

November 21, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray, Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Susan Collins, Vice Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Jeff Merkley, Chair, Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Ranking Member, Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole, Chair, House Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Rosa DeLauro, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Mike Simpson, Chair, House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
The Honorable Chellie Pingree, Ranking Member, House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Appropriations Chairs, Vice Chair, and Ranking Members, Interior Subcommittee Chairs and Ranking Members,

The groups listed below respectfully request that Congress include \$565,732,000 for the National Wildlife Refuge System to cover damages from recent natural disasters.

Refuges have been struck by recent disasters including hurricanes Helene and Milton and many unnamed but still highly impactful storms, which damaged both built infrastructure and natural habitats on refuges. The Refuge System is also still trying to recover from damages that occurred in 2023 since the last disaster relief package. Between the two years, 37 different natural disasters impacted approximately 90 refuges. Some of the hardest hit include Merritt Island NWR in Florida, affected by both Hurricanes Helene and Milton; and Don Edwards San Francisco Bay NWR, subject to flooding from severe winter storms. At present, many impacted refuges remain closed to the public with staff prioritizing community needs.

Funding needs include the removal of debris and hazardous materials, repair of facilities, and rehabilitation of damaged habitats. Refuges must accomplish these tasks or else be permanently diminished. Without supplemental funding, impacted refuges will fall short of achieving their wildlife conservation purposes and be unable to serve their communities with hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities. The total cost of damages is greater than the \$527,035,000 appropriated for the Refuge System in FY24, leaving the System far short of the funding it

needs. If regular appropriations must be used for disaster recovery, vital aspects of refuge management including visitor services and law enforcement will be further compromised.

Refuges play a positive role in their communities by offering wildlife-related recreational opportunities and contributing to local economies through the ecotourism they attract. More than that, refuges can also help keep their communities safe. That is particularly true of wetlands that absorb flood waters or coastal marshes that provide a buffer against storm surge. These types of services are “nature-based solutions” to the dangers posed by natural disasters. In recognition of the protective power of refuges, the Refuge System should receive additional funding to invest in resilience, as was done following Hurricane Sandy in 2013. We request that the Refuge System receive an additional \$0.75 of resilience funding for every \$1.00 needed to repair built infrastructure on refuges, for a total of \$289,884,000.

In closing, as you negotiate a disaster relief supplemental that must pass in the remainder of this Congress, we urge you to provide the Refuge System with the full amount needed to cover its unfunded disaster damages, and also to make an investment in nature-based solution that will be rewarded by greater resilience when future disasters occur. We appreciate your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Defenders of Wildlife
Izaak Walton League of America
National Audubon Society
National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
The Wildlife Society