



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

MAR 31 2022

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Chair
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Huffman:

Enclosed are responses prepared by the Department of the Interior to the questions for the record submitted following the January 20, 2022, legislative hearing on H.R. 4057, Albatross and Petrel Conservation Act, H.R. 4716, Refuge From Cruel Trapping Act of 2021, H.R. 4677, New York-New Jersey Watershed Protection Act, H.R. 4092, Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2021, H.R. 5973, Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Reauthorization Act of 2021, H.R. 6023, Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp Reauthorization Act of 2021, and H.R. 1546, Combating Online Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2021.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to you on this matter.

Sincerely,

Christopher P. Salotti
Legislative Counsel
Office of Congressional and
Legislative Affairs

Enclosure
cc: The Honorable Cliff Bentz
Ranking Member

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Questions from Chairman Huffman

There are currently 568 refuges within the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Based on the FWS trapping website, trapping currently occurs on 242 refuges across 46 U.S. states and the U.S. Minor Outlying Islands, equating to nearly 43% (42.6%) of the entire refuge system.

Question 1. *On how many refuges does trapping for commercial and recreational purposes occur? Of the 242 refuges where trapping currently occurs, how many allow a) steel-jaw leghold traps; b) Conibear or kill-type bodygripping traps; c) snares or cable restraints for recreational or commercial purposes?*

Response: When public trapping is permitted on National Wildlife Refuges, we do so in accordance with state laws, state regulations, and state licensing requirements, with additional refuge-specific regulations, as needed, to ensure consistency with applicable federal statutes. To be consistent with state requirements and meet refuge-specific objectives, decisions on trapping for commercial and recreational purposes, and associated information collection, are maintained at the individual refuge level. Trapping on the refuges occurs in various combinations, meaning some may only conduct trapping for management purposes, while others allow commercial or recreational trapping, and some allow both. Again, this is planned, implemented, and monitored at the individual refuge level.

The FWS has stated on their website that trapping is used within the NWRS as a wildlife management tool. The agency also views the activity as a “legitimate recreational and economic activity,” but that trapping for these purposes may not be allowed on all refuges, even on refuges where trapping for management purposes occurs.

Question 1. *Of the 242 national wildlife refuges where trapping currently occurs, how many allow trapping for management purposes only? In the 242 refuges where trapping currently occurs, how many refuges use steel-jaw leghold traps, Conibear or kill-type body gripping traps, snares or cable restraints for wildlife management purposes, or a combination of the aforementioned traps? And what types of body-gripping traps are most frequently used? For what the purposes or scenarios are body-gripping traps chosen as a wildlife management method on refuges?*

Response: There are currently 226 refuges that have approved management plans allowing for the use of trapping for management purposes. However, not every refuge utilizes trapping every year but instead only when needed to meet refuge management objectives. In 2021, only 100 refuges used trapping for management purposes.

Body-gripping trap types used on refuges include legholds, spring traps, and snares, with the conibear trap used most frequently. Body-gripping traps are used to remove pest species (including invasive species) to protect refuge infrastructure such as water control structures,

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dike/impoundment roads, and wildlife habitat. In other situations, trapping occurs to protect threatened or endangered species.

Question 2. Who conducts trapping for wildlife management purposes on national wildlife refuges? Is it FWS employees, employees of other federal agencies, private contractors, a combination of a-c, or some other entity? (Please specify)?

Response: Trapping for wildlife management purposes on national wildlife refuges is conducted by a combination of Service employees, other federal employees, state employees, and private contractors. Factors such as staffing capacity, expertise requirements, and availability help to determine who conducts trapping for wildlife management purposes.

Question 3. Which non-lethal methods are used for wildlife management purposes on refuges? How does the cost of their deployment compare to the use of body-gripping traps for similar management purposes?

Response: Trapping must meet management objectives that have been determined in each refuge's planning documents. Both lethal and non-lethal alternatives are part of the analyses. Non-lethal methods used on refuges may include predator proof fencing, live trapping with humane killing, and live trapping feral dogs/cats to be taken to a shelter. Live trapping animals is more complex and costly due to factors such as live traps are much larger and can be difficult to bring into the trapping site; they require more frequent trap checks; and the disposition of the live animal may pose higher risks to employees compared to the use of body-gripping traps for similar management purposes. Additionally, live trapping costs are driven by staffing capacity, logistics, and complexity of the live trapping effort - often preventing the ability to achieve management objectives, and sometimes by the need to contract out the work. It is important to emphasize that many states do not allow the release of invasive or pest animals to another location.

Question 4. What types of body-gripping traps do the FWS or other federal agencies or federal contractors ("federal personnel") use for management purposes on national wildlife refuges? Is there a FWS-wide policy on how to decide when body-gripping traps may be used for wildlife management? Are non-lethal methods attempted first? Are there any other body-gripping traps the FWS or other federal agencies or federal contractors use for wildlife management purposes? If yes, what traps are used?

Response: The Service decides whether to use trapping as a wildlife management tool in accordance with the conservation mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of the individual refuge. The bureau conducts a robust analysis on a station-by-station basis to determine if trapping is the appropriate management tool.

