

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2020 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
FEBRUARY 20, 2019**

**SUBMITTED BY CAROLINE G. BROUWER, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS FOR
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION**

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

I appreciate the invitation to testify at Public Witness Day, and am pleased to submit testimony on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The Refuge Association and its membership of representatives from Refuge Friends organizations and concerned citizens thank you for your support for the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) particularly for the small funding increases over the last several fiscal years. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on the FY2020 Interior Appropriations bill and respectfully request:

- \$586 million for the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) accounts of the Refuge System;
- \$900 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), with \$150 million allocated for the FWS, including these high priority requests:
 - \$10 million for Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area (FL);
 - \$6 million for Silvio O. Conte NFWR (CT, NH, VT, MA);
 - \$3 million for Cache River NWR (AR);
 - \$2 million for Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (WY, ID, UT);
 - \$2 million for Blackwater NWR (MD);
 - \$2 million for Clarks River NWR (KY);
 - \$8 million for Hakalau Forest NWR (HI); and
 - \$8 million for the Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area (ND, SD);
- \$50 million for the Refuge Fund;
- \$75 million for the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program;
- \$75 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program;
- \$47.6 million for the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund;
- \$6 million for the Neotropical Migratory Bird Fund.

All of the programs delineated above add value both to wildlife conservation in all 50 states and to the economic activity in local communities. Wildlife refuges and the NWRS average almost \$5 in economic return for every \$1 appropriated. By far, the biggest challenge facing the Refuge System today is the completely inadequate budgets that fail to cover the cost of maintaining the incredibly rich and diverse wildlife habitats that make up the Refuge System.

The funding gap that has arisen due to low budget allocations over the last decade has degraded critical wildlife habitat and imperil important species. We must change this trajectory.

The Refuge System is currently responsible for 850 million acres of land and water. Of that total, 750 million acres are included in the 5 Marine National Monuments created by Presidents Bush

and Obama, yet very little additional funding has been provided to these water resources since their initial creation in 2006.

The Service is also expanding its outreach by working to make conservation more accessible to the American public via urban refuges and urban partnerships. To begin bridging these gaps, the Refuge Association urges Congress to fund these critical programs that leverage federal dollars and serve as economic drivers.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM – OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

The Refuge Association chairs the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a 25-year-old diverse coalition of 23 sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing more than 16 million Americans that supports increased funding for the Refuge System. CARE estimates the NWRS needs **at least \$900 million annually** to manage its 100 million land acres and 750 million acres of marine national monuments. Yet the Refuge System is currently funded at roughly half that amount – \$488 million or 57¢ per acre.

The Refuge System cannot fulfill its obligation to the American public, our wildlife, and 53.6 million annual visitors without increases in maintenance and operation funds.

Funding for the Refuge System has declined substantially from a funding level of \$503 million in FY10 to its current FY2019 \$488 million – \$92 million below the \$580 million it needs just to keep pace with inflation and salary increases. This has forced the Service to cut back on programs and create efficiencies whenever possible – efficiencies that are sometimes harmful or even dangerous. For example, many refuges have been placed into complexes, where staff travel sometimes large distances to juggle duties on multiple refuges. Three states have no refuge law enforcement staff on the ground, and thirteen others have only one law enforcement officer for the entire state. Several states have no visitor services or environmental education staff.

Even with these challenges, the Service has risen to the occasion and taken care of the lands and waters entrusted to it. Staff work overtime and on weekends. Law enforcement staff are pulled off their duty station to cover shifts on the southern border. And the Service **has cut its deferred maintenance backlog in half** from \$2.7 billion to \$1.16 billion. But budget cuts also led to the loss of 488 positions since FY11. Because most refuge lands and waters are highly managed to provide optimal habitat conditions, this deterioration in staffing has had a dramatic impact resulting in significant declines in habitat protection and management, hunting, fishing, volunteerism and scientific research.

Visitation to all refuges jumped by 8 million over the last six years. Overall, more people are looking to recreate on wildlife refuges, yet understaffed refuges struggle to provide those opportunities. Reductions in visitor services can be extremely troubling to constituencies who want to visit. At Tualatin River NWR in Oregon, elimination of the visitor services position cut all teacher training workshops and community outreach. Prior to this loss, over 100 teachers were trained each year at the refuge. Due to budget shortfalls, Patuxent Research Refuge in Maryland – the refuge closest to the nation’s capital – has cut back on school programs, reduced its visitor service staff by half, and even closed its visitor’s center every Thursday.

Equally troubling is a 15% drop in the number of volunteers since FY2011. At a time when record numbers of Americans are retiring and have the capability and desire to give back, the Service’s ability to oversee their efforts has been curtailed. Volunteers provide an additional

20% of work on our national wildlife refuges, yet they are being turned away when the System needs them the most.

