director Hamilton:

Congratulations on your recent appointment to the position of director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We welcome you to your new post and look forward to embarking with you on a new era of American wildlife conservation, one that promises great opportunities while also posing new, unprecedented perils for many of our most vulnerable species and habitats.

As a professional wildlife biologist and Service official for many years, you are no doubt well aware of many urgent wildlife issues with which your agency is grappling, and which you, as director, must now address as a leader and top decision maker.

However, while we suspect you are still unpacking boxes in your new office, we feel compelled to spotlight a wildlife emergency of the highest order. **This crisis, the bat epidemic known as white-nose syndrome, cannot afford any delay before receiving your focused attention.**

Over the last two winters, this newly emergent disease has decimated bat populations across the Northeast. It threatens to extirpate several species from a large swath of our country, and leading bat biologists are predicting the total extinction of one or more species within a few years' time. According to one state wildlife biologist who has monitored bats for many years, it is possible that under the worst-case scenario, "an entire order of mammals" will be wiped out from the United States.

White-nose syndrome is named for the visible white fungus on affected bats' muzzles and other extremities. Since its discovery in caves near Albany, New York in late winter of 2007, the malady has spread to nine states: New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Virginia. To date, biologists have documented six bat species as affected, including the federally listed Indiana bat. As the disease spreads, it may kill bats of other species, including the extremely vulnerable, endangered Virginia big-eared bat.

If white-nose syndrome strikes Kentucky, Tennessee, and other, neighboring southern and midwestern states, which seems likely in the next one to two years, we stand to lose some of the largest hibernating bat populations in the world. North American bat populations will suffer a blow from which they will probably never recover.

Lack of coordination among various wildlife agencies and institutions, and a dearth of resources for research, monitoring, and management, have severely hampered the response to white-nose

syndrome. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is clearly the most appropriate agency to take the lead in addressing what is rapidly becoming a national wildlife disaster. Yet the agency has still not created a dedicated, full-time position for a white-nose syndrome coordinator, nor has it requested funds adequate to address the growing crisis. The budgets of other, vital Service programs are being squeezed in order to pull together meager funds for white-nose syndrome work. Crucial research projects that could further our understanding of the disease and the mechanism by which it spreads are not happening, due to lack of resources. **Without this knowledge, there's little chance we'll discover a way to stop the disease in time to save species from extinction.**

This is what must happen: Without delay, the Fish and Wildlife Service needs to develop a plan to respond to white-nose syndrome. This plan must include research priorities; a system of coordination and decision-making in concert with other federal and state agencies; a budget that takes into account the current scope of the disease and its likely spread across the country over the next several years; a strategy for protecting already-affected populations, and for minimizing the possibility of spread of the disease, based on best current knowledge; and a timeline for action, with the hire of a national white-nose syndrome coordinator to occur within the next four to six weeks.

The rapid die-off of our bats is the most urgent wildlife issue in the United States today.

The loss of bats has serious implications not only for the natural systems in which they occur, but also for agriculture, which depends on their pest-consuming services. Farmers may be forced to utilize more toxic pesticides, without bats to keep insect numbers in check. Increased use of poisonous chemicals, of course, will likely harm other wildlife species, and could even pose a threat to human health.

We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and explain in more detail why we believe that white-nose syndrome should command your immediate attention as new director of the Service. Please contact our senior counsel in Washington, D.C., William Snape, at 202-536-9351 to schedule a meeting in person or by phone.

Truly, a significant element of America's wildlife heritage is at stake, and **the next few months may be all the time we have left to reverse this unprecedented biological disaster.**

Again, congratulations on your appointment, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kieran Suckling". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kieran Suckling, Executive Director

CC: Noah Greenwald, Endangered Species Program Director, Center for Biological Diversity