

**TESTIMONY OF JIM KURTH, CHIEF, NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM,
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE
THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE ON NATURAL
RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS, And
INSULAR AFFAIRS, REGARDING H.R. 4402, THE GUAM MILITARY TRAINING
AND READINESS ACT OF 2014**

April 29, 2014

Good afternoon Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Jim Kurth, Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today regarding H.R. 4402, the *Guam Military Training and Readiness Act of 2014*. H.R. 4402 would have adverse impacts on the operation of Guam National Wildlife Refuge, which serves a critical role in conserving the natural and cultural heritage of Guam and is an important recreational destination for over 92,000 Guam residents and tourists each year. We look forward to continuing to work with the Navy expeditiously to fully assess all options to ensuring that the Navy's critical training mission is accomplished in a manner that minimizes deleterious impacts to the refuge and the species it was established to conserve. For these reasons and those outlined below, DOI requests additional time to work with the Department of the Navy in finding a resolution of the issues surrounding the Marine Corps critical training requirement.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Today, the Refuge System encompasses more than 150 million acres of land and water. It is the world's premier network of public lands devoted to the conservation of wildlife and habitat, and provides some of our country's best outdoor recreational opportunities. The Refuge System preserves a diverse array of land, wetland, and ocean ecosystems—from Guam, American Samoa, and other remote Pacific islands, north to the high arctic of northern Alaska, east to the rugged coastline of Maine, and south to the tropical U.S. Virgin Islands. In sum, the Refuge System contains 562 refuge units with at least one in every state.

The Refuge System offers about 47 million visitors per year the opportunity to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, learn about nature, and pursue other outdoor activities. These visitors make refuges an important economic driver, generating nearly \$2.4 billion for local economies each year. In Fiscal Year 2011, the Refuge System supported more than 35,000 private-sector jobs. Refuges provide local communities with a host of ecosystem services such as improved water quality, and play a key role in supporting community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and connect people with nature.

Guam National Wildlife Refuge

Guam National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established on October 1, 1993. The refuge is comprised of three units: the Andersen Air Force Base Overlay Refuge Unit, the Navy Overlay Refuge Unit, and the Ritidian Unit. The Ritidian Unit is comprised of 1,217 acres, including near-shore habitat, owned in fee by United States and administered by the Service. The other two units of Guam NWR total approximately 22,456 acres, and are overlays on property managed by the Department of Defense as part of Air Force and Navy installations.

The Guam NWR was primarily established to protect and recover nine species listed under the Endangered Species Act and endemic to the Mariana Archipelago, including the Guam Micronesian kingfisher, Guam rail, Mariana crow, Mariana fruit bat, Vanikoro swiftlet, Mariana common moorhen, two species of sea turtles, and a tree known as the hayun lagu. The 385-acre terrestrial portion of the Ritidian Unit is designated as Critical Habitat under the Endangered Species Act for the Guam rail, Mariana crow, and Mariana fruit bat.

At the time the Guam NWR was established, 12 other species of birds and the little Mariana fruit bat had already been extirpated from Guam due to predation by the non-native invasive brown tree snake (BTS). With abundant prey and no natural predators, the BTS population grew rapidly and spread throughout Guam. The BTS population continues to plague most of the island today and is a major threat to local species.

Guam NWR serves a critical role on the island by providing an opportunity for Guam's native species to be preserved for the benefit of future generations of Guam residents and other Americans. Guam NWR provides habitat for the last remaining populations of the Mariana fruit bat and the hayun lagu on Guam, and the best remaining habitat for repatriation and recovery of other extirpated species. For example, recent installation of predator-proof fencing (at the cost of \$866,000) around 125 acres of native forest on Guam NWR has allowed the Service to move beyond simply maintaining remnant populations of native species and enhance recovery efforts.

