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Contact
Desiree Sorenson-Groves
202-290-5593,
dgroves@refugeassociation.org
Caroline Brouwer: 202-420-9625,
cbrouwer@refugeassociation.org

Land and Water Conservation Fund Reauthorized for Three Years & Proposed Road through Izembek NWR Rejected

FY16 Interior Spending Package includes \$481 million for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance

(Washington, D.C.) – House and Senate lawmakers reauthorized the Land and Water Conservation Fund for three years and set FY16 spending at \$450 million in the FY16 Interior spending bill that was announced early Wednesday morning, a major boost in LWCF funding.

The Refuge System’s Operations and Maintenance budget was set at \$481 million, a \$7.2 million increase over last year’s budget. Overall, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service budget was set at \$1.5 billion, an increase of \$68 million.

The bill importantly does not include a so-called ‘rider’ that would have allowed the construction of a road through Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its congressionally designated wilderness in Alaska, a poison-pill amendment strongly opposed by the National Wildlife Refuge Association and refuge Friends groups nationwide.

“We’re extremely pleased to see a bill that increases funds to the Refuge System and does not include a road through a globally important wetland at Izembek NWR,” said David Houghton, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. “A three-year reauthorization of LWCF is great news because it now allows important refuge conservation projects to move forward with more certainty. The Refuge Association commends the Chairs and Ranking Members of the full appropriations committees in the House and Senate and Interior appropriations subcommittees for working together on a bi-partisan bill that will benefit America’s wildlife heritage.”

Of the \$450 million for LWCF, the Refuge System will receive \$68.5 million for projects next year. Among the Refuge Association’s LWCF priorities that were funded:

- Recreational Access for Sportsmen and other users: \$2.5 million
- Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge: \$4.6 million



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- Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge - \$2 million
- Bear River Watershed Conservation Area- \$2 million
- Dakota Grassland Conservation Area - \$6.5 million
- Dakota Tallgrass Prairie Wildlife Management Area - \$3 million

The agreement includes \$2.5 million for urban wildlife conservation as well as \$2.1 million for volunteer partnerships; an increase of \$500,000 over the FY15 enacted level, for costs related to ensuring that volunteers, who currently contribute 20% of all work done on refuges, maintain a robust presence at wildlife refuges.

The House and Senate are expected to pass the legislation this week, and the president is expected to sign the bill. The legislation funds the Refuge System and other Interior agencies for the remainder of FY16.

The bill is not without its faults. Included in the legislation is a provision preventing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from issuing further rules to place sage-grouse on the Endangered Species Act.

“A spending bill is not the place to create sweeping policies that prevent the Service from following the law under the Endangered Species Act,” Houghton said. However, the bill also included \$60 million for the Bureau of Land Management and \$3.3 million for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conserve greater sage-grouse habitat.

No funds are provided for land protection planning, and the agreement includes the requested increases for maintenance support and deferred maintenance.

The following is a breakdown of Refuge System related funding levels included in the bill:

- Land and Water Conservation Fund: \$68.5 million
- Refuge Fund: \$13.2 million
- North American Wetlands Conservation Fund (NAWCA): \$35.1 million
- Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program: \$51.7 million
- Coastal Grant Program: \$13.3 million
- State Wildlife Grants: \$60.6 million
- Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund: \$3.9 million
- Multinational Species Conservation Fund: \$11.1 million
- FWS Construction: \$23.7 million

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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.