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## **Annual Year-End Address with President & CEO Collin O'Mara**

Hosted by Chief Development Officer Dirk Sellers

December 11, 2025

*Transcript of Zoom Webinar\**

**Dirk Sellers:** Hello, everyone, and thank you for joining us on National Wildlife Federation All Access. I'm Dirk Sellers, Chief Development Officer. Today, I'm joined by my friend and Federation President and CEO, Collin O'Mara, who's here to talk more about the current moment in conservation.

Before we begin, I want to review a couple of housekeeping items with you. If at any point you experience internet connectivity issues during today's webcast, you may use the link provided in your registration and reminder emails to sign in again. The link for this webcast will also be shared with you later this week, should you want to review the webcast recording again or share it with someone else.

Without further ado, let's get started.

Collin, welcome. I feel like I said the same thing to you last year, as we got started, but again, it's true, it's been a very busy year for all of us at the Federation. What role do you see NWF playing in this important moment of accelerating partisanship and division?

**Collin O'Mara:** Hey, Dirk. It's great to be with you, and thank you, everybody, for joining today.

This question really gets at what makes NWF different, and we take the long view, not only the challenge we face, but the solutions that we need. We focus on durable solutions that take time, but pay off for wildlife and people, you know? I mean, Dirk, I view us as bridge builders. Especially at a time when there's a challenging political environment, how do we bring people together across differences, across regions, across different interests, and still do big things for the country?

We know right now that about a third of U.S. wildlife species are at heightened risk of extinction — from freshwater mussels and fireflies to iconic species like gray wolves and buffalo and the eastern hellbender. We've worked to reverse these trends and help species endure even in the face of immense and interconnected challenges.

And we've been successful and know it's possible because we've been in this for the long haul and will continue to be for years to come. You know, NWF is turning 90 years old next year.

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These past nine decades we've seen NWF as the center of the conservation movement, bringing people together. Our seminal gathering in 1936 directly led to the law that codified kind of what we think of as a North American model, bringing together good science, having dedicated funding, making sure that the pieces are there to make sure that wildlife is managed by professionals and not by politicians.

Ever since then, we've been in the middle of the room and working on and negotiating on every deal. The reason I'm so dressed up today is I was just on the Hill a few minutes ago trying to make sure that this permitting negotiation accelerates projects, and at the same time doesn't harm wildlife in the process.

And so, we're in the middle of every single law, whether that's the original Clean Air Act, or Clean Water Act, or the Endangered Species Act, or the Great American Outdoors Act just a few years ago. These laws aren't monoliths, nor are they eternal. As the Supreme Court demonstrated just a few years ago, these foundational laws face new challenges that attempt to erode their intent and their effect.

This is why we do work to build bridges, to focus on our common interests, our love of wildlife, our public lands, our waters, and nature. Ultimately, we're focused on building a movement that sustains and, when necessary, defends our victories for wildlife and people. I think there are huge opportunities right now if we're willing to bring people together at a time when other people are trying to rip us apart.

**Dirk Sellers:** You know, one of the things that I love about the Federation is how millions of Americans not only know and trust the organization, but they also bring us into their homes. Whether it's reading *Ranger Rick*® to their kids or to their grandkids, planting pollinator gardens in their backyard, or using NWF resources to just get outside — there are countless stories of how NWF truly becomes part of our members' lives.

What inspired you, or even surprised you, maybe, this year about how folks invited NWF into their homes?

**Collin O'Mara:** Yeah, many of you have maybe heard me tell the story, but my journey with the Federation started when I was like 4 or 5 years old, you know, doing activities with my mom, and sending over the seed packet of milkweed, getting it to actually germinate, and seeing the incredible migration and the symbiotic relationship between the native plant and the species, as well as the migration corridor.

I think if we polled today's attendees, I guarantee pretty much everyone would have a personal story about how they encountered NWF either in the wild, or on the pages of *Ranger Rick*®, or *National Wildlife*® magazine, or had some experience that made them part of the Federation family.

