

August 14, 2025

U.S. Foundation for International Conservation

Introduction

The United States supports international conservation efforts through foreign assistance, diplomatic engagement, and law enforcement. International conservation efforts primarily focus on protecting species, restoring habitats, and supporting sustainable activities that promote conservation (e.g., ecotourism), among other priorities. Congress generally has supported these efforts and has debated the level, scope, prioritization, and effectiveness of U.S. international conservation activities. Congressional interest in international conservation issues stems from a range of factors, including concerns about human-caused threats to global biodiversity, interest in supporting protected areas, links between conservation and national security, and concerns about human rights.

Congress has shaped U.S. policy on international conservation through its authorization and appropriation of foreign assistance and its oversight of federal programs. Congress expanded its approach to international conservation in 2024 by enacting legislation to establish the U.S. Foundation for International Conservation (hereinafter, the Foundation; P.L. 118-159, Division E, Title LI, Subtitle A). The Foundation is not operational as of the date of this In Focus.

Purpose and Governance of the Foundation

Congress authorized the Foundation as a charitable nonprofit organization, tax-exempt and not an agency or instrument of the federal government. The Foundation is to serve several purposes, including providing grants for managing conserved areas in eligible countries with high biodiversity and high-value ecosystems; administering, accepting, leveraging, and incentivizing private-sector funds for managing conservation; identifying and supporting viable conservation projects; and coordinating with various stakeholders (e.g., Indigenous peoples, local communities, governments) in conservation activities.

As directed by Congress, the Foundation is to be managed by an Executive Director and governed by a Board of Directors (Board) composed of the Secretary of State (Secretary), the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Secretary of the Interior, the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and the “head of one other relevant federal department or agency.” The Secretary is also directed to appoint four private donors and four independent experts with diverse points of view. No more than five appointments can be from one political party.

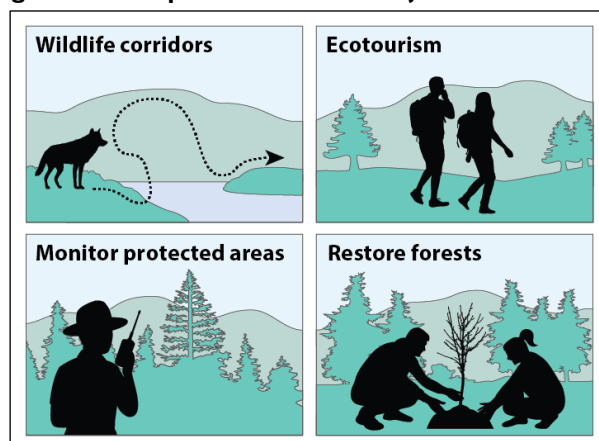
Plan of Action and Grants

The Foundation is to be guided by a plan of action. Within six months after the Foundation is established, the Executive Director is to submit a three-year plan of action

to the Board of Directors. The plan is to include priority actions for the Foundation; the processes and criteria for (1) selecting projects to support, (2) developing grant proposals, and (3) evaluating grant implementation; and staffing and budget requirements. The plan is to be updated annually.

The Foundation is to provide grants to support projects that “enable effective management” of protected and conserved areas—including wildlife dispersal and corridor areas, buffer zones, and other area-based conservation measures. (See **Figure 1**.) Eligible projects that receive grants are to focus on area-based conservation; have a cost ratio of 2:1 (i.e., \$2 of nonfederal funding for every \$1 of federal funding); have long-term binding agreements that ensure local populations have access to resource management and sustainable economic activity; incorporate performance indicators; leverage baseline funding for sustained management of not less than 10 years; and create economic opportunities for local communities.

Figure 1. Examples of Potential Projects



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Grant Eligibility

Countries eligible for grants are those with low-income to upper middle-income economies, a high level of threatened biological diversity or species, and significant ecosystems at risk of degradation or destruction. Countries must demonstrate a commitment to conservation through actions such as protecting lands (e.g., establishing forest and marine reserves) to be considered for funding. The Foundation may not provide support for a government if the Secretary has determined the government has

- repeatedly provided support for international terrorism, as determined under the Export Control Reform Act of 2018 (50 U.S.C. §4813(c)(1)(A)(i)), the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2371(a)), the Arms

Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. §2780(d)), or another relevant provision of law;

- been identified under Section 116(a) or 502B(a)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2151n(a) and §2304(a)(2)) or another relevant provision of law; or
- has failed the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s “control of corruption” indicator within three years preceding the intended grant.

