

**TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
ON
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM'S OPERATIONS NEEDS AND MAINTENANCE
BACKLOG**

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Good morning Chairman Fleming and members of the Subcommittee. I am Jim Kurth, acting Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the important work funded by the National Wildlife Refuge System's operations and maintenance accounts, and on the tools we use to protect America's wildlife and natural areas.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The Refuge System is the world's premier network of public lands devoted to the conservation of wildlife and habitat, and offers about 44 million annual visitors the opportunity to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, and learn about nature through environmental education and interpretation. And with its widespread presence and history of working with partners, the Refuge System also plays a key role in supporting innovative community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and to reconnect people to the outdoors through the Administration's America's Great Outdoors initiative.

The Refuge System includes over 150 million acres of land and water; natural gems that Americans have protected for themselves and their children. The Refuge System is a diverse land, wetland, and ocean conservation system spanning more than half the planet—from Guam, American Samoa, and other remote Pacific islands, north to the high arctic in northern Alaska, east to the rugged coastline of Maine and south to the tropical U.S. Virgin Islands. National wildlife refuges are found in every U.S. state. In total, the Refuge System now contains 553 refuges and 38 wetland management districts.

The presence of a national wildlife refuge in a community offers significant economic benefit in the form of jobs and visitor spending in local stores, hotels, and service stations. According to a Service analysis entitled *Banking on Nature 2006: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*, refuge visitors generated \$1.7 billion of annual sales to local economies, of which 87% was spent by travelers from outside the local area. The ripple effect from these visitors created over 27,000 jobs and more than \$543 million in employment income.

But the Refuge System is just a part of a growing and massive outdoor recreation business sector. According to the *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, 33.9 million Americans spent a combined total of \$76.7 billion on hunting and fishing in 2006. Even more popular, wildlife watching was enjoyed by 71.1 million Americans, who spent \$45.7 billion. Moreover, research has shown that permanently protected land in the vicinity of developed areas significantly increases property values. A substantial number of national wildlife refuges are located in and around cities, and in places where development is rapidly occurring. It is clear that Americans place high value on wild lands and healthy populations of fish and wildlife. In addition to economic benefits, refuges provide many environmental services for communities. For example, refuges can filter rainwater before it enters municipal supplies, reduce flooding by slowing excess surface runoff, and attenuate storm surges before they reach coastal homes and businesses. Finally, refuges place relatively few demands on local infrastructure when compared to more intensive development.

Because national wildlife refuges offer substantial economic benefit and unparalleled wildlife experiences, it's no surprise they enjoy broad public support. Advocacy groups as diverse as the National Rifle Association, The Wilderness Society, Safari Club International, and National Audubon Society, among many others, all agree that the Refuge System is a unique American treasure worthy of continued investment. But the Refuge System is facing tremendous challenges—from the threats placed upon wildlife by habitat destruction, non-native species, and a rapidly changing climate, to a dwindling interest in the outdoors by many young Americans. The Service is already responding to these challenges, while also working to cultivate the support of both traditional and new constituencies, particularly diverse, urban youth. To amplify our efforts and hone our approach, the Refuge System is now spearheading a collaborative effort that aims to craft a progressive vision for wildlife conservation in America. We call it *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*.

Conserving the Future will help ensure that the Refuge System is on track to achieve its mission, while being prepared to meet the challenges of our changing world. The Service has been encouraging everyone—wildlife watchers, outdoor educators, hunters, anglers, youth, Service employees, refuge Friends groups, other conservation partners and concerned citizens—to participate in shaping the Refuge System's future. These efforts will ensure that the resources of the Refuge System are used in a prioritized and efficient manner to reach the Service's goals as well as outcomes our constituencies are asking for—such as, continued hunting and fishing opportunities, wilderness experiences, restoration of degraded lands, thriving wildlife populations, among many others.

In order to achieve these outcomes, the Service uses a variety of approaches, such as actively managing and restoring wildlife habitats, offering technical and financial assistance to private landowners, and building public support through volunteer programs. One of the most effective approaches is the protection of important wildlife habitats via land acquisition or conservation easements. In America, lands with some form of legal protection are highly fragmented. Many species, such as salmon or Florida panthers, try their best to navigate barriers, including hydroelectric dams and 10-lane interstates, but are usually unsuccessful and are therefore their populations are vulnerable. When the Refuge System acquires new properties, species such as

these benefit from the renewed connection between protected parcels. These acquisitions are good for wildlife, but they're also good for people because the Refuge System only acquires lands in easement or fee title from willing landowners who are paid market value for their land. For these people, putting an easement on their property or selling it to the Refuge System guarantees that the land they love will forever remain just as they know it; preserved for their children and grandchildren.

