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**TESTIMONY OF THE
COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT (CARE)
BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
REGARDING FISCAL YEAR 2016 APPROPRIATIONS
FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

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

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the fiscal year 2016 (FY 2016) Interior Appropriations bill. The National Wildlife Refuge System stands alone as the only land and water conservation system with a mission that prioritizes wildlife and habitat conservation alongside human, 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 oceans, coasts, wetlands, deserts, tundra, prairie, and forests.

We thank you for the desperately needed funding increase for FY 2015 and respectfully request a funding level of \$508.2 million for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System for FY 2016.

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 and concerned citizens passionate about wildlife conservation and related recreational opportunities.

American Birding Association	National Wildlife Federation
American Fisheries Society	National Wildlife Refuge Association
American Sportfishing Association	Safari Club International
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies	The Corps Network
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation	The Nature Conservancy
Defenders of Wildlife	The Wilderness Society
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.	The Wildlife Society
Izaak Walton League of America	Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Marine Conservation Institute	Trout Unlimited
National Audubon Society	U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance
National Rifle Association	Wildlife Forever
	Wildlife Management Institute

The National Wildlife Refuge System, established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903, protects approximately 150 million acres on 562 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts across the U.S. From the Virgin Islands to Guam and the Pacific marine

national monuments, 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. With a refuge within an hour's drive from most metropolitan areas, the Refuge System attracts a growing number of visitors each year (46.5 million in FY13) with opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, kayaking, 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%.

Increased visitors and pressures on these lands from nearby development, a changing climate, and other impacts, combined with declining budgets have caused a steep decline in staffing levels within the Refuge System. The Refuge System is now \$72 million below what it needs to keep pace with inflation, relative to the FY10 budget of \$503.2 million. Workforce has declined in that time by over 500 employees, who provided services such as administration, maintenance, fire management, and science support. That is a loss of 1/7 of the workforce, and the refuges simply cannot be maintained or provide the adequate visitor services, environmental education, access for hunting, and law enforcement that will ensure these lands are used as intended.

According to a report issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in late 2013, *Banking On Nature*, these visitors generated \$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. jobs. In addition, refuges provide major environmental and health benefits: filtering storm water before it is carried downstream to municipal aquifers, reducing flooding by capturing excess rainwater, and minimizing the damage to coastal communities from storm surges. According to a 2011 report by Southwick Associates, refuges generate more than \$32.3 billion in these ecosystem services each year, *a return of over \$65 for every \$1 appropriated by Congress.*

Budget cuts are impacting rural communities in Alaska—this year, the USFWS office in McGrath was closed and management of Innoko NWR was complexed with Nowitna and Koyukuk NWRs in Galena. At its height in 2010, the McGrath office had 12 staff; now, only one outreach staffer is being maintained in the village. The office had direct connections with the rural villages in the area, and the Refuge System is now struggling to maintain those connections with one staffer. And perhaps more importantly, the economic impact and loss of the \$1 million to the village it took to run the office could have dire impacts to communities that surrounded it.

In New Mexico, Bosque NWR brings in hundreds of thousands of visitors every year to see the abundant bird populations that migrate through the refuge - particularly sandhill cranes. This summer, the visitor's center will close two days a week due to budget shortfalls. And over the last two decades, refuge staff has battled the invasive and water-hungry salt cedar. Staff no longer has the funding to continue to fight this fast-spreading tree at the levels they were, and it starting to spread again - at times in areas where the invasive plant had previously been completely removed. With the current drought conditions in the southwest, it is critical that refuge staff are provided the resources necessary to remove this species from the landscape and taxpayer dollars already spent on removal is not wasted.

At minimum, CARE estimates that the Refuge System needs at least \$900 million in annual operations and maintenance funding to meet conservation targets, including wildlife management and habitat restoration and opportunities for the public to recreate. Unfortunately,

inadequate funding threatens the System's ability to carry out its mission, 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. As a result, System performance levels dropped substantially.

