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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2015 APPROPRIATIONS**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Friends of the Potomac River Refuges, thank you for this opportunity to submit comments on the proposed FY 2015 appropriation for the National Wildlife Refuge System (contained within the overall budget for the US Fish and Wildlife Service).

The Friends of the Potomac River Refuges (FoPRR) was founded in 2002 as a non-profit 501(c)3 organization; it promotes conservation, awareness, and appreciation of the wildlife and habitats of the three refuges in the complex and provides assistance to refuge programs.

The three National Wildlife Refuges in the Potomac River Refuge Complex (Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck, Occoquan Bay and Featherstone) are urban refuges serving a population of about 3.4 million in Northern Virginia and the District of Columbia. The refuges border Occoquan Bay at the junction of Fairfax County and Prince William County.

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR was established in 1969. It contains 2,277 acres and is just 18 miles south of the District of Columbia, adjacent to a rapidly growing metropolitan area where habitat is constantly altered. As the first national wildlife refuge specifically established under the Endangered Species Act for Bald Eagles, its focus is on forest, marsh, and riverine habitat important to the Bald Eagle. This refuge is a combination of oak-hickory forest and freshwater marshes with 4.4 miles of shoreline. Visitors are able to hike through eastern forests to beautiful views of the largest fresh-water marsh in Northern Virginia. It hosts Bald Eagles and over 200 species of other birds, 31 species of mammals, and 44 species of reptiles and amphibians.

Occoquan Bay NWR was established in 1998. It contains 640 acres and is just 22 miles south of the District of Columbia. It hosts extensive grasslands interspersed with marshes and early successional shrub and forest areas that support Neotropical migratory birds and grassland dependent species. This refuge is a one of the largest remaining open spaces in Northern Virginia, comprising a unique mix of wetlands, forest, and native grasslands. Visitors enjoy relatively flat, open vistas of both the meadows as well as the Potomac River. The refuge is home to a resident population of Bald Eagles, over 230 species of other birds, River Otters, Muskrats, a variety of turtles, frogs, 70 species of butterflies and 60 species of dragonflies.

Featherstone NWR will open to the public this calendar year. It contains 325 acres of marsh and riverine habitat important to both waterfowl and eagles and is located 27 miles south of the District of Columbia.

Why are these and other refuges important?

Economic Benefits of Refuges – The Division of Economics in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a study in October 2013 entitled: *Banking on Nature – The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*. Some of the highlighted findings, noted below, demonstrate the importance of wildlife refuge-based recreation:

- *Recreational visits to national wildlife refuges generate substantial economic activity. In FY 2011, 46.5 million people visited refuges. Their spending generated \$2.4 billion of sales in regional economies. As this spending flowed through the economy, over 35,000 people were employed and \$792.7 million in employment income was generated.*
- *Refuges contributed an average \$4.87 in total economic output for every \$1 appropriated in Fiscal Year 2011.*
- *About 72 percent of total expenditures are generated by non-consumptive activities on refuges. Fishing accounted for 21 percent and hunting 7 percent. Local residents accounted for 23 percent of expenditures while visitors coming from outside the local area accounted for 77 percent.*
- *Refuge recreational spending generated about \$342.9 million in tax revenue at the local, county, state and Federal level.*
- *National wildlife refuges are seen widely as travel-worthy destinations: 77% of refuge spending was done by visitors from outside the local area; and*
- *The combined economic contribution to communities nationwide is almost five times the \$492 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY 2011.*

Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell stated: “Our National Wildlife Refuge System is the world’s greatest network of lands dedicated to wildlife conservation, but it is also a powerful economic engine for local communities across the country, attracting more than 46 million visitors from around the world who support local restaurants, hotels, and other businesses. ... In addition to conserving and protecting public lands for future generations, the report shows that every dollar we invest in our Refuge System generates huge economic dividends for our country.”

The study covered 92 of the over 550 refuges, including three of the 33 refuges in California (Sonny Bono Salton Sea, San Luis and Sacramento NWRs) and four of the 14 refuges in Virginia (Occoquan Bay, Great Dismal Swamp, Eastern Shore of Virginia and Back Bay NWRs).

The study (based on FY 2011 data) showed the following for the three California and four Virginia refuges:

	<u>Total Visitors</u>	<u>Total Visitor Expenditures</u>	<u>Jobs Created</u>	<u>Jobs Income</u>	<u>Tax Revenue</u>
CA:	189,814	\$8,912,600	92	\$4,307,600	\$1,990,100
VA:	251,043	\$4,906,700	66	\$2,909,400	\$ 806,000

Hunting, Fishing Wildlife Observation and Nature Photography – More Economic Benefit

The study found that wildlife-related recreation fuels much of this economic contribution. The National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, which informed the *Banking on Nature* report, found that more than 90 million Americans, or 41 percent of the United States' population age 16 and older, pursued wildlife-related outdoor recreation in 2011, and spent nearly \$145 billion annually.

