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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2010 APPROPRIATIONS
April 23, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Desiree Sorenson-Groves, Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). On behalf of the NWRA and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals, Friends organization affiliates and concerned citizens, thank you for your strong support for the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) including the \$28.7 million increase for Fiscal Year 2009 and approximately \$200 million for refuges in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. While we were disappointed the FY09 number was reduced in conference from the Subcommittee's mark of \$469 million, the increase will keep the downsizing plans that had reduced refuge staff by over 300 positions where they should be: on the shelf. I further thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2010 Interior Appropriations bill. We respectfully request the Subcommittee support:

- **An overall funding level of \$514 million for the operations and maintenance (O&M) budget of the NWRS, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS);**
- **An allocation of \$5 million for Volunteer Community Partnerships for the NWRS;**
- **An allocation of \$25 million for Climate Change Planning for refuges;**
- **An allocation of \$15 million for work to control and eradicate invasive species on and near refuge lands, of which \$1 million would continue the highly-successful Volunteers and Invasives Program and \$5 million would conduct large scale invasive projects;**
- **An allocation of \$4 million for the new Pacific Marine Monuments to conduct needs assessments, operate a research vessel, and remove two ship wrecks;**
- **An overall funding level of \$100 million for the NWRS construction budget including \$12 million for Visitor Facilities Enhancements (VFE) and \$5 million for a research vessel retrofit for the Pacific Islands refuges;**
- **An allocation of \$75 million for the FWS' Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, increasing the Service's ability to create partnerships and identify, prioritize and implement land and water conservation opportunities beyond refuge boundaries;**
- **An allocation of \$100 million in the FWS land acquisition budget through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to acquire vital refuge habitat from willing sellers;**
- **A funding level 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;**
- **Prohibition of funds for activities that would advance a road through Izembek NWR in Alaska.**

National Wildlife Refuge Funding – O & M and Construction

The NWRA is the chair of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 23 sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing more than 14 million Americans. The Refuge System needs at least \$765 million, and likely more, in annual operations and maintenance funding by 2013 to properly administer its 150 million acres as mandated in the Refuge Improvement Act. To reach this reasonable goal, we respectfully request that you provide \$514 million in FY 10 for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance (O&M).

After years of flat budgets, Congress in recent years has demonstrated a commitment to fund our national wildlife refuges. The increases in FY 08 and FY 09 allowed for the suspension of workforce downsizing plans that outlined an eventual 20% reduction in overall staffing levels. But with more than 10% of staff already eliminated since 2004 and a current O&M backlog of more than \$3.5 billion, additional increases that build upon the last two years are essential.

Within the allocation for refuge O&M, we recommend \$15 million for inflationary costs; \$25 million for inventory and monitoring to help refuges cope with Climate Change; \$5 million for Volunteer Community Partnerships as authorized under the NWR Volunteer and Community Partnerships Act; \$5 million for large scale invasive species projects; \$1 million to continue the Volunteer Invasives Program and \$4 million assess and manage the new monuments in the Pacific, including the removal of ship wrecks currently damaging fragile coral reefs.

We ask the Subcommittee to expand funding for the Refuge System's construction budget to \$100 million. The FWS has more than \$1 billion worth of construction needs, including the replacement of quickly deteriorating structures that are not energy efficient and are becoming more expensive to maintain. Construction funds also support large-scale habitat restoration projects such as the Salt Pond restoration efforts at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay NWR or wetland restoration at the Nisqually NWR in Washington. Funds for new visitor/administration centers will be a net benefit with regards to both efficiencies and economic impact to local communities. Refuges with a broad range of outdoor and indoor programs often create more revenue, jobs in service industries, and income for local communities. Recent studies indicate that out-of-town refuge visitors are increasingly accounting for most of the revenue and taxes created for local communities. Importantly, these centers often provide opportunities for refuge Friends to generate increased revenues through bookstore operations. These private funds, in turn, leverage federal dollars for mission-critical projects. Finally, new centers are required to be green infrastructure models, demonstrating efficient ways to recycle materials and water, green construction techniques, and opportunities for employing alternative energy sources.

Within an allocation of \$100 million, we recommend \$5 million for the retrofit of a research vessel that will assist the FWS in management of the new Pacific monuments; \$5 million for the greening of existing refuge infrastructure and \$12 million for visitor facility enhancements which will create better experiences for visitors and thereby create support for the System.

Assessing the Needs of the Refuge System – Climate Change

The Refuge System is badly lagging in developing strategies to address Climate Change. With many government scientists and biologists now talking openly about their conclusions regarding effects of a changing climate on habitat and wildlife, they are playing a frantic game of catch up.

