

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2021 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
FEBRUARY 6, 2020**

**SUBMITTED BY CAROLINE G. BROUWER, VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS FOR
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION**

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the invitation to testify at Public Witness Day, and am pleased to submit testimony on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The Refuge Association and its coalition of representatives from Refuge Friends organizations and concerned citizens thank you for your support for the National Wildlife Refuge System, particularly for the \$14 million funding increase in FY2020. Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the FY2021 Interior Appropriations bill, most importantly regarding funding for the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance Fund, which we respectfully request you fund at \$586 million in FY2021.

All of the programs included in this testimony add value both to wildlife conservation in all 50 states and to the economic activity in local communities. Trip-related spending by recreational visits generated \$3.2 billion of economic output in local economies. Wildlife refuges are economic engines for their communities, but by far, the biggest challenge facing the Refuge System today is the completely inadequate budgets that fail to cover the cost of maintaining the incredibly rich and diverse wildlife habitats that make up the Refuge System.

The funding gap that has arisen due to low budget allocations over the last decade has degraded critical wildlife habitat and imperiled important species. Although the FY2020 appropriations bill injected a much-needed \$14 million to the budget, funding levels remain below the high of \$503 million in FY2010, with the shortfall becoming more acute every year. We must change this trajectory.

Overall, inadequate staffing levels of federal wildlife officers and inadequate levels of funding for invasive species eradication are two areas that are in desperate need of increased funding. Your FY2020 bill injected an additional \$2.9 million for the law enforcement budget – spurring an additional hire of 43 officers. Additional funding in FY2021 would add to that hiring and change the current statistic where fully one-third of states have only one or zero refuge law enforcement officers. For invasive species, the Service has prioritized the creation of invasive species strike teams, which are an efficient use of federal dollars, assigning invasive species experts to regions and specialties, not individual refuges.

The Refuge System is currently responsible for 850 million acres of land and water. Of that total, 750 million acres are included in the 5 Marine National Monuments created by Presidents Bush and Obama, yet very little additional funding has been provided to these water resources since their initial creation in 2006.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM – OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

The Refuge Association chairs the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a 25-year-old diverse coalition of 23 sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing more than 16 million Americans that support increased funding for the Refuge System. CARE estimates the NWRS needs **at least \$900 million annually** to manage its 100 million land acres and 750 million acres of marine national monuments. Yet the Refuge System is currently funded at slightly more than half that amount – \$502.4 million or 59¢ per acre per year – even with the recent increase in funding. By comparison, the National Park Service is funded at \$30 per acre per year.

The Refuge System cannot fulfill its obligation to the American public, our wildlife, and 59 million annual visitors (in FY2019) without increases in maintenance and operation funds.

Even with the recent gains in the current fiscal year, overall funding for the Refuge System has declined substantially over the last ten years. Funding in FY2010 was \$503 million – \$598 million in today's dollars with inflation and salary increases. This difference of \$95 million has forced the Service to cut back on programs and create efficiencies whenever possible – efficiencies that are sometimes harmful or even dangerous. For example, many refuges have been placed into complexes, where staff travel sometimes large distances to juggle duties on multiple refuges. One year ago, one third of states had zero or one refuge law enforcement officers for the entire state, but increased funding and new hiring is helping to alleviate this shortfall. Several states have no visitor services or environmental education staff.

Even with these financial challenges, the Service has risen to the occasion and taken care of the lands and waters entrusted to it. Staff work overtime and on weekends. Law enforcement staff are pulled off their duty station to cover shifts on the southern border. Budget cuts have led to the loss of nearly 500 positions since FY11. Because most refuge lands and waters are highly managed to provide optimal habitat conditions, this deterioration in staffing has had a dramatic impact resulting in significant declines in habitat protection and management, hunting, fishing, volunteerism and scientific research.

Current funding is nowhere near the at least \$900 million needed for full funding. Our goal is to reach that figure in the next four years, and funding the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance Fund at \$586 million is the first step to reaching that goal.

The number of annual Refuge System visitors jumped by 13 million over the last six years. More people are looking to recreate on wildlife refuges, yet understaffed refuges struggle to provide those opportunities. Reductions in visitor services can be extremely limiting for constituencies who want to visit. Equally troubling is a 15% drop in the number of volunteers since FY2011. At a time when record numbers of Americans are retiring and have the capability and desire 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.

