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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2009 APPROPRIATIONS
March 13, 2008

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 150 refuge Friends organization affiliates and thousands of concerned citizens throughout the United States, thank you for your leadership and strong support for the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) including your \$56 million increase for Fiscal Year 2008. While we were disappointed the number was reduced in Conference, the enacted \$39 million increase was greatly needed and your support truly meant all the difference. I further thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2009 (FY09) Interior Appropriations bill. Specifically, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee support the following:

- **An overall funding level of \$514 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);**
- **An allocation of \$55.1 million for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, of which \$2 million be allocated to conduct strategic habitat conservation around national wildlife refuges in strategic partnerships among the FWS, 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 the Volunteers and Invasives Program which utilizes Friends and volunteers to identify and eradicate invasive species on and in connection with refuges;**
- **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 allocation of \$25 million for the NWRS construction budget to prevent further degradation of Refuge System infrastructure;**
- **An allocation of \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program;**
- **An allocation of \$10 million for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) in the FWS' Resource Management General Administration appropriation;**
- **Include language prohibiting use of funds for a land exchange at the Izembek NWR in Alaska;**
- **An allocation of \$30 million for Climate Change Planning for refuges.**

The NWRA is the chair of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 22 wildlife, hunting, fishing, conservation, and scientific organizations representing more than 14 million members and supporters. A comprehensive analysis by CARE determined that the Refuge System needs \$765 million in annual operations and maintenance funding by 2013 to properly administer its nearly 100 million acres and provide the full spectrum of wildlife dependent recreation identified in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. To reach this reasonable goal, we respectfully request that you provide \$514 million in FY09 for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance (O&M).

Recent years of stagnant budgets have caused the System O&M backlog to rapidly escalate to more than \$3.5 billion. This huge backlog has forced the FWS to initiate plans for a dramatic 20% workforce downsizing. Visitors often show up to find roads and visitor centers closed, parking lots and boat launches in disrepair, and habitat restoration projects put “on-hold” or eliminated. Invasive plant species continue to encroach on the Refuge System lands and undermine their ability to fulfill their mission. In addition, a serious staffing deficiency in biologists and law enforcement officers has caused biological monitoring and habitat management to diminish and allowed illegal activities such as poaching and trespassing to increase. All of these shortcomings have reduced the opportunity for wildlife dependent recreational opportunities on Refuge System lands. Creating and enhancing these opportunities is critical to connecting people to our natural resources. We are grateful for the much-needed budget increase that Congress provided the Refuge System for the current fiscal year, and we respectfully urge the Congress to build upon this important step toward restoring the Refuge System by carefully considering our request in the FY09 budget.

While providing adequate funding to operate and maintain the Refuge System is of vital importance, 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, 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 (SWAP), 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. All while strengthening economies through improved quality of life, clean water and outdoor recreation and appreciation.

Accordingly, for FY09 we respectfully ask that the Subcommittee appropriate \$55.1 million for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, of which \$2 million be allocated specifically to conduct strategic habitat conservation around national wildlife refuges that engages 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. These local initiatives will result in strategic visions which 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” in the Volunteers and Invasives Program by again appropriating \$1 million for this valuable program. With annual allocations by Congress since FY03, more than 207 separate refuges have taken actions to control invasives, and the Refuge System has identified approximately \$166 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. Over the past three years, funding awarded to refuges through this program for engaging volunteers in invasive species management has enabled 2,750 volunteers to contribute more than 49,000 hours to the treatment, inventory, and restoration of over 211,000 acres of refuge lands. In FY06, a total of 917 volunteers contributed 22,239 hours and participated in the treatment, inventory and restoration of 73,909 refuge acres.

Likewise, the Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program has demonstrated powerful results at the 32 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 24,000 acres of refuge lands, in addition to hundreds of water bodies, have been inventoried and mapped by a corps of nearly 200 trained volunteers contributing 8,000 hours. Refuges participating in the program have used the data to engage an additional 887 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 the House passed “REPAIR Act” (H.R. 767) that directs the Secretary to establish a Cooperative Volunteer Invasives Monitoring and Control Program to document and combat invasive species in and near national wildlife refuges.

The NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to allocate sufficient funding to assess and purchase high-priority water rights and high-priority lands and conservation easements through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Inadequate water quantity and quality represent some of the biggest obstacles for refuges to overcome and unfortunately, many refuges do not own the water rights on the refuge or they are not guaranteed an allocation of water from a river or stream. The FWS is currently compiling a needs-based priority database of where water rights need to be secured, and we urge the Subcommittee to allocate sufficient funding to allow the FWS to acquire these essential rights while they are available and affordable. In some cases, if we fail to act, refuges will be left high and dry.

The Refuge System land acquisition backlog is estimated at more than \$4 billion, with over 15 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 annual 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 which have willing sellers and are immediately available for purchase: \$5.6 million for Crystal River NWR (FL); \$6 million for Stewart B. McKinney NWR (CT); \$2.15 million for Rappahannock River Valley NWR (VA); \$1 million for Lake Umbagog NWR (NH); \$2.5 million for Silvio O. Conte NFWR (MA); \$1.1062 million for Bayou Sauvage NWR (LA); \$3.5 million for Rachel Carson NWR (ME); \$2 million for Pelican Island NWR (FL) and \$6 million for James Campbell NWR (HI).

We encourage the Subcommittee to resist the zeroing out of the Refuge System's construction budget proposed in the president's FY09 budget request and instead allocate \$25 million. The FWS has identified over \$1 billion in construction projects, which in many cases will result in replacement of quickly deteriorating structures that are becoming more expensive to maintain.

The NWRA urges the Subcommittee to appropriate at least \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program in FY09 to implement statewide conservation plans, supporting projects to keep common species common and develop partnerships. These state-based plans can dovetail with refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) and help fulfill the shared federal/state responsibility for keeping our nation's wildlife from becoming endangered.

We encourage the Subcommittee to allocate \$10 million for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through the FWS' Resource Management General Administration appropriation. 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 species in, around and outside of national wildlife refuges across the country.

The NWRA is strongly opposed to a proposed land exchange at the Izembek NWR on Alaska's peninsula, which would allow a road to be built through the biological heart of the refuge. This exchange is in the President's FY09 budget justification and has also been introduced as legislation in both the House and Senate (HR 2801 and S 1680).

And perhaps most importantly in this era of uncertainty related to climate change, we urge the Subcommittee to allocate \$30 million in dedicated funding to allow the FWS to create a plan for how to manage refuges in such a way that would allow them to adapt to anticipated changes. Work currently conducted by scientists including Dr. Michael Scott, Senior Scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey and Professor of Wildlife Biology at the University of Idaho, show how models for individual refuges can be made that simulate rising water levels, increased temperatures, and how species are expected to react. While these innovative tools are now readily available, without dedicated funding, refuge staff is simply unable to take full advantage. Refuges are perhaps our best natural laboratories on a national level to assess impacts to wildlife and habitat as a result of global climate change; a small investment could yield valuable insights that will guide wildlife management and land use planning well into the future.

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.