

NOFO Description

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

FWS – International Affairs

Species Conservation Catalyst Fund (SCCF) on Songbirds Trade

Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)

Fiscal Year: 2024

<https://www.fws.gov/service/species-conservation-catalyst-fund>

Background, Purpose and Program Requirements:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service or FWS) mission is to work with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The International Affairs Program delivers on this mission through its technical expertise, international conservation experience, and financial assistance by supporting strategic projects that deliver measurable conservation results for priority species and their habitats around the world.

Wildlife trafficking is estimated to be a multibillion-dollar business involving the unlawful harvest and trade of animals and plants. Illegal wildlife trade has broad security implications, with corruption and sophisticated transnational crime syndicates often at the center of these illicit activities. Wildlife trafficking can place stressed animals in unsanitary conditions while evading disease surveillance, increasing the risks of disease spillover and spread. Illegal wildlife trade removes hundreds of thousands of animals and plants from wild populations each year and increases the extinction risk for threatened and endangered species, which are often the target of wildlife crime because of their rarity and value.

Species Conservation Catalyst Fund

The Combating Wildlife Trafficking Program's Species Conservation Catalyst Fund (SCCF) is an initiative that aims to reduce wildlife trafficking for selected species within the complex social-ecological systems across a species' trade chain. The fund focuses on specific species or species groups primarily threatened by illegal trade and supports work that catalyzes significant and sustained change in both demand and range countries.

The SCCF is envisioned as a 'conservation accelerator' fund that enables award recipients to launch or grow projects, build skills relevant to their work, and develop networks of researchers and practitioners. The SCCF advances an evidence-based approach to combating wildlife trafficking, by supporting recipients to provide an empirical understanding of the contexts in which species are trafficked and develop, implement, and evaluate activities that reduce the threat of trafficking to species populations. Projects supported through the SCCF will help build a body of evidence to guide future conservation and counter-trafficking efforts. The SCCF is also

designed to develop capacity for award recipients to sustain conservation impact by attracting additional funding, attention, and other resources for future work on the species. In service of these holistic goals, the SCCF also builds in support to convene and coordinate award recipients for activities like strategic planning, communications, and networking.

This Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) launches the SCCF's third species group, songbirds (suborder Passeri or Oscines, order Passeriformes) native to the Guiana Shield and Caribbean. In total, up to \$5 million is expected to be available for the SCCF Songbird initiative through several funding opportunities over the next few years. The expected funding amount for this current NOFO is \$1,400,000.

See below for more details on this funding opportunity. Please be sure to read this entire document and related attachments, as updated information has been added (e.g., to section *D. Application and Submission Information* and section *E. Criteria* in GrantSolution NOFO version) to clarify requirements, expectations, and funding criteria.

Funding Opportunity

The purpose of this NOFO is to support new or existing strategies to reduce the illegal, unsustainable international trade of songbirds native to the Guiana Shield and Caribbean traded for singing competitions. This NOFO aligns with the missions of the Service and the Department of the Interior and reflects the priorities of the Biden-Harris Administration, including Administration policies articulated by Executive Orders 14008, 13985, and 14005.

SONGBIRD TRADE FOR SINGING COMPETITIONS

A distinct market within the widespread caged bird trade of Latin America and the Caribbean is the trade of songbirds for singing competitions (Mirin and Klinck 2021; Roldán-Clarà et al. 2014). Popular in the Guiana Shield of South America and the Caribbean, this sport consists of “racing” male songbirds to assess which bird can sing a specific song the most in a given time. Singing competitions can be high stakes events; songbirds can sell for US\$500-10,000 (Neme 2015) and owners of champion birds earn monetary prizes and social prestige. The sport can also play a significant socio-cultural and economic role as an opportunity for: intergenerational knowledge transfer of bird trapping, training, and care skills; socializing across class, race, and ethnicity; personal development as a discipline-oriented hobby for birdkeepers; connecting with cultural roots and identity; and sport-associated economic opportunities for lower income groups in urban and non-urban areas, including some rural Indigenous communities (Gupta 2014; Mirin and Klinck 2021).

