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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF THE
COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES REGARDING FISCAL YEAR 2017
APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, 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 economically 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 \$506.6 million for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System for FY 2017. We also thank you for the much needed \$7 million funding increase for FY 2016—the continued support of the Committee for refuges will be much appreciated by all of our organizations.

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
Sportsmen's Alliance
The Corps Network
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute

The National Wildlife Refuge System, established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903, protects approximately 150 million acres on 563 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts in every state and territory in the U.S. An additional 418 million acres of water within the Pacific marine monuments round out the total of 568 million acres within the management jurisdiction of the Refuge System. 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 (48.5 million in FY15, up from 46.5 million just two years before) providing opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, kayaking, hiking, and outdoor education. In fact, from 2006 – 2011, during our nation's greatest economic recession since the Great Depression, visitation to our national wildlife refuges increased by 30%, showcasing the value Americans place on the Refuge System.

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.

The Refuge System budget is now \$77 million below the level needed to keep pace with inflation plus salary increases, relative to the FY10 budget of \$503.2 million. Workforce has declined in that time by over 500 positions, who provided services such as administration, maintenance, fire management, wildlife management, and research support. That is a loss of 1 out of 7 refuge positions. As a result, refuges are struggling to be maintained and provide the adequate visitor services, environmental education, access for hunting, and law enforcement that will ensure healthy habitat and a safe and enjoyable visitor experience.

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 FY16 to \$481 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.

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)

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. The following measures for which performance declined from FY10 to FY15:

- 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%)
- Acres treated for non-native, invasive plants (- 34%)
- Riparian miles restored (- 30%)
- Acres of farming (- 30%)
- Total refuge acres receiving needed management (- 12%)
- Number of volunteers (-14%)
- Volunteer hours (-2%)
- Fishing visits (- 5%)

However, many measures of public use increased for the Refuge System over this same time frame, despite budget shortfalls. Funding for FY17 needs to ensure Americans will be able to continue these valuable recreational activities. These include:

- Hunting visits (+2%)
- Waterfowl hunt visits (+7%)
- Photography participants (+ 52%)
- Number of boat trail visits (+ 18%)
- Acres of prescribed grazing (+ 13%)
- Number of auto tour visits (+ 14%)
- Wildlife observation visits (+ 12%)
- Number of visitors (+ 9%)

Refuge visitation is growing and is expected to continue. In fact, from FY10 to FY15, the Refuge System welcomed 9% more visitors. However, refuges are losing valuable staff committed to visitors and volunteers. We thank you for the \$500,000 increase to the visitor services budget line in FY16, which will be helpful in slowing that loss. Volunteers provide numerous benefits to the Systems, from staffing refuge nature stores, maintenance, interpretation, and much more. These volunteer can only work when the System is reasonably staffed and thus able to extend requisite volunteer training and oversight.

Further reductions or stagnation in Refuge System funding will likely show continued declines in the System's conservation work and public use opportunities. If annual operations and maintenance funding does not rise, 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;
- Reduced number and quality of visitor programs, with visitor centers operating at fewer hours, and delayed plans to add or expand hunting programs at refuges;

- Lost revenue for local communities as visitor numbers drop. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service FY13 budget justification, “Each one percent increase or decrease in visitation impacts \$16.9 million in total economic activity, 268 jobs, \$5.4 million in job-related income, and \$608,000 in tax revenue.”
- 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 vast marine national monuments.

Challenges abound throughout the system. In California, years of severe drought have caused a dramatic reduction of water deliveries to wildlife refuges, while proposals to change deliveries from higher quality surface water to brackish groundwater threaten the functionality of these refuges as waterfowl habitat. In Minnesota, the Morris Wetland Management District has seen a staffing reduction of 70% leading to the conversion of native prairie and waterfowl habitat to forest as a result of decreased fire management of wetland habitats. At the Loxahatchee NWR in Florida, instead of healthy takes, alligator hunters found emaciated animals severely impacted by the drastic increase in invasive species on the refuge.

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.

We understand the budget constraints the Committee is working under; however, we see the systemic declines in performance of the Refuge System on a daily basis due to the lack of adequate funding. As stated above, the System needs a minimum of \$900 million each year to function the way it was intended, and CARE is dedicated to working with your Committee to see that this goal is reached.

CARE is supporting the President’s request of \$506.6 million for FY17, although it is substantially less than what the System needs. Albeit roughly half the optimal funding amount, \$506.6 million is a \$25 million increase, and we hope it will help the System maintain its ability to manage refuge lands as intended in their purpose for the benefit of the American 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.

We urge Congress to fund the Refuge System at \$506.6 m in FY17 – to bridge the growing gap between what the System needs and what it receives, enabling refuges to continue moving America forward.

On behalf of our more than 16 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the FY 2017 House Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.