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Environmental Groups Say Federal Money Needed to Save Monarchs

[March 9, 2021](#) [ALEXANDRA JONES](#)

A letter sent to lawmakers Tuesday warns the beloved butterflies could go extinct without funding to support conservation efforts.

A Monarch butterfly sits on a tree trunk at the Sierra Chincua Sanctuary in the mountains of Mexico's Michoacan state in 2011. (AP Photo/Marco Ugarte, File)

WASHINGTON (CN) — An annual \$100 million in conservation funding on the federal government's tab could help protect the monarch butterfly from extinction, according to a letter sent to lawmakers by more than 80 conservationist groups Tuesday.

Monarch populations, which once numbered in the billions, have been dying out rapidly in recent years, says the letter, spearheaded by the Center for Biological Diversity. Recent counts show an

85% decline in the eastern U.S. population that overwinters in Mexico and a 99% decline in the western population that overwinters in California.

The [letter](#) predicts that without emergency help from Congress, the western population of monarch butterflies — which was estimated to number just 2,000 last year — could soon collapse entirely. The document notes that the federal government’s own scientists have estimated there is an 80% chance monarchs will die out in the next 50 years.

“Breadcrumbs in funding and inadequate policies have gotten the monarch to where it is,” Stephanie Kurose, a senior policy specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement Tuesday, making the case for why Congress has a “moral obligation” to step in.

Conservation groups have made identical monetary requests on behalf of the monarchs [numerous times](#) in the [past few years](#) to no avail, but now Democrats chair the Committee on Appropriations in both the House and Senate. The Tuesday letter was addressed to the committee’s leaders, Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Democratic senator from Vermont, and Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, a Democratic representative from Connecticut, as well as their Republican subordinates.

The monarch has been under siege from multiple angles over the last few decades. Part of the species’ demise lies in its specificity. Monarchs lay their eggs solely in milkweed plants and as caterpillars they feed exclusively on its leaves. Increased use of herbicides by large-scale farms in the Midwest has destroyed milkweed populations and the Environmental Protection Agency was ordered [in July 2020](#) by a Ninth Circuit panel to review whether glyphosate-based herbicides harm monarch butterflies by damaging milkweed.

Advocates [have said that](#) monarchs are capable of rebounding, but in order to do so they need the right conditions — including abundant milkweed and nectar sources.

As the conservationist groups note in their Tuesday letter: “Reversing that trend by actively restoring milkweed and other pollinator habitat is critical to ensure the long-term survival of the monarch butterfly.”

“We sincerely hope Congress will step up to the challenge and help save one of the world’s most iconic butterflies from further decline,” it continues.

The groups’ request for \$100 million per year is based partially on estimates by the citizen science organization Monarch Watch, which says the cost to restore and maintain one acre of milkweed ranges anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000.

“If our leaders don’t take bold, transformative action right now, the monarch will no longer be a symbol of childhood and summers, but just a memory,” Kurose said Tuesday.

Monarchs have also lost around 167 million acres of land they once used as summer breeding grounds to human development, a term which encompasses both agriculture and suburban

sprawl. Climate change too has stressed the monarch, as well as other butterfly populations, as regions become hotter and drier.

The Trump administration's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [announced an agreement](#) with the University of Illinois-Chicago last year that asked transportation and energy-related businesses to plant milkweed in and around their facilities to help the butterfly species.

Scientists [in 2019 also indicated](#) that everyday citizens can help the species by planting milkweed gardens in their backyards.