Evidence suggests that current singing competition trade practices appear to be driving the decline of some species. Potentially 15 wild bird species native to the Guiana Shield and Caribbean – primarily seed-finches, seedeaters, buntings and grosbeaks – may be experiencing local or range-wide declines due to wild harvest for singing competitions (according to FWS consultations with field experts and Juergens et al. 2021; see SCCF Songbird Priority Species below). Four SCCF Songbird Priority Species are formally recognized as in decline: the great-billed seed-finch (*Sporophila maximiliani*) is Endangered and the Cuban bullfinch (*Melopyrrha nigra*) is Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Red List), and the rose-

breasted grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) and painted bunting (*Passerina ciris*) are listed as FWS Birds of Conservation Concern (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2021). The Service includes 15 species as Songbird Priority Species under the SCCF Songbird initiative with the understanding that the suite shares similar trade pressures and may likewise benefit from similar conservation interventions to result in force-multiplying impacts.

The international trade of these songbird species for singing competitions is suspected to be a primary driver of declines, in part because songbirds are typically trafficked with high mortality. For example, in the United States, nearly all live singing competition songbirds are imported illegally without being declared. Hundreds of birds are seized each year, yet this is estimated by the Service to be a small fraction of the true number trafficked into the country. Likewise, in Trinidad and Tobago, where 4% of people keep songbirds for singing competitions and most of the birds used for singing competitions are foreign-sourced, songbirds are commonly imported illegally without the permits required by law (Gibson 2022). Trafficked birds are subject to inhumane transport conditions (carried in small cages or confined in hair curlers under clothing) and death rates are notoriously high due to stress or injury (Gibson 2022). Smuggled birds also move in association with other illegal activities and evade regulatory, quota, and disease monitoring (Gibson 2022; Rueb 2015). Even when birds are seized, repatriation and reintroduction back to the wild is challenging and rarely occurs. Most of the songbirds used in singing competitions from the Guiana Shield or Caribbean are not included in the Appendices to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES; see **Appendix I. SCCF Songbird Priority Species in the NOFO Supplemental Document**), and therefore are not protected under an international regulatory mechanism such as the system of permits and certificates required for CITES-listed species. This leaves the capture and trade in songbirds from the region subject to a patchwork of domestic laws and regulations, which vary between countries.

While songbird singing competitions are celebrated and promoted via contemporary news and social media, little empirical research has been conducted on the socio-ecological aspects or sustainable management of the trade (Mirin & Klinck 2021, Gibson 2022). Likewise, global awareness among the conservation community about the illegal, unsustainable trade of songbirds in the Guiana Shield and Caribbean is limited and focused on the “Asian songbird crisis” (e.g., Lees & Yuda 2022; IUCN Species Survival Commission Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group).

This funding opportunity solicits projects to reduce the illegal, unsustainable international trade of native songbirds from the Guiana Shield and Caribbean for singing competitions. Proposals are invited for two broad Objectives: (1) addressing the illegal, unsustainable trade of songbirds or (2) convening and coordinating SCCF Songbird award recipients for projects aimed at meeting Objective 1.

Note: For definitions of terms used in this NOFO, see Appendix II. NOFO Definitions of the NOFO Supplemental Document.

Objective 1. Addressing the illegal, unsustainable trade of songbirds

Proposed projects contributing to this objective should implement activities that address the trade of songbirds. Projects should achieve one or more of the following outcomes. Applicants do not need to complete all of the sub-outcomes under an outcome.

Outcome 1.1. System(s) for ensuring legal and biologically sustainably sourced songbirds for singing competitions are assessed, piloted, and evaluated, while supporting sustainable community livelihoods.

