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**TESTIMONY**  
**BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND**  
**RELATED AGENCIES**  
**CONCERNING U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE FISCAL YEAR 2007**  
**APPROPRIATIONS**  
**April 28, 2006**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). On behalf of the NWRA and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals, more than 110 refuge Friends organization affiliates and thousands of concerned citizens throughout the United States, thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2007 (FY07) Interior Appropriations bill. Specifically, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee support:

- a funding level of \$415 million—an increase of \$33 million over the President’s request—for the operations and maintenance (O&M) budget of the National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in the FY07 budget;
- an allocation of \$1 million to continue to support volunteer projects on and in connection with refuges, like the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program (VIMP) and competitive grants, which utilize Friends and volunteers to identify and eradicate invasive species;
- an increase in the FWS construction budget to prevent further degradation of Refuge System infrastructure;
- an allocation of \$100 million in the FWS land acquisition budget to accommodate the numerous willing sellers across the country;
- an increase in funding for the FWS’ Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program;
- an allocation of \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program;
- an allocation of \$9 million for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) in the FWS’ Resource Management General Administration appropriation; and
- an increase in the FWS’ Contaminants Program budget.

As you know, the National Wildlife Refuge System continues to be crippled by a \$3.1 billion funding backlog that harms every refuge in the System. Specifically, funding shortfalls limit the ability of refuges to successfully conduct important science-based, biological programs and hire critical staff, while also hindering opportunities for the public to engage in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), 21 diverse conservation and sporting organizations, chaired by the NWRA, has determined 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 needs an annual \$16 million increase over the previous year's funding to achieve a "no-net-loss" funding level. Without this increase, the FWS cannot account for cost-of-living increases for FWS personnel, rising rent and utilities and other cost increases, while sustaining current levels of visitor services and wildlife management. The Refuge System needs at least \$16 million to avoid employee layoffs and reductions in services, maintain protections for wildlife and habitat and help contain growth of the Refuge System backlog. It is crucial that, at a minimum, the cost-of-living and "uncontrollables" are covered in the FY07 budget. To prevent the additional loss of programs, maintain protections for wildlife and habitats, make some modest and needed advances, and provide for addressing the backlog in coming years, the NWRA recommends a refuge O&M budget of \$415 million for FY07.

For FY07, we encourage the Subcommittee to continue its support for volunteer-based invasive species 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, FY05 and FY06 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 approximately \$260 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 is showing tremendous results at the 14 geographically diverse refuges currently participating in the program. For example, at Lee Metcalf NWR in Montana, funding provided through the volunteer-oriented invasives appropriation resulted in the eradication of invasive spotted knapweed, houndstongue and tansy from 16 acres of the refuge for approximately 50% less than the cost of using contractors. The Program is a partnership among the NWRA, FWS, United States Geological Survey (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 FY06, current refuges in the VIMP will conduct invasive species control efforts, while seven new sites will be added to the program. Since its inception, 316 volunteers have participated in mapping, treating and restoring over 3,000 refuge acres through the Program.

Collection of this data aids the FWS in detecting early infestations of invasives on refuges, and helps to prioritize rapid response eradication activities. The technology is proving successful and

should continue to be expanded to more 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.

A competitive grants program for cooperative invasive species projects with refuge Friends and volunteers constitutes the majority of the \$1 million allocated “for cooperative projects with [F]riends groups on invasive species control.” In 2006, 60 volunteer projects were selected through the competitive grants program, 25 of which directly involved Friends groups. Through the competitive grants, 876 volunteers participated in the treatment, inventory and restoration of 72,931 refuge acres.