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I think one of the most remarkable ways that we brought wildlife and wild places into the homes of everyday people this year was through our partnerships with “The Americas” and this was an incredible documentary series that aired on NBC. We were the official conservation partner of the series. We helped connect the amazing stories and the species that the show highlighted to the challenges and opportunities facing wildlife and people alike. An average of 5.5 million people viewed “The Americas” every week that it ran. It more than doubled NBC's expectations. And it was the most viewed nature documentary on TV in 15 years, since some of the great David Attenborough documentaries.

And it was more than just people watching TV — because we were able to partner with NBC, and we led a conservation campaign called “Come Together for Nature.” We saw viewers take time and pledge more than 200,000 outdoor hours of reconnecting with nature, spending time protecting the local environment, trying to restore habitat. Our digital outreach actually garnered 693 million impressions, driving the kind of awareness we need to protect the wildlife and wild spaces that people saw on the show “The Americas.” And so, we’re trying to reach folks in different ways, in different mediums.

I was also really excited about the Jr. Ranger competition, which was a runaway success for Ranger Rick and the Federation. You know, for decades, *Ranger Rick*® and *Ranger Rick Jr.*® magazines have inspired millions of children to connect with animals, to deepen their understanding with nature, and help wildlife thrive.

And in the 2025 Jr. Ranger competition — we launched a partnership with Colossal and the amazing conservationist Jeff Corwin — it highlighted young naturalists who love nature and love wildlife. And a few months ago, after weeks of outdoor adventures and nationwide demonstrations of community spirit, the 2025 Jr. Ranger competition crowned its champion, a young boy — an avid nature lover, had great projects — named Thomas. I'm really, really excited to expand this partnership in 2026.

And I think one of the things that I'm looking to do more of is having more folks engaged in our Eco-Schools program, our schoolyard habitat program. Things where folks can roll up their sleeves and really make a difference in the local community. And I think the Jr. Ranger program showed that there are just tens of thousands of young people across the country doing amazing things. If we can give them the tools, they'll take it to the next level.

**Dirk Sellers:** Yeah, that really speaks to how NWF can bring people together, and how the organization continues to inspire the public to act for wildlife. Can you expand on how NWF has worked throughout 2025 to build bridges and bring more people into this incredibly important movement?

**Collin O'Mara:** We know that conservation brings people together, right? We saw it during the pandemic, when folks turned to nature as a way to kind of keep their sanity, and, you know, we just can feel that connection. It's embedded in our history, and it kind of endures to this day, and we see it at every level. We see it when folks come together to plant a pollinator garden in their community, or their home, or their place of worship. We see it when folks just get

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outdoors and hike, fish, hunt, camp, cycle, paddle, and just enjoy nature, or when they tell their leaders what they value.

We have had some big ballot measure wins, which we'll talk about this year. One of the largest outpourings of support this year came when a handful of members of Congress proposed selling public lands. This is one of these issues that comes up every few years, but this year it was particularly threatening because the person that was proposing it was the chair of the committee that oversees America's public lands, and so it was a bigger kind of threat than we've seen in previous iterations.

Thanks to the swift action of the Federation and more than 40,000 of our members and supporters — and rallies in places like Cheyenne, WY, and Boise and Twin Falls, ID, and all across the West — we not only moved the House lawmakers to walk back their plans to sell public lands; there was some incredible leadership by Rep. Ryan Zinke, (R, MT) and Rep. Mike Simpson (R, ID), but we also convinced the Senate proponent of this, Sen. Mike Lee (R, UT), to abandon his effort and kind of put the idea back on the shelf and not include it in the budget bill.

And what made me so excited was that it was that bridge building that you asked about, right? There was a great sign I saw in New Mexico. There was a huge rally, and the governors of the western states were together in Santa Fe, and 2,000 people showed up. And there's a great sign that said, "Rednecks & Tree Huggers United!" to defend our public lands. And it was folks that may not agree on anything, but they agree that that's part of our heritage.

And that resounding win underscores what makes the Federation different. We can work across the aisle; we can bring together Republicans and Democrats. In this case, there was a Republican-only bill, and so, you know, making sure that those that were able to work across the aisle in a way that not enough organizations can these days, and that we can still secure major wins for wildlife, for habitat, and for people.