Ongoing wildlife conservation and management work on Guam NWR by the Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Department of Defense, and other partners is leading and informing efforts to contain and reverse the spread of BTS elsewhere in the Pacific, particularly Hawai'i. Guam serves as a beachhead to combat the spread of BTS elsewhere. If not properly contained, the approximately \$4.79 million spent annually (2009-2012) on Guam would need to be multiplied and spent on other islands throughout the Pacific to halt the spread of this destructive species. If BTS establish on O'ahu in Hawai'i, their population would reach an estimated 7.5 million snakes on the island alone (Burnett et al. 2008). The associated economic losses from power outages and medical costs from snake bites could reach \$761 million annually (Shwiff et al. 2010). Tourism could be impacted as well, with an annual cost of \$138 million to almost \$1.4 billion. Guam NWR is the Pacific Island's "Ground Zero" in the fight against this deadly invasive species.

Guam NWR also provides important local recreational and educational opportunities for over 92,000 residents and tourists per year. Of these 92,000 visitors, an estimated 35,000 local residents use the Guam NWR as a place for wildlife-dependent recreation, 45,000 tourists visit and provide economic benefits to the surrounding communities, and 12,000 school children come to the Guam NWR each year to learn about conservation and the island's traditional habitat. To welcome visitors, Guam NWR recently opened a Nature Center where exhibits introduce visitors to what Guam's natural world was like over 500 years ago before widespread development. The new Nature Center is the only environmental education facility on-island, and is a vital tool for communicating the value of stewardship for Guam's environment.

Guam NWR protects important cultural resources as well. The refuge contains the oldest known and longest-lasting ancient Chamorro settlement site. Archaeological evidence of Guam's prehistoric Chamorro culture can be found throughout the Guam NWR. Visitors are able to participate in forest and cave tours to view pictographs, ancient Chamorro pottery pieces and latte stones, which are the symbol of the Chamorro people.

H.R. 4402, Guam Military Training and Readiness Act of 2014

H.R. 4402, the "Guam Military Training and Readiness Act of 2014," would authorize the Secretary of the Navy to establish a surface danger zone (SDZ) over a portion of the Ritidian Unit of the Guam National Wildlife Refuge to support the operation of a live-fire training range complex (LFRTC) on Andersen Air Force, Northwest Field. The legislation would deem operation of the LFRTC on Anderson Air Force Base, Northwest Field, and the associated SDZ, as authorized uses of the refuge – therefore overriding the Service's ability to make this determination under the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd).

The Secretary of the Navy would also be authorized to prohibit access to the refuge, including by Service staff, for the minimum amount of time necessary to meet training requirements, which may impact the Service's ability to manage the Ritidian Unit. We are currently engaged in cordial and frequent discussions with the Department of the Navy to address the potential impact of access restrictions to, for example, the recently installed predator fence (where the intrusion of a single pregnant/gravid female predator could undo hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of work).

The Refuge is designated Critical Habitat for several federally listed species and is the prime repatriation site for species extirpated by introduced BTS. Guam NWR is an important site for distinct populations of species endemic to the Mariana Archipelago. Any potential impacts to these species would be addressed through the Section 7 consultation process under the ESA.

Additionally, access to the refuge by the public would be restricted by passage and implementation of H.R. 4402. Guam NWR includes the island's best public beach, the oldest known and longest-lasting ancient Chamorro settlement site, and the only place on the island where visitors can experience the Guam's abundant natural resources and fragile ecosystem unimpaired by human activity.

If H.R. 4402 is enacted, operations and availability of Guam NWR could be impacted, potentially compromising the wildlife heritage of Guam, recreational opportunities for residents and tourists, and the BTS interdiction program.

Current Status

As part of the NEPA process, on April 18, 2014, the Department of Defense issued a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for their operational changes on Guam, including seven alternatives for the proposed LFRTC. We believe this process will allow the Service and other agencies to have important input on alternative training sites, and allow the public to weigh in on their concerns.

The Service recognizes the importance of the training mission of the Nation's military installations and we support that mission, just as the Department of Defense supports our conservation mission. There are a great many examples of thriving cooperative relationships between the Service and military installations.

Conclusion

The Service is a strong partner with the DOD and looks forward to continuing to work with them and this subcommittee on a solution that addresses the imperative need for training of our Nation's troops and the conservation of our Nation's natural resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.