



Summary Report-Sharing Sessions 2023

Executive Summary

For more than a century, Congress has established a network of public lands dedicated to the conservation, protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. These lands and water that are essential for threatened and endangered species are under the responsibility of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This agency provides outdoor space for Americans to learn, experience and support conservation of its natural resources for generations to come. Americans support the protection of their public lands and feel it is important to protect lands for their conservation and economic values they provide to local communities (Defenders of Wildlife Factsheet, 2022)

The over 500 refuges, and 70 fish hatcheries support public environmental education for youth programs, provide a place for outdoor recreational activities (e.g., hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and nature photography) and encourage overall health benefits by the outdoor experience. Since 2010 the US Fish and Wildlife Service has seen a significant reduction in funding and loss of over 800 staff positions (NWRA, 2023 Fact Sheet; “Funding Challenges of the National Wildlife Refuge System”). This detrimental loss in staff positions has also resulted in critical loss of operations and maintenance funding tied to each position. Thus, this loss also results in the loss of operation capabilities in addition to loss of positions. Over the past decade, reduced staffing and funding erosion have contributed to significant impacts experienced across the refuges and hatcheries by the American public.

This report summarizes the current impacts shared by many Friends organizations across the country felt because of the current reduced staffing crisis. From the 3 sharing sessions attended by Friends organizations across the country 4 general categories of impacts were discovered:

1. law enforcement,
2. visitor services,
3. biological, and
4. maintenance and facilities.

In general, refuges have experienced increased crimes (i.e., poaching, litter, immigration issues, illicit sex and drug activities), increased safety risks for visitors, increased closure of

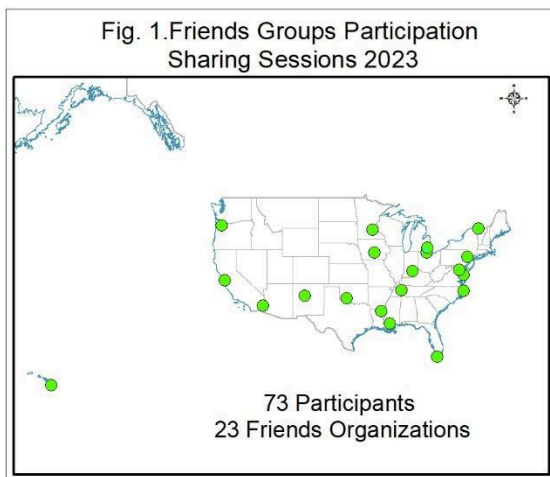
visitor centers and reduced operations of environmental education programs for youth and adults, reduction of volunteer opportunities, increased invasion of non-native species, lack of habitat management for wildlife and endangered species, loss of biodiversity, and increased concern over erosion of infrastructure including buildings, water control structures, fences, trails, roads and equipment in the absence of maintenance funds and positions.

Friends Sharing Sessions – Shared Stories Across the Country

The primary purpose of Friends organizations is to bring non-governmental assistance to the Service through volunteer efforts, private contributions, community outreach, and other activities. (FWS Manual Chapter 633.1)

The goal of the recently held “Sharing Sessions” was to bring Refuge and Hatchery Friends organizations together virtually to share information regarding the impacts of inadequate funding and reduced staffing. Friends organizations were invited to share their observations, examples and stories about impacts seen on refuges and hatcheries across the nation. Following the three virtual sessions, information obtained was compiled based on the comments of the participants. General themes were developed and used to help Friends organizations build messages to local, regional, and national representatives to make them aware of the need for adequate funding and staffing for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service programs.

Virtual sessions were held January 25th, Feb 2nd, and Feb 9th. While scheduled for one hour, sessions generally lasted nearly 90 minutes to allow participants a chance to share.



73 Participants attended the three-sharing sessions. Participants included representatives from across the country from west (Hawaii, Tualatin River) east (Missisquoi, Virginia) and north (Detroit Lakes, Ottawa) to south (Southeast Louisiana, Keys) (Fig. 1).

For each session, participants were asked to describe the challenges Friends Organizations are facing locally due to reduced funding and staffing.

Law Enforcement Impacts - Public Safety Concerns

Among the biggest issues described by Friends organizations is the concern for reductions in the law enforcement program. Friends reported that chronic understaffing of law

enforcement staff has resulted in increased illegal and illicit activities on public refuge lands and increased safety risk to the public visiting their public lands. Activities described included increased dumping, poaching, destruction of property, illicit sex and drug activities, border issues, increased risk to public visitors, including youth and closure of public areas (e.g., wildlife drives). As a result, increased pressure is put on local law enforcement authorities. In some cases, one refuge law enforcement officer is assigned for an entire state or for many refuges 5 hours or more apart. Not only does this discourage visitors but also discourages a succession of new officers joining the Service.