- 1.1.1. Songbird supply is better understood and informed by social science research on:
 - a. the social, cultural, economic, political, and situational factors that drive markets, human behavior, or policies related to sourcing songbirds,
 - b. rates and trends of songbird supply,
 - c. differences in supply for domestic versus international songbird trade, or
 - d. barriers to having a fully legal and sustainably sourced trade system.
- 1.1.2. The current, historical, and future effects of singing competition trade on songbird species populations, distribution, and habitat are better understood and informed by research, and used to inform sustainable sourcing and wild bird conservation and management planning.
- 1.1.3. Wild bird conservation and management approaches are developed and implemented by or with people involved in supplying songbirds.
- 1.1.4. Sustainable sourcing system(s) is (are) explored, studied, designed, piloted, and evaluated. Potential unintended social and ecological consequences and tradeoffs of proposed system(s) are considered.
- 1.1.5. Songbird trade system(s) is (are) strengthened to reduce disease occurrence and ensure ethical transport and captivity conditions for birds along the trade chain.
- 1.1.6. Songbird trade system(s) is (are) strengthened to enable economically fair livelihood benefits and culturally appropriate practices for people along the trade chain, including lower-income groups.

Outcome 1.2. Demand for songbirds for singing competitions is understood and the people involved in trade reduce illegal, unsustainable trade and, as appropriate, transition to legal, sustainable trade.

- 1.2.1. Songbird demand is better understood and informed by social science research on:
 - a. the social, cultural, economic, political, and situational factors that drive markets, human behavior, policies, or practices related to consumer demand for songbirds,
 - b. rates and trends of songbird demand, or
 - c. differences in demand for domestic versus international songbird trade.

- 1.2.2. Effective strategies to reduce illegal, sustainable trade (and as appropriate, transition to legal, sustainable trade) are developed and implemented by or with songbird keepers and buyers/sellers.
- 1.2.3. Songbird keepers and buyers/sellers have increased understanding, capacity, and motivation to reduce demand for trafficked birds and/or advocate for and comply with laws, policies, and practices that lower barriers to legal, sustainable trade.
- 1.2.4. Songbird keepers and buyers/sellers have increased understanding, capacity, and motivation to develop and follow ethical handling and transport practices that ensure healthy, disease-free songbirds in captivity and the wild.

Outcome 1.3. Local, national, and international authority capacity is strengthened to protect birds and regulate songbird trade.

- 1.3.1. Robust and practical laws, policies, and systems are established or strengthened to regulate and encourage compliance with legal, sustainable songbird trade for singing competitions.
- 1.3.2. Regulatory, law enforcement, and judiciary needs (e.g., resources, training, community monitoring) are identified and addressed to strengthen capacity to manage songbird trade.
- 1.3.3. Communication, coordination, and opportunities for learning exchanges among authorities within and between source and demand countries are established and maintained.

***Note:** Award recipients selected to contribute to Objective 1 will be expected (and financially supported) to attend events and coordination efforts facilitated by the entity selected to implement Objective 2. These activities are intended to advance systems thinking and a well-connected, collaborative conservation network that will enable the effective, long-term conservation of songbirds.*

Objective 2. Convening and coordinating SCCF Songbird award recipients

Multisectoral, cross-disciplinary exchange of actors working across the trade chain is necessary to holistically understand and address the complexity of wildlife trafficking (Browne et al. 2021). As such, the Service aims to ensure that SCCF Songbird Objective 1 award recipients (hereafter referred to as “award recipients”) work in collaboration and/or coordination to ensure their collective efforts achieve effective, sustainable reductions in the illegal, unsustainable trade of songbirds for singing competitions.

The Service invites proposals for a single cooperative agreement award that would provide support to award recipients to convene, exchange information, develop skills, and build partner networks to help meet the goals of the SCCF Songbird initiative. Although only one award will be given, applicants may collaborate with other organizations to fulfill the activities for Objective 2.

Proposals should plan and budget activities to include several key personnel from each award recipient (likely two to six awards lasting between two and five years). For example, virtual or

in-person workshops should include all costs for facilitating in addition to hosting participants (e.g., travel, lodging, per diem, admin costs for processing reimbursements).

Projects must achieve both Outcome 2.1 and 2.2 (including all sub-outcomes) and may additionally include Outcome 2.3 or any sub-outcomes of Outcome 2.3.

Outcome 2.1. SCCF Songbird award recipients share a common vision for reducing illegal, unsustainable songbird trade for singing competitions.

