



## Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement

*Submitted by Libby Marking, CARE Chair,  
Director of Government Affairs for the  
National Wildlife Refuge Association*

### **Written Testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee On Interior, Environment, And Related Agencies Concerning Fiscal Year 2025 Appropriations for the National Wildlife Refuge System**

May 10, 2024

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

**The following members of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement urge Congress to allocate at least \$602.3 million in funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance account under the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This funding is necessary for the Refuge System 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 to conserving these special landscapes. 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 Refuge Friends members.

American Birding Association  
American Fisheries Society  
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  
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 territory, national wildlife refuges conserve a diversity of America's environmentally sensitive and vital ecosystems, including wetlands, coasts, forests, prairie, tundra, deserts, and oceans. These public 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, and environmental education and interpretation.

Funding for the Refuge System has only increased by 4.7 percent since FY2010 and currently sits at \$527 million, or \$5.55 per land acre. In today's dollars, the appropriations allocated in FY2010 equates to approximately \$765 million. Because funding has not kept up with inflation, accounted for annual fixed costs, or correlated with the growth and increased needs of the Refuge System since FY2010, the Refuge System budget has effectively decreased. This has led to unsustainably low staffing levels and lost capacity.

Our request of at least \$602.3 million for the Refuge System represents a needed increase over FY2024 funding levels and will help secure a strong future for the Refuge System, but more needs to be done. To achieve a fully funded and effective Refuge System, an annual budget of at least \$2.2 billion is needed to provide for its basic needs, meet mandates and public demand, and ensure commensurate staffing of other similarly sized public lands systems. This request is an important step towards that goal and we urge Congress to make significant investments in these treasured public lands and waters.

### **Staffing Challenges**

At its peak, staffing levels exceeded 3,240 employees across the Refuge System. The number of full-time employees (FTEs)—already a fraction of the other comparable federal land agencies at ~2,500 FTEs—has decreased by 27 percent since FY2011. This has made it difficult for the Refuge System to manage its vast network of lands and waters and to fulfill its mission of conserving wildlife and habitats.

The insufficient funding and capacity impacts are felt System-wide, impacting conservation planning, wildlife and habitat management, visitor services, law enforcement, and maintenance. No refuges are fully staffed, and more than half of refuges have zero staff on site. Multiple refuges have been closed to the public and are completely unmanaged. Many employees must manage multiple wildlife refuge units, sometimes traveling hundreds of miles per day.

Rising fixed costs are also eating into annual appropriations. It costs the refuge system an estimated \$3 million for every one percent raise in payroll costs. Without base increases in the budget to cover these fixed costs, several much-needed positions are eliminated every year.

### **Impacts to Visitors**

The Refuge System has grown significantly since FY 2010, adding 21 new refuge units and 549 million submerged marine acres, opening 6 million acres for hunting and fishing, and visitation

has grown to over 68 million annual visitors—an increase of 47 percent since FY2011. While this growth has enhanced the Refuge System and benefited the communities around refuges, it has also put more pressure on the already stressed and underfunded System that provides vital wildlife habitat and important services to hunters, anglers, birders, and other nature enthusiasts.

Visitor Services staff has decreased by 25 percent since FY10 despite the increase in visitorship. Nearly all of the Refuge System’s 125 visitor centers operate on limited hours, with some centers completely closed, and none would function without volunteers. However, many volunteer programs have been cut back or eliminated due to a lack of supervision from professional FTEs or necessary infrastructure. In 2023, there were 48 percent fewer volunteers than in 2016.

The Refuge System has a large deferred maintenance backlog of \$2.65 billion, with most structures near or past the end of their maximum useful life spans, such as buildings, roads, bridges, and trails. As the Refuge System has opened additional acres for hunting and fishing, there has not been 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.

Public safety has also been jeopardized due to budget shortfalls, impacting both visitors and wildlife. As of February 2024, the Refuge System has the lowest number of law enforcement officers in over 10 years while simultaneously seeing its highest visitation and crime rates in its history. Currently, seven states have no officers stationed within their boundaries (CT, DE, IA, MI, NH, OH, VT), and nine states with just one officer (GA, Guam, HI, IN, KY, PA, PR, RI, WY). Increased funding is needed to improve visitor access, public safety, and wildlife protection.

### **Impacts on Fish and Wildlife**

The limited staffing capacity has several negative impacts on the ecological health of the Refuge System. Due to capacity issues, only 27 percent, or 379 of the 1,364 threatened and endangered populations occurring on refuges, are monitored. This leads to compromised adaptive management capability, inability to manage invasive species, the destruction of native habitat, and the potential loss of more species. With current resources, USFWS can only successfully control 7 percent of 3.3 million acres of lands infested with non-native species, which has increased 30 percent since 2005. USFWS also has extremely limited capacity to effectively manage the Refuge System’s millions of marine acres and 100 coastal and marine units.

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 21 teams, this program eradicates and prevents the spread of invasive species on the Refuge System and nearby public and private lands, protecting natural resources for adjoining communities. For example, nutria has successfully been eradicated from the Delmarva Peninsula through this work in partnership with other agencies, which is helping to build resiliency against sea-level rise in impacted counties of the Chesapeake Bay. Funding for wildlife and habitat management activities is desperately needed to deal with longer-term

invasive species management challenges. Without funding to enhance and 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.

By law, refuges must update their Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) 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, over 60 percent of CCPs have become out-of-date or were never finalized, which severely limits landscape-level planning and adaptability to changing conditions. With an increased planning budget, refuges could modernize and update these important management plans that help them reach their conservation goals.

### **The Need for Action**

Without a necessary increase in funding for the Refuge System, we anticipate further impacts both within and outside of refuge boundaries. These impacts could include more 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 Refuge System will empower and enable individual refuge units to deliver on-the-ground conservation that benefits wildlife and local communities across the nation. We urge Congress to prioritize the Refuge System and address these overarching funding challenges to ensure that the USFWS is equipped to effectively manage the wildlife, habitat, programs, and visitorship that rely on the health and integrity of the Refuge System.

On behalf of our more than 16 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit comments on the FY2025 House Interior Appropriations bill. Thank you for considering our request of at least \$602.3 million for the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY2025. Please contact Libby Marking at [lmarking@refugeassociation.org](mailto:lmarking@refugeassociation.org) for additional information.