The NWRS is in dire need of dedicated dollars to inventory and monitor the impacts of climate change and to craft a plan to aid species in adapting. We recommend \$25 million for inventory, monitoring and planning. Many innovative modeling tools are now available to aid refuge staff but without funding, they are simply unable to take full advantage. Refuges are perhaps our best natural laboratories to assess impacts to wildlife as a result of global climate change and to demonstrate effective adaptation strategies; a small investment could yield valuable insights that will guide wildlife management and land use planning well into the future.

Invasive Species – Control and Eradication

The NWRS is succumbing to a relentless onslaught of invasive species with over 2.3 million acres of refuge lands infested with invasive plants and 4,387 invasive animal infestations. Funding is needed to halt their progress and in some cases remove them entirely. In FY 08, refuges spent over \$15.3 million dollars on invasive species management, a 144% increase over FY 04. A 2008 GAO report found that the number one management action that had increased in cost was the management of invasive plants. And while volunteers can help, with funding over the past four years enabling 4,660 volunteers to contribute more than 73,000 hours on 291,000 acres of refuge invasives projects, there must be aggressive, dedicated funding to bolster volunteer efforts. We urge the Subcommittee to continue its strong support of the Volunteers and Invasives Program by again appropriating \$1 million and we support an allocation of \$5 million for large-scale invasives control projects such as the Spartina grass eradication effort at Willapa Bay NWR. Many invasives projects must be large in scale to be effective but lack of funding has prevented such projects from moving forward.

Strategic Growth and Partnerships

While providing adequate funding to operate and maintain the Refuge System is of vital importance, most refuges are too small in size to fully achieve their conservation objectives. Their integrity depends on the health of surrounding lands and waters; and in turn, the health of refuge lands and waters has an enormous impact on surrounding communities. Consequently, there is a growing need to provide funding to ensure that lands and waters outside refuge boundaries are conserved. NWRA encourages a *Beyond the Boundaries* approach, which identifies and prioritizes crucial additions to the nation's conservation estate while improving connectivity between refuges and other conservation lands.

Accordingly, for FY 10 we respectfully ask that the Subcommittee appropriate the authorized \$75 million for the FWS' Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The Partners program is a powerful tool for working with private landowners to collaboratively conserve refuge landscapes while leveraging federal dollars. A \$75 million investment in the Partners program will conservatively net \$300 million worth of additional conservation. On average, for every \$1 appropriated, an additional \$4 are leveraged; in some cases the return is over \$10.

To strategically grow the Refuge System, NWRA strongly supports President Obama in encouraging Congress to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to its authorized annual level of \$900 million in the next five years. In FY10 we urge the Subcommittee to allocate \$100 million for the FWS to secure high-priority water rights and high-priority lands and conservation easements. 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.

Currently, there are roughly 8.3 million acres remaining to be acquired within approved refuge boundaries. At the previous Administration's requested rate of refuge land acquisition for FY 09, it would take over 16 centuries to acquire these lands. \$100 million for refuge land acquisition may seem high, but consider that if Congress appropriated 8 times that amount or about \$827 million annually, it would still take a full 20 years before the Refuge System would have acquired all the lands currently in acquisition boundaries.

Within this request, the NWRA encourages the Subcommittee to provide funding for the following projects which have willing sellers, are immediately available for purchase and provide increased connectivity between important public and private lands which will ultimately increase species ability to adapt: \$1.5 m, Crystal River NWR (FL); \$3 m, Silvio O. Conte NFWR (MA, CT, NH and VT); \$2 m, Blackwater NWR (MD); \$2 m, Nestucca Bay NWR (OR); \$2.7 m, Cache River NWR (AR); \$4 m, Upper Ouachita NWR (LA); \$7.4 m, James Campbell NWR (HI); \$5 m, Rocky Mt. Front Conservation Area (MT); \$3.5 m, Rachel Carson NWR (ME); \$2 m, Sevilleta NWR (NM); \$2.8 m, Wallkill River NWR (NJ); \$1 m, James River NWR (VA); \$1 m, Supawna Meadows NWR (NJ), \$1.5 m, Back Bay NWR (VA), and \$1.5 m, Patoka NWR (IN).

The NWRA also urges the Subcommittee to appropriate \$85 million for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program in FY 10 to implement State Wildlife Action Plans, and support projects to keep common species common and develop partnerships. These science-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.

Izembek NWR, Alaskan Peninsula

The NWRA is strongly opposed to a provision included in the 2009 Public Lands Omnibus which could result in a road through the Izembek NWR, AK should Secretary Salazar determine it is in the public interest. Proponents from King Cove (pop 800) argue the road is needed for medical evacuations to reach Cold Bay (pop 80). Congress already met these needs by appropriating \$37.5 million in 1998 to upgrade King Cove's medical clinic and airstrip and purchase a state of the art hovercraft, which has met every medical evacuation need since it became operational in February 2007. We urge the Subcommittee to prohibit funds for activities that would advance a road.

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.