Some of this is our incredibly diverse membership, and the 7 million folks that are part of the Federation family. And some of this is the amazing work of our state affiliates that are in all 50 states and a handful of territories. These are incredible organizations that just do great work in the local communities, and again, in a bipartisan or nonpartisan way. And when we can speak across generations like that and across geographies, we can keep public lands in public hands. We can make sure that wildlife gets the attention it deserves.

**Dirk Sellers:** Agreed. Collin, you often talk about how nature not only brings people together, but it also can help us address some of the challenges that are facing today's youth, how it can help us address public health concerns, and even seemingly intractable divisions politically. Can you say more about that work?

**Collin O'Mara:** Yeah, I've talked to many of you about this, and you'll probably be hearing more from me about it. If you look at what's fueling a lot of the division right now in our country, so much of it is connected in some way to our disconnect from nature. Whether it's the algorithm

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in social media that's having you see more and more angry kinds of posts, or politicians that are exploiting our differences.

I think the antidote to a lot of that — to the algorithm and just to our disconnection — is conservation. You know, in my two decades working in conservation and public policy, I've seen this firsthand. There's a unifying power of nature — from overwhelming support for conservation ballot measures to the recent formidable collective defense of our public lands. There's a patriotism of place, right? Folks may disagree on everything else, but they love their local park. They love the wildlife refuge. They love the wildlife that's in their backyard, right?

So how we bring that together, and kind of embrace that, and encourage folks to put the screen down for a few hours, spend that “green hour” that we often talk about getting young folks up. I mean, it's interesting to me right now, across the country, watching schools in very conservative districts or very liberal districts, all proposing ways to not have the phones in the classroom and not have the kids on social media.

I'm seeing it all the time across the country. I think one of the questions for us is how do we scale it up? But when I see, communities come together to clean up a river or restore a park or see participants not as political opponents, but just as neighbors, right? Not as a “red team” and a “blue team,” but just as a kind of red, white, and blue. There's an opportunity there to stitch things back together that I think may have been frayed over the last many, many years. And, this work, this patriotism of place that I talked about, that's not one defined by partisan identity, but rather by our shared love of nature, our shared love of community, our shared love of wildlife.

And if nature is that “antidote to the algorithm” that funnels people into these feedback loops, then it's a way that we as the Federation need to redouble our efforts to make sure that every kid has the opportunity to have those meaningful outdoor experiences, that every family or adult has natural places that are close to home that they can enjoy. And so, I'm really bullish about this right now. One of the things that we've worked on a lot with our strategic plan is we have to evolve a little bit, right? Some of the normal ways we did work in the past aren't necessarily going to work right now, we have to pivot in certain ways.

You know, if we're going to repair our nation, we all need to replace some screen time with green time. We need more time out hiking and camping and fishing and hunting and paddling or just taking in the wonders of wildlife. We've seen huge health benefits to this — there's physical health benefits, and mental health benefits.

The Federation, over the past year as well as our 90-year history, is just trying to keep nature within reach, right? Accessible and vibrant. It's really central to who we are, and it's really what makes us patently different from some other organizations in the green space and beyond.

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**Dirk Sellers:** One of the other things I often hear you say is that NWF's unique roles have a lot to do with its state and its territorial affiliates, and the role that they play in conservation and the movement. How has NWF leveraged this unique structure to make a real difference for wildlife and people?

**Collin O'Mara:** First of all, I do want to thank all of you for being here today, because you're not only supporters of the Federation, but many of you are also supporters of our state and local affiliates all across the country, and their work complements and enhances the work we can do at the national level and at a nationwide scale. And they really set our conservation priorities through our unique conservation process.

Unlike a lot of other organizations, our state affiliates aren't subsidiaries of the National Wildlife Federation. They're independent, autonomous organizations. They have their own boards. They have their own priorities, and they come together — from the California and Massachusetts affiliates to the North Dakota and West Virginia affiliates — to try to find that common cause. You see this power reflected in national campaigns, like the Great American Outdoors Act that we successfully waged a few years ago, the public land sales, the pushing for more funding for wildlife refuges. My number one priority still is passing the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act. I'm optimistic there's some good news to come there in the next few weeks. But also supporting state and local efforts.

