



COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT
1001 CONNECTICUT AVE. NW, SUITE 905, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2021 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
MARCH 6, 2020**

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 2021.

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 of \$502.4 million is now, after 10 years of dramatic cuts and slow increases, finally back to the same level of funding in FY 2010 of \$503.2 million. However, these ten years of reduced funding mean the System is now \$92.6 million below the level needed to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs (\$595 million), relative to the FY10 budget. At least \$8-10 million of appropriations increases are required each year just to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs, and these budgets are going in the wrong direction. The \$14 million increase approved by this committee in FY2020 was a great start to repairing the damage wrought on the System over the previous decade, but more must be done.

Workforce has declined by over 700 positions through attrition since the high staffing point in 2011 (FY19 NWRS staff, 2,833/FY10 NWRS staff, 3,542), leaving the Refuge System workforce at 80% of where it was a decade ago. Those employees provided services such as administration, maintenance, fire management, wildlife management, and research support. 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.

This year, CARE would like to focus on two critical levels of funding that are particularly low at this time: refuge law enforcement and invasive species management. Law enforcement levels are at approximately 25% of full funding (FY20 FTEs ~260/full funding ~1,100 FTEs), and roughly half of where the System feels it needs to be to protect the public and wildlife populations (FY20 enacted \$41 million/NWRS 5-year goal \$70 million). This time last year, there were 13 states which had only one or zero law enforcement officers based on refuge units (excluding zone officers). After two rounds of hiring due to the increase in funding contained in the FY20 enacted bill, these states have made hires and placed additional officers in these areas of critical need.

This latest round of hiring will also alleviate the burden that has been placed on federal wildlife officers around the country over the last three years due to details along the U.S./Mexico border. Nearly all commissioned officers have made multiple trips to the border for 21-day details over the last several years, and the intention with the current increase in funding is to hire permanent LE staff at these border refuges. This means refuge law enforcement staff will be able to stay at their assigned refuges and eliminate both the constant disruption and huge cost of moving staff across the country down to the border on a regular basis.

An additional, critical problem in the Refuge System is out of control invasive species. Some of the invasives issues have been very public, such as Asian carp and kudzu. Realistically, however, the Service is dealing with an enormous problem: 2.4 million Refuge System acres are infested with invasive plants, and current funding and capacity only allows treatment of 10% of those acres. Similarly, the Refuge System has 1,749 invasive animal populations and currently controls 5.3% of those. Species run from everything from mice to feral hogs to lygodium to salt cedar.

The Refuge System has created strike teams, which work in particular regions, not just on one refuge. For example, there is a strike team of five staff in Washington state that works on multiple wildlife refuges, in addition to two Air Force facilities nearby (Mountain Home AFB in

Idaho and Fairchild AFB in WA). Their mission is to tackle various invasive plants, which range from Russian olive, various knapweeds, yellow star thistle, and the ever-present phragmites. Based in Burbank, WA, this team travels over a huge area. More teams like this are needed all across the country, with 12 teams already active and another 28 needed. The total cost for each team is roughly \$500,000.

Invasive species threaten wildlife refuges that facilitate habitat conservation and public recreation. The reality is that the majority of wildlife refuges are small, highly managed areas, maintained for the benefit of certain species. Wetlands managed for waterfowl, for example, lose their ability to provide nesting or wintering habitat and appropriate food for migrating birds if invasive species overtake a wetland unit. Habitat value decreases and available food decreases. If tall weeds grow in areas traditionally used for hunting with shorter, native grasses, then the recreational value of these lands decreases as well.

Unfortunately, overall 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. Staffing levels remain very low, with many refuge complexes losing critical staff for basic functioning of the complex. Legacy Region 3, which includes the Great Lakes States, remains 100 staff short based on their optimal staffing models (296 current positions) and are functioning at 75% capacity. 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 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. The loss of managed hunts, such as youth hunting programs and hunts for the disabled, has been dire.

This dire funding situation can be seen across the other seven legacy regions. 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 568 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 (59 million in FY19, 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. 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.

CARE Requests \$586 million in FY21

We acknowledge that this request would mean a dramatic \$84 million increase. However, with the effective \$92 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 further closures of visitor centers, elimination of environmental education programs that currently work closely with local schools, reduced quality of habitat for hunting, reduced treatment of invasive plants that reduce habitat quality for wildlife (both game and non-game) and place nearby private lands at higher risk of infestations, and 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.

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 urge Congress to fund the Refuge System at \$586 million in FY2021 – 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 FY2022 is \$525.4 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 FY2021 House Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.