



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 2024 Appropriations
For the National Wildlife Refuge System**

March 17, 2023

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement urges Congress to sufficiently fund the Operations & Maintenance budget of the National Wildlife Refuge System and address the staffing shortfall so it can continue to effectively fulfill its conservation mission, provide opportunities for wildlife dependent recreation, and connect communities to nature.

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 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.

American Birding Association
American Fisheries Society
American Sportfishing Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Izaak Walton League of America
Marine Conservation Institute
National Audubon Society
National Wildlife Federation

National Wildlife Refuge Association
Safari Club International
The Nature Conservancy
The Corps Network
The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation, and the only set of federal lands in the nation set aside for the management of America's native wildlife. 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.

These lands and waters are important recreational and tourism destinations in communities across the United States, and offer a variety of recreational opportunities, including sustainable hunting and fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

However, without adequate funding, the ecological and recreational potential of the Refuge System cannot be fully realized. The President's \$624.9 million request for Refuge Operations & Maintenance represents a needed increase over FY2023 funding levels and will help secure a strong future for the Refuge System, but more needs to be done.

The \$503 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY 2010 equates to ~\$700 million in 2022 dollars. Current funding (\$541 million) provides a mere .64 cents per acre for management. Since funding has not kept pace with inflation, this has led to unsustainably low staffing levels, lost capacity, and a significant maintenance backlog.

Staffing

At its peak, staffing levels exceeded 3,240 employees across the Refuge System. Over 800 permanent refuge positions have been lost since FY 2011, an enormous 25% loss in capacity. Today, the Refuge System is staffed by approximately 2,400 permanent staff while the actual need is estimated to be 7,300. An additional \$560 million would be needed to hire enough staff to reach full staffing capacity.

Some refuges have seen staff reductions of 75% or more, requiring consolidation or reduction of visitor services, management and law enforcement. No refuges are fully staffed, and more than half of refuges have zero staff on site. Many refuges are closed to the public and are completely unmanaged.

Rising fixed costs are also eating into increases in appropriations. It costs the refuge system an estimated \$3 million for every one percent raise in payroll costs. System-wide, the modest funding increase provided in FY 2021 did not even cover the cost of the scheduled 1% federal wage increase. Without base increases in the budget to cover these fixed costs, several much-needed positions are eliminated every year.

Planning

By law, the Refuge System must update their Comprehensive Conservation Planning (CCPs) every fifteen years. Up-to-date management plans ensure that each wildlife refuge can be adaptable to present and upcoming needs, from a changing climate and extreme weather events

like wildfires, to rising recreational visitors and commercial uses. However, due to a consistent lack of funding, over forty percent of CCPs have become out-of-date or were never finalized. Not only do some wildlife refuges not have the staff or capacity to carry out a new CCP process, but some simply do not have the resources to renew these important plans. With an increased planning budget, the Refuge System could modernize and update these important management plans that help them reach their conservation goals.

Visitor Services

Despite staffing and planning shortages, the Refuge System has grown significantly since FY 2010, both in terms of acreage (14 new refuge units and millions of acres of marine national monuments) and services (the urban program has dramatically changed the way conservation is delivered to constituents, and visitor numbers have grown, to over 67 million visitors a year in FY 2022). These pressures are putting increased strain on the System that provides vital wildlife habitat and important services to hunters, anglers, birders, and other nature enthusiasts.

CARE welcomes sustainable recreational use of national wildlife 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. As the Refuge System has opened additional acres for hunting and fishing, there is not an equivalent increase in funding to improve habitat, maintain necessary infrastructure like blinds, boat launches, piers, parking lots, and restrooms, or support popular hunting and fishing programs for youth and serve people with disabilities, veterans, seniors and others. Insufficient funding does not allow the Refuge System to retain and hire enough qualified biologists, visitor services staff, law enforcement, and the wage-grade staff to provide the services needed to properly maintain these places enjoyed by so many Americans.

Impacts to Fish and Wildlife

CARE’s primary concern is what this means for wildlife populations. 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.

Significant progress has been made in the early detection and rapid response against newly introduced invasive species on refuge system lands thanks to the expansion of invasive species strike teams. Now up to 14 teams, this program prevents the spread of newly introduced invasive species on the refuge system and nearby public and private lands, protecting resources for adjoining communities. However, additional funding for access enhancements and infrastructure, such as watercraft cleaning stations, are needed to empower public adoption of invasive species prevention best practices. Funding for wildlife and habitat management activities is desperately needed to deal with longer term invasive species management challenges. Without funding to apply prevention measures, new threats will emerge and known invasive species such as phragmites, kudzu, quagga mussels, purple loosestrife, feral hogs, and invasive carps will continue their spread throughout the refuge system.

The Need for Action

If funding for refuges remains stagnant for operations and maintenance activities, we anticipate 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 habitat quality, diminished hunting and fishing opportunities, reduced invasive species management 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.

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 healthy ecosystems. 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 FY 2024 House Interior Appropriations bill. We are available to discuss our request with the committee at a time of their convenience. All questions can be directed to Libby Marking at lmarking@refugeassociation.org.