We're just really proud to work as one federation. Let me highlight just a few, Dirk, just for folks that are on some of these affiliate-driven programs to show what is possible.

- We've worked with an Illinois affiliate, the Prairie Rivers Network, to publish the Quad Cities Climate Risk Report, and this detailed a whole myriad of ways that the cluster of cities along the Mississippi River could reduce their flood risks, and we've seen horrible flooding in the Mississippi Delta. We're seeing more intense flooding further and further upstream. Thanks to our efforts the City of Rock Island voted to conserve 600 acres of wetlands along the Mississippi River in July to kind of create that bladder. And it's obviously great for resilience from storms, but it's also great for waterfowl and a whole bunch of aquatic species. It's going to protect habitat for the Blanding's turtles and other at-risk species, while also improving water quality and mitigating their flood risks.
- Our great California affiliate, the Planning and Conservation League — that actually celebrated their 60th anniversary this year — successfully advocated to extend the Habitat Conservation Fund, which was established by the California Wildlife Protection Act, which was passed by voters in 1990. \$30 million a year goes to wildlife conservation, every year from the state legislature, without fail, since 1990. This is a program that was slated to expire. It has restored more than 1.2 million acres of habitat throughout California. Now, fortunately, we were able to push out that sunset date to 2035, and so we're going to make sure another \$30 million every year is going to be spent on critical conservation work.

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- Another great example is the Ohio River. For a long time, the Ohio River — even though it supports 25 million people — doesn't receive nearly the attention that places like the Great Lakes, or the Chesapeake, or the Puget Sound, or the Colorado receive. Working closely with the Kentucky Waterways Alliance, the West Virginia Rivers Coalition, the Ohio Conservation Federation, the Penn Future, so many of our affiliates across the 17 states that comprise the Ohio River Basin. We just had some legislation that was introduced at the federal level to create a program to actually invest in the restoration and resilience of this incredible resource. It's the most polluted waterway in the country. And it's an opportunity to make sure that that's turned into a real asset that can help revitalize community, improve health, and help a whole lot of wildlife along the way.

So, just three examples, but they're just really, really exciting. Work that allows us to partner on the ground and go from the grassroots to the halls of Congress in a seamless way across the One Federation family.

**Dirk Sellers:** Yeah, it's really amazing stuff. You said earlier that the Federation takes the long view on conservation and wildlife recovery. At a moment when science itself is under threat, how do you see NWF rallying experts and the public alike to respond?

**Collin O'Mara:** We try to be completely nonpartisan in everything we do and bring people together, but one of the biggest challenges that we've faced over this year has been this relentless cascade of cuts to programs and people performing essential conservation science, wildlife biology, habitat restoration, resilience projects.

At our founding, if you go back to 1936, there were three core principles that the Federation was founded upon. The first one was science — sound scientific wildlife management. The second one was dedicated funding to make sure that we can conserve habitat and restore species populations. And the third was education.

But science is really the foundation. And these cuts have impacted vital programs and data management reports by the U.S. Geological Survey, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and so many other agencies.

And seeing this, our incredible chief scientist, Dr. Diane Pataki, and her team worked with our affiliates and allies throughout the conservation space, and groups like the Wildlife Society, and the Fisheries Society, and a lot of the scientific societies to host a series of virtual and in-person rallies to draw attention to the crisis. And I want to highlight a few of these. It's an example of how we, the Federation, are, again, building these bridges, bringing people together, connecting dots for the public and policymakers.

We held a rally, a virtual rally, for the Cornerstone of Conservation Science, and it brought together incredible speakers like one of my favorite birders in the country, Dr. J. Drew Lanham from South Carolina, Ken Kaufman, and partners from across the conservation space to talk

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about what's at stake when there are proposed steep cuts to programs at the U.S. Geological Survey, the Ecosystems Mission Area in particular. Or when folks are furloughed, when positions are cut, when budgets are cut, when there's rescissions, you know, kind of the "rescissioned" into oblivion.

And more than 2,000 people, tuned into this rally! It was far exceeding our expectations. It might have been close to 3,000. It was almost like we didn't have enough capacity on Zoom to handle so many people. But it also shows how much public support and how much public concern there is for what's happening at the federal level.

