



National
Wildlife Refuge
Association

January 18, 2023

Shannon Estenoz
Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and
Parks
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Martha Williams
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Estenoz and Director Williams:

Our national wildlife refuges are essential for protecting biodiversity and climate resilient habitats, providing community-driven conservation, and expanding wildlife dependent recreational opportunities nationwide. However, increased funding needs paired with insufficient budgets has resulted in a National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) that has long been strained under the weight of critically low staffing levels and lost capacity. In the 118th Congress, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (Refuge Association) intends to center our advocacy and campaign efforts around addressing the staffing challenges of the NWRS. We appreciated meeting with Director Williams and Cynthia Martinez on these issues in November, 2022, and we look forward to continuing to work closely with you as our staffing campaign progresses.

As you know, over 800 positions have been lost since FY2011—an enormous 25% loss in capacity. Several much-needed positions are eliminated every year as congressional appropriations lag behind inflation and actual funding needs. Today, no refuges are fully staffed, and more than half of refuges have zero staff on site, leaving existing refuge staff stressed and overworked. Many refuges have closed to the public and are completely unmanaged. This situation is unsustainable as the NWRS continues to grow and experience increased visitation, and as the health of the NWRS becomes more essential in this age of worsening biodiversity and climate crises.

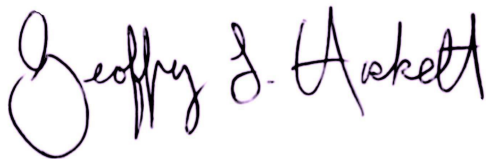
With the help of our partners, our staffing campaign will uplift the vital importance of wildlife refuges for conservation, recreational opportunities, and preserving our nation's wildlife and natural resources. We have begun engaging our grassroots supporters to equip them with the tools to effectively educate their Members of Congress about the staffing crisis and advocate for the funding needs of the NWRS. In partnership with the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, we are also working with refuge Friends organizations and learning from them how

staffing shortage impacts are being felt on the ground. Throughout the year we will empower this strong grassroots network with advocacy training, webinars, fact sheets, talking points, action alerts, virtual Hill days, guidance on appropriations process engagement, and other resources to bring awareness to these issues in Congress and incite action.

The Refuge Association also chairs and manages the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 24 wildlife, sporting, scientific, and conservation organizations that focuses solely on increasing funding for the NWRS. For the last several months we have worked hard to revitalize this coalition and prepare it to become a powerful force in the new Congress. Soon we'll be coming together to establish a strong strategic plan for fiscal years 2024 and 2025, and we are pleased that Eric Alvarez will be participating in those discussions. With our combined strengths and resources, we plan to increase our political outreach and communications tactics tenfold while amplifying our traditional events, such as the annual National Wildlife Refuge Expo and Hill briefings in coordination with US Fish and Wildlife Service leadership. The Refuge Association is also working towards transforming the congressional National Wildlife Refuge Caucus from a caucus in name only to an active and engaged alliance that will coordinate with CARE, push for increased funding, and raise awareness of the NWRS staffing crisis amongst their colleagues.

After many consecutive years of drastically insufficient budgets that have not kept pace with inflation or an ever-growing Refuge System, this work is more critical now than ever. We are excited to embark on this staffing campaign and we hope to continue working closely with you on these issues. We look forward to your support as we work together to ensure that these important areas can continue to be protected and managed for the benefit of wildlife and future generations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Geoffrey L. Haskett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Geoffrey L. Haskett
President
National Wildlife Refuge Association

cc:

Matt Strickler, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
Cynthia Martinez, Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System