The FY13 Refuge Annual Performance Plan (RAPP) reports revealed falling performance rates in several important System categories, including habitat condition, habitat restoration, recreation opportunities, volunteerism, and scientific research. The following data shows the systemic impact of budget cuts from FY10 – FY14.

Measures for which performance declined from FY10 to FY14

- Open water acres restored (-89%)
- Wetland acres restored (-69%)
- Acres of non-native, invasive plants controlled (-63%)
- Number of invasive animal populations controlled during the year (-59%)
- Acres of forest/shrubland improvement (-56%)
- Acres treated for non-native, invasive plants (-41%)
- Riparian miles restored (-37%)
- Acres of farming (-22%)
- Number of Inventory and Monitoring surveys accomplished (-20%)
- Total refuge acres receiving needed management (-9%)
- Number of volunteers (-15%)
- Volunteer hours (down 6% from FY11 to FY14)
- Fishing visits (-7%)
- Hunting visits (-5% from FY11 to FY14)
- Waterfowl hunt visits (-1% from FY11 to FY14)
- Big game hunt visits (-9% from FY11 to FY14)
- Total “other” recreational participants (-13%)

However, many measures increase for the Refuge System over this same time frame:

- Photography participants (+45%)
- Number of boat trail visits (+21%)
- Acres of prescribed grazing (+11%)
- Number of auto tour visits (+11%)
- Wildlife observation visits (+8%)
- Number of visitors (+2.6%)

As habitat management declines, the System's fragile ecosystems are subject to opportunistic invasive species. And the foothold they gain in refuge lands can quickly transfer to adjacent private and state lands; an issue of great concern in places like southeastern Idaho where the CARE group visited in 2012. Between FY10 and FY14, the System treated 41% less acreage for invasive plants and, sadly, saw a 63% drop in acreage where invasive plants were successfully controlled. One step forward and several steps back is an inefficient way to manage the Refuge System and threatens years of cooperative efforts with partners and landowners.

CARE thanks the Subcommittee and Congress for the much needed increase in funding for FY15. It was hoped that the budget increase could reverse the systemic declines in performance but because the System needs at least \$15 million annually to maintain management capabilities, there is in reality, the increase of \$4 million was in actuality a decrease. And unfortunately,

emergencies nationwide such as natural disasters and looming endangered species listing could force the System to deal with these crises instead, further exacerbating the issues.

Understanding the constraints of the budget process, CARE is supporting the President's request of \$508.2 million for FY16, although it is substantially less than what the System needs. Albeit roughly half the optimal funding amount, \$508.2 million is a \$34 million increase, and we hope it may help the System maintain its ability to manage refuge lands as intended in their purpose. If the requested funding level is satisfied, the Refuge System can better address the following tasks:

- 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 that quality recreational opportunities continue to be offered to the public;
- Maintain facilities and equipment used to serve the public and manage habitat;
- Provide law enforcement officers needed to keep refuge resources and the people who come to appreciate them safe.

Refuge visitation is growing and is expected to continue. In fact, from FY10 to FY14, the Refuge System welcomed 2.7% more visitors. However, refuges are losing valuable staff committed to visitors and volunteers. The number of volunteers dropped by 6%, particularly troubling considering this work force is a 20% boost to existing Refuge System staff. Refuges rely on volunteers for welcoming and greeting visitors, staffing refuge nature stores, maintenance, interpretation, and much more. Volunteer service, however, is only possible if the System is reasonably staffed and thus able to extend requisite volunteer training and oversight. Arguably, the System's mission cannot be fully achieved without refuge volunteers and Friends groups.

If the Refuge System is forced to sustain further reductions, future RAPP reports will likely show continued decline in the System's conservation work and public use opportunities. Funding cuts are already impacting America's refuges. If annual operations and maintenance funding does not rise, CARE anticipates further impacts both within and outside of refuge boundaries, including:

- A decrease in the 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;
- A decline in the number and quality of visitor programs, with visitor centers operating at reduced hours, and plans to add or expand hunting programs at refuges being postponed;
- Lost revenue for local communities as visitor numbers drop; according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) 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.

We urge Congress to fund the Refuge System at \$508.2 m in FY16 – 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 2016 Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.