



*Protecting
America's
Wildlife*

National Wildlife Refuge Association

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**TESTIMONY BY EVAN HIRSCHE, PRESIDENT
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2006 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE U.S. FISH AND
WILDLIFE SERVICE
April 29, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals and members of the more than 240 refuge "Friends" group organizations throughout the United States, thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2006 (FY06) Interior Appropriations bill.

Specifically, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee support a \$16 million increase in the operations and maintenance budget of the National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in the FY06 budget. This request represents a "no-net-loss" approach to the Refuge System budget. We also ask the Subcommittee to: restore funding for the refuge Wildlife and Habitat and Visitor Services accounts; continue to support volunteer projects on and in connection with refuges, like the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program, that utilizes Friends and volunteers to identify and eradicate invasive species; allocate \$150,000 in the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) budget to integrate Refuge System invasive species data with the USGS National Institute of Invasive Species Science (NIISS) database; protect refuges from threats under the auspices of right-of-way privileges; provide \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program; and provide funding for land acquisition in the Refuge System through the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

As you know, the National Wildlife Refuge System continues to be crippled by a \$2 billion funding backlog that harms every refuge in the System. Specifically, funding shortfalls limit the ability of refuges to successfully conduct important biological programs and hire critical staff, while also hindering opportunities for the public to engage in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

While significant strides were made to reduce the shortfall in connection with the 100th anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System – and we are grateful to the Subcommittee for its work in this regard – efforts must be made to prevent any backsliding on these past gains. The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), 21 diverse conservation and sporting organizations, of which the NWRA is a member, has determined that it will be necessary to increase the annual Refuge System budget to \$700 million simply to meet the System’s top tier needs. Our groups, representing a national constituency numbering more than 5 million Americans, recognize the value of a healthy Refuge System to both the wildlife and habitats refuges were established to protect and the 40 million visitors that frequent these special places each year.

The National Wildlife Refuge System budget must increase by approximately \$16 million in FY06 to achieve a “no-net-loss” funding level. The \$16 million increase accounts for cost-of-living increases for FWS personnel, rising energy costs and other cost increases, while sustaining current levels of visitor services and wildlife management. This funding level will allow the Refuge System to avoid employee layoffs and reductions in services, maintain protections for wildlife and habitat, prevent backsliding on gains already made, and help to contain growth in the Refuge System backlog.

The NWRA is concerned about cuts in the Administration’s FY06 budget proposal for the Wildlife and Habitat account. The cuts affect funding for essential staffing needs and represent approximately 10 FWS jobs.

We are also concerned about cuts in the Administration’s FY06 budget proposal for the Refuge System’s Visitor Services and Visitor Facility Enhancements programs. Visitor Services funding pays for many Friends group and volunteer programs that support refuges and provide the public with wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities. We urge the Subcommittee to restore this vital funding to prevent refuges from losing the ability to provide to the public the simplest and most cost-effective methods of outreach, education and orientation, made possible, in part, by the vibrant Refuge System volunteers.

For FY06, we also encourage the Subcommittee to continue its support for volunteer-based invasives detection and eradication activities by again appropriating \$1 million for volunteer-oriented invasives programs.

The NWRA thanks the Subcommittee for its work in the FY03 and FY05 budgets to promote the use of volunteers to address the growing threat of invasive species on and adjacent to our national wildlife refuges. More than 300 separate refuges have taken actions to control invasives, and the Refuge System has identified \$150 million of invasive species projected needs. By utilizing the strong volunteer support available to the Refuge System, we can significantly expand our ability to identify and record data on invasives in refuges, and implement control measures.

The Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program (VIMP), currently underway at six pilot refuges (Hobe Sound (FL); National Bison Range (MT); Ottawa (OH); San Bernard (TX); San Pablo Bay (CA); and the Pondicherry unit of Silvio O. Conte (NH)), is showing tremendous results. The Program is a partnership among the NWRA, FWS, USGS and The Nature Conservancy that seeks to train refuge volunteers to identify invasives and collect extensive data using inexpensive but sophisticated global positioning system (GPS)/geographic information system (GIS) data-collection equipment. The data is entered into a centralized database and will augment incomplete information previously compiled by refuge staff.

As a result of funding provided by this Subcommittee in FY05, the six original pilot refuges in the VIMP will begin invasive species control efforts, while at least six new sites will be added to the program. The balance of the FY05 allocation will provide funding for a competitive grants program for cooperative invasives projects with refuge Friends and volunteers.

Collection of this data aids the FWS in detecting early infestations of invasives on refuges, and helps to prioritize rapid response eradication activities. This technology is already proving successful and should continue to be expanded to a larger percentage of refuges in the coming years. The program provides a more complete picture of the scope and impact of invasives on fragile refuge habitats and helps the FWS develop stronger invasives management protocols. In addition, broader community awareness and involvement generated through this program serves to strengthen federal, state and private lands initiatives aimed at addressing this rapidly growing threat.

The USGS National Institute of Invasive Species Science assists the FWS and other Department of the Interior agencies in invasive species monitoring and management efforts. In 2002, NIISS conducted a refuge-wide survey of invasive species and created a web-based database to report this information. Expanding this database into one capable of combining existing disparate data on invasive species in the Refuge System would greatly advance efficiency and cost-effectiveness of early detection and control as well as help track the success of control efforts.

We recommend that the Subcommittee allocate \$150,000 in the USGS budget to integrate National Wildlife Refuge System invasive species data (such as the data created through the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program, Invasive Plant Strike Teams and Refuge Lands GIS) with the NIISS database.

The NWRA supports the Administration's request for funding to increase the number of rapid response strike teams to quickly respond to invasive species infestations. We ask the Subcommittee to include funding for the creation of two more strike teams for FY06 to effectively combat the spread of invasive species in wildlife refuges, while preserving funding for base programs.

We would also like to express our appreciation to the Subcommittee for extending the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program for 10 years in FY05. Our organization, members and affiliated Friends groups see first-hand the benefits this valuable program provides the Refuge System. We hope the 109th Congress will act to make this important program permanent.

The NWRA also encourages the Subcommittee to include language prohibiting the use of funds by the Bureau of Land Management to use the recordable disclaimer regulations with regard to any lands within a designated National Wildlife Refuge System unit, national monument, wilderness study area, National Park Service unit, or lands within the National Wilderness Preservation System. As the Subcommittee is aware, issues such as rights-of-way claims in national wildlife refuges through the use of Revised Statute 2477 threaten wildlife habitat and visitor experiences at many refuges.

We encourage the Subcommittee to fund the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program at \$85 million. This important program gives states the needed funding to develop and implement comprehensive conservation plans to protect declining species and their habitats.

The NWRA also encourages the Subcommittee to provide funding for land acquisition in the Refuge System through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Specifically, we request the following:

- \$1.9 million for Balcones Canyonlands NWR (TX);
- \$2 million for Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (UT);
- \$2.3 million for Big Muddy NWR (MO);
- \$500,000 for Chickasaw NWR (TN);
- \$300,000 for E.B. Forsythe NWR (NJ);
- \$510,000 for Great Swamp NWR (NJ);
- \$2.5 million for Laguna Atascosa NWR (TX);
- \$2.5 million for Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR (TX);
- \$1.6 million for Rachel Carson NWR (ME);
- \$2.5 million for Tensas NWR (LA); and
- \$2.15 million for Trustom Pond NWR (RI).

In conclusion, the NWRA believes the National Wildlife Refuge System can meet its important conservation objectives only with strong and consistent funding leveraged by the valuable work of refuge volunteers. We extend our appreciation to the Subcommittee for its ongoing commitment to our National Wildlife Refuge System.