In recent years, a new model of conservation has begun to find success in certain parts of the rural U.S. That is, a model that finds shared objectives between the needs of wildlife and those interested in maintaining traditional working lands, such as for livestock grazing and haying. Private landowners, conservation groups, states and the federal government are all working together to protect America's special places. For example, in the Rocky Mountain Front and Blackfoot Valley of central Montana, people are working cooperatively to protect one of the most special places left in the Rockies—an area that preserves ranching lifestyles while maintaining critical corridors for grizzly bears and other animals to make their seasonal migrations. Similarly, in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, people are collaborating to protect an area that is home to some of the last remaining tallgrass prairie in America. With over 96% of this globally rare ecosystem already destroyed, preserving what's left ensures room for wildlife to roam while preserving the rich agricultural heritage of the region. It's truly a win-win-win when voluntary conservation easements designed to protect more than 100 species of grassland birds and 500 plants simultaneously preserve land ownership and property rights for participating landowners, and keep these properties on local tax rolls.

Overwhelmingly, Americans support conservation initiatives, even in the face of economic hardship. Since 1988, Americans have voted to raise \$56 billion for land conservation through bonds, property or sales tax increases, or other financial mechanisms. Ballot initiatives have passed in 43 states to date, with an overall passage rate of nearly 76%, or 1,740 out of 2,299 initiatives.¹

The Refuge System's Operations and Maintenance Accounts

The Refuge System prioritizes its project spending in alignment with its overall strategic goals. Our staff and funding conserve an extraordinary amount of species and ecosystems. Currently, the Service is tracking about \$3.3 billion in operational needs and deferred maintenance projects, including about \$650 million in operations and \$2.7 billion in maintenance. It is important to note that the \$2.7 billion in maintenance reflects the total amount of projects required to bring all assets up to excellent conditions.

Managing the Refuge System is not unlike running a large company with hundreds of branch offices. It requires simultaneous attention to both national and local issues, and a diverse and highly trained workforce that must work together for the entire operation to run smoothly. Our workforce contains mostly biologists and professional wildlife managers, but also contains professional educators, law enforcement officers, heavy equipment operators, fire fighters, real estate appraisers, IT and cartography professionals, budget specialists, and more than a few pilots and boat captains. With fewer than 4,000 employees working at more than 380 locations

¹ LandVote 2010 by *The Trust for Public Land and Land Trust Alliance*

spanning all U.S. states and territories, and with only \$3.35 for every acre we manage, the Refuge System must work hard to ensure its operations are efficient.

Operations Account

The Refuge System spends Operations money on activities that contribute to meeting our mission. These are the activities that keep land and water in suitable condition for wildlife, and provide safe access and recreational opportunities for visitors. For budget purposes, the Refuge System organizes its operational activities into four areas: Wildlife and Habitat Management, Visitor Services, Law Enforcement, and Conservation Planning. A database—the Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS)—catalogs outstanding operational projects, including the staff and equipment necessary to perform routine management activities. From a refuge manager’s perspective, projects in RONS represent the prospective work and people to get the job done. These funding increases are for monitoring, restoring, and protecting wildlife and their habitats, supporting wildlife-dependent recreation, ensuring a safe environment for people and wildlife, and creating strategic plans with extensive public involvement that ensure a collaborative approach to conservation.

The continual improvements being made to RONS have allowed the Refuge System to be strategic in its allocations by identifying and prioritizing operational funding increases. While RONS previously indicated approximately \$1 billion in project funding, careful analysis in the past two years has reduced this figure, primarily by removing lower priority projects. Making these choices has allowed the Refuge System to focus on only the highest priority needs. Currently, RONS contains 5,349 projects that describe a combined total of approximately \$650 million. A portion of these “projects” actually represent additional staff. Such staffing calculations were developed from two staffing models, both of which used measurable and objective workload drivers to predict number and location of staff. One model, the *Law Enforcement Deployment Model*, was developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and determined the number of law enforcement officers to ensure visitor, staff, and resource protection. The IACP called for 845 officers. Currently the Refuge System has approximately 213 officers. The second model—*Staffing Model for Field Stations in the Refuge System, June 2008*—calculated the necessary non-law enforcement positions at refuges across the country.

The majority of Operations funding is spent on wildlife and habitat management. These activities are at the core of what the Refuge System does. For example, at Blackwater NWR in Maryland and at many other refuges, freshwater impoundments are managed with dikes, pumps, canals, water control structures, and even prescribed fire to obtain ideal conditions for waterfowl and shorebirds.

