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Hello, everyone and welcome to the nature's infrastructure audio series, where we will be chatting with our partners, stakeholders, and tribal nations to see firsthand how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a difference to communities and conservation nationwide.

In November 2021, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was signed, providing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \$455 million in funding over five years to restore nature's infrastructure.

In these two short years, the Service has been putting these dollars to work through projects which are focused on climate resiliency, community partnerships, and restoring the ecosystems and habitats that are critical to the survival of the fish, wildlife, and plants we are entrusted to conserve.

We are excited to share some of this important work with you as we discover new and exciting ways that these investments are helping protect, preserve, and promote nature's infrastructure.

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On today's episode, we're kicking things off with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director, Martha Williams. Director Williams, thanks for joining us to talk about how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is helping promote collaboration and conservation across the nation.

Thanks for having me, Sue. And I'm really excited to have this conversation. Who knew that talking about infrastructure could be so cool?

Let's start with the obvious question. Why is the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law so important to conservation and to protecting, preserving, and promoting nature's infrastructure?

Well, Sue, I think for a number of reasons. What I think first and foremost is it's been this once-in-a-lifetime, once-in-a-career for any of us who have been working in conservation, investment in nature and investment and why nature matters to people and communities.

So across the nation, the Service is implementing Bipartisan Infrastructure Law dollars to conserve sagebrush in the American West, to protect listed species in the Klamath Basin, to advance green infrastructure in the Delaware River Watershed, to control aquatic invasive species in the Lake Tahoe area, to plug orphan oil and gas wells on national wildlife refuges, and to restore degraded and fragmented aquatic habitats across the nation to improve fish passage. Are all of these projects and initiatives new or are some projects extensions of things that the service has already been working on?

Great question, Sue. And I want to back up before because what the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law really does by investing in nature, it's specific about supporting habitat restoration, identifying and eradicating invasive species, and having us focus more proactively on conserving at-risk and listed species and in connecting communities around the country. So, the examples you just gave of the

sagebrush ecosystem, the Klamath Basin, Lake Tahoe, Delaware River, orphan oil and gas wells, those are, you know, the specific areas that we are focused on, and really delighted to be able to pay attention to.

Why it's been successful so quickly is there were so many projects and partnerships that had been developed over time that were ready to go. This investment met so much demand, because people had been wanting to do this kind of work and hadn't had the money to do it or hadn't had the catalyst to really pull us all together to focus our efforts. So, I would say, sure, it's letting us do lots of work that we couldn't do before. But we've been thinking about this and wanting this opportunity and there were so many projects that were absolutely ready to go and get out the door. And that's really exciting to be able to show why this investment matters.

I agree it is very exciting. And you know, the Service is one of several federal agencies that received Bipartisan Infrastructure funding. Is there any overlap or coordination with other federal agencies on some of these projects that you're talking about?

Yes, there totally is overlap. And I think that's another beauty of this investment. And I would brag a little bit about the Fish and Wildlife Service in that I think we have found our superpower throughout this process and that we know how to bring partners together to do projects. And we haven't been the big funder in the past. But what we got under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, you know, is not what some other agencies got. Nonetheless, we are really coordinating with other agencies. So we are thinking about more of a landscape approach and making sure we're sequencing our projects, and making sure that they work together and build off of each other. Which is, really, something that we haven't always done so well. And I'm seeing these pockets of brilliance, where we are all starting to realize, oh my gosh, look what we can achieve when we are pulling these projects together.

With so many important restoration projects that need funding, how does the Service select the projects which received Bipartisan Infrastructure Law investment dollars?

So, this goes back to I think the principles behind the America the Beautiful initiative, which I really argue are so solid, because they're what we've learned over the years works well. And that's focusing on collaborative efforts of really letting community speak to their priorities, meeting people where they are, clearly honoring private property rights and building in these different partners. So that's guided the way in which we have worked together to fund these projects. It's not the Fish and Wildlife Service priorities. It's what we're hearing from our partners and communities, and specifically, with the way the funding goes, working with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and all that they're pulling together, too. So, so the Fish and Wildlife Service, as an example, isn't stepping in and saying, hey, we really just want to do this. We're asking for grants, we're asking for partners, what their priorities are, what they want to see happen. And then working with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to leverage that money and work together.

Speaking of partners and communities, an important part of planning and implementing these projects is really focusing on locally led collaborative conservation. What does that mean? And what's the benefit of including communities in these efforts?

That's the opportunity we've all feel so palpably, right now is we get this investment, we get to show why we think this community collaboratively led work is so much more durable and is much more impactful. So, by working with the community, we can better understand why a fish passage project might be important to recreation, or flood safety, or water quality. For example, we can better understand that by working with the community and the community sees we care in investing in them. And they get to be more connected to nature and realize why this work matters. That's the opportunity I think we have before us.

Well, I know that you've been able to get out on the landscape and see some of these projects firsthand. Do you have any experiences from these visits which have really moved you?

I have gotten to get out and see a whole bunch of different projects around the country. And like the classic mom, I don't have a favorite. But I think they are all moving in their own way. What I see when I go places is I think about the people's faces that I see and their engagement and excitement in doing this work together. And getting to do something they've thinking about for a long, long time, and haven't had the investment to do it and that somebody cares about their community. What is so obvious to me now, as I've traveled around the country, is each place, people believe in their sense of place. They care about where they are. So, is one more beautiful than the other? I don't know. I think it's incredibly important and beautiful to the people who are there. And I'm privileged enough to go see with them what really matters to them.