Trapping must meet the management objectives that have been determined in each refuge's planning documents. Both lethal and non-lethal alternatives are part of the analyses. In addition, the Service coordinates with appropriate state wildlife agencies and conducts consultations

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pursuant to required NEPA documentation and ESA consultation (if necessary). When deciding on how best to manage wildlife, the cost and efficacy of live trapping are considered, and non-lethal control is used when appropriate. There is often no effective way to move or dispose of live-trapped animals as, in many cases, animals cannot be released somewhere else due to state laws and regulations. Nutria are an example of animals that cannot be released back into the wild. In addition, the large number of pest species to remove often prohibits the ability to successfully or cost-effectively live trap. The Service and other federal agencies or contractors may use body gripping traps, for wildlife management purposes, that include legholds, spring traps, and snares, with the conibear trap used most frequently.

While the FWS website lists the refuges on which trapping currently occurs, more information is needed on how much trapping occurs on each refuge and for what purposes. More information is also needed on what types of body-gripping traps are being used, what animals—target or non-target species—are being trapped, and in what numbers. Lastly, more information is needed on other management tools available to the FWS, including non-lethal methods of management and control, how they are currently being deployed, and the cost of their deployment.

Question 1. How many non-target animals (not limited to companion animals, service animals, and protected species) are caught each year in body-gripping traps on refuges where trapping occurs? Please provide data for 2019-2021 if possible. How many humans have been caught in body-gripping traps on refuges where trapping occurs? What are the steps that FWS take to ensure non-target animals and humans do not get caught in body-gripping traps on a refuge where trapping occurs?

Response: Partial year data collected for required congressional reporting in 2020 and 2021 indicate that fewer than 150 non-target animals were trapped. A review of our records management system was completed and there were no records found regarding humans being caught in traps. For human safety, each refuge with a trapping program posts a sign that is accessible to the public to alert the public that trapping occurs therein. Each refuge with a trapping program also provides this information on its website.

To prevent non-target animals from being captured, a variety of methods are used, including appropriate trap placement (e.g., areas away from non-target animals, avoiding time of year and time of day), camouflage, dyes, trap covers with openings designed for target animals, frequent trap checks, and placing traps in tunnels with excluder devices.

Question 2. Does the FWS track and maintain data or records on the trapping that occurs within the NWRs? If the agency does not collect this information, what steps would need to be undertaken to implement a data tracking system? If the agency does collect this information, what steps would need to be undertaken to make these data available to the public?

Response: When public trapping is permitted on National Wildlife Refuges, we do so in accordance with state laws, state regulations, and state licensing requirements, with additional refuge-specific regulations as needed to ensure consistency with applicable federal statutes. To

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be consistent with state requirements and also meet refuge-specific objectives, decisions on trapping activities are made and associated information collection is maintained at the individual refuge level. To make trapping data available to the public would require the development of national database and additional staffing capacity at the field, Regional, and Headquarters level to collect and enter data, conduct quality control, summarize, and maintain the data. Additional personnel would be needed to make the data available to the public on local refuge websites and our national FWS trapping website.

Question 3. Are recreational/commercial trappers who deploy body-gripping traps on refuges required to provide information to the refuge or the FWS—including but not limited to the number of traps set, the types of traps set, the location of the traps, the number and species of target and non-target animals they catch, the method(s) used to kill animals found alive in the traps, other? Additionally, does the FWS have an agency-wide policy in place regarding the trapping that occurs on refuges for wildlife management purposes regarding trap-check times, where traps may be set within the refuge, when during the year traps may or may not be set, approved kill or release methods for animals caught in traps, types of body-gripping traps that may be used, procedures for keeping a record of non-target animals caught, or any other pertinent information?

Response: Recreational and commercial trappers who deploy body-gripping traps on refuges are often required to provide information to the station where trapping activities occur, but more commonly through voluntary or mandated requirements under state regulation. This information can be used to assess how wildlife management objectives are being met for the local station. The State of Alaska is a special case, because recreational and commercial trapping is allowed by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) under applicable State and federal laws and regulations. ANILCA states that, except in emergencies, any regulations prescribing such restrictions relating to trapping shall be put into effect only after consultation with the appropriate State agency having responsibility over hunting, fishing, and trapping activities. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game does not require trappers to report. Trapping data is received from a voluntary survey sent to those who purchased trapping licenses.

As previously noted, the Service decides whether to use trapping as a wildlife management tool in accordance with the conservation mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of the refuge and conducts a robust analysis on a station-by-station basis to determine if trapping is the appropriate management tool. Trapping must meet the management objectives that have been determined in each refuges' comprehensive conservation plan and associated trapping plan. Both lethal and non-lethal alternatives are part of the analysis. The FWS Refuge Manual's Trapping Policy, 7 RM 15, applies to trapping for both management purposes and for recreational and commercial trapping and states that trapping programs will be conducted in the most professional manner possible, using the most humane, selective, and effective technique that is reasonably practical.

Requirements, such as trap check times, are intended to reduce animal suffering and non-target captures. General trapping conditions stipulate species and numbers to be taken, seasons and hours, areas where trapping is permitted or prohibited, methods of trapping, methods of

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dispatching animals found alive in traps, methods of carcass disposal, procedures for submission of reports of target and non-target species and animals suspected to be diseased, provisions governing use of refuge vegetation, provisions governing trap and equipment removal, and other provisions as required. Additional, more restrictive, conditions may be required by the refuge manager to be consistent with guidelines of the State wildlife agency.