Another example of important management funded with Operations dollars is found in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas, where refuge lands are restored with operations funds. Here, in one of the most diverse plant and animal communities in the entire U.S., more than 95% of the native vegetation has been cleared for agriculture and other development. Still, more than 500 bird and 300 butterfly species, including some of the rarest in America, have been documented in this four-county area. Owing to the biological richness preserved by the three

national wildlife refuges here, southern Texas has become one of the premier eco-tourism destinations in the country. However, Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR alone has more than 110 disconnected parcels—many of which were purchased as farmland and restored back to native vegetation—scattered along the final 200 miles of the river. This arrangement may be okay for winged critters like birds and bats, but it presents huge barriers to animals that walk, slither, or hop. Strategically acquiring lands from willing sellers and restoring those lands with operations dollars connects habitats, improves water quality, and helps nearby Texas cities and towns thrive with the 600,000 annual visitors attracted to this natural spectacle. These visitors generate approximately \$150 million for the local economy, which is substantial given the median household income in the area is only \$27,000.

Operations funding also allows for proactive work that actually saves money in the long run. For example, non-native invasive species (e.g., nutria, kudzu, cheat grass, and verbicina) have a foothold nearly everywhere in America. These invaders cost us dearly, in terms of money but also reduced forage for livestock, increased fuel for catastrophic wildfires, and degraded wildlife habitat. The most effective approach when battling invasive species is to detect and eradicate them early, before they gain a strong foothold and spread quickly. Operations money funds this critical work, which not only safeguards refuge lands but also surrounding private property.

Maintenance Account

In addition to operational work, the Refuge System also allocates funding to important maintenance projects. The Refuge System has an extensive array of constructed facility assets that are vital to achieving the System's mission. A database known as the Service Asset and Maintenance Management System (SAMMS) catalogs projects for more than 45,000 assets, which are collectively valued at about \$24 billion. About 35% of the value of this investment is in water management structures which aid in managing wetland impoundments for an array of wildlife and recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, and birding. Nearly 50% is invested in roads, trails, bridges, and parking areas, allowing our employees to access areas for management and research, and facilitating access for visitors. About 11% is invested in buildings that provide office space, labs, visitor space, residences, and storage for vehicles, equipment, and various supplies. The remaining 6% of our infrastructure is comprised of items such as small-scale visitor facilities, radio and communication systems, docks/piers for equipment transport, and various other items.

About a decade ago, the Refuge System began a more structured approach to managing its constructed assets, and in general the condition of our facilities is now much improved. Our data show an improving trend in the facility condition index for our buildings, water management assets, and transportation assets. We initiated comprehensive condition assessments that are completed every five years by specialists trained in estimating repair costs. Five-year budget plans were developed to prioritize funding over multiple years using a criteria-based ranking approach. Collectively, these efforts have allowed us to gain a much more detailed and accurate understanding of the condition of our assets and the costs to adequately address maintenance. In the last 10 years or so, the list of deferred maintenance projects appeared to grow considerably, from about \$600 million to about \$2.7 billion. However, much of this growth is a result of more complete and accurate information rather than changes in asset condition. It's also noteworthy

that the maintenance backlog has remained relatively stable at \$2.5 to \$2.7 billion for the last four years.

Importantly, however, these more detailed cataloging efforts have had the effect of producing a number which reflects the total amount of projects required to bring all assets up to excellent conditions rather than to keep the condition of the most important components of key assets at a sustainable level.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act) allowed many important projects to be completed. This funding represented an important investment that helped maintain the critical buildings, levees, water control structures, and more, that we need to meet both the biological and visitor-related goals of the Refuge System. The Refuge System received approximately \$212 million in funding from the Recovery Act: 60% was devoted to existing facilities, 29% to new facilities, 8% to habitat improvement projects, and 2% to youth employment.

Whether through Recovery Act funding or annual appropriations, the Refuge System uses its available funds in strategic ways for the highest priority projects. We use a variety of methods to leverage available resources and promote the wise use of taxpayer dollars. These include pooling resources with our partners and between refuges, renting rather than purchasing construction equipment where appropriate, organizing maintenance action teams composed of staff who can complete projects for less than contractors, employing youth to assist with routine maintenance tasks, developing a corps of more than 42,000 volunteers who contribute nearly 1.5 million hours of work annually, and other means to find the most cost effective way to complete projects.

The Refuge System has some atypical assets within its overall maintenance program. Our road system is not a well-defined system of paved highways but is instead a collection of mostly “native surfaced” roadways often located in environmentally sensitive areas, which are subject to flooding. These roads may have been built, for example, as an addition to a levee project and may be under-designed or unsuitable for substantial vehicular traffic. Determining how best to maintain such roads is challenging both in terms of design and reliable and consistent forecasting of long-term maintenance costs. In the last decade, funding through the surface transportation authorization bill has made a significant improvement to the condition of refuge roads. Another asset challenge is management of infrastructure on our many island refuges in remote areas of the Pacific Ocean, such as Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. Costs to mobilize a construction crew at Midway are very expensive (generally over \$100,000 per event) and Midway alone has identified over \$210 million in deferred maintenance projects.

