

**Testimony in Support of FY 2013 Funding for the
Department of the Interior**

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Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

The Natural Science Collections Alliance appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of fiscal year (FY) 2013 appropriations for the Department of the Interior (DOI). We encourage Congress to provide the DOI Working Capital Fund with at least \$70.6 million in FY 2013.

The Natural Science Collections Alliance is a non-profit association that supports natural science collections, their human resources, the institutions that house them, and their research activities for the benefit of science and society. We are comprised of over 100 institutions which are part of an international community of museums, botanical gardens, herbariums, universities, and other institutions that house natural science collections and utilize them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, and outreach activities.

Scientific collections are a vital component of our nation's research infrastructure. Whether held at a national museum, government managed laboratory or archive, or in a university science department, these scientific resources contain genetic, tissue, organismal, and environmental samples that constitute a unique and irreplaceable library of the Earth's history. The specimens and their associated data drive cutting edge research on significant challenges facing modern society, such as improving human health, enhancing food security, and understanding and responding to environmental change. Collections also inspire novel interdisciplinary research that drives innovation and addresses some of the most fundamental questions related to biodiversity.

The institutions that care for scientific collections are important research centers that enable scientists to study the basic data of life, conduct modern biological, geological, and environmental research, and provide undergraduate and graduate students with hands-on training opportunities.

The federal Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections (IWGSC) was established by President Bush to evaluate the status of federally owned object-based scientific collections. In 2009, the IWGSC reported that, “scientific collections are essential to supporting agency missions and are thus vital to supporting the global research enterprise.” In response, in 2010, the Office of Science and Technology Policy directed federal agencies to budget for the proper care of collections. “Agencies should ensure that their collections’ necessary costs are properly assessed and realistically projected in agency budgets, so that collections are not compromised.”

We are pleased to see that DOI has included an increase of \$3.5 million in its budget request for the Cultural and Scientific Collections program. Interior is an important caretaker of museum collections; the Department has an estimated 146 million items, which is second in size only to the Smithsonian Institution. Although many of the department’s collections are located in bureau facilities, artifacts and specimens are also housed by non-governmental facilities, such as museums and universities.

The FY 2013 budget request would implement a multi-year action plan to address recommendations made by the DOI Inspector General regarding Interior’s accountability for its cultural and scientific specimens. In a December 2009 report, the Inspector General found that DOI has failed to properly accession, catalogue, or inventory museum collections, leaving artifacts “unavailable for research, education, or display and ... subject to theft, deterioration, and damage.” The proposed budget increase would support oversight and technical assistance for better care of collections, start a pilot project to identify and assess collections at non-federal repositories, and study consolidation of bureau and non-bureau facilities housing collections.

We support the proposed DOI study of bureau and non-bureau facilities housing biological collections to determine the potential for economies of scale, improvements of oversight and accountability, and space reduction. Because excellent public and private facilities already exist in every state, we believe the study is likely to conclude that contracting with existing bio-repositories that have the experience and expertise to house and curate the collections and associated data will be the most efficient and cost-effective means by which federal agencies can access the collections data required to accomplish agency missions. We applaud the increased recognition by DOI and other federal departments of the immense importance of biological collections and the data they provide in support of the nation’s research enterprise that ultimately drives economic growth, improves human health, addresses energy needs, and enables sustainable management of our natural resources.

The National Park Service is also planning to continue its investments in collections. The proposed budget would support the third year of an initiative to eliminate the archival backlog at 165 parks and to address the recommendations made by the Interior Inspector General. In FY 2013, the National Park Service plans to catalog an estimated 7.4 million additional museum objects through the Flexible Park Program.

Conclusion

Scientific collections are an important part of our nation’s research enterprise. Research specimens connect us to the past, are used to solve current societal problems, and are helping to

predict future environmental changes. Continued investments in scientific collections are critical for our nation's continued scientific leadership. Please support the budget request for the Department of the Interior's Capital Working Fund, which will support Interior's efforts to preserve scientific collections – a truly irreplaceable resource.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this request.