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Spending Cuts Threaten Operations of America's National Wildlife Refuges

Continued budget cuts will cost local economic revenue

WASHINGTON, D.C. (June 24, 2014) - The steady decline in congressional funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System is threatening the economic vitality of hundreds of local communities that rely on the tourism and recreation dollars that refuges provide.

A new report released today by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), warned that without adequate funding for basic maintenance and repairs, refuges will be forced to reduce visitor services and wildlife habitat management. That in turn, will harm opportunities to hunt, fish and view wildlife on refuge lands.

“More than \$2.4 billion generated in local economies is at stake,” said David Houghton, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which leads CARE. “National wildlife refuges are economic engines, but without sufficient funding from Congress, those engines are going to stall.”

The report, “America's National Wildlife Refuges: Home for Wildlife, Haven for Wildlife Enthusiasts,” notes that in addition to conserving wildlife habitat for the future, refuges provide the American public with many additional benefits, from recreation and education to military safety, fire suppression and scientific advancement.

“National Wildlife Refuges are the only system of federal lands where by law, fish, wildlife and habitat conservation is the purpose, and hunting, fishing and other wildlife related activities are priority uses,” said Dale Hall, CEO, Ducks Unlimited. “Every year, more than 47 million hunters, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts visit wildlife refuges, bringing in \$2.4 billion in sales revenue to the communities around the refuges, clearly demonstrating the economic value of these lands.”

The CARE coalition is comprised of 23 wildlife, sporting and conservation organizations that span the political spectrum, representing 16 million Americans who value outdoor recreation and wildlife conservation.

CARE estimates that the refuge system needs at least \$900 million each year in operations and maintenance (O&M) funding to properly care for its 150 million acres. At its highest funding level in FY 2010, the System received little more than half the needed amount—\$503 million.

Since then, congressional appropriations have not only failed to account for rising costs, but have actually been backsliding. To reduce costs, refuges have had to cut numerous staff positions and sacrifice vital habitat management, visitor services, and maintenance activities.

“Our wildlife refuges are critical to wildlife conservation and the recovery of endangered species in this country,” said Jamie Rappaport Clark, president of Defenders of Wildlife and former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But due to budget shortfalls, we are increasingly seeing refuges close their doors to the public and scale back habitat restoration programs. We need to build a better legacy for future generations, one of valuing and supporting our natural heritage.”

To begin to bridge the gap between refuges’ funding needs and their actual budgets, CARE is calling on Congress to provide \$476.4 million in FY 2015 for the Refuge System’s O&M accounts.

Among the report highlights:

- In FY 2013, more than 38,000 people spent 1.4 million hours volunteering on refuges, a contribution worth an estimated \$31 million, or the equivalent of 702 full-time employees;
- Nearly 47.5 million people visited national wildlife refuges last year, and their spending supported 35,000 private U.S. jobs;
- The jobs created by and around refuges generate an estimated \$800 million in employment income and add nearly \$343 million in local, state and federal tax revenue;
- Nearly 31 million refuge visitors participated in wildlife watching in FY2013—representing about 65 percent of all visits to the Refuge System;
- The 364 refuges open to hunting and 303 open to fishing, as well as all 38 wetland management districts open to both activities are some of the best places for these sports, which generated a combined \$89.8 billion spent;
- The “ecosystem services” that refuges provide, such as clean drinking water and storm buffers, are worth an estimated \$32.3 billion, or \$65 for every dollar Congress invests in the Refuge System.

The report also noted several examples of how budget cuts are taking a toll:

- In the now completely unstaffed Tern Island in the Hawaiian Islands Refuge, green turtles, seabirds, and the endangered Hawaiian monk seal are suffering increased mortality as a result of entrapment in marine debris;
- In Alabama, Choctaw National Wildlife Refuge is expected to experience a drop of at least 80 percent in volunteer support due to the loss of coordinating staff, and Bon Secour Refuge has already seen its volunteer contribution annually decline by 2,000 hours—a

loss of about \$44,000 in donated time;

- In South Carolina, Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge was forced to cancel its December archery hunt last year because of staff shortages and budget reductions;
- Cokeville Meadows Refuge in Wyoming was unable to open a long-awaited hunting season this year due to a lack of adequate staffing to process hunting regulation updates, resulting in strained relationships with state and local partners;
- At Fish Springs Refuge in Utah, staff fell two weeks behind on refilling a major refuge wetland unit, which significantly reduced the area available for waterfowl hunting;
- At Aransas Refuge in Texas, a fishing pier is one of 12 public facilities shut down because the loss of maintenance staff has left the refuge unable to ensure such structures are safe;
- At Virginia's Chincoteague Refuge, the number of environmental education participants in FY 2013 was 1,700 - less than half what it was just five years prior - due to budget cuts.

For CARE's full report and additional information, please visit www.FundRefuges.org.

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) is a national coalition of 22 wildlife, sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing a constituency numbering more than 16 million Americans. CARE has been working since 1995 to educate Congress, the Administration, and the public about America's magnificent National Wildlife Refuge.

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