

Testimony in Support of FY 2017 Funding for the Department of the Interior

March 22, 2016

Submitted by:

Joseph Cook, Ph.D.

President

Natural Science Collections Alliance
1201 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 420
Washington, DC 20005

Submitted to:

House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

The Natural Science Collections Alliance appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of fiscal year (FY) 2017 appropriations for the Department of the Interior. We encourage Congress to provide at least \$2 million for Cultural and Scientific Collections support within the Working Capital Fund. We also encourage Congress to provide adequate funding for the scientific collections maintained by the United States Geological Survey, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service. These collections are used to inform resource management and support law enforcement efforts. Additionally, we support the Smithsonian Institution's requested funding level of \$922.2 million.

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. Our membership consists of institutions which are part of an international community of museums, botanical gardens, herbaria, universities, and other institutions that contain natural science collections and use them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, natural resource management, and outreach activities.

Scientific collections are a vital component of our nation's research infrastructure. Whether held at a 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.

According to the federal Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections, “scientific collections are essential to supporting agency missions and are thus vital to supporting the global research enterprise.” In recognition of the importance of collections, the Office of Science and Technology Policy issued a memo in 2010 that 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.”

Preservation of specimens is in the best interest of science and the best interest of taxpayers. Proper care of existing scientific collections is typically more cost effective than attempting to recollect the information. Moreover, preservation of specimens and associated data allows for integration into new research. Specimens that were collected decades or centuries ago are often used in cutting edge research in the fields of genomics, biodiversity, and human health.

We are pleased to see that Interior has included an increase of \$1.0 million in its budget request for the Cultural and Scientific Collections Management initiative. Interior is an important caretaker of museum collections; the Department has an estimated 146 million items, which is second in size 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.

In addition, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) plans to maintain its efforts to preserve, inventory, and digitize geological scientific collections, such as rock and ice cores, fossils, and samples of oil, gas, and water. The National Geological and Geophysical Data Preservation program helps states with collections management, improves accessibility of collections data, and expands digitization of specimens. We are grateful to Congress for awarding additional funds for this program in FY 2014. USGS plans to maintain the expanded program in FY 2017.

Another USGS program is supporting public access to biodiversity information. The Biodiversity Information Serving Our Nation system is the only web-based federal resource for finding species in the United States and contains 250 million records. It also serves as the U.S. connection to the Global Biodiversity Information Facility.

The Bureau of Land Management has requested an additional \$1.0 million to inventory cultural resources on public lands. Presently, 90 percent of public lands have not been assessed for heritage resources. Efforts would be focused in areas susceptible to looting, vandalism, fire, and environmental change.

The National Park Service is planning to continue its investments in scientific collections. The proposed budget would support plans to catalog an additional two million museum objects in FY 2017. Additionally, several parks would address planning, environmental, storage, security, and fire protection deficiencies in museum collections. An additional 20 grants per year would be funded through the Preservation Technology and Training program to support innovative solutions for cultural resource management.

The Smithsonian Institution is a valuable federal partner in the curation of scientific specimens. The National Museum of Natural History alone cares for 127 million specimens. In order to

make these scientific resources more available to researchers, educators, and the public, Smithsonian is requesting an increase of \$2.1 million in FY 2017 for digitization of collections. This effort will substantially increase availability of information on these collections via the Internet. Additionally, Smithsonian is seeking \$2.7 million in new funding to strengthen curatorial staffing, which would be matched with private funds, dollar for dollar. These new staff would backfill positions left open by retirements and budget constraints. The current staffing level is insufficient to provide optimal care for the collections. Lastly, the Institution requests \$1.5 million in new funding to address deficiencies the Smithsonian Inspector General identified in the preservation of collections.

Conclusion

Scientific collections are critical infrastructure for our nation's research enterprise. Research specimens connect us to the past, are used to solve current societal problems, and are helping to predict the impact of future environmental changes. Sustained 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 and the Smithsonian Institution, which will support these organizations' efforts to preserve scientific collections – a truly irreplaceable resource.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this request.