



**TESTIMONY OF
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**BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
THE OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE BACKLOG WITHIN THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
MAY 26, 2011**

Mister Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I am Jamie Rappaport Clark, Executive Vice President of Defenders of Wildlife (“Defenders”). I greatly appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of Defenders today.

Founded in 1947, Defenders has more than one million supporters across the nation and is dedicated to the protection and restoration of all wild animals and plants in their natural communities. Defenders has been substantively involved in National Wildlife Refuge System law and policy for decades, and actively worked for passage of legislation that culminated in the landmark National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (“Refuge Improvement Act”). Defenders has also been a leading voice in the formulation of national policy guidance issued since passage of the Refuge Improvement Act, including policies addressing planning, compatibility and appropriateness of secondary uses, biological integrity, diversity and environmental health, wilderness, and recreational use. In addition, since 1995, Defenders has been an active member of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (“CARE”), a diverse coalition of 21 organizations, including the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the National Rifle Association, and the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance. Representing more than 14 million Americans, CARE works to educate Congress and the American public about the Refuge System and to secure strong investments in the valuable wildlife, lands, and waters it protects.

As the only federal land system in the U.S. dedicated primarily to the conservation of wildlife and habitat, the Refuge System is of paramount importance to Defenders and to all Americans, especially the more than 40 million people who visit and enjoy national wildlife refuges each year. Having also served as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“Service”) from 1997 to 2001 after a career in federal service as a wildlife biologist first with the Department of the Army and then with the Service, I am very familiar with the causes and implications of the Refuge System’s operations and maintenance backlog. In my testimony, I will highlight these subjects, as well as offer some suggestions for addressing the backlog.

THE GROWTH OF THE BACKLOG

The Refuge System's estimated operations and maintenance backlog has grown from approximately \$1 billion in 1996 to its current total of \$3.3 billion. There are several causes of this rapid growth. Most important to recognize is the System's chronic and severe underfunding. With appropriations that have consistently failed to cover annual program needs, unfunded projects have been forced onto the growing list of deferred operations and maintenance projects. The longer a project is delayed, the higher the cost of funding it later.

Also largely unaccounted for in appropriations have been annual increases needed to cover rising fixed costs, including salaries, utilities, rent, and fuel. CARE estimates that the Refuge System needs at least \$15 million each year just to keep up with these annual fixed costs. But as funding fails to include these adjustments, money to pay for these rising costs must be diverted from habitat management, visitor services, law enforcement, maintenance, or other programs, further adding to the extensive backlog.

Finally, the magnitude of the backlog's growth since 1996 is misleading, as some of the increase can be attributed to changes in quantifying the System's facilities. Earlier calculations were based on inconsistent assessments that failed to account for basic assets such as roads and levees. By implementing a more comprehensive and standardized approach, the Refuge System now has more accurate records of its facilities, helping to correct earlier underestimates of true maintenance needs.

IMPACTS OF THE BACKLOG

At \$3.3 billion, the current backlog has left personnel struggling to uphold the System's mission to conserve wildlife for the American public, as well as to harness its full potential as an economic driver of local communities. At the end of FY 2010, nearly 12,800 refuge facilities were overdue for scheduled maintenance or replacement, accounting for a maintenance backlog totaling more than \$2.7 billion. The operations backlog, at close to \$677 million, consisted of approximately 5,600 project needs, including important staff positions; more than half of these needs are considered critical to the System's mission.

These deficiencies have clearly taken a toll on the Refuge System. Refuges do not have the resources to treat millions of acres infested with invasive plants and animals. The staff of law enforcement officers, numbering 213, is barely one-quarter of the 845 officers recommended by the International Association of Chiefs of Police in a 2005 analysis. In many cases, the System has coped with funding shortfalls by grouping several refuge units into a single complex, allowing staff and resources to be shared, though they are generally spread too thin to adequately address management needs.

The impacts extend to the public as well. Funding shortfalls have meant that many visitor facilities go without needed maintenance or repairs, sometimes posing risks to public safety. Severe staffing shortages also hamstring efforts to expand or even maintain existing visitor use opportunities such as wildlife observation, hunting, fishing, and environmental education. Despite these challenges, a steadily growing number of refuge visitors, approximately 45 million in FY 2010, indicates that the Refuge System has only begun to scratch the surface of its true potential to attract the public.