I just was at the Fair Hill Marsh in New Hampshire with the Secretary talking about the value of salt marshes for water quality, for sure for flooding for this whole ecosystem. But being there on the marsh and seeing the birds fly by, seeing the Secretary of the Interior light up and really engaged with the partners. I mean, it was a cold, snowy January day, and that didn't matter at all. What mattered was this energy and I think really infectious enthusiasm at what we can achieve together.

In these trips that you've had, you've had the opportunity to meet and to chat with different community members. So, from these discussions, are people sharing how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a difference in their communities? Do they have any stories that have resonated with you?

Absolutely. Every one of them has. They'll say to me, like, look, the salmon have come back where they haven't been able to come back for 100 years. Or in Wilmington, look at this incredible riverwalk where people have access to a river that they could not access before. It wasn't safe. That they lived near that river, but they never got to use it.

Or to go to Wyoming and have a landowner and the community talk about the importance of investing in the meadows, these wet meadows, and how it helped them stay on the landscape and support this Western way of life.

I think too, I was in Fairbanks this summer to see some of the beginning pieces of Gravel-to-Gravel and fish passage, but you could tell they've been working about it for so long, and how important it was to the flooding in the community and allowing the river to flow differently. Salmon are a way of life for so many people and investing in this Gravel-to-Gravel initiative, it was showing that we really saw that and

care about trying to support salmon coming back because they are culturally important. Because people, you know, live eating them.

Well, another example, I think this was probably as sad and moving as any of my trips. One, I got to swim in the Yukon River. To be on the Yukon River in the summer, where I should have been hearing birds, raucous birds and seeing bears on the banks by eating fish. And I should have seen all this community activity and fish camps that had been operating forever. It was eerily quiet. Nobody was out. There were no bears. We didn't hear the birds, raucous birds. There were no salmon. People weren't at their salmon camps, which they had built their families around for generations. So, I would say that was a heartbreaking and very special experience.

Well I think it's really important that you're bringing up these challenges in our communities, because at the heart of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is this emphasis and the need to address these kinds of challenges. So, what's the crossroads between the conservation work and environmental justice?

Connecting nature to people is woven throughout the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the America the Beautiful initiative, I mean, that's at the heart of it. But when I think about environmental justice, an example, on trips, and investment from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, would be orphan wells.

I got to go to Lacassine, Louisiana, and Atchafalaya to see these orphan wells, which if you haven't seen one before, these are old oil wells that have been abandoned. And so you can see, water looks like unhealthy water around the old infrastructure. They stand out like sore thumbs. And this is finally bringing money to bear working on projects proposed by the communities in the state, saying, please help us on this orphan well, and we'd like your helping cleaning it up. So, seeing those and why it was so important to those communities that didn't think that the water or the refuge, where these orphan wells were, were places for them. But they really are for them, and we need to clean them up.

You've mentioned several times this idea of connecting people to nature, and the importance of connecting people to nature. How do these Bipartisan Infrastructure Law investments create greater access to public lands and outdoor recreational opportunities? And why is directing conservation efforts to communities that lack exposure, or benefits of nature, so important?

It's used in so many ways to connect people to nature, whether in an urban setting or in a rural setting. It's the focus on these ecosystem restoration projects that weren't working well and so people either didn't feel safe using them, didn't feel welcome, didn't know how to get to them.

I think about going to Masonville Cove, outside of Baltimore, where this whole community used to be. Their story and their culture was based on the water, but they can't get to the water anymore. And so working to have some sort of path, or being able to cross the highway, so they can actually even see the water, and know that their community had long time, been a water-based community, but it isn't now anymore.

So, I think it's all about the follow through. I think we used to just do work or say this is important for certain reasons. But we didn't always explain why. And this is all about you tell us what you need, we're going to show up and help achieve this. And we're going to connect it to why this work is impactful for

the economy, for the community, for individual health, and, turns out, for the ecosystem. And the species that depend on that ecosystem. That it's so intertwined. So, I feel like this is the, not only the first time at least, the Fish and Wildlife Service has had this real investment in what we do. But it's also teaching us to follow through and really connect why this work matters to everyone in this country. That's a big shift and an exciting one.

Yeah. And \$455 million is a large investment to support a lot of projects across the nation. How would you define success?

I would define success as people realizing and seeing that this is so important, we can't afford to not continue to make these investments that pay off tenfold, from what we put into them. That the payoff is completely worth it. And actually, so worth it, that we really couldn't exist in a good way without making these kinds of investments for people to see that connection from the work to themselves. That is success. Getting to carry this work, going forward to really make a difference in people's lives, while also being completely focused on the ecosystem and conservation benefits, too.

We talked a lot about collaborative conservation. We've talked about moving projects to the finish line. We've talked about connecting people with nature and public lands, access for those public lands. Any last thoughts or words of wisdom that you'd like to leave us with?

I don't know whether I stressed enough that we can't do this alone. This is really a joint effort. And so, part of it is just bringing everyone to the table to realize why it matters. I'm really heartened by this. It's exciting work. There's a need for it. More and more people and applicants want to do it than we have a chance to fund. And so, I think I'd love, Sue, to leave on an inspirational note of a call to action for us all to really join in this moment in time and show why this investment matters.

Director Williams, thank you so much for taking time to chat today about all the important work that's happening on the landscape and the impactful ways that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a difference throughout the nation.

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And for everyone listening, thank you for taking the time with us to learn more about these significant projects. In future episodes, we'll be taking a deeper dive into these project areas as we speak with partners, stakeholders, and tribal nations to discover how these investments are helping protect, preserve, and promote nature's infrastructure. We'll see you next time.

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The Nature's Infrastructure podcast is a production of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Headquarters Office of Communications.