We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to the health of our nation's national wildlife refuges that funding be increased, and increased substantially. We are asking that your subcommittee provide nearly a \$100 million increase, and we do not ask this lightly. We understand the budget challenges this committee faces, but the situation on the ground is critical. The Refuge System is bare bones right now and cannot face more cuts. Every year, more and more refuges are closed to the public, habitat degrades, and visitors are turned away.

The Refuge Association appreciates the Subcommittee's consideration of our request of \$586 million for FY2020 for National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance.

STRATEGIC GROWTH – LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND (LWCF)

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is an essential tool for protecting the integrity of the Refuge System and is the primary funding source for land and conservation easement acquisition by federal land agencies. Some in Congress have argued that public lands like the Refuge System can't manage what they have and thus, all land acquisition should end. We believe that land acquisition in fee simple and as part of a targeted easement program will provide an important mix of habitats that will only increase the habitat value of the Refuge System.

Conservation easements add very little to operations and management costs, compared to other kinds of protected lands. In many cases, land acquisition is required to conserve intact and functional natural habitat. The Refuge System is responsible for safeguarding population levels of a range of species, including many that require specific habitat conditions, such as beaches for sea turtles and isolated springs for endemic desert fish. Other species require multiple habitat types during their life cycle. By acquiring critical habitat areas and linking conserved lands, the Refuge System enhances the integrity of the System and strengthens our network of habitat to give wildlife space and time to respond to changes, whether from climate or changing land use patterns.

The Refuge Association calls on Congress to fund LWCF at \$900 million per year, with \$150 million provided in FY2020 to the USFWS, including the projects enumerated on Page 1 and those advocated by Refuge Friends.

COMMITMENT TO REFUGE COMMUNITIES – REFUGE FUND

The Refuge System uses net income derived from permits and timber harvests to make payments to local communities to offset property tax revenue lost when the federally-acquired lands are removed from local tax rolls. The System relies on Congressional appropriations to the Refuge Fund to compensate for the shortfall between revenues and tax replacement obligations. However, declining revenues and lack of appropriations have resulted in the Service paying less than 50% of its tax-offset obligations since 2001. Reduced funding threatens the partnerships that are so important for successful conservation, and the negative impact on local communities is felt even more starkly in difficult economic times.

We also ask that this Committee consider converting or rolling the Refuge Fund into the PILT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) program. Some refuge lands are included in PILT and others are included in the Refuge Fund. One funding mechanism for all refuge lands makes sense and would streamline the process of returning funds to local communities.

The Refuge Association requests \$50 million for the Refuge Fund. We also call for a review of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1935 as amended, and consideration of conversion to a Payment-in-Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program to be consistent with other federal land management agencies and to provide Refuge communities with more equitable payments.

PARTNERSHIPS – PARTNERS FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM (PARTNERS PROGRAM)

With 75% of all fish and wildlife species dependent upon private lands for their survival, the Partners Program is one of the most powerful tools for protecting wildlife where it lives. By building effective partnerships between public agencies and private landowners to conserve America’s expansive working landscapes, the Partners Program has implemented nearly 29,000 restoration projects in the past twenty-five years, restoring over one million acres of wetlands, three million acres of uplands, and 11,000 miles of streams. The Partners Program leverages federal dollars, generating nearly \$16 in economic return for every \$1 appropriated for projects.

The Refuge Association and the landowner-led Partners for Conservation request \$75 million for FY2020. Such a funding level would result in an additional \$400 million worth of conservation across the nation. (I don’t think the \$300M and \$400M are necessarily referring to the same thing, but the \$78M and \$75M sound like they might be.)

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE GRANT PROGRAMS

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA), and the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (SWG) have been incredibly beneficial for national wildlife refuges.

- The NAWCA program delivers an average 3:1 match for all federal standard and small grants, and has restored wetlands on wildlife refuges across the nation. The Refuge Association fully supports a return to this program’s high water mark of \$47.6 million.
- The SWG program provides funding to state wildlife agencies for developing and implementing programs that benefit wildlife habitat for both hunted and non-hunted species. This funding is critical for research, wildlife surveys, species restoration, and habitat management on state lands, which all contribute to a system of healthy federal and state lands. The states are essential partners to the Refuge System, and we support funding for this program of \$75 million.
- The NMBCA program protects neotropical bird species across the Americas, with \$66 million in federal grants having been matched by \$250 million in partner funds. As wonderful as refuge lands are, wildlife conservation must also take place on state and private lands, as well as in other countries, particularly for migratory species. We support FY2020 funding at \$6 million for the NMBCA.

We believe that with sound conservation policy, increased funding, and the power of more than 40,000 dedicated volunteers, the Refuge System can fulfill its mission to provide wildlife dependent recreation for Americans and protect the habitat for more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species and more than 1,000 species of fish.

We look forward to working with Congress to accomplish this goal and appreciate your consideration of our requests. Please let me know if you have any questions.