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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2008 APPROPRIATIONS
April 27, 2007

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 138 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 2008 (FY08) Interior Appropriations bill. Specifically, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee support the following:

- **An overall funding level of \$451.5 million for the operations and maintenance (O&M) budget of the National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS);**
- **Of the \$6 million increase requested by the administration for the Partners for Wildlife Program, allocate \$1 million to implement Refuge Landscape Conservation Initiatives, strategic partnerships among the FWS, NWRA, refuge Friends and other national, regional and local interests that work with states, counties and municipalities to identify, prioritize and implement land and water conservation opportunities beyond refuge boundaries;**
- **An allocation of \$1 million to continue to support volunteer projects on and in connection with refuges, including the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program (VIMP) and competitive grants, which utilize Friends and volunteers to identify and eradicate invasive species;**
- **Withhold funding for implementation of a new National Bison Range Annual Funding Agreement, pending the conclusion of an investigation by the Department of the Interior Inspector General into FWS employee grievances and pending completion of a FWS Refuge Tribal AFA policy;**
- **An allocation of \$100 million in the FWS land acquisition budget through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to acquire vital habitat from numerous willing sellers across the country;**
- **An increase in the FWS construction budget to prevent further degradation of Refuge System infrastructure;**
- **For Midway Atoll NWR, \$3.23 million to initiate the public visitation program, provide needed equipment for safety and cooperative work, and to stop the deterioration of facilities that will be integral to visitor use;**
- **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.**

The National Wildlife Refuge System continues to be crippled by a \$2.75 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 essential staff, while also hindering opportunities for the public to engage in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Significant strides were made to reduce the budget shortfall in connection with the 100th anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System in 2003, and we are grateful to the Subcommittee for its work in this regard. Since then, however, annual appropriations have failed to keep pace with ever-increasing fixed costs and inflation. The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), consisting of the NWRA and 20 other diverse conservation and sporting organizations, has determined that the annual Refuge System budget of \$765 million is required simply to meet the System's top tier needs. CARE details these needs in a recently released report, *Restoring our Wildlife Legacy*. 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. At a minimum, it is crucial that the cost-of-living and other inflationary needs are covered in the FY08 budget. To keep the modest 100th Anniversary budget (FY04) on pace with inflationary costs, the Refuge System needs \$451.5 million for its operations and maintenance accounts for FY08.

While providing adequate funding to operate and maintain the Refuge System is of vital importance, unfortunately most refuges are too small in size to achieve their conservation mission and objectives alone. Their integrity depends on the health of surrounding state, federal and private lands and waters. Consequently, there is a growing need to provide funding to ensure that lands and waters beyond refuge boundaries are conserved. Today, the alarming rush to convert rural land to subdivisions and strip malls has caught wildlife managers off guard and requires quick action. In response, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) launched *Beyond the Boundaries*, a campaign designed to identify and prioritize crucial additions to the nation's conservation estate, improve connectivity between refuges and other conservation lands, and protect buffer zones. *Beyond the Boundaries* employs sound conservation science to integrate State Wildlife Action Plans (WAP), refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) and other conservation planning tools, and engages diverse stakeholders at the state and local levels to develop bold strategies for protecting critical wildlife habitat, while strengthening economies through improved quality of life, clean water and outdoor recreation and appreciation.

Accordingly, for FY08 we respectfully ask that the Subcommittee allocate \$1 million of the Administration's \$6 million request above FY07 levels for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to implement Refuge Landscape Conservation Initiatives in FWS regions 1, 3 and 5, with a focus on the Silvio Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in the latter. Each initiative will bring together diverse stakeholders in creating conservation visions for landscapes surrounding targeted refuges, and develop shared priorities for conservation action. The final visions – Refuge Landscape Action Plans – will serve as blueprints for use of state, federal and private conservation dollars and will expedite implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans.