In addition, damages from natural disasters, such as floods, drought or hurricanes affect many refuges—especially those in coastal or riverine zones. Refuges around the country are frequently in the crosshairs of natural disasters, whether hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the North Dakota floods of 2009, or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. These events have had a substantial effect on Refuge System maintenance.

Since 2000, seven former military sites have been transferred to the Refuge System. With these properties comes the cost of demolition, management, and public safety. The current deferred maintenance and demolition costs for projects on these seven former military sites is \$65.5 million.

In summary, the Refuge System has made significant progress in the last decade with regard to refining and improving its maintenance program. We have made great strides toward a more thorough understanding of costs and needs, and are focusing funds toward the highest priority needs.

Acquisition of Fee-Title Land or Conservation Easements Can Help Decrease Operations and Maintenance Costs

Without question, providing high-quality stewardship of the nation's wildlife refuges takes significant resources, and refuge managers must make maintenance decisions within a prioritized framework to ensure key assets remain at sustainable levels. The Refuge System sometimes faces questions about how its operations and maintenance backlog relate to its pursuit of acquiring new fee-title land or conservation easements.

The Refuge System, as part of its official charge from Congress, has a mandate to "...conserve fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats..." One of the most effective ways to do this is to protect areas that hold the greatest value for wildlife. This approach—acquiring rights to land and water—is a clear priority for both Congress and the majority of Americans who support preserving open space and wildlife, as evidenced by the public comments at the Administration's America's Great Outdoors sessions held last summer throughout the country. Investment in newly conserved properties provides more access for hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers; creates jobs and economic benefit to local communities; increases survival of wildlife; and helps private landowners preserve their family lands and lifestyle, such as ranching, in perpetuity. Any one of these reasons alone is a strong justification for conserving irreplaceable lands—in some cases, remnants of the last places on Earth where certain habitats exist, such as tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills of Kansas. But an equally compelling reason to purchase land or acquire easements is that consolidating fragmented lands often *reduces* operations and maintenance needs, thereby saving taxpayer dollars.

Most new acquisitions or conservation easements acquired by the Refuge System simply serve to fill in the gaps. Many are private inholdings within or immediately adjacent to an existing refuge parcel. Private inholdings may seem of small consequence, especially if the majority of the surrounding land is already legally protected and managed for wildlife. But those scattered and sometimes small inholdings can have a disproportionate and often adverse effect on the ability of a refuge to achieve its purpose. In a real way, strategic acquisitions or easements can significantly simplify management and reduce expenses related to signage, fencing, law enforcement patrols, legal permits, rights-of-way conflicts, fire fighting, road maintenance, habitat management and restoration, fighting invasive species, and meet important conservation objectives.

For example, at Laguna Atascosa NWR in Texas, acquisition of a tract already bordered on three sides by the refuge would result in significant savings in terms of reduced law enforcement

patrols and maintenance, and improved management effectiveness. The refuge would no longer require: maintenance for over 3 miles of fencing, which would save nearly \$200,000 over about 15 years; personnel to respond to frequent cattle trespassing; or maintenance of fire breaks. In addition, the acquisition would significantly improve the refuge's ability to properly manage most of the water in the Bahia Grande basins.

The Refuge System doesn't only acquire land to benefit wildlife, people, and to streamline management and save money—we also contribute to national security and a well-trained military. For example, Fort A.P. Hill is one of the largest military installations on the East Coast, but is located in a rapidly growing area in northern Virginia. Urban and suburban development has become a major challenge for military installations nationwide. Incompatible development – primarily residential housing and stores – close to an installation's boundary can limit training and other military operations. And so, in 2009, Fort A.P. Hill, using its Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program, partnered with nearby Rappahannock River Valley NWR and other partners to cost-share the preservation of adjacent lands that hold conservation and historic value. The ACUB program benefits military installations by providing buffers between the installations and neighboring communities. This enables the Army to more fully utilize the installations for military purpose. In the case of Fort A.P. Hill nearly 3,000 acres were preserved—a situation good for wildlife and the preparedness of our nation's military.

Conclusion

The Refuge System is nothing if not creative and focused. Creative in its use of partnerships to achieve an impressive amount of conservation work, and focused in its wise use of limited resources to get the highest-priority jobs done. While we always strive for a prioritized, efficient approach, it is true that higher budgets allow us to get more conservation done, and provide higher quality services to visitors. And during lean times, we are able to make the tough choices by prioritizing and using our resources efficiently, while continuing our commitment to excellent public service.

The Refuge System continues to seek ways to streamline management and find efficiencies. We have many ways to accomplish this, but one of the most effective ways is to remember, and act upon, the foresight and wisdom that Congress showed more than a decade ago, when in 1997 the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act ordered the 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...."

We appreciate the Subcommittee's attention to this important issue and hope we can cooperate to identify solutions that address our highest priority needs while still allowing the Refuge System to meet its mission.