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**FUTURE OF NATION'S WILDLIFE REFUGES AT RISK**

**Diverse Coalition Issues New Report Showing that Chronic Under-Funding Is Threatening America's Wildlife and Wild Lands**

**Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus Co-Chairs Speak Out**

**Washington, D.C.** – The nation's wildlife refuge system is operating at half the budget it needs, according to a new report released today by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE). The group, comprised of conservation, sportsman, recreation, and scientific organizations, finds that the wildlife refuge system is threatened by crime, invasive species, habitat fragmentation, global warming and a sharply reduced workforce, all of which are exacerbated by chronic under-funding.

"Already, about a third of all wildlife refuges have no staff at all, and the Fish and Wildlife Service's regional workforce plans have identified scores of additional refuges that are going to close their gates or have on-site staff removed," Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI) said. "Not only does this hurt the hunters and anglers that can no longer gain access to these areas, but lack of staffing can also cause biological operations to cease and invasive species to expand unchecked. We cannot allow our refuges, some of the last remaining areas of pristine wilderness in America, to deteriorate."

The report, "Restoring America's Wildlife Legacy 2007," details the nationwide impact of funding shortfalls and illustrates many of the deteriorating conditions at national wildlife refuges. It also outlines the consequences of under-funding and recommends funding levels for fiscal years 2009-2013 to offset the damage already occurring throughout the system.

"Unfortunately, our refuge system is now at great risk due to severe budget shortfalls. Operating today with less money than in 2004, the refuge system has reached a crisis point," states the report. "Because the refuge system can no longer keep pace with inflation, it is now in the process of eliminating staff and services."

"We take so much from the environment for our transportation systems, our energy usage and even our food needs, but the National Wildlife Refuge System is one of the few places we actually give back," said Congressman Jim Saxton (R-NJ), a senior member of the House Natural Resources Committee. "Back in 1997 when we passed the bipartisan Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act, we envisioned a national network of refuges to protect and expand natural habitat for our wildlife in an era of unprecedented commercial and residential development. Only a decade later, that vision is in jeopardy. Congress needs to support sufficient maintenance and operation funding for the refuge system it helped build."

According to recently released regional workforce plans from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the refuge system is cutting 20 percent of its staff, a permanent loss of 565 positions. The report finds that without these jobs, visitors will encounter:

- Shortened or eliminated visitor center hours;
- Dilapidated viewing platforms and hiking trails;
- Reduced or cancelled hunting and fishing events;

- Outdated materials, maps, brochures and websites.

Without further funding, habitat maintenance and law enforcement staff will be limited in their ability to:

- Control invasive plant and animal species;
- Enforce safety regulations and protect refuge visitors;
- Manage habitat;
- Implement necessary conservation measures for endangered or threatened species.

The report goes on to conclude that “Unless Congress increases the annual appropriations for the refuge system soon, the Fish and Wildlife Service will be unable to perform its Congressionally mandated duty to ‘administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations.’”

"The report released today by CARE brings to light the extremely important issue of protecting our nation's environmental treasures," said Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE). "Bombay Hook and Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuges in my home state of Delaware conserve important segments of the Delaware Bay Marshes. They are vital stop-over sites for migrating shorebirds and wading birds, and are considered some of the best wetland habitat areas along the Atlantic Coast. Every time I visit I am in awe of their beauty. I know others feel exactly the same about the refuges in their districts, which is why we will work extremely hard to ensure that the refuges are adequately funded and protected."

The refuge system needs an annual increase of \$15 million per year simply to keep up with inflation. CARE recommends a total budget of \$765 million per year by fiscal year 2013 based on a comprehensive analysis of refuge system funding needs. CARE recommends \$451.5, or about a \$55 million increase, for refuge operations and maintenance funding for the next fiscal year.

“Incremental increases over the next five years will enable the refuge system to fulfill its mandate of protecting wildlife and provide wildlife-dependant recreation by fiscal year 2013,” states the report.

The report can be found on line at <http://www.fundrefuges.org/care/carehome.html>

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The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement is a diverse coalition of 21 conservation, recreation, sporting, and scientific organizations with more than 5 million members across the United States. CARE has been working since 1995 to help the National Wildlife Refuge System fight a serious funding crisis.

Members include: American Birding Association\*\*\*American Fisheries Society\*\*\*American Sportsfishing Association\*\*\*Assateague Coastal Trust\*\*\*Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies\*\*\*Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation\*\*\*Defenders of Wildlife\*\*\*Ducks Unlimited, Inc.\*\*\*Izaak Walton League of America\*\*\*National Audubon Society\*\*\*National Rifle Association\*\*\*National Wildlife Federation\*\*\*National Wildlife Refuge Association\*\*\*Safari Club International\*\*\*The Corps Network\*\*\*The Wilderness Society\*\*\*The Wildlife Society\*\*\*Trout Unlimited\*\*\*U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance\*\*\*Wildlife Forever\*\*\*Wildlife Management Institute