

NATIONAL
SPELEOLOGICAL
SOCIETY, INC.



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DEDICATED TO THE EXPLORATION, STUDY, AND CONSERVATION OF CAVES

February 15, 2018

Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Zinke and Secretary Perdue,

Caves are a key American resource. Many are directly connected with groundwater resources that supply fresh water for human communities. They attract millions of tourist dollars and provide homes for insectivorous bats that save American farmers billions of dollars annually. Caves also contain whole ecosystems of microorganisms of potentially great biotechnological value.

The National Speleological Society (NSS) is by far the most knowledgeable and influential protector of these too often forgotten, but critically important resources. Many of America's most valuable caves were originally discovered and reported by our members. In fact, America's largest remaining population of endangered gray bats, in Fern Cave, Alabama, was discovered by NSS members and was purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Under a management agreement with the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge, it was effectively managed and protected by NSS members for more than 20 years, because the Fish and Wildlife Service lacked funds to do so. In fact, largely due to caver collaboration, today there are millions more of this species than when its extinction was predicted in the early 1970's.

When a fungus-caused disease was accidentally introduced into North America, it was NSS members who discovered it in 2007. NSS members helped fund experts to attend the first national meeting to manage the crisis. We also volunteered countless hours in support of research and survey work.

Unfortunately, federal agencies have overreacted, often closing all caves to caver entry, even those not used by bats. They also canceled long-standing cooperative management agreements, resulting in great harm to key resources like Fern Cave, that were left unprotected and vandalized. At the same time, federal agencies have spent millions funding efforts to prevent WNS from spreading or to find a cure.

Despite these well intended efforts, WNS has rapidly spread from coast to coast. Bats can quickly move long distances, and available evidence indicates that bats, not humans, are accounting for its rapid movement. In fact, survey and research efforts in the bats' hibernation caves are causing far more harm than good. WNS kills bats by forcing them to wake up too often from hibernation, wasting limited fat reserves before spring. Yet winter surveys, and efforts to find a cure, are greatly increasing risk of bat mortality through additional arousals.



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Today, members of the National Speleological Society are deeply concerned that agencies are wasting millions in taxpayer dollars on efforts that are in fact often putting bats at even greater risk. Continuation of current emphasis will needlessly create new endangered species at a time when funds are desperately needed to help depleted, but resistant remnant bats recover.

After ten years, it is time to acknowledge that WNS is going to run its course. Even if a cure were found, the practical field applications present insurmountable logistical challenges and expenses. Further, it is simply unlikely that humans are a significant vector of WNS transmission, the only proven method to date being physical bat to bat contact, as demonstrated and published by the National Wildlife Health Center laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin.

In summary, blanket cave closures have proven ineffective and counterproductive. They have damaged long-standing collaboration with the NSS and threatened needless creation of additional endangered species, each of which could cost millions annually in endangered species enforcement and compliance. It is time to re-open America's caves. We are requesting that the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture revisit their current cave closure and decontamination policies and lift the ban on entry of federally owned caves not important to bats. Members of the National Speleological Society deplore current actions, but stand ready, once again to become part of the solution.

Sincerely,

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