

Cooperative Alliance For Refuge Enhancement
Chair: National Wildlife Refuge Association
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**TESTIMONY FROM THE
COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT
BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES CONCERNING FISCAL
YEAR 2009 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

April 25, 2008

The *Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement* (CARE) represents over 14 million people that care deeply about America's National Wildlife Refuge System. This testimony is submitted on behalf of CARE's 22 member organizations:

American Birding Association	National Wildlife Federation
American Fisheries Society	National Wildlife Refuge Association
American Sportfishing Association	Safari Club International
Assateague Coastal Trust	The Corps Network
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation	The Nature Conservancy
Defenders of Wildlife	The Wilderness Society
Ducks Unlimited	The Wildlife Society
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies	Trout Unlimited
Izaak Walton League of America	U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance
National Audubon Society	Wildlife Forever
National Rifle Association of America	Wildlife Management Institute

Chairwoman Feinstein, Ranking Member Allard, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2009 (FY09) Interior Appropriations bill. The National Wildlife Refuge System stands alone as the *only* land system in the world with a mission that prioritizes wildlife conservation over all other activities. Since 1995, CARE has worked to showcase the needs of the remarkable Refuge System and to secure a strong Congressional commitment for protecting America's shorelines, wetlands, deserts, tundra, and forests. CARE wishes to express our deep gratitude to the Subcommittee for the funding increase in FY 2008 and the dramatic turnaround it represented. To continue enacting the conservation vision that President Theodore Roosevelt first espoused more than a century ago, CARE respectfully requests a funding level of \$514 million for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY09.

A recent detailed analysis by CARE found that our National Wildlife Refuge System needs \$765 million in annual Operations and Maintenance funding to properly administer its nearly 100 million acres, educational nature programs, habitat restoration projects, and much more. Reaching a level of \$514 million in FY09 is the next essential step along the pathway toward

\$765 million, and will enable wildlife refuges across the country to shelve the downsizing plans that call for a devastating 20% reduction in staff and return to what refuges do best: protecting America's wildlife and water quality, providing a haven for threatened and endangered species, and guaranteeing a positive experience for 40 million annual visitors, whether hunting, fishing, birding, or learning from educational programs.

When refuges are short-staffed, it doesn't only affect activities *inside* refuge boundaries. Refuges are also unable to dedicate sufficient attention to threats *beyond* refuge boundaries, such as water rights disputes, upstream contamination, adjacent landfill sites, or planned developments. And as in recent years, when staff levels are reduced to only one or a few staff per refuge, opportunities to partner with other interested stakeholders are lost, dramatically and adversely affecting volunteer involvement and the leveraging of additional dollars. For example, consider that the reasonably well-staffed San Luis Refuge Complex in central California is often able to effectively *triple* its annual budget through creative partnerships. With this extra income, more trees are planted, invasive species are being eradicated, hunting programs are thriving, and staff can closely monitor outside threats. This situation demonstrates how much is possible with a critical mass of staff able to capitalize on funding and partnering opportunities, and how much is now being lost at other refuges.

In addition to their integral role in American wildlife conservation, refuges are critically important on local and regional scales, as visitors in 2006 generated more than \$1.7 billion in sales to local economies, creating over 27,000 U.S. jobs and \$543 million in personal income. While these figures are undeniably significant, it is widely recognized that the Refuge System's potential remains largely untapped. In addition to being local economic engines, America's wildlife refuges also provide innumerable environmental benefits to communities. For example, many refuges in urban or suburban settings filter storm water before it runs downstream to municipal water supplies and, in many areas, reduce flooding by capturing excess rainwater and attenuating coastal storm surges. The native vegetation on many of America's refuges helps absorb pollution and captures carbon from the air, while natural filtration and sound water management promotes healthy fisheries within and beyond refuge boundaries. And importantly, refuges provide a way for children to connect with the natural world.

There is a national wildlife refuge within an hour's drive of every metropolitan area in the U.S. As children spend more and more time inside on computers, watching television or playing video games, the need for a place to bring our youth to experience and explore the outdoors has never been more important. Many refuges work with local volunteer organizations such as "Friends" to provide environmental education programs to local schools; but when budgets are tight, they are often the first programs to be curtailed.

Prior to the generous FY08 appropriation, many years of inadequate budgets rapidly ballooned the Operations and Maintenance backlog to \$3.5 billion and forced many refuges to eliminate all staff. Today, over one-third of America's wildlife refuges have no staff; nobody to open the gates, teach the school children, repair the levees, pull the weeds, or even clean the bathrooms. While the increase in FY08 helped immensely, many years of decline and degradation cannot be undone overnight. So refuge visitors still show up to find roads and visitor centers closed, viewing platforms and hiking trails in disrepair, and habitat restoration and school education programs eliminated. Non-native, invasive plants have degraded over 2.3 million acres and

crime is on the rise as only 180 full-time law enforcement officers are asked to do the job of over 840.

Unfortunately, President Bush's FY09 budget proposal for the National Wildlife Refuge System does not improve the situation. The Administration's request does not consider rapidly rising inflationary costs. Each year, just to keep fuel in the trucks, pay for rising utilities and building rent, allow for salary adjustments and other fixed costs, the Refuge System needs a \$15 million increase. With the current surge in fuel prices expected to continue through the year, that number is certain to climb dramatically. Therefore, to return the Refuge System to inflation-adjusted FY 2004 levels and ensure a "no net loss" budget, the Refuge System needs a minimum of \$466 million in FY09.

In a nation with ever-shrinking natural areas, we must act quickly to safeguard our unique natural heritage for the benefit of wildlife and millions of present and future Americans. It was Teddy Roosevelt who reminded America that "our duty to the whole, including the unborn generations, bids us restrain an unprincipled present-day minority from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations." CARE agrees that 40 million refuge visitors and all future Americans deserve the opportunity to see 100 million acres of the most visually stunning and biologically rich lands and waters in North America. Quite simply, the only way to ensure a future with clean water, thriving wildlife populations, and hunting and fishing opportunities is to increase the Refuge System's FY09 appropriation to \$514 million.

On behalf of our over 14 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to offer comments on the FY09 Interior Appropriations bill and extends our sincere appreciation for the Subcommittee's strong commitment to America's National Wildlife Refuge System.