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## **MESOAMERICA 2020: Conservation Partnership of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Organization of American States (OAS)**

### **MESOAMERICA 2020 Anniversary Event**

#### **Opening Remarks by OAS Assistant Secretary General H.E. Nestor Mendez: September 21st, 2015**

- Thank you for joining us today at this event organized by the U.S. Permanent Mission to the OAS, the Department of Sustainable Development, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as we celebrate the first year of implementation of a new initiative to promote sustainable development and conservation of natural resources at the community level in Mesoamerica. Building on decades of work from the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, this complementary program will support “Conservation Corridors” that are an innovative, transformational idea.
- Because existing protected areas within Central America alone are too small and isolated to maintain ecosystem functions and large scale processes, Mesoamerica 2020 uses a landscape-scale approach to conserve the region’s unique ecosystems and jaguars, tapirs, monkeys, macaws, and other iconic wildlife that can also serve as umbrella species for the rest of the region’s biodiversity.
- Several Conservation Corridors exist, but ultimately the idea would be to have landscape and ecosystem corridor management from Canada to Patagonia. Other successful initiatives include the US-Canada “Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative”, the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, as mentioned, the Andes Amazon -- and finally from the Patagonian Grasslands and Pampas to Chile's Lake District. Corridors provide land and water pathways that link protected areas with one another, allow plants and animals to pollinate and migrate, while adapting to the pressures of global warming.
- Mesoamerica is strategic as it has a very diverse geography, with its location as a terrestrial land bridge between North and South America, the presence of two oceans with the second largest coral reef in the world, extensive mountain chains with peaks that reach up to 4211 m, and areas ranging from deserts to very wet rain forests.
- The forest and marine habitats of Mesoamerica are stellar. From coral reefs and lowland rainforests to pine savannas, semi-arid woodlands, grasslands, and high mountain forests, Mesoamerica has 22 “ecoregions” that have been identified by biogeographers. Astonishingly, Mesoamerica has less than one percent of the



World's land mass holds up to 8% of the World's biodiversity -- and connects the Americas through the land bridge.

- For example, Panama, has almost 1000 species of birds — more than Canada and the United States combined. The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, which runs for 1,600 kilometers along the coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, is the world's second largest coral reef system. Mesoamerica contains 8 percent of the world's mangrove forests, highly productive ecosystems for fisheries and protection from hurricanes. Mesoamerica is also considered to be one of the world's most important centers of origin for agricultural crops: its indigenous peoples bred various beans, maize, squash, and chili peppers from wild species endemic to the region.
- It is worth noting that the Mesoamerican countries recently signed a PLAN DIRECTOR CORREDOR BIOLÓGICO MESOAMERICANO (CBM) -2020: GESTIÓN TERRITORIAL SOSTENIBLE as well as the Environmental Sustainability Mesoamerican Strategy (EMSA) so these efforts will work in tandem.
- Another innovation is the protected seascapes that are being knitted together through the "Caribbean Challenge" -- where 20% of the marine areas of each signatory State would be protected by 2020. We are supporting these efforts in our project called ReefFix, with support from the Government of Mexico.
- Increased thought on socio-economic connectivity, through, for example, trade corridors, is also key to diminishing the "Extinction Crisis" in high biodiversity hotspots.
- Our hope with this Mesoamerica 2020 initiative is that with Government buy-in by the member States of the OAS -- beginning here with the Mesoamerican Ambassadors -- that a modest investment in capacity building exercises and small project grants will yield large conservation and socio-economic pay-offs. While combining science and stewardship -- we seek to maintain and restore ecosystem integrity required for landscape-scale wise-use of natural resources.
- Great progress has been achieved in this regard in the last year. Through a partnership effort with the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE), the USFWS and the OAS held the Meso-America Regional Meeting "Advancing Biodiversity Conservation Practice in Mesoamerica" at the CATIE Campus in Turriabla Costa Rica from August 25 to 27, 2014. The meeting brought together conservation practitioners from 7 Mesoamerican countries as well as representatives from other countries in the Americas to share lessons



learned, promote the use of best practices, and identify training needs for the region.

- This Mesoamerica 2020 Initiative therefore hopes to protect ecosystem services such as clean water and fertile soils, promote peaceful cooperation and fostering regional economic growth and integration. We should be able to turn around deforestation and add forest cover -- as Costa Rica has done -- increasing from 22% forest to over 50% forest since 1970.
- The good news is that conservation efforts in Mesoamerica already protect nearly 11 percent of Mesoamerica's land area. Building on this foundation, projects in the buffer zones, corridors and multiple-use areas encourage land users to test and adopt management practices such as pollinator-friendly cocoa and shade coffee that are both biodiversity-friendly and economically viable, using incentives such as payments for ecosystem services. Under this approach, communities and their governments develop strategies for land and water use that encompass entire landscapes -- so they can simultaneously conserve biodiversity and sustain livelihoods in farming, forestry, and fisheries.