Entities eligible for grants include nonprofit organizations with expertise in conserved area management and economic development, governments of eligible countries, and Indigenous and local communities in eligible countries.

Safeguards and Accountability

The Foundation is to include safeguards, policies, and guidelines in any agreements for support. This includes establishing an ombudsman position to serve as a neutral source of information and assistance to anyone affected by the Foundation’s activities, an annual review of the Foundation’s activities by the Secretary, and an independent accountability mechanism (discussed below).

The Foundation is required to have an Independent Accountability Mechanism led by an independent accountability official. The accountability staff will review projects to ensure their compliance with the Foundation’s environmental and social safeguards, help resolve concerns between complainants and project implementers, and report to the Board of Directors on projects, policies, and practices.

Appropriations and Sunset

In the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress authorized \$1 million for the Foundation for FY2025 and not more than \$100 million for each of FY2026 through FY2034. The explanatory statement accompanying Division F, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-147), specified that “\$100,000,000 shall be made available to support new public-private partnership foundations for conservation and food security if legislation establishing such foundations is enacted into law by December 31, 2024.” Because the legislation to establish the Foundation passed before this deadline, \$100 million might be available under FY2024 appropriations law until September 30, 2025, for State to implement the Foundation. P.L. 119-28, the Recissions Act of 2025, may affect funding for the Foundation. State has discretion to identify recissions under the account that includes funding for the Foundation, but has not reported whether funding for the Foundation was rescinded. The law specifies that the Foundation is to terminate 10 years after it becomes operational.

Selected Issues for Congress

Congress may conduct oversight on the establishment and implementation of the Foundation and its level of appropriations. Congress also may debate how the

Foundation’s activities may broadly influence U.S. international conservation.

Establishment of the Foundation. Congress may conduct oversight on the establishment of the Foundation, including the governance structure, Board, and development of the plan of action. Further, Congress might inquire if the Foundation received appropriations for FY2025 and consider appropriations for FY2026. For FY2026, the House Committee on Appropriations recommended \$100 million for the Foundation. When deciding appropriations for the Foundation, Congress may consider whether appropriations will correspond to demand for conservation grants. Some stakeholders might argue that requiring a cost share for funding might deter less-developed countries from requesting grants. Other stakeholders contend that formally leveraging financial support (e.g., a 2:1 cost share) from local communities and governments, and encouraging economic benefits from conservation activities, could increase “buy-in” for conservation programs in developing countries. Still other stakeholders assert that meeting the cost share may not be an obstacle and that the Foundation’s primary benefit is to have U.S. government backing for projects due to federal members on the Board.

Congress also may oversee the Foundation’s administration. For example, Congress might consider how implementation of the Foundation may affect project selection. Some stakeholders may assert that nonfederal Board members might bias project selection to benefit or supplant their existing activities. This concern, in part, may be addressed by safeguard, reporting, and accountability provisions in the law that aim to provide transparency on how projects affect conservation and communities and by independent oversight that assesses whether projects adhere to requirements under the law. Some stakeholders might note that nonfederal Board members might provide greater on-the-ground expertise for selecting projects and seeking nonfederal collaborators.

Role of the Foundation. Congress might consider how the Foundation may fit into the broader portfolio of U.S. international conservation. Some stakeholders might argue that the Foundation’s activities could shift U.S. international conservation policy towards prioritizing area-based conservation rather than species-based conservation; supporting actions that aim to promote economic opportunities versus preserving landscapes in their natural state. Further, some stakeholders might question whether the Foundation is a replacement for other U.S. international conservation programs. These perspectives are balanced by some stakeholders who assert that projects funded by the Foundation that aim to conserve ecosystems also are beneficial to species and biodiversity. Additionally, some may contend that the Foundation’s activities can be one of several approaches the United States uses to support international conservation.

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