We've been able to engage with all the attendees and others and host additional rallies. We just had one outside the Department of Interior a few weeks ago, but I'm proud to say it worked. So, in the budget that's being considered right now for those agencies, the Congress, with bipartisan support, in a lot of cases led by Republican committee chairs of the Appropriations subcommittees not only restored a lot of the funding for these agencies, but actually proposed increases in some cases. And so, you know, there is strong support.

One of the things that we're telling our team all the time is, don't ever get down, right? The fight's not over. Even though something's proposed in a budget, or, in some cases, DOGE proposed some cuts for different agencies, if we stay at it, the public's on our side. We've got to make sure those voices are heard, but we can make sure that good decisions are made by getting the right information in front of the right people. And, you know, I'm proud to say when the budget's passed, hopefully next January, which is obviously 5 or 6 months late, but it's better late than never, the funding for these very programs we advocated for are going to be, very close or above the levels that they were in the last administration. So, a huge testament to the power of people.

**Dirk Sellers:** We talked at the outset how you and I are both Ranger Rick kids from back in our day. I'm sure a lot of folks on the call with us can relate to that. One of the other factors that makes the Federation different is our focus on education and inspiring future generations of conservationists. How has NWF inspired youth in 2025, strengthened the critical pipeline for future conservationists, and advanced other efforts, like *Ranger Rick*®, etc.?

**Collin O'Mara:** This goes back to our founding in 1936, where education was one of the three priorities they identified. But look, none of our work today matters if there's no young leaders who can take up the baton when we inevitably retire and step away.

Under the leadership of our incredible Vice President for Education and Engagement Kim Martinez, we've worked with educators — more than 10,000 educators across the country — school systems, and students directly to foster the shared love of nature, essential knowledge about wildlife's role in our lives, and instill this strong conservation ethic.

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You know, fortunately, millions of kids are able to participate in NWF education programs because of all of your support. And so, I'll just give a couple examples from this past year.

- We hosted our third annual Earth Tomorrow Summit Institute in Houston. This is a program that started in Atlanta, Georgia, now it's doing great things in the state of Texas. But more than 40 students, youth, and staff were in a week-long, intense experience of environmental education and leadership development. It included experiences throughout the greater Houston area to experience the history, meet leaders in the conservation space, explore sites that illuminate the importance of stewarding through an environmentally just lens. They looked at where some of the flooding had been in the past few years, different resilience projects, what works, what doesn't — showing that nature is the best way to restore some of these sites. Again, a great opportunity for those young leaders to have those experiences they can take with them into college and beyond.
- After more than a decade of running, we've been partnering with our Oregon affiliate, the Association of Northwest Steelheaders, as well as the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to support schools through our Fish Eggs to Fry program. We've engaged 25 schools and helped dozens more across the state of Oregon to foster Chinook salmon eggs in classroom aquariums before releasing them as young fry into local watersheds in the Lower Columbia Basin. And, as many of you know, one of my passion projects has been trying to figure out how to restore the salmon populations in the Northwest that continue to be some of the most imperiled in the world and this is where some of the dams that have been in the Lower Snake River that have been blocking their passage. Again, trying to build those stewards of tomorrow, they're going to help advocate to make sure these fish can swim free and spawn and hopefully return to the historical levels that they're a fraction of right now.
- There's another great example, that throughout meetings with state legislators and press events and letter writing campaigns and op-eds, high schoolers from across New York State have been advocating for a statewide climate education program. They're members of our Climate and Resilience Education Task Force. There's a youth steering committee, and their tenacity paid off so last November policymakers announced a new instructional requirement for climate education beginning next year — in 2026-2027 school year — and it's going to benefit 2.4 million students across the great state of New York. And again, it's a program that's being advocated by students, for students, for that next generation.

These are just three examples — I can give you hundreds more — of the incredible work that Kim Martinez and her entire education team do in partnership with our affiliates every day and in this past year.

And so, I do want to thank all of you for your enduring support for this exceptional work, because it's such an important part of how we're going to make sure this work survives and thrives for future generations.