Educational Benefits – Refuges offer unique opportunities for neighboring schools, especially those in urban or urbanizing communities, to bring students in to learn first-hand about the environment. Local universities take advantage of the natural settings to conduct research on a variety of topics such as water and air quality, the effect of invasive species, and issues affecting the health and populations of native plants and animals.

Intangible Benefits for Wounded Warriors and All Others – Refuges, with their emphasis being on protection of the natural habitat and wildlife, much more so than parks, provide unique places in the urban landscape where anyone can go to have quiet reflective time in a natural environment. Refuges and other green space are becoming more widely recognized for their importance for our Wounded Warriors and their families.

Secretary of Interior Jewell recently announced an “Action Plan for Sharing Educational Opportunities, Healthful Recreation & Jobs in America’s Great Outdoors.” The plan includes:

- *Expanding participation of military families in existing and possibly new programs in cooperation with the Department of Defense.*
- ***Increasing services in support of the interests and needs of military families relative to psychological health and physical rehabilitation through use of its 500 million acres of public land, recreational, and educational programs.***
- *Evaluate options for determining how access fees to Federal lands might be waived for active duty military personnel who have been injured or who are in rehabilitation resulting from injuries related to military service, including PTSD.*

Status of the Refuges – The three refuges in the Potomac River Complex are typical of refuges throughout the system. Insufficient funding and shortage of staff means no or limited implementation of programs for: a) fire protection and suppression; b) law enforcement and safety; c) fighting invasive species; d) environmental education; and e) maintaining refuge facilities. Without a meaningful increase in fiscal and staff resources, implementation of the new plans announced by Secretary Jewell intended to help veterans, their families and most especially our Wounded Warriors, cannot be effectively implemented in the refuge system.

The Potomac River Refuge Complex presently has a staff of seven. The Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the complex reflects a minimum workforce level of 16 to carry out mandated safety, law enforcement, maintenance and program functions. There are no fiscal or staff resources to implement any of the Secretary’s programs for Wounded Warriors.

Conclusion – The President’s Budget request for the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) for FY 2015 is less than a 1% increase over FY 2014. That insignificant amount creates concern about the future of refuges and the role they play in preserving vital habitat and native species.

FOPRR’s position is that the **FY 2015** level for NWRS should be no lower than **\$480.4 million**. The Refuge System needs an increase of at least \$8 million over the FY 2014 appropriated level just to maintain the same management capability.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) estimate that the Refuge System needs at least \$900 million in annual operations and maintenance funding to properly administer its 562 refuges and 38 wetland management districts spanning over 150 million acres. FoPRR fully supports the NWRA in its call to move towards fully funding the NWRS at **\$900 million annually** for operations and maintenance. At its highest funding level in FY 2010, the Refuge System received only \$503 million—little more than half the needed amount. Since that time, congressional appropriations have not accounted for rising costs, but have been steadily reduced. This resulted in the loss of 324 employees since 2011, or a 9% cut in overall staffing levels. Yet based on the *Banking on Nature* study, the Refuge System actually pays for itself several times over by generating \$4.87 in economic activity for every \$1 appropriated by Congress to run the Refuge System.

The FoPRR also joins NWRA in supporting the following:

- *Appropriate \$168.8 million in FY 2015 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to acquire conservation easements on working lands and to purchase in-holdings and vital habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System and reauthorize LWCF at \$900 million annually.*
- *Appropriate \$35 million in FY 2015 for the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and reauthorize the Act at \$75 million.*
- *Increase appropriations for essential conservation programs including State Wildlife Grants, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, Coastal Grants, and the Department of Interior’s Fire Management Program.*

We know federal government spending must be reduced. However, the budget for the National Wildlife Refuge System represents little more than a rounding error in the entire federal budget. Given the Refuge System’s documented revenue-generating history, funds appropriated to it add to the revenue, not to the deficit. The Refuge System’s role in preserving vital natural resources and its potential to benefit to our Wounded Warriors and the enduring economic value of fostering community-based conservation in urban areas, should make increasing the annual NWRS budget to \$900 million an easy decision.

The opportunity to provide testimony to this committee is greatly appreciated.

Thank you, Randy Streufert,
Director, Friends of the Potomac River Refuges