



COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT
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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2019 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
APRIL 27, 2018**

SUBMITTED BY THE COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Udall, and Members of the Subcommittee:

The National Wildlife Refuge System stands alone as the only federal land and water conservation system with a mission that prioritizes wildlife and habitat conservation alongside wildlife-dependent recreation. Since 1995, the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) has worked to showcase the value of the Refuge System and to secure a strong congressional commitment for conserving these special landscapes.

Found in every U.S. state and territory, national wildlife refuges conserve a diversity of America's environmentally sensitive and recreationally vital ecosystems, including wetlands, coasts, forests, prairie, tundra, deserts, and oceans, and provide Americans with an opportunity to encounter and engage with these areas.

We ask that the Committee provide a funding level of \$586 million for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System for FY 2019.

This testimony is submitted on behalf of CARE's 23 member organizations, which represent over 16 million American hunters, anglers, bird and wildlife watchers, scientists, managers, and concerned citizens passionate about wildlife conservation and related recreational opportunities.

American Birding Association
American Fisheries Society
American Sportfishing Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Izaak Walton League of America
Marine Conservation Institute
National Audubon Society
National Rifle Association
National Wildlife Federation

National Wildlife Refuge Association
Safari Club International
The Corps Network
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute

We also thank you for the much needed \$2.8 million funding increase for FY 2018, as well as the added funding to continue to reduce the refuge maintenance backlog. In addition, we very much appreciate the \$210 million allocated by this Subcommittee to assist refuges damaged by

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. The continued support of the Committee for refuges is much appreciated by all of our organizations.

Inadequate Funding—Challenges to the Refuge System

The Refuge System budget, at \$486.7 million, is now \$93.3 million below the level needed to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs (\$580 million), relative to the FY10 budget of \$503.2 million.

Workforce has declined in that time by 488 positions through attrition. Those employees provided services such as administration, maintenance, fire management, wildlife management, and research support. That is a loss of nearly 1 out of 7 refuge positions. As a result, refuge staff struggle to maintain habitat, while also providing adequate visitor services, environmental education, and access for hunting, fishing, and other recreation.

An additional problem with lack of funding is the System's inability to provide for ongoing maintenance costs, which only compound and become more expensive with time. At Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee NWR in Florida, the invasive species issues are overwhelming the refuge. In the last 12-15 years, Loxahatchee has struggled with invasive Lygodium, with initial costs of \$2 million a year to restrict uncontrolled spread. Now, the refuge needs roughly \$5 million a year for 5 years in order to control this weed, with costs having doubled or tripled.

Unfortunately, inadequate funding threatens the System's ability to carry out its mission, which is mandated by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Between FY10 and FY13, Refuge System funding was reduced by \$50 million – a 10% cut. Even with increased budgets in FY18 to \$486.7 million, the Refuge System continues to function at unsustainable levels. CARE estimates that the Refuge System needs at least \$900 million in annual operations and maintenance funding to meet conservation targets, including wildlife management, habitat restoration, and opportunities for public recreation.

Completely inadequate numbers of federal wildlife officers (by some measures, the number of FWOs should be three times higher than current numbers) imperil healthy habitat and the safe and enjoyable visitor experience. The 'lucky' refuges still have one or two employees per refuge or refuge complex doing work such as environmental education, biology, or maintenance work. Yet many other refuges sit for years with unfilled, critical positions. For example, the Ding Darling NWR in Sanibel, Florida—the 8th most visited refuge with 936,000 visitors last year— is losing their environmental ranger this spring. Environmental education is a critical service provided to the community by this refuge, and this kind of loss is inexcusable.

Without drastic increases in funding, there is simply no room left to trim positions and still maintain at least a portion of those services—they will simply disappear, and school programs or ongoing maintenance will end.

National Wildlife Refuge System: Statistics and Visitors

The National Wildlife Refuge System, established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903, protects approximately 850 million land and marine acres on 566 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts in every state and territory in the U.S., and 5 marine monuments in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. These acres are both part of the Refuge System and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service managed (with some marine acres co-managed with NOAA). From the Virgin Islands to Guam to Alaska to Maine, the Refuge System spans 12 time zones and protects America's natural heritage in habitats ranging from arctic tundra to arid desert, boreal forest to sagebrush grassland, and prairie wetlands to coral reefs.

A refuge is within an hour's drive from most metropolitan areas, enabling the Refuge System to attract a growing number of visitors each year (53.6 million in FY17, up from 46.5 million in FY13) and provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, kayaking, hiking, and outdoor education. Americans are flocking to refuges for the wild beauty and recreational opportunities they provide.

