

**Susan Recce**

**Director**

**Division of Conservation Wildlife and Natural Resources**

**National Rifle Association**

**Testimony on**

**“Operations and Maintenance Backlog within the National Wildlife Refuge System”**

**Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs**

**Committee on Natural Resources**

**May 26, 2011**

The National Rifle Association (NRA) appreciates the invitation to testify today. The growing backlog of operation and maintenance needs within the Refuge System is of such concern to the NRA and its hunter members that we helped form a coalition more than 15 years ago to address this problem. We have been an active participant in the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) since that time.

Hunters have been the backbone of the National Wildlife Refuge System dating back to 1903 when hunter-conservationist President Theodore Roosevelt established Pelican Island as the first national wildlife refuge. Today, there are 553 refuges, with over half or 322 opened to hunting.

Over the past 7 decades, more than \$750 million have been generated for the Refuge System, largely by waterfowl hunters through the purchase of the Duck Stamp. This amounts to nearly \$25 million annually. The Duck Stamp was J.N. “Ding” Darling’s visionary approach to building a system of federal lands that are set aside primarily for wildlife and the protection of habitat.

Ninety-eight cents out of every Duck Stamp dollar is spent directly on purchasing land for the Refuge System. Thanks to the support of hunters across America, more than 5 million acres of wetland and grassland habitat has been added to the Refuge System. This volunteer, citizen-based revenue for federal land acquisition is unparalleled anywhere else, in the United States or the world, and exemplifies the unique role that hunters play in wildlife conservation.

Some might suggest that funding for land acquisition further exacerbates the problem of financing the management responsibilities that go with acquisition of new lands. The NRA views the Duck Stamp revenue and Congressional appropriations for land acquisition as a

requirement for good citizen and government investment in the present and future protection and restoration of natural resources that this country is blessed with.

That is why the NRA supports CARE's mission to increase the level of operations and maintenance funding for the Refuge System through moderate increases in annual appropriations. That mission helps protect our hunters' long-standing investment in the Refuge System.

Well known is the fact that the operations and maintenance backlog for the Refuge System is over \$3.6 billion; a backlog that can affect the ability of the Fish and Wildlife Service to provide quality opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation. The figure is staggering, but what federal land system does not have a long list of needs with a sizeable price tag at the end of the column. The National Park Service, as an example, faces in the neighborhood of \$9 billion in backlog needs.

Mr. Chairman, the NRA appreciates the attention your Subcommittee is focusing on the current backlog of the Refuge System and inviting suggestions on how to address this burden that hangs over the Refuge System. There is no question that the size of the backlog means that many critical elements of running the Refuge System, like wildlife and habitat management projects, facility upkeep and equipment maintenance, cannot be accomplished or are severely constrained because of limited funding.

Of particular concern to us is the impact on wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing that were recognized as important responsibilities of the Refuge System when they were made "priority public uses" in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. All those who value this unique system of lands have a real concern over how to keep annual funding levels at least minimally adequate.

In the letter of invitation, Mr Chairman, you asked several questions of the witnesses. The first question is why the operations and maintenance backlog has increased over seven fold in the last 15 years.

It probably goes without saying that fixed costs are always on the rise and that it will always be a contributing factor as are costs associated with deferring maintenance so that repair costs are greater when the problem has grown larger. But I believe the greatest factor is due to a better accounting of what assets the Refuge System contains and, consequently, the costs associated with maintaining those additional assets.

The partnership that CARE has developed with the Fish and Wildlife Service over the same period of time could have resulted in this increased backlog because of the importance that CARE has placed on a scrupulous accounting of operations and maintenance needs, along with the accounting of every dollar spent on the backlog. Given that the span of time under review parallels that of CARE's existence, an improved tracking system that CARE insisted upon could be the reason why the backlog increased substantially over the last 15 years.

CARE has consistently asked for concrete date from the Service that would allow us to understand the backlog and overall needs of the Refuge System in order to fully function. Our requests for information have become more finely tuned, and as a result the way in which the Service collects data has improved. As the Service becomes more efficient in the way information is collected, the backlog will likely grow, although in some cases it has declined. As noted in CARE's 2011 report to Congress entitled, "Restoring America's Wildlife Refuges" the operations backlog was reduced from \$1 billion to \$677 million due to new staffing models, the updating of project information and the leveraging of partnerships.

