



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 2023 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
MARCH 10, 2022**

SUBMITTED BY THE COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT

Chairwoman Pingree, 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.

All of the CARE members listed below have endorsed this testimony and our request to your subcommittee. We represent millions of users of the National Wildlife Refuge System—wildlife watchers, hunters, anglers, wildlife professionals and conservationists, and Friends members. Current funding levels do not provide the Service with the resources or staff needed to maintain and manage habitat to support fish and wildlife and provide quality recreation experiences. We recommend the committee provide the most robust funding possible to support the important mission of the refuge system.

We ask that the Committee provide a robust increase over current funding levels for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System for FY 2023.

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

CARE has found it difficult to determine an appropriate request from this Committee for FY2023, given the late release of the FY2023 President's Budget Request and the ongoing FY2022 process through Congress. What we can share with the Committee is the incredible need for additional funding and the benefits increased funding will provide to the Refuge System.

Current funding levels (FY2021 enacted) remain at \$503 million, the same dollar figure appropriated by Congress in FY2010. However, in the intervening 12 years, the Refuge System funding levels dropped to \$453 million, causing staffing shortages and zeroing out budgets for items such as planning. Without a planning budget, it has been difficult for the System to issue comprehensive conservation plans (CCPs) and to determine appropriate use of Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars to build out refuges within already-approved acquisition boundaries. And since FY2010, well over 1,000 FTE positions have been eliminated—a full quarter of Refuge System staff.

CARE is concerned about these staffing shortages. There are some refuges which used to have full time staff of up to 25 or 30 FTEs which are now run by a staff of three. Many refuges are now contained in complexes, which makes sense on paper, but a situation that is driven by a lack of staff. Due to this lack of staff, only one refuge within a complex has daily staff while the others remain regularly unstaffed until a complex staff member can find the time to check on the property. Law enforcement staffing levels remain low, with federal wildlife officers often covering refuge units that are hours away from each other, which has led to a reliance on local and county law enforcement departments as their back-up.

Beyond staffing shortages, the Refuge System has grown since FY2010, both in terms of acreage (13 new refuge units and millions of acres of marine national monuments) and in services (the urban program has dramatically changed the way conservation is delivered to constituents, and visitor numbers have grown, to over 64 million visitors a year (in 2021)). These new pressures on the System, while excellent for wildlife habitat and conservation and for the hunters, birders, and families who visit, are only compounded by the lack of funding for biologists, visitor services staff, law enforcement, and the wage-grade staff who maintain these places we love.

Given the lack of clear guidance from Congress and the Administration regarding FY2022 appropriated levels and an FY2023 request, CARE is asking this subcommittee increase funding to reflect the increase in inflationary costs from FY2010 and take into consideration the Urban Program and the new acreage. We are also requesting the Subcommittee include planning dollars in your bill, so that CCPs and other planning can be accomplished.

Inadequate Funding—Challenges to the Refuge System

Found in every U.S. state and four territories, 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. With its primary focus on wildlife conservation,

refuges provide habitat for an abundance of species, but they also provide a place for people to go to recreate.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has been impacted by a decade of declining funding. In the late 2000's, CARE worked closely with the Bush and Obama Administrations and Congress to increase funding for Refuge System O&M by \$132 million over three years (FY07-10). At its peak funding of \$503 million in FY2010, staffing levels were over 3,240 across the Refuge System O&M. Over 1,000 refuge positions have been lost since that time, a 25% loss in staff. Wage grade staff number only 500, down from 1,000 in the late 1990's. Law enforcement staff in Region 5 (Northeast Region) alone has dropped in half—there are now 21 LE officers in 13 states with one-quarter of the American population. The System has hired new staff in the past year, but gains are slow and COVID has hampered efforts to train new law enforcement staff.

CARE's primary concern is what this means for wildlife populations. For example, there is a striking, long-term decline in bird populations that is occurring along the Atlantic flyway. Shorebird populations have declined 40% over the last 40 years, the primary cause of which is human disturbances. There are numerous refuge units along the east coast, which should be a haven and resting spot for migratory birds. However, funding shortages have meant that there are few staff on the beaches to prevent and mitigate conflicts between people and wildlife. When birds are disturbed numerous times a day, they lose nutrients and their ability to reproduce.

In previous years, CARE has focused on critical areas of funding that are particularly low. Every aspect of the Refuge System is strained. Immediate needs of the Refuge System include:

- USFWS estimates that law enforcement needs a minimum of \$75 million dollars.
- More capacity for invasive species strike forces are needed to control phragmites, kudzu, quagga mussels, purple loosestrife, feral hogs, carp and other invasives. Over 2.4 million 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.
- Many visitor services and environmental education programs have been turned over to volunteers. And as wonderful as they are, volunteers and Friends members are now the face of many visitor's centers. Many refuge visitor centers have remained closed during COVID restrictions, and Friends groups have had to move online and restrict their presence on the ground.
- Refuges are down to one specialist or less for each refuge complex. For example, cuts have been made strategically so that there is at least one biologist per refuge complex. But if that biologist is on leave or leaves the complex for a different position, there is no one to continue the work. And it is the same scenario with law enforcement and maintenance workers and many other positions in the System.
- Funding increases are not keeping pace with salary increases. In Alaska, for example, a 0.5% salary increase last year translated into a loss of 3 FTEs. System-wide, the modest funding increase provided in FY2021 did not even cover the cost of the scheduled 1% federal wage increase.

- As the Refuge System has opened additional acres for hunting, there is not an equivalent increase in funding to do habitat maintenance, manage parking lots and restrooms, support hunting programs for youth, the disabled, veterans and others.

This funding situation can be seen across the other seven 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 refuge facilities will continue to close.

National Wildlife Refuge System: Background

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.

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.

If annual operations and maintenance funding does not rise, CARE anticipates further impacts both within and outside of refuge boundaries. These impacts could include closures of visitor centers, elimination of environmental education programs for schools, reduced quality of habitat for hunting, reduced treatment of invasive plants, on refuge lands and nearby private lands, and reduced capacity for prescribed fire, which is an important tool to improve wildlife habitat 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.

On behalf of our more than 16 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the FY2023 House Interior Appropriations bill, and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss our request.