



## Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement

*Submitted by Desirée Sorenson-Groves, CARE Chair,  
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National Wildlife Refuge Association*

### **Written Testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee On Interior, Environment, And Related Agencies Concerning Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations for the National Wildlife Refuge System**

April 4, 2025

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

**The following members of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement urge Congress to support robust funding and no less than the FY2025 funding level for the National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance account under the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. This funding is necessary for the Refuge System to effectively fulfill its conservation mission and provide opportunities for hunting, fishing and wildlife-dependent recreation.**

This year the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) celebrates 30 years of working together 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 support 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  
Defenders of Wildlife  
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.

**For the past 15 years, funding for the Refuge System has been stagnant and that impact is being felt nationwide. Funding for the Refuge System was \$503 million in FY2010 and currently sits at \$527 million for FY2025. If the System had just kept pace with inflation, it would be funded at \$731 million.**

The Refuge System needs additional funding to meet its mission. We urge Congress to increase funding for the System and 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 and currently is ~2,100 FTEs, a 30% decrease. Since the beginning of this calendar year, the staffing has declined over 10% with additional cuts anticipated. At these staffing levels it is almost impossible for the Refuge System to accomplish its important mission.

### **Impacts to Visitors**

Since FY2010, visitation to the Refuge System has increased by over 53%. While increased visitors and wildlife dependent recreational opportunities, such as 6 million new acres opened for hunting and fishing, has benefitted the communities around refuges, it has also put more pressure on the 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% since FY10 despite the increase in visitation. Nearly all of the Refuge System's 125 visitor centers operate on limited hours, and now many centers are 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 staff or necessary infrastructure. In 2023, there were 48 percent fewer volunteers than in 2016 and the number continues to decline when the System arguably needs volunteers now more than ever.

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 January 2025, the Refuge System has the lowest number of federal wildlife law enforcement officers in over 10 years at just 198, down from 221 just one year ago. Currently,

seven states have no officers stationed within their boundaries, and nine states with just one officer. 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 impacts management capability including reduced capacity to manage invasive species, leading to the potential loss of habitat for species. With current resources, USFWS can only successfully manage 7 percent of 3.3 million acres of lands impacted by 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 extreme weather events and wildfires to rising recreational visitors and commercial uses. 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**

Further cuts in funding for the Refuge System will likely cause 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 FY2026 House Interior Appropriations bill. Thank you for considering our request to increase funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY2026. Please contact [Desirée Sorenson-Groves](#) for additional information.