

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2023 APPROPRIATIONS FOR
THE UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

MARCH 10, 2022

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

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

I am pleased to submit testimony on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. The Refuge Association and its coalition of representatives from Refuge Friends organizations and concerned citizens thank you for your support for the National Wildlife Refuge System, and **we request an increase in funding for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance to \$712 million in FY2023.**

The National Wildlife Refuge Association's mission is to protect, promote, and enhance the National Wildlife Refuge System. We work closely with Refuge System staff in Headquarters, regional offices, and on refuges themselves. We talk to them about their projects, and what they need to do their jobs. And the overwhelming response is: we need more staff, and we need more funding.

Wildlife refuges are economic engines for their communities, but, by far, the biggest challenge facing the Refuge System today is a lack of funding. Refuge units are incredibly rich and diverse wildlife habitat, and each unit is unique and requires unique management. The lack of staff on refuge units is stark. Since FY2010, when the budget was funded nearly the same (\$503m) as it is today in FY2022 (\$519 million as proposed in the omnibus bill released March 9, 2022), nearly 1,100 positions have been lost, an enormous 25% loss in capacity. We as a conservation community cannot continue to expect healthy lands and wildlife populations when we allow staffing levels to drop so low that maintenance is impossible, visitor services are curtailed, and planning and biological work is either eliminated or severely reduced.

Over the last decade, flat or declining budgets have resulted in reduced station allocations and staffing across the Refuge System. These reductions have been so severe that most refuges can no longer operate effectively, efficiently, or, at times, safely. Additionally, more and more units are facing the reality of having no staff to conduct even the most basic management and public use activities.

The Service has a responsibility to manage for the long-term sustainability of the System and to avoid reactive, ad hoc, and piecemeal actions in response to budgetary changes. These budget declines are now resulting in the inability of the Refuge System to serve the public and protect natural resources.

Last year, we implored this committee to increase funding for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance to \$600 million, which we believed was the bare minimum to jump start recovery of the System. This Committee delivered, with the allocation in your bill at \$582 million. We very much appreciate the work you and your staff put into developing that allocation. We understand that the politics of Congress have prohibited such a needed increase in the FY2022 omnibus bill outlined as this testimony was due. Given that the increase you called for in FY2022 was not delivered, we ask that you go further this year, and allocate the money that the System *actually* needs—a jump to \$712 million.

How did we calculate \$712 million?

Back in FY2010, the Refuge System saw the largest funding level ever-- \$503 million. Much has changed in the intervening 12 years, and funding needs have gone up, while budgets have dropped. In FY2010:

- there were 555 wildlife refuges (today, 568)
- the marine national monuments had only just been created, but not yet expanded to their current size
- the urban refuge program had not been created or implemented.
- 46 million visitors came to refuges (today, 64 million)

More than 40% of refuges have no current Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Either an existing CCP is older than the recommended 15 years or there is no plan. Funding for planning has largely been eliminated due to budget cuts.

In short, twelve years ago, the Refuge System was smaller, with fewer visitors, and fewer acres to maintain, protect, and restore.

Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation calculator, \$503 million in January 2010 is worth \$641 million in January 2022. The failure to offset the impacts of inflation over the past 12 years is a major reason for the dramatic decrease in staffing and capacity on refuges. The additional acreage, the creation of the urban program, and the increased visitors have enhanced the System and benefited the communities around these refuges. These changes have also put more pressure on the Service, which is already stressed and underfunded.

- The urban program build-out will cost roughly \$25 million, a worthy investment into underserved urban communities.
- Planning costs for land acquisition and CCPs will cost an additional \$25 million.
- Refuge law enforcement should receive a \$21 million increase on top of current funding. There are now 250 law enforcement officers patrolling 850 million acres of land and water. Even excluding the water acres, each federal refuge officer now patrols, on average, 400,000 acres. In many cases, one officer alone is responsible for an entire state, with their refuge units hours away from each other.

Add it all together, and we are looking at \$712 million, the bare minimum of what the System truly needs to provide healthy wildlife habitat for healthy wildlife populations and accommodate the birders, hunters, schoolchildren, and families who visit. In this age of rapidly warming climates, we must invest as much funding as possible today, so that these protected areas are available tomorrow for shifting ecosystem and conservation needs.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the largest system of public lands set aside for wildlife conservation in the entire world. Nothing like the System exists anywhere else. The United States has a professional workforce of biologists, wetlands managers, foresters, wildlife officers, and many others who are trained to manage these lands. We are squandering this opportunity to manage this System of biologically critical habitat and overwhelming staff, who care deeply about their jobs and the Refuge System.

FY2022 Funding Versus Full Funding:

The Refuge Association is asking for funding of \$712 million in FY2023, but the real need long term is well over \$1 billion. Current funding is roughly half that. Refuges have traditionally been havens for wildlife, with limited opportunities for public use. But times have changed, and people are flocking to the Refuge System—59 million in FY2019, and we know there was a huge boom in visitors during COVID-19 lockdowns, up to 64 million in FY2021. Friends Group membership is up, and they are more engaged than ever and advocating on behalf of their local refuge. Urban partnerships are exploding, and the demand for visitor services is intense. All refuges should be staffed with a refuge manager, biologists, wage grade staff, and visitor services staff, plus any specialists needed, such as foresters and marine biologists, teachers and urban specialists.

We know that flat O&M funding leads to a Refuge System that is quickly eroding in habitat maintenance, but also an ability to even keep refuges open. No refuges are fully staffed. More than half of refuges have zero staff on site. Many refuges are closed to the public and are completely unmanaged. Lewis and Clark NWR in Oregon, for example, is closed and unmanaged, even with thousands of scaup migrating through and the scaup population in an overall decline.

Looking to the future, it is critical that we invest in the Refuge System today. If this funding shortage continues for much longer, we will start to see a brain drain in professional capacity and refuges requiring millions of dollars in restoration work to restore lands that eroded during these times of reduced management.

Everglades Headwaters NWR—The Land and Water Conservation Fund

EHWNR goals include the protection of 100,000 acres with conservation easements, which protect the land from development and conserve its wildlife and water values while keeping the land in private ownership, privately managed (which reduces public costs), and on the tax rolls. An additional 50,000 acres will become (if protected) public conservation lands open to public recreational access, supported by the sportsmen's community.

EHWNR has 38 federally listed endangered species and is one of those rare refuges that can hit all of these refuge priorities: conserves or protects against threats to resources, protects ESA habitat, ecosystems, water, biodiversity, and cultural and historic resources, strengthens resilience to climate change impacts, has recreational access, benefits underserved or at-risk communities, and demonstrates strong local partner engagement and support.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association requests \$20 million in LWCF funding for the Everglades Headwaters NWR in FY2023.

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 in FY2023.

Partnerships – Partners For Fish And Wildlife 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 Partnerscapes request \$75 million for FY2023.** Such a funding level would result in an additional \$400 million worth of conservation across the nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. We look forward to working with you to fund these important programs, and to bring the Refuge System back to a place where it can protect and grow our natural heritage for the 21st century.