



NEWS RELEASE

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BUDGET CUTS THREATEN NEBRASKA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES AND THE COMMUNITIES THAT DEPEND ON THEM *Coalition Calls on Congress to Provide Adequate Funding*

Washington, DC—According to a [new report](#) released today by the [Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement](#) (CARE), Nebraska's seven national wildlife refuges and one wetland management district will be in grave jeopardy if proposed congressional budget cuts to the [National Wildlife Refuge System](#) are enacted. Nebraska's refuges protect diverse habitats such as riverine wetlands, tallgrass prairies, riparian woodlands, and sand dunes, which support a variety of species including the golden-winged warbler, sandhill crane, blacktail jackrabbit, bison, and mule deer. In 2010, approximately 213,000 visitors enjoyed wildlife-related recreation on Nebraska's refuges, including hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. At Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge alone, every federal dollar appropriated to the refuge budget generated \$4.60 in revenues to the local economy.

Yet, if proposed congressional budget cuts to the National Wildlife Refuge System are enacted, national wildlife refuges in Nebraska may not be able to continue protecting wildlife, offering world-class recreation, and ultimately enhancing their local economies. Nebraska refuges are saddled with a backlog of approximately \$22.4 million in deferred maintenance and \$5 million in mission-critical operations needs. These refuges need at least 39 additional staff, including wildlife management, visitor services, law enforcement, and maintenance positions. Without sufficient funding, Nebraska refuges will fall farther behind in their mission to conserve wildlife for the benefit of the American public.

"National wildlife refuges are critical to the health of human communities and to the vitality of local economies," says Evan Hirsche, President of the [National Wildlife Refuge Association](#) and Chair of the CARE coalition. "This is no time to cripple a critical federal program that provides so much benefit to Nebraska communities."

For Todd Wick, a fifth-grade science teacher for the Blair School District in Blair, Nebraska, the nearby DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge is an invaluable teaching tool. The refuge, which straddles the border between Nebraska and Iowa, provides an outdoor classroom for the district's 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 11th graders throughout the school year. "The refuge makes a difference in how kids view nature and how they view life," says Wick, who has seen problem students transform to being "fully engaged, with their hands always up and always wanting to share what they've learned." The refuge "makes learning real," he says. "It's real life, real science—and that has meaning to the kids."

Found in every U.S. state and territory, and within an hour's drive of most metropolitan areas, national wildlife refuges:

- Attract approximately 45 million visitors each year, with a range of activities that include wildlife-watching, hunting, fishing, photography, hiking, canoeing, kayaking, and environmental education.
- Protect clean air and safe drinking water for nearby communities.
- Generate more than \$1.7 billion for local economies and create nearly 27,000 U.S. jobs annually.

The report, [*Restoring America's Wildlife Refuges 2011: Assets for All Americans*](#), notes that the Refuge System has been underfunded since its inception in 1903, and that the diversion of personnel to respond to last year's Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has made it even harder to keep up. Adequate federal funding is critical to:

- Address a crippling operations and maintenance backlog of more than \$3.3 billion.
- Tackle chronic understaffing, which has left more than 36% of refuges without any on-site staff.
- Address a severe shortage of law enforcement personnel that leaves only 213 officers, when 845 are needed, to patrol the System's 150 million acres, even as both visitation and crime are increasing.
- Treat more than 2.5 million acres of refuge lands overrun with non-native, invasive plants, and combat nearly 4,000 invasive animal populations that ravage millions more acres—problems that can spread beyond refuge boundaries.

Funding increases for the Refuge System in FY 2008 through FY 2010 allowed for meaningful progress toward addressing these issues. To maintain this progress, CARE has urged Congress to fund the Refuge System's operations and maintenance budgets at \$511 million in FY 2012. This modest request is the absolute minimum needed to maintain management capabilities at current levels and is essentially flat funding. The \$8 million increase over FY 2010 funding levels will help keep fuel in the trucks, pay for higher utilities and building rent, and cover other rising fixed costs that threaten to erode existing management capabilities. This budget request represents a significant compromise, since a funding increase of at least \$16 million is the amount truly needed to address these growing costs.

Although some members of Congress have proposed cutting budgets back to FY 2008 levels in order to deal with the nation's current fiscal challenges, doing so "would devastate a system already under stress," the report notes. "No good business leader would allow their company's capital assets to deteriorate. Similarly, Congress should not pursue a budget strategy that would cause the further deterioration of assets that belong to all Americans. Such an approach simply does not make good business sense and will only cost taxpayers more in the future. Protecting our National Wildlife Refuge System with a strong investment today will continue to pay returns to the American people many times over."

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The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) is a national coalition of 21 wildlife, sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations representing a national constituency numbering more than 14 million Americans. CARE has been working since 1995 to help the National Wildlife Refuge System fight a serious funding crisis.

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