There are also specific impacts on operation and maintenance needs that have contributed substantially to the \$3.3 billion backlog. As noted in CARE's 2011 report, the cost of demolition and management for 7 refuges established since FY 2000 on former military sites added \$65.5 million alone to the backlog. The cost of the cleanup was not absorbed by the Department of Defense before the lands were transferred to the Service.

I also believe that the challenges the Service faces and that the Refuge System has to respond to have also increased like fighting the spread of invasive species, improving habitat for the growing list of threatened and endangered species, intensifying land management in the face of the incursion of suburban development deeper into rural areas, and responding to contaminants that reach refuges from outside its borders. The important question is what steps can be taken administratively or legislatively to reverse this backlog, or at least to whittle it down.

While there will likely never be solutions that will result in the Refuge System becoming self sustaining or fully funded with annual appropriations, I do believe more can be done with what is already being utilized. First is strengthening partnerships, especially with the state fish and wildlife agencies. Many state agencies already have agreements with specific refuges to assist in managing visitor programs, like hunting, as well as to share in law enforcement responsibilities and wildlife restoration projects of mutual benefit. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies are in the best position to speak to that specifically.

Second is the better utilization of volunteers. People who volunteer their time and labor at refuges contribute around 20% of the total work accomplished on refuges – the equivalent of 643 full-time employees for a workforce of just 3,500. One-fifth of the total projects on refuges accomplished by volunteers is an impressive figure, but it is possible to increase that percentage with some administrative adjustments.

For example, volunteers are supervised by Visitor Services staff, but often times when the money is tight, the position is absorbed into other duties or not filled, meaning that all that potential in-kind labor and resource cannot be harnessed and utilized. It also takes staff time to train volunteers to teach and supervise other volunteers, so the network of volunteerism could be hugely expanded with a small investment in Visitor Services staff to manage a team of refuge volunteers.

This is an area that needs to be examined closely as many people of the "baby boomer" generation have retired or about to retire and have the health, education, income, skills, and interest to do something of value. In order to tap this potentially huge pool of volunteers, the

Fish and Wildlife Service has to have the staff resources to supervise and train volunteers. Further, volunteers are a resource that can be shared by several land managers in the geographic area so there would be no loss of opportunity to volunteer or work to be accomplished. It also may be valuable to have a survey conducted of volunteers and refuge "Friends Groups" to find out what they believe could be done to increase volunteerism on refuges. I suspect they know more than anyone else what it takes to recruit and retain good volunteers.

Another administrative step would be to expand to other states the interagency partnership that has been developed in Nevada. In 1997, the 4 land management agencies, the National Park Service, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service and the BLM formed SNAP, the Southern Nevada Agency Partnership. They share resources and volunteers; law enforcement duties are cross delegated and they work together on long-term planning. While each agency has its own mandates, they have a common goal of assisting each other.

One idea that has been discussed is the issuance of a stamp, the cost of which could be a few cents above the cost of the current postage stamp with the additional funds going to the Refuge System. The Postal Service recently issued a stamp for international wildlife, the "Save Vanishing Species" stamp at a cost of 55 cents to be sold for the next 2 years. This was the result of bi-partisan Congressional action last year. Congress could do something similar for our native wildlife. A Refuge System stamp, supported by the power of the 14 million members and supporters that make up the CARE organizations, could be very successful.

If it involves going to the public, any revenue raised outside of appropriations would have to be voluntary. Many people believe that their tax dollars pay for or should pay for the upkeep of federal public lands. Resistance to the payment of entrance fees has arisen because of that belief. So, it is unlikely that fee increases will be well-received. And, I believe that the Fish and Wildlife Service, along with the other agencies, have had ample time to tap the authorities and resources available to them to raise revenue through that source.

In summary, the National Wildlife Refuge System protects resources that hunters and anglers and millions of other Americans cherish and they have put a lot of their own time and money into protecting that investment. There will always be some level of backlog that annual appropriations cannot cover. I believe the first and least costly approach to reducing the backlog that can't be done through appropriations is for the Administration to find ways in which volunteerism and partnerships with state and federal agencies can be improved and expanded.