FY2020 increases in law enforcement funding has brought that budget up to \$41 million, allowing the hiring of a new class of 43 officers, for a total of 260 officers. These officers will be fully trained by the end of Fall 2020, allowing them to move down to border refuges in South Texas and Arizona to relieve the officers sent to these refuges on sometimes up to a dozen 21-day details. They will be stationed in states that currently have no officers, or bolster the law enforcement presence at refuges that currently see law enforcement coverage of ¼ time or less.

Another priority for the Refuge Association is combatting the spread of invasive species, both plant and animal. Overall, the problem is vast. 2.4 million Refuge System acres are infested with invasive plants, and current funding and capacity only allows treatment of 10% of those acres. Similarly, the Refuge System has 1,749 invasive animal populations and currently controls 5.3% of those. One refuge particularly in need of funding is the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, which is currently allocated \$1.15 million from appropriated and headquarters dollars, but needs \$2 million per year to comply with the Service's obligations under the management agreement with the State of Florida.

One method the Service is using to combat invasive species spread is the use of "strike teams", currently numbering 12. There is a need for an additional 28 teams, at an annual cost of \$454,000 per team, or \$12.7 million. Starting in 2009, the Refuge System began spending \$1 million per year to eradicate invasive species, which has proven successful with eradication of several species from various wildlife refuges. Additional funding of \$3 million would fund 3 total projects each year.

The examples with law enforcement and invasive species control are just two of the most critical funding shortfalls. The Refuge System also faces a lack of wage-grade workers (mostly maintenance staff), biologists, and visitor services specialists, and climate change is an ever-present complication that makes planning difficult and time-consuming.

We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to the health of our nation's national wildlife refuges that funding be increased, and increased substantially. The \$14 million increase in FY2020 was desperately needed, but in reality, that is the minimum amount needed just to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs. The situation on the ground is critical. The Refuge System is bare bones right now and increased growth in urban spaces and outdoor recreation, and the impacts of climate change, place additional stress on the System. Every year, more and more refuges are closed to the public, habitat degrades, and visitors are turned away.

The Refuge Association appreciates the Subcommittee's consideration of our request of \$586 million for FY2021 for National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance.

STRATEGIC GROWTH – LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND (LWCF)

The Land and Water Conservation Fund 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. Some in Congress have argued that public lands like the Refuge System can't manage what they have and thus, all land acquisition should end. We believe that land acquisition in fee simple and as part of a targeted easement program will provide an important mix of habitats that will increase the habitat value of the Refuge System.

The Refuge Association calls on Congress to fund LWCF at \$900 million per year, with \$150 million provided in FY2021 to the USFWS.

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. The System relies on Congressional appropriations to the Refuge Fund to compensate for the shortfall between revenues and tax replacement obligations. However, declining revenues and lack of appropriations have resulted in the Service paying less

than 50% of its tax-offset obligations since 2001. Reduced funding threatens the partnerships that are so important for successful conservation, and the negative impact on local communities is felt even more starkly in difficult economic times.

We also ask that this Committee consider converting or rolling the Refuge Fund into the PILT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) program. Some refuge lands are included in PILT and others are included in the Refuge Fund. One funding mechanism for all refuge lands makes sense and would streamline the process of returning funds to local communities.

The Refuge Association requests \$50 million for the Refuge Fund in FY2021.

PARTNERSHIPS – PARTNERS FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM (PARTNERS PROGRAM)

With 75% of all fish and wildlife species dependent upon private lands for their survival, the 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 Partners Program leverages federal dollars, 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 FY2021. Such a funding level would result in an additional \$400 million worth of conservation across the nation.

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE GRANT PROGRAMS

- The North American Wetlands Conservation Act delivers an average 3:1 match for all federal standard and small grants, and has restored wetlands on wildlife refuges across the nation. The Refuge Association supports funding at the proposed authorization level of \$60 million, as passed in H.R. 925.
- State and Tribal Wildlife Grants provides funding to state wildlife agencies directed to developing and implementing programs that benefit wildlife habitat for both hunted and non-hunted species. This funding is critical for research, wildlife surveys, species restoration, and habitat management on state lands, which all contribute to a system of healthy federal and state lands. The states are essential partners to the Refuge System, and we support funding for this program of \$75 million.
- The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act program protects neotropical bird species across the Americas. As vital as refuge lands are, wildlife conservation must also take place on state and private lands, as well as in other countries, particularly for migratory species. We support FY2021 funding at \$6 million for the NMBCA and thank the subcommittee for the increases this last fiscal year for all three of these programs.

We believe that with sound conservation policy, increased 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 to accomplish this goal and appreciate your consideration of our requests. Please let me know if you have any questions.