

Daniel D. Price  
Vice President, Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge  
768 Joseph Jessica Rd.  
Colville, WA. 99114

**TESTIMONY  
FOR THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR,  
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES  
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2016 APPROPRIATIONS**

Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge (FLPONWR) and its members would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee concerning the funding of National Wildlife Refuge system for fiscal year 2016. We ask you to support the President's funding proposal of \$508.2 million for the Refuge System. We feel that any less funding could have negative impacts on the Refuge's ability to protect and enhance the environment and wildlife within the Refuge System. Less funding would also impact local economies, jobs, recreation and environmental education. The Little Pend Oreille NWR (LPONWR) is a unique Refuge that needs your support.

A budget item that is critical to the Little Pend Oreille and to indeed critical to all the forests in the west is funding for Hazardous Fuels Reduction. So we would ask for your support to appropriate \$60 million dedicated to the support the Refuge System's fire program through the Department of Interior's Hazardous Fuels Reduction program. Not only does this program help to elevate catastrophic fires it is also a vital tool in wildlife management. I will have more details of how this program directly effects the Little Pend Oreille NWR later.

We are also asking for your support to provide 173.8 million from the Land and Water Conservation fund for the purchasing of in-holdings that are of vital ecological importance and also the purchase of in-holding leads to better wildlife connectivity and allows for more cohesive management of the ecosystem.

**THE LITTLE PEND OREILLE WILDLIFE REFUGE**

The LPONWR is located in the Northeast part of Washington State near the small city of Colville. The LPONWR is just over 40,000 acres and is the only mountainous mixed conifer refuge in the lower 48. It also has several small lakes, ponds, streams, marshes and the Little Pend Oreille river that support a wide variety of wildlife from songbirds, every woodpecker native to the Rockies, and waterfowl to bears, bobcats, cougars, elk, moose and white-tailed deer. Interestingly the protection of the white-tailed deer and song birds were the main reasons for the establishment of the refuge. The refuge is considered critical winter habitat for the deer. Small amphibians, small reptiles, butterflies, dragonflies are also important parts of the refuge's ecosystem.

The refuge also comprises large stands of ponderosa pine which have very little protection outside of the refuge. The protection of the pine habitat is of critical importance to the future of the white-tailed deer, elk and the other species, such as the threatened Columbia ground squirrel that are connected to this

habitat.

## **VISITATION AND ECONOMICS**

The LPONWR has about 60,000 visitors per year who enjoy activities such as bird watching, hiking, camping, mountain biking, hunting, horseback riding and hunting. Not only do people enjoy these activities but they are also a positive contribution to the local economies. According to the 2004 "Banking on Nature" economic study the refuge visitors had a "final economic demand," to the local economy, of almost \$3.7 million and helped to generated 42 jobs (a significant number in this rural community). If you compare this to the Refuge Budget there was "\$3.82 of recreational benefits for every \$1 of refuge expenditures." All in all a very good investment.

If we compare this to the 2011 Banking on nature study the final demand totaled \$3.9 million with associated employment of 30 jobs. The big number here is the loss of 12 jobs. With a loss a staff projects such as mechanical and hand thinning cannot be set up and managed thus leading to a loss in private sector jobs in an area that is already economically depressed.

## **HABITAT PROTECTION AND ENHANCEMET**

Over the past 20 years the refuge has been hard at work restoring a healthy forest and habitat at the refuge after about 30 years of management by the state. While always a Federally owned Wildlife Refuge there was a management agreement between the State and the National Fish and Wildlife service starting in the 1960's and ended in the early 1990's after the GAO found it to not be in the best interest of the Refuges in question (the LPONWR).

Many illegal roads have been closed, lakes rehabilitated, and the health of the forest has also been greatly improved providing a much better habitat for the native wildlife. But the is still much work left to be done.

One of the most important roles the Refuge staff has been forest rehabilitation through prescribed burns and thinning operations (which provide jobs to local loggers and bring wood to local mills) which have helped to open up overcrowded forests, reduce the chance of catastrophic fires. These operations also help neighboring property owners from the chance of fire spreading to there property. These burns and thinning operations also help to keep meadows open and productive providing a food source for deer, elk, moose and other wildlife.

