

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 JUSTIN S. HALL
PRESIDENT, FRIENDS OF NISQUALLY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

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

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the Friends of Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex in the State of Washington, which was formed in 1999 to support the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, its associated Black River Unit, and the Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on the FY 2021 Interior Appropriations bill. The Nisqually Complex is blessed with three very unique refuges:

Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge

Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge (Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR) was established in 1974. Its creation was led by a grass roots citizen movement to aid in the protection and enhancement of the Nisqually River Delta. It is currently 4,529 acres, though its approved boundary is 7,415 acres. In 2009 the Refuge accomplished the largest estuary restoration on the West Coast when 762 acres of diked habitat was converted back to salt marsh and tidal estuary, essential rearing grounds for threatened Puget Sound Chinook salmon. The Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR is an urban refuge. Located between the cities of Olympia and Tacoma and just an hour and a half from Seattle and two hours from Portland, the Refuge receives over 220,000 visitors a year and over 10,000 students and teachers participate in the environmental education program.

Black River Unit

The Black River Unit of Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR protects a unique freshwater floodplain that is also critical habitat for the federally-threatened Oregon Spotted Frog. The Refuge Complex continues to acquire land within the 3,900 acre approved boundary and currently oversees 2,100 acres. Although the Unit hosts the largest breeding population of Oregon Spotted Frog in western Washington, management is concentrated in three small areas, as the Complex lacks the resources to increase monitoring, control invasive species, and expand habitat management along the 7-mile stretch of river within the boundary. With future expansion and acquisition of private lands within the approved boundary, and additional resources, the Refuge has the potential to not only enhance habitat for a diversity of wildlife species but also provide wildlife-dependent opportunities for people to engage in the outdoors.

Grays Harbor Wildlife Refuge

Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge (Grays Harbor NWR) was established by law in 1988 and the first land was purchased in 1990. The highlight of the Grays Harbor NWR is the one hundred thousand shorebirds that stopover during the spring migration. The Refuge is open to the public where visitors can view large flocks from the one-mile boardwalk extending into the salt marsh. Over 12,000 people visit annually, mostly in the spring. A partnership between Grays Harbor NWR, Grays Harbor Audubon Society, and the City of Hoquiam puts on the Grays Harbor Shorebird and Nature Festival during the peak spring migration the last weekend of April or first weekend in May. The three-day festival brings in more than 1,400 visitors. The Grays Harbor, Hoquiam, Aberdeen area is economically depressed and one of the purposes of the annual Festival is to increase ecotourism and

help the local communities; however, an annual festival only provides short-term benefits. Grays Harbor NWR has the potential to be a mainstay in the community and a destination for visitors if an Interpretive Center, prioritized by Congress but not funded, was supported for construction with an annual budget for staffing, operations, and maintenance. This would increase the Refuge's capacity to be a contributing member of the community and provide a venue for long-term partnerships with natural resource agencies (e.g., National Park Service, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife), organizations (Grays Harbor Audubon Society), and Native American Tribes to combine environmental education and interpretive opportunities for the public.

Friends of Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Friends of Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex was formed in 1999 to promote the conservation of the natural and cultural resources of these sites, and engage in educational, charitable, scientific, and civic activities that will increase public awareness and assist management in accomplishing Refuge goals. We provide just under \$60,000 a year to support programs at the Refuge, with our primary focus being the environmental education program.

The story of the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex and that of the entire Nisqually River watershed is one of partnerships. The original Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge was formed out of a community desire to see the Nisqually Watershed protected. That same desire led to the creation of the Nisqually River Council, which is a coordinating council of 23 federal, state, local, and tribal governments along with motivated stakeholders that works to preserve, protect, and promote the Nisqually Watershed. The Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex has been a member of the Council since its founding in 1987.

The 2009 restoration of the Nisqually estuary is shining example of how this partnership has benefited its members and the Nisqually Watershed as a whole. Plans for the restoration were presented to the Nisqually River Council, the Nisqually Indian Tribe piloted the restoration techniques on lands it had acquired in the estuary, and Nisqually River Council member agencies were tapped to help with the funding of the project. The restoration project was supported by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service funds and Ducks Unlimited contributions, as well as more than \$5 million in grants from donors including: Puget Sound Acquisition and Restoration funds from all five South Puget Sound watersheds; Salmon Recovery Funding Board funds from the Nisqually River Council; Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program funds administered by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Refuge Manager who oversaw the restoration, Jean Takekawa, said that the project would not have been possible without the partnerships and community support formed through the Nisqually River Council.

Perhaps unique in the National Refuge System is the partnership and coordination between the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex and the Nisqually Indian Tribe. The 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek was signed within the present day boundaries of the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR. In 2016, the Refuge was renamed to honor Nisqually fishing and tribal rights activist and visionary leader Billy Frank Jr. Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR manages Tribal Lands located within the estuary under a Cooperative Agreement in the same manner as they manage Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR lands. Whereas the Refuge monitors habitat and wildlife species, the Nisqually Indian Tribe provides an essential ecological component by monitoring federally-threatened Chinook salmon and steelhead fisheries within Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR. This collaborative effort within the Nisqually River Delta is the ideal partnership for protecting one of the largest restored estuaries remaining in Washington.

