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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2016 APPROPRIATIONS, March 13, 2015**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association and its membership of current and former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) professionals, Refuge Friends organizations and concerned citizens, thank you for your support for the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), particularly for the funding increase for fiscal year 2015 (FY15). We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on the FY16 Interior Appropriations bill and respectfully request:

- \$508.2m for the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) accounts of the NWRS, including \$5m for the Pacific Marine Monuments;
- \$900m for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), with \$173.8m allocated for the FWS, including \$10m for Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area (FL); \$3m for Silvio O. Conte NFWR (CT, NH, VT, MA); \$3m for Cache River NWR (AR); \$3m for Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area (KS); \$2m for Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (WY, ID, UT); \$3.4m for Blackwater NWR (MD); and \$1m for the Clarks River NWR (KY);
- \$60m for the Refuge Fund;
- \$75m for the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program;
- \$14m for the FWS Coastal Program;
- \$60m for FWS for Preparedness and Hazardous Fuels Reduction (under DOI);
- \$70m for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program;
- \$50m for the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund;
- \$5m for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Fund;
- \$11m for the Multinational Species Conservation Fund.

We understand our nation's challenging fiscal constraints but cutting funding to programs that are economic drivers and job creators in local communities only exacerbates an already difficult situation. For example, the NWRS averages almost \$5 in economic return for every \$1 appropriated and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program returns nearly \$16 for every \$1 spent on projects. Unfortunately, just when these public lands and programs could return economic output to communities and help them through the recession, funding fell dramatically. Budgets have not kept pace with rising costs, and the gap between the funding needed to maintain these programs and the funding appropriated has widened dramatically. The Refuge System is approximately \$72 million below what would be needed to keep pace with inflation relative to the FY10 level (\$545.8 million inflation-adjusted).

To begin bridging that gap, NWRA urges Congress to fund these critical programs that leverage federal dollars and serve as economic drivers.

National Wildlife Refuge System – Operations & Maintenance

NWRA chairs the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 23 sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing more than 16 million Americans that supports increased funding for the Refuge System. CARE estimates the NWRS needs at least \$900 million annually to manage its 150 million acres and over 400 million acres of national marine monuments, yet it is currently funded at roughly half that amount – at less than \$1 per acre. The Refuge System cannot fulfill its obligation to the American public, our wildlife, and 47 million annual visitors without increases in maintenance and operation funds.

Funding for the Refuge System has declined substantially since a funding level of \$503 million in FY10. Slight increases in FY14 and FY15, after reaching a low of \$452.6 million in FY13, have brought the System to its current \$474.2 million. Unfortunately, this is approximately \$72 million below what the Refuge System needs to keep pace with inflation. **Budget cuts have led to the loss of 430 positions since FY11.** Because most refuge lands and waters are highly managed, this deterioration in staffing has had a dramatic impact resulting in significant declines in habitat preservation and management, hunting, fishing, volunteerism and scientific research.

For instance, visitor services staff has declined by 15%, forcing a reduction in public programs and hours of operation. Hunting visits are down by 5% since FY11 and fishing visits are down 7%. Overall, there are fewer opportunities for the public to recreate, yet the desire for such programs is still high and visitation to all refuges since FY11 has actually increased by 2.6%.

Reductions in visitor services can be extremely troubling to constituencies who want to visit. Take the Midway Atoll NWR in the Hawaiian Islands. In November of 2013, due to sequestration cuts, the Service suspended the visitors services program at Midway. Although in the five years prior to this suspension, the refuge saw only about 300 annual visitors, those visitors were passionate about their reasons for visiting. Perhaps they wanted to view the more than 3.5 million birds that call the refuge home, or perhaps they wanted to visit the Battle of Midway National Memorial to pay tribute to fallen U.S. soldiers from World War II. Whatever their reason, they wanted to have one of the most unique refuge experiences in the entire System. Congress has asked for a GAO investigation on why the Service suspended its program; yet it's clear that when you cut the budget and lose several positions including a permanent Wildlife Biologist, Park Ranger, and Law Enforcement Officer, there will be ramifications.

Equally troubling is the 15% drop in the number of volunteers since FY11. At a time when record numbers of Americans are retiring and have the capability to give back, the Service's ability to oversee their efforts has been curtailed. Volunteers provide an additional 20% of work on our national wildlife refuges, yet they are being turned away when the System needs them the most.

During these years of challenging budgets, the Refuge System's potential to drive local economies and create jobs is of paramount importance. *Banking On Nature*, a report issued by the FWS in 2013, shows that even during the worst recession since the Great Depression, the Refuge System saw sales and economic output increase 20% to \$2.4 billion, visitation increase 30% to 46.5 million, average return on investment increase 22% to \$4.87 for every \$1 appropriated, and supported jobs increase 23% to 35,000.

Strategic Growth

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is an essential tool for protecting the integrity of the Refuge System and is the primary funding source for land and conservation easement acquisition by federal land agencies.