It is important to know that the Little Pend Oreille NWR, along with a large percentage of western forests, are in a fire ecology. Meaning that these forest rely on fires to keep them health and productive. We know that because of past management policies and our lack of understanding of the importance of fire to these ecosystems our forest have become overcrowded which is contributing to large catastrophic fires and the reduction of habitat for animals such as elk and deer whom rely on open forests and meadows. To keep up the pace of keeping our forest health I respectfully ask for your support in appropriating \$60 million in dedicated funding to the Refuge System

What does this mean for the Little Pend Oreille NWR. The Refuge has about 10,000 acres that are open pine and mixed forests that are reliant on fire. The goal was and is to keep these acres on a ten year fire rotation. The years from 2000-2010 the Refuge was able to complete about 1000 acres of prescribed

burns per year to keep on target. The last four years, because of reduction of staff, the Refuge is down to around 100 acres per year. The reduction in staff also leads to less commercial thinning project, as part of fuels reduction, as the Refuge is lacking the staff to lay out and manage the thinning. This leads to a loss of private sector logging jobs as well as less logs going to the local mills.

If the Refuge does not have the resources for Fire and Fuels Reduction to keep up pace we risk the loss of habitat and we increase the chance of a large catastrophic fire. Interestingly the Refuge as a good example of the importance of fuels Reduction. A few years ago a fire (Slide Creek) was started by a lightning strike off the Refuge in private timber land. This land had not gone through and fuels reduction or thinning. The fire “crowned” a took off toward the Refuge in an area that the Refuge had recently had a thinning project to reduce fuels. When the fir hit the Refuge land instead of staying a “crowning” fire going through the trees it sat down and became a ground fire which is much easier to control and is what mother nature would have done in the past. By this fire sitting down the Refuge showed that it is a good neighbor and the Fuels reduction possibly saved many acres of not only Refuge but also private, state and other Federal lands.

The staff has also worked to rehabilitate the lakes, ponds, marshes, streams and the river. One examples is the removal of tench and Eurasian milfoil from Lake McDowell which is still may always be an ongoing battle. This year another invasive was introduced to the lake (Sun Fish). This fall the Refuge and the State worked together to hopefully rid the lake of these invasive species. But as the past shows it will be a continuing battle.

## **REVENUE SHARING PROGRAM**

Being in a rural area with a high poverty rate the Revenue Sharing Program is of vital importance to our communities. It help to pay for schools, libraries, fire protection, roads, law enforcement and the list goes on. However the currant system and it formula for calculating these payments is out of date and insufficient. Along these lines we are asking for your support in moving the Refuge Revenue sharing program to the PILT program as it is a more adequate system. In the mean time we ask for you to appropriate \$60 million to the Refuge Fund to insure that local communities receive proper compensation. It is also just part of being a good neighbor and part of the community.

## **FRIENDS AND THE REFUGE**

Our organization (FLPONWR) was established in 2001 and has work tirelessly with the refuge to make many improvements at the refuge and help to reach out to the public about the importance of the refuge. Our public outreach also points out to people all of the recreational opportunities that the Refuge offers.

One of our concerns is if budget cuts lead to cut in staff this could harm our collaborative efforts. Being a small organization (80-90 members) and in an area with a small population there is no dedicated staff member to coordinate volunteers. The staff has done an outstanding job working with us and we feel that any staff cut could make collaboration with staff more difficult as individual staff members would have more work and less time to help the volunteers. You must know that the volunteers in the refuge system as a whole play a vital role in helping out and improving the Refuge system. But volunteers can only do so much.

## **FINAL APPROPRIATIONS REQUESTS**

I respectfully request your support for the full funding of the National Wildlife Refuge Systems at \$508.2 million for FY2016, provide 173.8 million to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, appropriate \$60 million to the Refuge Fund to ensure compliance with the Refuge Revenue Sharing Program to help compensate local communities who this funding is critical for, fully fund the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program at \$75 million, increase the Coastal grant Program to \$14 million in FY16, appropriate \$70 million for State Wildlife Grants, appropriate \$11 million for the Multinational Species Conservation Fund., \$5 million for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, allocate \$50 million for the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund and lastly the appropriate \$60 million in funding to the Refuge Systems fire program through the Department of Interior's Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program.

In closing I cannot stress enough how important it is to fully fund the Refuge system. Further cuts will hurt the environment and wildlife. Local economies will also be hurt by less employment and tax revenues. By fully funding the Refuge System we help to ensure that we protect these special places for future generations.

On behalf of the Friends of the Little Pend Oreille, thanks for listening.

Daniel D. Price