- 2.1.1. Recipients collaboratively build a model for systems thinking by developing a theory of change and indicators of success that capture how projects advance outcomes from Objective 1.
- 2.1.2. Recipients pursue synergies and avoid duplication in projects by coordinating on project progress and identifying opportunities for complementing other songbird trade or conservation projects and initiatives.

Outcome 2.2. SCCF Songbird award recipients strengthen their skills and capacity to advance effectiveness and enable long-term sustainability.

- 2.2.1. Recipients engage in a community of practice by sharing resources and supporting co-learning.
- 2.2.2. Recipients collectively advance relevant skills to improve project implementation by receiving trainings and other capacity-building activities.

Outcome 2.3. SCCF Songbird award recipients inform and engage appropriate audiences to reduce illegal, unsustainable international songbird trade.

- 2.3.1. Recipients collaboratively develop a communications plan and outreach materials to strategically raise awareness about the songbird trade problem and solutions.
- 2.3.2. Recipients strategize on the appropriate need and timing for broader regional/global coordination with other songbird trade and conservation actors.

General guidance

Trade focus: Projects must ultimately aim to impact the international songbird trade for singing competitions (i.e., not focus on trade in songbirds for the caged bird trade generally). Activities may also help combat the illegal, unsustainable trade of birds or wildlife more broadly, but projects must primarily benefit the trade of songbirds sourced from the Guiana Shield and Caribbean for singing competitions. Projects may focus on the domestic trade (whereby birds are sourced from the wild and sold to an end-user within the same country) if activities are clearly linked to reducing the illegal, unsustainable international trade (whereby birds are sourced from the wild in a different country than where they are sold to an end-user).

SCCF Songbird Priority Species: Project activities should benefit one or more of the following 15 species of songbirds. These species were selected because they are either 1) commonly traded for singing competitions domestically and, in some cases, internationally and show evidence of species or population declines due to trade for singing competitions or 2) Threatened or

Endangered species at risk of becoming a substitute species for singing competitions (according to Juergens et al 2021 and FWS consultation with field experts). See **Appendix I. SCCF Songbird Priority Species in the NOFO Supplemental Document** for more species information.

SCCF Songbird Priority Species:

- Chestnut-bellied seedeater (*Sporophila castaneiventris*)
- Chestnut-bellied seed-finch (*Sporophila angolensis*)
- Cuban bullfinch (*Melopyrrha nigra*)
- Great-billed seed-finch (*Sporophila maximiliani*)
- Grey seedeater (*Sporophila intermedia*)
- Large-billed seed-finch (*Sporophila crassirostris*)
- Lined seedeater (*Sporophila lineola*)
- Painted bunting (*Passerina ciris*)
- Plumbeous seedeater (*Sporophila plumbea*)
- Red siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*)
- Rose-breasted grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*)
- Ruddy-breasted seedeater (*Sporophila minuta*)
- Slate-colored seedeater (*Sporophila schistacea*)
- Wing-barred seedeater (*Sporophila americana*)
- Yellow-bellied seedeater (*Sporophila nigricollis*)

Priority geographic areas: Project activities should take place in:

- Guiana Shield and Caribbean range countries for priority songbird species, including Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Brazil, and/or
- Transit or consumer demand countries where priority songbird species are being traded for singing competitions, including Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands.

Please note that this program will not fund projects in countries that have supported terrorism or that are subject to U.S. sanctions (see section C3. *Other* for specific countries).

Important considerations: Project activities should be developed and implemented in coordination, collaboration and/or consultation with relevant authorities and community members who will be affected by or engaged in activities (e.g., communities living in or near songbird habitat; bird dealers and transporters; bird keepers or singing competition bird clubs). Empirical research should be clearly tied to interventions. Activities should also enable trade that follows best practices for bird health care and welfare. All approaches and interventions should be culturally appropriate and ethical. Finally, we encourage applicants to follow best practices of inclusive science and conservation, such as by conducting project activities in local language(s), prioritizing values of the local region, and centering local people and practitioners in leadership, planning and implementation (e.g., Soares et al. 2023).

LITERATURE CITED

Links to the following documents are provided to applicants as reference only. The inclusion of these documents should not be viewed as an official endorsement of a particular approach or strategy in responding to this NOFO.

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