Visitor Services Impacts - Loss of Conservation Education for Americans

Like the lack of law enforcement capabilities, Friends described detrimental impacts to visitor services programs, public events, and visitor center operations across the country. These detrimental impacts occur when visitation has dramatically increased. This loss or drastic reduction in visitor services staffing results in erosion of public engagement with local communities. Friends described loss of education programs, especially youth programs, and public events (e.g., youth fishing rodeos, wildlife-oriented festivals, refuge week celebrations, ranger programs, etc.). Visitor centers are reducing hours of operations or altogether closing, resulting in a drastic loss of connection with local communities and negatively impacting Friends ability to generate revenue to support the site. With no professional staff available to provide the necessary training, coordination and organization of volunteer support, programs are reduced or eliminated due to a deficiency of volunteers. In addition, hatcheries have no funding for Visitor Services Programs despite the interest in public education. To make up for the lack of professional staffing, some programs have relied on inexperienced interns to carry out the duties of full-time professional staff.

Wildlife and Habitat Management - Loss of Biodiversity and Endangered Species

During the sharing sessions Friends described serious concerns about the capabilities of wildlife and habitat management. Specifically, reduced staffing has led to the inability to maintain habitats for wildlife populations as more and more invasive species are seen taking over natural habitats. This is occurring from the loss of staffing to adequately monitor and manage wildlife populations and their habitats. There is a lack of resources available to conduct scientific work in support of wildlife management in the absence of professional biologist staff. 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act and it is especially concerning that there is there is a decrease in funding to monitor trust species that the Refuge System is held accountable for.

Maintenance and Facilities - Higher Safety Risks to Public and Staff

Per the FWS website “Keeping infrastructure safe, accessible, and cost-effective is a top priority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (FWS Infrastructure website page, April 6, 2023). The responsibility to maintain facilities and infrastructure on refuges and hatcheries is solely the responsibility of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Reduced funding of positions and operations dollars has resulted in the erosion of facilities due to a huge, deferred maintenance backlog.

In the sharing sessions it has been made clear that reductions in maintenance staff and inability to keep up with deferred maintenance projects at the current levels has produced significant safety concerns for both service staff and the public visiting refuges and hatcheries. While it is the responsibility of the Fish and Wildlife Service to adequately maintain a safe environment for the visiting public and its employees, Friends and volunteers are heavily relied upon to complete maintenance repairs in the staff shortfall. This is not acceptable, and Friends should not be held responsible for these repairs. Emergency efforts underway are addressed to reduce the chance of mishaps or worse for the visiting public and employees. Examples of Friends stepping up to fill in the gaps include paying for necessary roofing repairs to keep a visitor center open, emergency boardwalk repairs to avoid public injury, paying tens of thousands of dollars for routine maintenance work, and paying for routine cleaning services. Friends funds are being diverted to cover routine maintenance costs. Other impacts observed are closures of facilities, wildlife drives and portions of refuges due to maintenance backlogs, inefficiencies with contracting, lack of supervision of volunteers, eroded facilities, poor equipment conditions, inability to coordinate and organize volunteers to complete maintenance projects.

General Staffing Comments - Complexing Produces Loss of Efficiency.

From the sharing sessions, it was made clear that the systematic complexing of refuges across the country has contributed to increased workloads on an already taxed staff. Refuges hundreds of miles apart (some up to 5 hours apart) have been complexed with minimum or no staffing resulting in less capability across the entire complex. This is especially true in maintenance, biology, law enforcement and visitor services programs. Staffing has been cut in many complexes by 50 %. The existing staffing levels cannot sustain the amount of work required by 4 or 5 or in some cases 9 refuges spread out across hundreds of miles with one biologist, or one law enforcement officer, for example. Friends believe an evaluation of the refuge complexing initiative recommended by H. Dale Hall, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2006 is in order. The efficiency desired has been lost due to over complexing and reducing staff.

Friends noted in the sharing sessions that there is a significant decrease in the number of staff by 25 to 50% at most refuges which impacts the volunteer and outreach programs.

This shortfall has been due to loss of staff from funding positions, lack of incentives to keep highly qualified staff, retirements with no replacements or replacements with lower grade positions resulting in less qualified personnel, hiring freezes and expansion of refuges in absence of increased staffing. It is noted that the loss of staff positions also produces less operational funding for maintenance and other refuge operations.

Conclusion

We thank Friends organizations for sharing the impacts of underfunding on refuges and hatcheries across the nation. Friends will continue to share their stories and messages advocating for increase funding for these very special places that are committed *to the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats with the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.*

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