Challenges at the Complex

The biggest challenge at the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex is adequate funding for staff. Currently, 7 permanent employees manage over 11,000 acres of lands with Black River Unit 40 minutes from the main office and Grays Harbor Refuge an hour and a half away. The Complex has one maintenance worker to maintain the infrastructure and assist with habitat management, yet a large amount of time is spent commuting between work sites. Ideally, the Complex needs twice the staff (15) to achieve the full purposes of the Refuges, not only to benefit fish and wildlife, but also to provide quality, safe outdoor opportunities for the public. This is a common limitation for many other refuges.

Due to the lack of sufficient staffing, potential Oregon Spotted Frog habitat at the Black River Unit is being overtaken by invasive species. In fact, invasive species are a problem at all three units. Law enforcement is another significant issue at the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Currently we have ¼ of a Refuge Law Enforcement Officer. The Officer is housed 2 hours away in Sequim at the Washington Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR is located directly off Interstate 5, a major corridor between Seattle and Portland. This close proximity and easy exit and entrance onto the highway may be the reason why there is higher crime at Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR, particularly car prowls. Trespassing into closed areas set aside for wildlife and engaging in non-wildlife dependent activities are also big problems despite miles of trails throughout the refuges: for example, portrait photographers disturbing birds so their subjects can sit in the grasslands, dogs on- and off-leash on confined boardwalks and in fields and wetlands, and fishing and hunting in closed areas. A full time law enforcement presence on the refuges is needed to curb abuses and to provide education to those unaware of the rules and regulations and the reason why they are in place. Additionally, a security surveillance system for the parking lots would go a long way towards reducing the problem with car prowls.

The overall level of service to the public is dramatically different between Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR and Grays Harbor NWR. Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR has the infrastructure (office, visitor center, environmental education center, miles of trails, and maintenance shop) to host an active visitor services and education program, over 100 refuge volunteers, interpretive programs, and an annual watershed festival. Grays Harbor NWR, on the other hand, has a dedicated but small corps of volunteers and one dedicated event, the Grays Harbor Shorebird Festival. Every day, we see what can be accomplished if the infrastructure and staff are available to serve the public and the benefits to surrounding communities. Grays Harbor NWR and, in the future, Black River Unit have so much potential to be as popular a destination for visitors, including school groups – if supported by adequate public resources and appropriate staffing.

The education program at the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR is incredible and is the direction for the future focus of this urban refuge. The Refuge is a popular regional destination, especially on clear (or non-rainy) Pacific Northwest days, and regularly exceeds its visitation capacity due to current resource limitations. This is also true for the education program, which serves a remarkable 10,000 students each year, but continues to face growing demand from school districts and teachers. With additional staff, the program can be expanded to provide environmental education outreach within the communities and follow-up visits to the Refuge.

Currently, the environmental education staff is comprised of an Education Program Manager and two AmeriCorps members. These positions are provided through a contract with a partner non-profit and funded through a combination of station funds, Friends of Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex funds, and competitive grants. The Refuge Complex would like to move the program fully in house, but the permanent staff position is not on the organizational chart and current annual

budgets cannot accommodate the full position. Approval for adding the environmental education staff to the Complex's organizational chart will provide the capacity to develop a more sustainable outreach program and implement urban outreach goals. This in turn, allows Friends' funds to support other refuge needs (e.g., visitor services, volunteers, maintenance of visitor facilities, etc.).

Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually NWR is a priority urban refuge and is well poised to help fulfill the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director's priorities: the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, Engaging in the Outdoors, and Youth Education. In 2016, the Complex submitted an Urban Refuge proposal in hopes of receiving the additional base funding (\$1,000,000) to implement the new program. We were not selected for the Urban Refuge funding; however, the proposal still serves as a guidance and plan for future opportunities to reach out into urban communities such as the Department of Defense at Joint Base Lewis McChord, the Nisqually Indian Tribe, our neighboring communities of Olympia and Tacoma and our nearby major metropolitan areas of Seattle and Portland. Our location right off Interstate 5 makes us an ideal destination to engage folks with the Refuge System and a great jumping off point for education staff to head out into the community. We want to help create the next generation of people who will actively take care of our nation's lands.

As it is now, our Friends group and volunteers are picking up the slack and smoothing out the inconsistencies in the funding to the best of our ability. However, volunteers and outside staff are not a sustainable model for our Refuge System.

National Funding and the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Overall, the National Wildlife Refuge System requires at least \$900 million in Operations and Maintenance Funding to be considered fully funded. At this level, all refuges would be fully staffed, with adequate maintenance, biological, hunting, fishing, environmental education, and interpretation programs. We ask that you work towards the overall goal of \$900 million in annual funding. In support of that goal we request that this subcommittee allocate \$586 million in funding for the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance fund for FY 2021.

This request of \$586 million, an increase of \$84 million over FY 2020 appropriations, would greatly impact our refuge. The Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge Complex would be better able to hire the staff needed to:

- Have an adequate level of law enforcement
- Increase our Urban Refuge outreach
- Control invasive species to benefit a diversity of fish and wildlife
- Restore critical habitat for Oregon Spotted Frog
- Construct and operate the promised Interpretive Center at Grays Harbor NWR
- Provide additional wildlife-dependent opportunities at Grays Harbor NWR and Black River Unit
- Further build out our environmental education programs

Our Refuges are the face of public lands for many people in the South Puget Sound community, as they are for communities across the country. We need full funding to ensure that they stay protected, accessible, and stewarded for the generations to come.

Thank you for your consideration.