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**Dirk Sellers:** Well, Collin, thank you for your time today, and for addressing some of our questions and telling us more about what's been happening at the Federation.

Any final thoughts for us as we wrap up?

**Collin O'Mara:** Yeah. I just want to say thank you to everybody. I know you all have choices on where to spend your time, and where to support, and, it's rough right now on a lot of fronts — I'm not going to sugarcoat the challenges that we're facing in different decisions and in different parts of government policymaking — but we're still making good progress, and I think what we're finding is that folks love conservation. Right? Folks love wildlife, folks want clean water, folks want places to recreate, folks want good educational programs.

And I just want to thank you for being a voice for wildlife and for people, because, the confidence that you put in NWF allows us to speak on the Hill, — not just as another organization, but as an organization that's 7 million strong, with amazing affiliates, with amazing partners all over the place, and is taken more seriously.

I mean, I was just on the Hill this morning — meeting with both Republicans and Democrats that are trying to figure out ways to make some of the clean energy transition more efficient and do it in smart ways. It was a refreshing series of conversations, because even though the sides aren't always talking to each other, the goals that they were articulating behind-the-scenes were, in some cases, completely aligned. So that's the space we're going to need to make progress.

And our entire strategic plan right now is oriented around three big goals:

1. The first one is the biodiversity crisis. We have to meet the moment. When you look at how one-third of species in the U.S. are at heightened risk of extinction, it's incredibly important that we have a massive recovery effort across the country. We've had great successes, but the scale of change we're seeing now to habitat, to fragmentation, to degradation, the climate impact, the influence of invasive species, of different kinds of pollution, requires an all-hands-on-deck response. That's going to require work at every level, doing things in smart ways, working with Indigenous leaders, and working with state leaders, and bringing people together all across the country.
2. The second is on climate, and making sure that, as we're moving towards a cleaner energy future, we do it in ways that also are smart for wildlife. That means making sure that we're not causing additional problems by bad siting or different solutions that may have adverse impacts. Again, being smart about the way we do things, and making the case that climate change is an existential threat to wildlife. Making sure folks connect those dots.
3. And then the third one is around environmental justice. There's still too many Americans living with legacy pollution or ongoing pollution. Those same kind of air pollutants, or water pollutants, or soil contamination are the same things that are now harming

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wildlife populations. It's the proverbial canary in the coal mine. And so, how we work together, with communities that may be focused just on clean air and clean water, but we know there's a huge wildlife benefit, and there's also a huge human health benefit. How do we join forces to make sure that nature wins and people are healthier at the same time?

These are big opportunities, and so I know it's easy to be kind of pessimistic about the future, or to be down by the news of the day, but I'm absolutely confident that we're going to come out of this stronger. I'm confident we're going to make real progress. I think there's more and more alignment among folks that are looking for ways to make a difference, and I'm seeing more activism at the local level.

I'll just tell you one last story. I know I've got to jump in a second but, I've become a big proponent the last few years of ballot measures, and one of the big ones this year was in Texas. It was a ballot measure that passed the Republican legislature with overwhelming support, had the support of the Republican governor, Greg Abbott, and it was on the ballot. This ballot measure was proposing a billion dollars of investment in water resources every year for the next 20 years. So, \$20 billion worth of investment in the state of Texas. It's the biggest single conservation bond measure in American history.

We launched a big campaign with our local affiliate, the Texas Conservation Alliance, and a bunch of partners in all parts of the state. A huge mobilization went into the last couple of months, and the ballot measure passed with more than 70% support. And that number alone is amazing, but what makes it even more amazing is if you look at the urban versus rural numbers; they both passed by close to the same margin. You look at different races, you look at different ages — there's something that unites us right now around conservation. That's why I'm excited. And that's why I think at the end of the day, we're going to continue making great progress.

So, Dirk, I just want to say thank you to everybody for joining us today, and I just hope you'll continue to stand with us as we enter our 90th anniversary, and we're grateful for everything that you do for the Federation family.

**Dirk Sellers:** Hear, hear! And thank you all for tuning in to this edition of *All Access*. On behalf of everybody at NWF, Happy Holidays. We appreciate you.

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