

## **Testimony of Robert A. Petzel**

Chairwoman McCollum, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Robert Petzel, President of Refuge Friends, Inc the Friends organization affiliated with the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

In the midst of 4 million people, down the road from the largest shopping mall in America, and neighboring a major international airport is a critical piece of Minnesota wildness. The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1976 to provide habitat for a large number of migratory waterfowl, fish, and other wildlife species threatened by commercial and industrial development, and to provide environmental education, wildlife recreational opportunities, and interpretive programming for Twin Cities residents. Considered one of the premiere Urban Refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System, the 14,000 acre refuge is part of a corridor of land and water stretching 70 miles along the Minnesota River.

St. Paul, Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs represent a rich diversity of cultures, with a rapidly growing population of color expected to make up at least 40% of the region's overall population by 2040. Yet, refuge visitation does not yet reflect this diversity. Unless urban refuges like Minnesota Valley welcome communities of color and identify barriers to participation the future of conservation is at risk. Personal connection and experience with nature is the foundation from which a conservation ethic is built in future generations.

The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge:

- Protects, restores, and enhances large blocks and corridors of habitat to provide sustainable landscapes for people and wildlife
- Provides opportunities for residents and visitors to access the Refuge and connect with wildlife and plants in a diversity of ways meaningful to them
- Operates two Education and Visitor Centers, which are assets for the urban, suburban and rural residents of the Twin Cities area
- Increases connections with a diversity of residents in the Twin Cities through outreach programming that connects residents of all ages and backgrounds with the nature in their own communities and draws them to visit and experience the Refuge for themselves
- Engages a diversity of people as volunteers, interns and employees to meet Refuge ecological and educational objectives, and build a conservation ethic throughout the community
- Introduces children to the wonders of the natural outdoors through educational, recreational, and interpretive programming, thereby building a pool of future employees, volunteers, advocates and philanthropists

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge provides superior Environmental Education for Twin Cities communities. Through partnerships and training programs the wildlife refuge served

9,108 students and teachers in Fiscal Year 2018. Refuge staff provided expert-led outdoor lessons for students, trained dozens of new teachers in the skills of teaching students outdoors, and mentored recent college graduates to become the next generation of Environmental Educators. Access to the Refuge, all educational programming, and community events are FREE to the public.

Nationally, the Fish and Wildlife Service identified 14 urban refuges for specialized funds dedicated to reaching new audiences. The Urban Program has continued to allow Refuge System staff to do outreach to new constituencies, but at this time only four wildlife refuges are currently funded.

In addition, while the size and number of Refuges has grown, the operation and maintenance and law enforcement budgets have not kept pace. Current operations and maintenance funding is only half of what's needed. Funding levels have actually declined since 2010 while visitation to Refuges has increased by 7 million. Currently, there are less than 150 wildlife field officers covering 567 units of the Refuge System. With increasing demands on these officers to serve on the southern border in addition to their regular duties, additional funding is crucial to protect our refuge lands and waters.

The resource needs of the Refuge System at large are also reflected locally at Minnesota Valley, I will highlight just a few examples:

- Law enforcement: The Refuge has only one wildlife officer and he is shared with neighboring refuges covering much of the state of Minnesota. In addition, this one officer has been detailed to the southern boarder for over six weeks in the last six months. During those times, the natural resources of the Refuge and the safety of our visitors are compromised. Previously, the Refuge had enough resources to fund three officers and the demands of a urban population are only growing.
- Operations and maintenance funds: Minnesota Valley, like all refuges in the System is poorly underfunded to operate our facilities and manage our lands. The visitor center in Bloomington is an aging resource that is extremely valuable to the community. Important updates including new entrance doors, upgraded security cameras, solar lights in the parking lot, and repairs to our wheelchair lift and elevator are outside the scope of our current budget.
- Urban program: We are connecting with a multitude of cultural and civic groups to engage with new audiences and promote the refuge throughout our community. The need is very real and demand is growing! As part of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, refuge staff continue to look for new ways to reach into and welcome communities of color as well as identify and overcome real or perceived barriers to participation in refuge activities and events. Using the "Meet Your Wildlife Neighbors", outreach trailer youth and families are engaged in fishing, birdwatching, and nature exploration at their local community parks. Partnerships with local artists, art education non-profits and cultural organizations connect nature, art and culture in an annual Eco Arts Fest incorporating perspectives from Hispanic, Somali and Karen communities. English language learner hikes, led by bi-lingual staff and local interns, introduces new visitors to the unfamiliar

habitats and wildlife of the refuge. These unique approaches and partnerships are just the tip of the iceberg. Minnesota Valley has only one  $\frac{3}{4}$  employee focused on urban outreach. If the vision of providing funding to Urban refuges is re-instated, we are hopeful that Minnesota Valley may be next in line for funding. With additional funding, much more could be accomplished for example:

- Refuge Ambassadors - enlisting community leaders to serve as the communication bridge between the refuge and the community they represent
- Refuge Buddies - connecting older generations of experienced outdoor recreation enthusiasts as mentors to inexperienced but interested youth and young adults

The country's 567 Wildlife Refuges are a national treasure. They provide clean air and water, a haven for wildlife, and a place for people to connect with nature. At a time when American children are suffering from too few outdoor opportunities, the work at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is more crucial than ever. I urge you to provide adequate funding so that Refuges throughout the System can survive and thrive.