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Testimony for House Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related  
Agencies

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Thank you Chair Harris and Ranking Member Bishop for the opportunity to submit testimony about the priorities of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for Fiscal Year 2025. My name is Dan Ashe, and I am the President and CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Founded in 1924, the AZA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that our more than 250 accredited zoos and aquariums reflect the global standard of excellence in animal care and welfare, conservation, education, science, and guest experience. AZA's member facilities are examples of how economic and environmental prosperity can work hand-in-hand. Our members welcome nearly 200 million visitors annually, generating more than \$22 billion in economic activity, and supporting more than 198,000 jobs across the country. They also contribute well over \$250 million in direct support for field conservation each year. They support work in 119 countries benefiting more than 998 species and subspecies, of which 232 are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). All U.S.-based AZA members are also licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

At the heart of AZA is its mandatory accreditation requirement, which assures that only those

zoos and aquariums that meet the highest standards can become members. The independent and objective AZA accreditation process includes self-evaluation, rigorous on-site inspection, and critical peer review. Our standards are publicly available and are continuously evolving and improving as we learn more about the needs of the animals in our care. Once earned, AZA accreditation confers best-in-class status, an important message for local, state, and federal governments and the visiting public. All AZA members are accredited every five years, ensuring that AZA members continue to grow as standards improve. AZA accreditation is the global gold standard for modern zoological facilities.

AZA and its members are leaders, partners, and participants in species conservation. We work in concert with Congress, the federal agencies, conservation organizations, state governments, the private sector, and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. AZA's Wildlife Trafficking Alliance is a coalition of private companies, non-profit organizations, and AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums working closely with U.S. government agencies to combat wildlife trafficking worldwide. AZA and its member facilities have long-standing partnerships with USDA, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Our collaborative efforts have focused on:

- Engaging in endangered species recovery and reintroduction, including some of the most successful and heralded recovery efforts, such as California condor and black-footed ferret;
- Carrying out rescue, rehabilitation, and confiscation of tens of thousands of animals in collaboration with federal and state agencies to the benefit of many threatened and endangered species;

- Supporting conservation domestically and internationally through multinational species conservation funds and state wildlife grants; and
- Partnering with USDA on inspector training and other ways to more effectively implement the Animal Welfare Act and its related regulations.

I am submitting testimony in support of the following key programs funded through the annual Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill.

#### Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Budget

Animal wellbeing is at the core of AZA's mission. All U.S.-based AZA members are licensed by USDA, and our members work closely with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). We thank the Committee for emphasizing the importance of inspector safety in the Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations agreement.

APHIS's charge to enforce the Animal Welfare Act can only be fully met if APHIS is provided with sufficient resources to do so. To ensure the humane treatment of more than 1 million animals nationwide, APHIS employs approximately 100 inspectors to assess thousands of groups across the country, including zoos, breeders, and managers of horse shows. By comparison, AZA maintains a pool of approximately 200 inspectors to assess more than 250 zoological facilities around the world. We know the importance of developing a workforce with professional, competent, and fair inspectors to ensure the wellbeing of animals. Based on the breadth of their mission and their current resources, we ask for increased funding for Fiscal Year 2025 for

APHIS's Animal Care program to better support and grow its inspector workforce.

We also encourage the Subcommittee to include the following report language to better direct APHIS's Animal Care program in their work:

The Committee supports efficient and effective enforcement and implementation of the Animal Welfare Act, including APHIS education, training, and outreach, in addition to active enforcement and documentation of violations, to improve the care of animals. The Committee urges APHIS's Animal Care program to focus enforcement efforts on facilities with a documented history of serious, repeat noncompliance incidents, including unannounced inspections, documentation of violations, and sharing of violations or failures of compliance with relevant local, State, and Federal Agencies. Through risk assessment and prioritization of low-performing facilities, APHIS will be able to devote its limited resources toward interventions that will have the greatest impact on animal welfare.

AZA and its members look forward to continuing to work with this Subcommittee and Congress to assure that as a nation we are devoting the necessary resources to conserve wildlife at home and globally.

Thank you.