



COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT
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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2020 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
MARCH 15, 2019**

SUBMITTED BY THE COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, 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 2020.

This testimony is submitted on behalf of CARE's 23 member organizations, that 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

Inadequate Funding—Challenges to the Refuge System

The Refuge System budget, at \$487.7 million, is now \$96.6 million below the level needed to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs (\$584.3 million), relative to the FY10 budget of \$503.2 million. At least \$8-10 million appropriations increase is required each year just to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs, and these budgets are going in the wrong direction.

Workforce has declined since the high staffing point in 2011 by 645 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. No refuges today are fully staffed, and in fact, nearly half of refuge units (282) are completely unstaffed.

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. For example, in Region 3, which includes the Great Lakes States, there are 296 current positions, down from their height of 346 staff in FY2010. Based on optimal staffing models, the region is 100 staff short. This shortage of staff has caused problems across the region: visitor centers prioritize hours for peak visitation and are closed many days. There is no ability to do restoration work on lands they have or have acquired. There are fewer federal wildlife officers. Maintenance of public use facilities such as parking lots and bathrooms has dwindled, particularly on Wildlife Management Areas, and approximately 20% fewer are mowed. At the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls, MN, the director position has been vacant for two years, and the city is questioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's commitment to the center. The loss of managed hunts, such as youth hunting programs and hunts for the disabled, has been dire. Many such hunts have not been held for years.

This dire funding situation can be seen across the other seven regions.

Between FY10 and FY13, Refuge System funding was reduced by \$50 million – a 10% cut. Even with increased budgets in FY19 to \$487.7 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.**

Inadequate numbers of federal wildlife officers (by some measures, the number of FWOs should be three to four 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.

In Region 6, which stretches from Colorado to the Prairie Pothole Region, retention of staff is a major problem. Biologists are in short supply, and regional headquarters staff struggle to get

biologists out to each refuge at even a fraction of the needed time. In 2014, they had 63 full time farm maintenance staff, now only 49 – a 25% reduction. They currently have ten refuge law enforcement positions open, and cannot fill them because of the combination of low pay and benefits with the very rural locations. At the same time, they’re looking to increase usage on refuges, such as hunting and fishing. Elk National Wildlife Refuge in Wyoming is 24,700 acres, and one FWO is stationed there—and he shares time at BLM lands as well.

Without significant 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. And refuges will continue to close.

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 567 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 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 (55 million in FY18, up from 46.5 million in FY13) and provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, kayaking, hiking, and outdoor education. Americans are visiting refuges in increasing number for the wild beauty and recreational opportunities they provide.

CARE welcomes recreational use of our nation’s refuges. The “Big 6” uses of the Refuge System—hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, photography, environmental education, and interpretation—were enshrined into law in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. 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.

CARE Requests \$586 million in FY20

We acknowledge that this request would mean a dramatic \$98 million increase. However, with the effective \$96 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.

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)

If annual operations and maintenance funding does not rise substantially, CARE anticipates further impacts both within and outside of refuge boundaries, including:

- Loss of refuge law enforcement to the point where visitors and wildlife are not protected—the System is currently functioning with 22% of the FWOs needed. Six states currently have zero FWOs, and another 10 only have one.
- Further closures of visitor centers, elimination of environmental education programs that currently work closely with local schools, and a loss of visitor services staff, which would leave many states with no visitor services staff at all, such as Maine.
- Reduced quality of habitat for hunting. Over the past two years, the Department of the Interior has worked to add and expand hunt programs at refuges, providing additional opportunities for outdoor recreationists as part of the “Big 6”. 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.
- 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;

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 FY2020 would help us meet that goal.

We urge Congress to fund the Refuge System at \$586 million in FY2020 – 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. The President’s Budget Request for FY2020 is \$509.5 million, which would be the highest amount ever appropriated to the Refuge System O&M. While we applaud the requested increase, more funding is needed.

On behalf of our more than 16 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the FY2020 House Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.