Increasingly, LWCF is being used to conserve working lands through the acquisition of easements that secure conservation protection while leaving the land in private ownership and on the tax rolls. Conservation easements are powerful tools that foster public-private partnerships with ranchers, farmers and foresters to conserve wildlife, habitat and a uniquely American way of life. Innovative landscape-scale initiatives using easements as a primary conservation tool have broad community and state support in New England's Connecticut River Watershed, the Flint Hills of Kansas, the Everglades Headwaters, Montana's Crown of the Continent, and the Dakota Grasslands. These iconic landscapes remain privately managed, generating tax income for local communities, securing our nation's food, and balancing resource use and resource protection for wildlife.

In many cases, however, land acquisition is required to conserve intact and functional natural habitat. The Refuge System is responsible for safeguarding population levels of a range of species, including many species that require very specific habitat conditions, such as nesting grounds for sea turtle and isolated springs for endemic desert fish. Others require multiple habitat types during their life cycle. By acquiring critical habitat areas and linking conserved lands, the Refuge System enhances the overall integrity of the system and strengthens our network of habitat to give wildlife space and time to respond to changes, whether from climate or changing land use patterns.

The Refuge Association calls on Congress to fund LWCF at \$900 million per year, with \$173.8 million provided in FY16 to the FWS for conservation easements and refuge in-holdings, including the following projects and those advocated by refuge Friends:

- Everglades Headwaters NWR & Conservation Area (FL) – \$10m;
- Cache River NWR (AR) – \$3m;
- Silvio O. Conte NFWR (NH, VT, MA, CT) – \$3m;
- Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area (KS) – \$3m;
- Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (WY, ID, UT) – \$2m;
- Blackwater NWR (MD) – \$3.4m;
- Clarks River NWR (KY) – \$1 m.

Commitment to Refuge Communities – Refuge Fund

The Refuge System uses net income derived from permits and timber harvests to make payments to local communities to offset property tax revenue lost when the federally-acquired lands are removed from local tax rolls, and relies on Congressional appropriations to the Refuge Fund to compensate for the shortfall between revenues and tax replacement obligations. Unfortunately, declining revenues and lack of appropriations have resulted in the Service paying less than 50% of its tax-offset obligations since 2001. The negative impact on local communities is felt even more starkly in difficult economic times and severely strains relations between the federal units and their local community, threatening the goodwill and partnerships that are keystones of successful conservation. NWRA requests \$60 million for the Refuge Fund and thanks Chairman

Calvert for his leadership in FY15 to pursue a much-needed increase. NWRA also calls for a review of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1935 as amended, and consideration of conversion to a Payment-in-Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program to be consistent with other federal land management agencies and to provide Refuge communities with more equitable payments.

Partnerships

With 75% of all fish and wildlife species dependent upon private lands for their survival, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program (Partners Program) is one of the most powerful tools for protecting wildlife where it lives. By building effective partnerships between public agencies and private landowners to conserve America's expansive working landscapes, the Partners Program has implemented nearly 29,000 restoration projects in the past twenty-five years, restoring over one million acres of wetlands, three million acres of uplands, and 11,000 miles of streams. The program has been instrumental in the success of such iconic landscape conservation projects as the Rocky Mountain Front and Blackfoot Challenge in Montana and the Flint Hills in Kansas, and is playing a key role in conserving greater sage-grouse habitat in the intermountain west.

The Partners program consistently leverages federal dollars for conservation, generating nearly \$16 in economic return for every \$1 appropriated for projects. The Refuge Association and the landowner-led Partners for Conservation request \$75 million for FY16. Such a funding level would result in an additional \$400 million worth of conservation across the nation.

The Partners Program provides a bridge between private and public conservation efforts that has been instrumental in the success of large landscape partnerships from Montana to Florida, and is playing a key role in conserving greater sage-grouse habitat in the intermountain west. To this end, we request an additional \$78 million for the Interior agencies to implement sagebrush steppe habitat conservation and monitoring efforts that will leverage \$300 million in Department of Agriculture investments across the west.

Sharing Lessons and Protecting Global Species

Wildlife species know no international boundaries, and therefore conservation must happen on a global scale to ensure populations survive. Many international wildlife agencies look to the Refuge System as the world leader in wildlife and fish conservation. The Service's Wildlife Without Borders Program and Multinational Species Conservation Funds together support global partnerships to protect marine turtles, tigers and rhinos, great apes and elephants and other iconic species. These programs are particularly important as wildlife face a poaching crisis that is leading species such as rhinos to the brink of extinction. The Refuge Association and student-led Tigers 4 Tigers Coalition request \$11 million for the Multinational Species Conservation Fund in FY16.

The Refuge Association believes that with sound conservation policy, adequate funding, and the power of more than 40,000 dedicated volunteers, the Refuge System can fulfill its mission to provide wildlife dependent recreation for Americans and protect the habitat for more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species and more than 1,000 species of fish. We look forward to working with Congress in 2015 to accomplish this goal.