

**Statement of Chairwoman Madeleine Z. Bordallo
Oversight Hearing on Oversight Hearing on Recent
Budget Trends Concerning the National Wildlife Refuge
System and Reviews of Relevant Reports released by
the U.S. Government Accountability Office and
Management Systems International**

**Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans
Wednesday, September 24, 2008**

This morning's hearing is a follow-up to the hearing the Subcommittee held last October concerning the efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to implement the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act.

We will hear testimony regarding a report being released today by the U.S. Government Accountability Office investigating recent budget trends affecting the Refuge System, and a second report released in June by Management Systems International that evaluated the performance of the Refuge System in meeting its own strategic goals.

As we learned last year, all is not well with the Refuge System. Testimony provided by former Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, former EPA Administrator, Carol Browner, and other witnesses painted the picture of a Refuge System stretched thin by insufficient funding, staff cuts and numerous major new challenges such as climate change, invasive species, and water shortages.

Regrettably, the two reports before us today, while not entirely negative, corroborate many of the criticisms made during last year's hearing. Most importantly, it appears that the effects of insufficient funding have had a ripple affect across the Refuge System, forcing the Fish and Wildlife Service to further scale back operations at many refuges, or even close refuges to public use altogether.

Permanent staffing levels have fallen by 7.5 percent from peak staffing levels in 2003. Not surprisingly, habitat quality in

many refuges has fallen between seven and twenty percent. Additionally, many visitor services programs, especially environmental education and interpretation, have noticeably declined in availability and quality.

Perhaps what will be most disturbing to many members is that both reports emphasize that funding for law enforcement remains severely insufficient. Consequently, law enforcement operations are woefully inadequate to cover a system of public lands that includes some of the most rugged and isolated terrain in the United States, and compromise public safety throughout the entire 98 million acre Refuge System.

In closing, the sum of these two reports is clear: the Refuge System has reached a tipping point where it faces an uncertain future. Yet before we can act intelligently to rectify this decline, we need to understand the facts. To the extent that this hearing helps draw attention to the current plight facing our National

Wildlife Refuges, it will have been a constructive first step in our important work to rebuild the Refuge System, and to bequeath to our children a wildlife legacy that is both abundant and diverse.