We also encourage the Subcommittee to continue its strong support “for cooperative projects with [F]riends groups on invasive species control” by again appropriating \$1 million for this valuable program. With annual allocations by Congress since FY03, 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. A competitive grants program for cooperative invasive species projects with refuge Friends and volunteers constitutes the majority of previous allocations. In FY06, a total of 811 volunteers contributed 16,176 hours and participated in the treatment, inventory and restoration of 74,786 refuge acres.

Likewise, the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program has demonstrated powerful results at the 31 currently participating refuges. A partnership among the NWRA, FWS, United States Geological Survey (USGS) and The Nature Conservancy, the program trains refuge volunteers to identify invasives and collect extensive data using inexpensive but sophisticated global positioning system (GPS)/geographic information system (GIS) data-collection equipment. To date, an estimated 23,651 acres of refuge lands, in addition to 220 water bodies, have been inventoried and mapped by 170 trained volunteers contributing 6,552 hours. Refuges participating in the program have used the data to engage an additional 791 volunteers in invasive plant management actions such as control and restoration measures. Importantly, the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Wildlife Refuge Caucus have recognized the value of this program, including it as a component of H.R. 767, the “REPAIR Act,” that directs the Secretary to establish a Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring and Control Program to document and combat invasive species in national wildlife refuges.

In December, 2006, FWS Director Dale Hall terminated the National Bison Range Tribal Annual Funding Agreement (AFA), citing work performance issues and documented employee grievances that illustrated a severely strained and counterproductive work environment with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. While we believe it’s vitally important that the FWS have a collaborative working relationship with the tribes at the Bison Range, we believe that the grievances, now under review by the Inspector General at the Department of the Interior, must be resolved before any consideration of a new agreement. Accordingly, we ask that the Subcommittee include bill language withhold funding for negotiating or implementing a new AFA pending results of the Inspector General’s investigation and pending completion of a FWS Refuge Tribal AFA policy.

The NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to allocate sufficient funding to purchase high-priority lands and conservation easements through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The Refuge System land acquisition backlog is estimated at \$4 billion, with 15.4 million acres remaining to be acquired within approved refuge boundaries. 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. The NWRA believes that \$100 million should be allocated toward Refuge System land acquisition, yet even at that rate, it would take at least 40 years to acquire priority lands. Within this request, the NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to provide funding for the following projects through the Land and Water Conservation Fund:

\$750,000 for Alaska Peninsula NWR (AK); \$1.5 million for Togiak NWR (AK); \$750,000 for Yukon Delta NWR (AK); \$710,000 for Stewart B. McKinney NFWR (CT); \$3 million for Bayou Sauvage NWR (LA); \$500,000 for Tensas NWR (LA); \$4 million for Silvio O. Conte NFWR (MA); \$2 million for Blackwater NWR (MD); \$1 million for Lake Umbagog NWR (NH); \$2 million for Cape May NWR (NJ); \$1.2 million for Great Swamp NWR (NJ); \$2 million for Wallkill River NWR (NJ); \$275,000 for Balcones Canyonlands NWR (TX); \$3 million for San Bernard NWR (TX); \$750,000 for Back Bay NWR (VA); \$3.1 million for James River NWR (VA); \$459,000 for Rappahannock River Valley NWR (VA); and \$3 million for Canaan Valley NWR (WV).

We encourage the Subcommittee to resist the \$25.5 million cut to the construction budget proposed in the president's FY08 budget request. The FWS has identified \$1 billion in construction projects, which in many cases will result in replacing quickly deteriorating structures that are becoming more expensive to maintain.

Midway Atoll NWR is an integral part of the newly established Northwest Hawaiian Islands National Monument and the sole area designated for public visitation. Accordingly, FWS will need adequate funding to fully realize its potential both for conservation and carefully coordinated public visitation. NWRA supports \$3.23 million to initiate the public visitation program, provide needed equipment for safety and cooperative work, and to stop the deterioration of facilities that will be integral to visitor use.

The NWRA urges the Subcommittee to appropriate at least \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program in FY08 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 National Wildlife 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.

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.