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**Contact**  
Desiree Sorenson-Groves  
202-290-5593, [dgroves@refugeassociation.org](mailto:dgroves@refugeassociation.org)

## **Omnibus Spending Bill Includes Budget Increase for Refuge System**

*Congress Increases Refuge System Budget; Passes Problematic Riders*

(WASHINGTON, DC) – Congress this week passed legislation to fund the government through the rest of Fiscal Year 2015, including \$474.2 million in the budget for operating and maintaining the National Wildlife Refuge System.

“We’re pleased that Congress approved a \$2 million increase for the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance budget,” said David Houghton, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. “The bill also includes a \$12 million increase in funding for the Fish and Wildlife Service, and in these tight budget times, this is good news.”

### **Spending Package Boosts Operations and Maintenance, Includes Refuge Revenue Sharing; Limits Land and Water Conservation Fund**

#### Refuge Budget Increased

The maintenance and operating budget for the Refuge System increases by \$2 million from last year under the bill, to \$474.2 million.

“We appreciate that Congress recognizes the value of America’s wildlife refuges and agreed to increase funding for operations and maintenance to help ensure the Refuge System achieves its mission,” Houghton said. “Given the realities of tight budgets and Capitol Hill politics these days, we appreciate the increase. We also know that this would not have been possible without the efforts of many Friends and other refuge supporters who have advocated on behalf of their refuges and the entire Refuge System.”

#### A Compromise on Land and Water Conservation Fund

House and Senate negotiators compromised on the spending level set for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, one of the main ways refuges fund land and water acquisitions.

Funding for refuges in the Land and Water Conservation Fund will be \$47.5 million, although only \$25 million is for specific refuge projects. The Refuge Association had recommended \$178.3 million for FY 2015. The consequence is that while a few Refuge Association priority projects received funding such as the Everglades Headwaters, Silvio O. Conte and Cache River refuges, many others will not be funded this year including the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area.



National  
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Delay on Greater Sage-Grouse Listing Decision

Among the so-called ‘riders’ included in the bill is one that attempts to delay a decision on whether to list the greater sage-grouse as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act by its September 2015 court-ordered deadline.

“Decisions on how and whether to protect wildlife under the Endangered Species Act do not belong in a spending bill,” said Houghton. “But even worse, this rider threatens to derail the tireless work happening on the ground by ranchers, sportsmen, conservationists, states and federal agencies to finalize strong conservation plans that protect sage grouse and the western way of life.”

Resource Protection Act

Left out of the bill was a provision to allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to recoup monetary damages from vandalism, pollution or other harm to refuge property. Each year, millions of dollars end up coming out of general operating expenses to repair or replace damaged property; the Refuge Association had pushed for Congress to give the Service the same authority given to the National Park Service for similar challenges. Language in the fine print does ask the Service to resubmit the request next year.

For a rundown on how all Refuge Association legislative priorities fared, visit our blog [\(link\)](#).

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*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America’s wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.*