Furthermore, with the Service's *Banking on Nature* report estimating that spending by refuge visitors in 2006 contributed \$1.7 billion to local communities alone, Defenders believes that stronger congressional investments in the Refuge System would pay even greater dividends by further improving the health of these local economies.

ADDRESSING THE BACKLOG

While the backlog may appear insurmountable and has undoubtedly held the Refuge System back from fully delivering on its conservation and public use goals, progress has been made. Steady increases in the operations and maintenance budget between FY 2008 and FY 2010 have helped the System to not only keep pace with rising costs, but also begin to make progress on some of the management challenges that have held it back from reaching its full potential. Funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act have also supported important projects on the maintenance backlog, which has held relatively steady at about \$2.7 billion during the past several years. Meanwhile, the operations backlog actually declined by more than \$300 million as a result of utilizing new staffing models, updating project information, and securing partnership opportunities.

These trends show that the combined efforts of the Administration and Congress can have meaningful, positive impacts on this backlog. Defenders urges the subcommittee to consider the following recommendations to build on these important steps forward.

Provide Annual Funding that Matches Annual Needs

CARE has estimated that the Refuge System needs at least \$900 million to adequately meet its annual program costs. Yet, its highest funding level reached only \$503 million in FY 2010. To prevent new projects from worsening the backlog, Congress must work to approach a funding level that, at a minimum, covers the Refuge System's annual needs. Each year, that funding must also be adjusted upward to account for rising fixed costs that would otherwise erode the System's ability to maintain a consistent level of management from one year to the next.

Support Partnerships and Volunteer Opportunities

With many refuges severely understaffed, available personnel are generally spread too thin to capitalize on partnership opportunities that could otherwise improve volunteer involvement and leveraging of additional resources. In contrast, for example, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in central California, being comparatively well staffed, has been known to effectively triple its annual budget by engaging in partnerships with other interested stakeholders. These extra resources have enabled staff to accomplish more of its restoration work, treat more acres of invasive species, and provide more successful hunting programs for the public. This situation demonstrates the great potential that exists when sufficient staffing is available to foster such partnerships, and how much is being lost at other wildlife refuges without adequate staffing. We urge Congress to fund critically needed positions that will provide more refuges the capacity to harness opportunities like those at the San Luis Refuge Complex.

Advance a Coordinated Inventory and Monitoring Program

The Service must continue working to identify opportunities to improve its management efficiency, which should include building on the Refuge System's newly initiated inventory and monitoring program. Collecting baseline data and tracking trends on each refuge is essential to more accurately determine management and funding needs so that dollars can be directed toward the highest-priority actions.

Standardizing data collection and information management across all Service regions and among the various federal land management agencies will maximize the efficiency with which data can be analyzed and shared, as well as ensure that data will continue to be useful over time. Congress should work with the Administration to develop a streamlined and coordinated approach to inventory and monitoring work.

Continue to Invest in Wildlife Conservation and Ecosystem Services through Critically Important Land Acquisition

The Refuge Improvement Act, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, directs the Secretary of the Interior to “plan and direct the continued growth of the System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States, to complement efforts of States and other Federal agencies to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats, and to increase support for the System and participation from conservation partners and the public.” In addition to protecting crucial wildlife habitat across an increasingly fragmented landscape, Defenders believes that land acquisition is a profitable investment that benefits the American public by safeguarding clean air and water supplies, providing space for outdoor recreation, and supporting local economies.

Inholdings, in particular, provide great potential to directly address operations and maintenance costs. As refuges incrementally acquire land within their acquisition boundaries, private inholdings often leave a patchwork of protected land that creates challenges for activities such as invasive species control and fire management. Acquiring these lands from willing sellers improves habitat connectivity, in turn helping to reduce future federal management efforts and costs.

CONCLUSION

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a vital part of America's natural heritage, conserving wildlife, providing clean water and other ecosystem services, affording abundant opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation activities, and serving as a living laboratory for environmental education and science. Continuing to invest in the System today by reducing the operations and maintenance backlog and making critically important land acquisitions will pay tremendous dividends for our children and future generations. Defenders of Wildlife stands ready to work with Congress and the Administration to find efficient and cost-effective ways to reduce the Refuge System's operations and maintenance backlog. I thank you for the opportunity to share my perspectives on this critical issue, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.