CARE welcomes recreational use of our nation's refuges. Refuge visitors generate \$2.4 billion annually to local and regional economies – on average returning \$4.87 in economic activity for every \$1 appropriated – and support 35,000 U.S. jobs¹. In addition, refuges provide major environmental and health benefits, such as filtering storm water before it is carried downstream and fills municipal aquifers; reducing flooding by capturing excess rainwater; and minimizing the damage to coastal communities from storm surges. Refuges generate more than \$32.3 billion in these ecosystem services each year, a return of over \$65 for every \$1 appropriated by Congress².

Public Use of the Refuge System—Increases and Decreases from RAPP

The FY15 Refuge Annual Performance Plan (RAPP) reports revealed falling performance rates in several important System categories – as a direct result of funding shortfalls – including habitat condition, habitat restoration, recreation opportunities, volunteerism, and scientific research. Performance declined from FY10 to FY15 for the following measures: open water acres restored (-63%), wetland acres restored (-70%), acres of non-native, invasive plants controlled (-58%), number of invasive animal populations controlled during the year (-55%), riparian miles restored (-30%), acres of farming (-30%), and total refuge acres receiving needed management (-12%).

However, many measures of public use increased for the Refuge System over this same time frame, despite budget shortfalls. Funding for FY19 needs to ensure Americans will be able to safely continue these valuable recreational activities. These include waterfowl hunt visits (+7%), photography participants (+52%), number of boat trail visits (+18%), acres of prescribed grazing (+13%), number of auto tour visits (+14%), and wildlife observation visits (+12%).

CARE Requests \$586 million in FY19

We acknowledge that this request would mean a dramatic \$100 million increase. However, with the effective \$93 million decrease in funding since FY10, the Refuge System has lost a great deal of conservation work and public use opportunities, all at a time when visitor numbers are increasing. If annual operations and maintenance funding does not rise substantially, CARE anticipates further impacts both within and outside of refuge boundaries, including:

- Reduced treatment of invasive plants, reducing habitat quality for wildlife (both game and non-game) and placing nearby private lands at higher risk of infestations;
- Decreased use of prescribed fire, which is used on refuges both to improve habitat for wildlife and to reduce hazardous fuels that pose a wildfire risk to nearby communities. This risk has been mitigated by the fire fix passed by the Congress this spring, but resources for prescribed fire still need to be in place on individual refuges;

¹ *Banking on Nature*, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, October 2013,

<http://www.fws.gov/refuges/about/refugereports/pdfs/BankingOnNature2013.pdf>

² *The Economics Associated with Outdoor Recreation, Natural Resources Conservation, and Historic Preservation in the United States*, Southwick Associates, October 2011,

[https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/pdfs/TheEconomicValueofOutdoorRecreation\[1\].pdf](https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/pdfs/TheEconomicValueofOutdoorRecreation[1].pdf)

- Reduced number and quality of visitor programs, with visitor centers operating at fewer hours, even as the numbers of visitors increases;
- Reduced quality of habitat for hunting. Secretary Ryan Zinke has continued to add and expand hunt programs at refuges. These hunt expansions will require corresponding funding to keep up with the demand on federal wildlife officers and on biologists and other staff responsible for keeping wildlife habitat and populations healthy.
- Elimination of ancillary functions like FWS's operation of Henderson Field at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, which serves as a critical emergency landing site for trans-pacific flights, as well as the public's main window to the marine national monuments.

The common denominator to all these challenges is a lack of funding. Adequate staffing and funding are critical to the maintenance of healthy wildlife populations and access for recreational users to a healthy ecosystem. Increasing funding for the System will empower and enable individual Refuge units to deliver on-the-ground conservation that benefits not only wildlife and recreation, but also local communities across the nation.

We ask that this Committee use a portion of its additional funding allocation in the budget deal finalized in January, and put it towards a substantial increase in Refuge Operations and Maintenance funding. CARE has a goal of seeing Refuge Operations and Maintenance funding reach \$900 million by FY2021, and a large increase in FY19 would help us meet that goal.

We urge Congress to fund the Refuge System at \$586 million in FY19 – to bridge the growing gap between what the System needs and what it receives – enabling refuges to continue moving America forward as the world's leader in wildlife conservation and restoration.

Our hope is that this level of funding will put the Refuge System on a path to full funding of \$900 million and help the System advance its mission to maintain refuge lands as intended in their purpose for the benefit of the American people, finalize outstanding Comprehensive Conservation Plans, and implement programs that will benefit both wildlife and people. If the requested funding level is satisfied, the Refuge System can better:

- Conduct management and restoration activities to provide healthy habitats that attract wildlife and, in turn, draw visitors and increase economic return to communities;
- Keep refuges open and staffed so quality recreational opportunities continue to be offered to the public;
- Maintain facilities and equipment used to serve the public and manage habitat;
- Provide federal wildlife officers needed to keep refuge resources and the people who come to appreciate them safe.

On behalf of our more than 16 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the FY 2019 House Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.