

**Testimony of Congressman Hakeem Jeffries**  
**Hearing on H.R. 6734 the “Keep America’s Refuges Operational Act of 2022”**  
**Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife**  
**March 29, 2022**

Good Afternoon.

I would like to start by thanking Chairman Huffman and Ranking Member Bentz for hosting today’s hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify on H.R. 6734, the “Keep America’s Refuges Operational Act.”

This commonsense and bipartisan legislation reauthorizes the National Wildlife Refuge System volunteer, community partnership and education program. Because of this program, Refuges can continue to benefit from volunteer support, which has successfully saved taxpayer dollars, generated millions for local economies and promoted jobs in communities across America.

In the 115th Congress, this Committee favorably considered an identical reauthorization bill, which was signed into law in April 2018. Since that time, the program has continued to leverage volunteer hours allowing Wildlife Refuges to remain accessible for millions of visitors each year. It is my hope that we can again work across the aisle to support our National Wildlife Refuge System.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is comprised of over 560 refuges located in every U.S. state and territory. They make up over 800 million acres of habitat dedicated to the conservation of fish and wildlife. Each year, National Wildlife Refuges host more than 60 million visitors, generating over \$3 billion in revenue for local economies and supporting over 40,000 jobs.

Visitors come from all over to explore, hunt, fish and enjoy America’s natural beauty. Refuges help to mold the next generation of conservationists and outdoor-enthusiasts by providing learning experiences and cherished memories.

But this wouldn’t be possible without the dedicated Refuge volunteers and community partners who donate their time and energy to keep Refuges open and operational. During FY 2021, 11,732 volunteers gave 648,879 hours of their time, which is the equivalent of nearly 318 full-time employees or a contribution of more than \$18.5 million.

Volunteers provide critical support to full-time staff in numerous ways. They operate visitor’s centers, conduct fish and wildlife population surveys, maintain visitor structures, roads and paths, fight invasive species and protect native plants and animals. They also help Refuges raise money for key infrastructure projects and visitor services.

Volunteers are of all ages, come from diverse walks of life, work in many different capacities and truly represent the gorgeous mosaic of the American people. But one thing they all have in

common is their committed to preserving our country's natural beauty so that we all can enjoy it for years to come.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the cosponsors of this legislation, Chairman Grijalva and Representatives Graves, Thompson and Sablan, with a special thanks to Representative Wittman for partnering with me again to advance this bill. I greatly appreciate your leadership and longstanding support for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Supporting this bill means supporting the economic benefits to be gained from being good stewards of the environment God has given to us.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration of H.R. 6734.