We encourage the Subcommittee to resist cuts proposed in the president’s FY07 budget request to the construction budget. The Administration has asked for \$19.7 million, a reduction of \$25.5 million or 57% compared to FY06. According to the FWS, the Agency has identified projects for approximately 1,500 new facility assets with a cost of about \$1 billion. Roughly half this dollar amount is for 270 visitor centers and headquarter offices identified by field managers, some of which would take the place of quickly deteriorating structures that are becoming more expensive to maintain than to replace. With an aging infrastructure and visitation to national wildlife refuges at an all-time high, the construction budget for the Service should reflect the growing needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to allocate sufficient funding to purchase high-priority lands and conservation easements. The Refuge System land acquisition backlog is estimated at \$4 billion. According to the FWS’ Land Acquisition Priority System (LAPS), as of 2004 approximately 15.4 million acres remain to be acquired within approved refuge boundaries. Across the country, willing sellers are standing by to work with the Service. Unfortunately, the FWS has neither the funding nor resources to handle these land acquisition opportunities.

Our primary concern is that vital refuge buffer areas and corridors may be lost, jeopardizing the very integrity of refuges. While a full suite of conservation strategies should be employed in working with private landowners, in cases where fee title acquisition is preferred by the landowner and the refuge has identified it as a top priority, the FWS should acquire the land. At a minimum, the NWRA believes that \$100 million should be allocated toward Refuge System land acquisition. Even at that rate, it would take at least 40 years to acquire priority lands, which is time we don’t have given that wildlife habitat is being lost at a rate 300% that of population growth in the United States.

Within this \$100 million request, the NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to provide funding for the following land acquisition projects in the Refuge System through the Land and Water Conservation Fund:

- \$3.2 million for Arapaho NWR (CO);
- \$922,503 for Back Bay NWR (VA);
- \$1.4 million for Balcones Canyonlands NWR (TX);

- \$726,000 for Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (UT);
- \$150,000 for Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR (TX);
- \$887,000 for Neal Smith NWR (IA);
- \$650,000 for Rachel Carson NWR (ME);
- \$2 million for Silvio O. Conte NFWR (MA);
- \$1 million for Stewart B. McKinney NFWR (CT);
- \$1.75 million for Tensas River NWR (LA); and
- \$3 million for Waccamaw NWR (SC).

There are a number of federal programs that reward landowners for practicing conservation. One of the leading programs in this area is the FWS' Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, which provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to voluntarily restore wetlands and other habitat on their land. Since this program began, hundreds of thousands of habitat acres have been restored, many of the projects located near national wildlife refuges. The Service has trouble keeping pace with landowner demand for this program, reporting that many states have waiting lists to participate. The NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to provide the "Partners" program with the resources it needs to assist landowners with habitat conservation, oftentimes complementing activities on refuge lands, or contributing to the resolution of problems on refuges that originate beyond refuge boundaries.

The NWRA urges the Subcommittee to appropriate at least \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program in FY07 to implement statewide conservation plans. Program grants support projects to restore degraded habitat, reintroduce native species, develop partnerships with private landowners, and collect useful data. These state-based plans can dovetail with the Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) that all refuges are required to produce, complementing the mission of the Refuge System. Further, adequate and consistent funding for State Wildlife Grants is essential to fulfilling the shared federal/state responsibility for keeping our nation's wildlife from becoming endangered.

We encourage the Subcommittee to allocate \$9 million for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through the FWS' Resource Management General Administration appropriation. NFWF works to achieve healthy and abundant fish, wildlife and plant populations through valuable partnerships. Each year, NFWF receives more project proposals than they are capable of funding. Adequate funding will ensure NFWF has the ability to leverage resources to fund projects that directly benefit diverse fish and wildlife species in, around and outside of national wildlife refuges across the country.

Contaminants were a major part of the tremendous damage inflicted on national wildlife refuges during the 2005 hurricane season. Unfortunately, funding for the FWS' Contaminants Program has remained flat for almost two decades. In light of recent natural and man-made disasters, this vital program is more important than ever, as the need to address contaminant issues on national wildlife refuges continues to grow. The NWRA urges the Subcommittee to provide increased funding for the Contaminants Program in FY07.

We extend our appreciation to the Subcommittee for its ongoing commitment to our National Wildlife Refuge System.