

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2022 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
MARCH 10, 2022

SUBMITTED BY CHERYL TUROCZY HART, BOARD VICE PRESIDENT OF
COALITION OF REFUGE FRIENDS AND ADVOCATES

Chair Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates. Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates (CORFA) is a non-stock corporation in the Commonwealth of Virginia whose mission is to be a national peer support group for members of Friends organizations and community partners, who are working to promote the understanding and conservation of natural, cultural, and historical resources associated with the National Wildlife Refuge and Hatchery Systems. Our organization has approximately 800 participants. I am Vice President of the Board of this organization. We thank you for your support for the National Wildlife Refuge System and for the opportunity to offer comments on the FY2023 Interior Appropriations bill, most importantly regarding funding for the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance Fund, which we respectfully request you fund at \$712 million for FY2023.

CORFA is an all-volunteer organization aiding the nonprofit groups that support National Wildlife Refuges and Hatcheries. These groups turn to CORFA to build relationships through conversations that answer questions and share information, insights, and experiences concerning nonprofit governance and management. Members of these nonprofits can receive and give advice on the various challenges our incredible organizations face such as building capacity, marketing and communications, fund-raising, and coalition building. I am a member of the Board of this organization and serve as Vice President.

When the pandemic quickly shutdown most federal, state, and local parks, and other public lands, there were few places visitors could go to safely enjoy and appreciate nature, while masked and socially distanced. One of those places was often a National Wildlife Refuge. Although Visitor Centers, restrooms, and even the parking lots might be closed, people flocked to National Wildlife Refuges by the millions to soak up a much-needed ration of the outdoors.

In 2019 over 59 million people visited National Wildlife Refuges. As more and more people “discovered” refuges as a respite in the very stressful time of Pandemic, there has been a heightened awareness of these public lands as a valuable resource to local communities. Refuges pumped \$3.2 Billion into local economies in 2019. But, with increased awareness and usage came increased need for upkeep and protection. The Fish and Wildlife

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Staff has done a stellar job of preserving the habitat of our refuges, but they are working at a great handicap. The completely inadequate budgets continue to fail to cover the cost of maintaining the incredibly rich and diverse wildlife habitats that make up the Refuge System. Our refuges are being loved to death.

A 2020 National Audubon article stated, “A lack of resources throughout the refuge system is limiting its capacity to provide healthy habitat for birds and other wildlife. Essential infrastructure is crumbling. Managers oversee growing groups of refuges that are lumped together even when they’re hundreds of miles apart. And staff can’t provide the community outreach and visitor services they want to offer.

Fixing these problems would take at least \$900 million a year, advocates say. That’s a far cry from the refuge system’s budget of \$502.4 million for the 2021 fiscal year.”

This funding gap that has arisen due to low budget allocations over the last decade has degraded critical wildlife habitat and imperiled important species. The Refuge System cannot fulfill its obligation to the American public and our wildlife without increases in maintenance and operation funds. Even with the gains in FY 2020, overall funding for the Refuge System has declined substantially over the last twelve years. Funding in FY2010 was \$503 million – \$598 million in today’s dollars with inflation and salary increases. This difference of \$95 million has forced the Service to cut back on programs and create efficiencies whenever possible – efficiencies that are sometimes harmful or even dangerous. For example, many refuges have been placed into complexes, where staff travel sometimes large distances to juggle duties on multiple refuges. We must change this trajectory.

National Wildlife Refuges are currently funded at 59¢ per acre per year. Compare that to funding for National Park Service at \$30 per acre per year.

The number of annual Refuge System visitors jumped by 13 million over the last few years and is likely to take another jump for 2021 visitors, due to lack of access to many other nature areas as mentioned above. More people are looking to recreate on wildlife refuges, yet understaffed refuges struggle to provide those opportunities. Reductions in visitor services can be extremely limiting for constituencies who want to visit.

Equally troubling is a 15% drop in the number of volunteers since FY2011. At a time when record numbers of Americans are retiring and have the capability and desire to give back, the Service’s ability to oversee volunteer efforts has been curtailed. Volunteers provide an additional 20% of work on our national wildlife refuges, yet they are being turned away when

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the System needs them the most. We hear every day from Friends groups about the frustration their members are experiencing because they cannot perform the volunteer work for their refuge that they would ordinarily be doing. Outdoor areas will continue to be a safer and popular choice for Americans looking to escape the seclusion of pandemic restrictions but without adequate staffing, refuges cannot provide the volunteer supervision that makes many of their visitor services possible.

The Refuge System is bare bones right now and increased growth in urban spaces and outdoor recreation, and the impacts of climate change, place additional stress on the System. Every year, more and more refuges are closed to the public, habitat degrades, and visitors are turned away. Current funding is nowhere near the at least \$900 million needed for full funding. Our goal is to reach that figure in the next three years. Funding the Refuge System Operations and Maintenance Fund at \$712 million is a step to reaching that goal.

CORFA appreciates the Subcommittee's consideration of our request of \$712 mil for the refuge system operations and maintenance budget for FY2023 We look forward to working with Congress to accomplish this goal and appreciate your consideration of our requests. Please let me know if you have any questions.