

Written Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on
Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Concerning H. R. 6734, Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022
March 29, 2022
Submitted By Joan Patterson

Chair Jared Huffman, Ranking Member Cliff Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee: This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, a not-for-profit organization incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, known as CORFA, is an all-volunteer organization composed of members of various Friends groups. I am President of the Board of CORFA.

CORFA believes that the Friends groups, which support refuges and hatcheries, are invaluable partners of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Friends have a critical role in ensuring that communities see a refuge or hatchery as a community asset. Our goal is to build a network of support for Friends organizations. Friends want to help Friends and to share their vast knowledge, expertise, and skills so all of us can better support national wildlife refuges and hatcheries.

Before making additional remarks, I would like to express my condolences to the Members of the Subcommittee on the death of Rep. Don Young.

I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022. This act allows the National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) System to:

- Work with volunteers in the management of refuges,
- Facilitate partnerships among U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Friends organizations, and other non-Federal entities to educate and engage the public in the conservation of the resources associated with a refuge, and
- Encourage donations and other contributions to the System.

The Act permits volunteers and members of Friends organizations to be actively involved in conserving our nation's natural, historical, and cultural resources associated with the National Wildlife Refuge System. Friends organizations are nonprofits with a mission to support the resources associated with a refuge or a complex of refuges. Nationwide there are 180 Friends organizations. The Act allows folks like me, Don Boyd, Ian Bergemann, and tens of thousands of other people to volunteer on national wildlife refuges.

Don Boyd is a volunteer with the Friends of Bosque del Apache NWR. Bosque del Apache NWR is a

beautiful and fragile wetland in the New Mexico high desert and the winter home of thousands of Sandhill Cranes and Snow and Rosses Geese. Don believes that when we understand why and how these places impact us, these places bring out the best in us. This is evident when you see the substantial financial support the Friends provide for equipment, land donations, and maintenance of the refuge. Additionally, the Friends host an annual Festival of the Cranes that, pre-COVID, attracted more than 6,000 people from around the world and has an economic impact to Socorro County of \$2.5 million each year. It is the greatest income-generating event in Socorro County.

Ian Bergemann first visited Outer Island NWR in Connecticut as a middle school student, and he fell in love with the place. That love was reignited when he visited the island as a college intern. That first summer changed his life and taught him exactly how he wants to make an impact in this world: generate and preserve childlike curiosity through experiences within nature. He gives tours and leads environmental education activities for children that are the same age he was for his first visit. He shares with them his middle school dream of living on Outer Island and sees in their eyes and awestruck faces that they have a similar dream. The Friends of Outer Island made Ian's first trip to the Island and his internship possible. He, at 22, is the President of Friends of Outer Island. Friends groups and the work they do has had a tremendous impact on the relationship between our environment and ourselves. Ian is eternally grateful that he has retained to his childlike sense of wonder about the world. He is even more grateful that every summer he is able to inspire more children and adults to reconnect to nature, build on their relationship with their environment, and rekindle their childlike sense of wonder and curiosity.

While we as volunteers donate our time, skills, and money to support the mission of refuges, our experiences can be life changing; this is true for Ian, me, and many others. In 1994 my husband and I were fairly new arrivals in the then small community of Sherwood, Oregon. We were anxiously awaiting word from an adoption agency when I saw an article in the local paper about the Tualatin River NWR. Members of the local community wanted to create a Friends group to increase awareness and support for the newly established refuge. Given that I was going crazy waiting for word from the adoption agency; I joined. Little did I realize how this decision would impact not only my life but the lives of my children and the community.

You see, I naively assumed that the refuge was open to the public and that I would be able to take our baby girl out to the refuge; wrong.

At that time, the refuge consisted of 12 acres that a fellow volunteer had donated to the Service in order to get the refuge established. Given the size and lack of access of the refuge, the public would have few opportunities to view or enjoy the resources, yet the staff and Friends worked together to create volunteer opportunities. Over the next ten years, through the efforts of the Friends and the community, the refuge grew but remained closed because it lacked safe access from the adjacent state highway. Meanwhile volunteers removed miles of barbed wire, tons of debris including a mobile home, and acres of invasive Himalayan blackberries. The Friends recruited church groups, scouts, and other

community partners and planted thousands of shrubs and trees. The Friends began hosting, and continue to host, an annual festival that attracts hundreds of people from the Portland metropolitan area. Further, the Friends built partnerships with community organizations, local governments, schools, and hundreds of people from the area. The Tualatin River NWR became a part of us and our communities.

Once we could host kids at the refuge, we saw how thrilled they were to see bald eagles, their curiosity as they tried to figure out whose poop they almost stepped in, and their joy as they jumped in puddles. So the Friends organization took on a different task that none of us envisioned when we joined; we started advocating for federal transportation dollars to provide the infrastructure needed to open the refuge including safe access. We came to Washington D.C. and spoke up for the needs of the refuge and, more importantly, for our community. Our kids, my kids, needed to have access to this amazing place to learn about our heritage, wildlife, and the resources these habitats provide for the surrounding communities.

So in addition to learning the skills necessary to assist the Service with the management of the refuge, the Friends, our families, neighbors, school kids, and community groups learned how to speak up to support the refuge. Eventually, Congress provided the funding essential to open the refuge.

Now the Friends, a plethora of volunteers, and USFWS staff work together to greet and provide a safe experience for the more than 150,000 people who visit Tualatin River NWR annually. They also continue to be involved in education, restoration, and maintenance activities. The refuge is truly a community asset.

My experience and that of other Friends members and volunteers at Tualatin River NWR is not unique. The Rappahannock Wildlife Refuge Friends in Virginia is made up of folks who love the Rappahannock River Valley NWR. They support it by building trails and structures, maintaining gardens, mowing grass, eradicating invasive species, connecting the refuge to the community, and fundraising.

The International Wildlife Refuge Alliance, the Friends group for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, raised \$3.5 million to build a 740-foot-long fishing pier and boat dock for the Michigan Sea Grant School. The pier is free to the public and can accommodate up to 100 anglers.

These efforts to support our national wildlife refuges extend beyond official “Friends” groups; they also include community partners such as the Friends of the Dunes. They are a nonprofit dedicated to conserving the natural diversity of coastal environments in northern California, including the Humboldt Bay NWR. They do restoration work and support educational and stewardship programs.

USFWS needs the support of Friends organizations, community partners, and volunteers. Without these folks, USFWS would struggle to safely accommodate visitors, provide recreation and education opportunities, and maintain the habitats. During COVID, visitation to refuges jumped to almost 65

million; unfortunately the number of volunteers declined during the same period. Nevertheless pre-COVID, around 38,000 volunteers donated between one million and 1.5 million hours annually. This is the equivalent of around 700 full-time employees, which means volunteers are providing over 20% of the work being done on national wildlife refuges.

The members of CORFA regularly hear from other Friends members regarding the frustration they experience when they are unable to perform volunteer work because there is not adequate USFWS staff to supervise projects or activities. Sometimes the shortage of USFWS staff also affects the ability of Friends to complete projects that they are funding in a timely manner. So, in addition to approving the this Act, I ask you to increase the Operations and Maintenance Fund for the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY 2023 to \$712 million. This will help USFWS maximize the benefits they receive from volunteers and their partners.

I want to thank Representative Jefferies for introducing the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022. This act allows USFWS to continue to work with volunteers and facilitate partnerships so vital to educating and engaging the public in conserving our natural, historical, and cultural resources associated with the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Thank you for your consideration, and please feel free to contact me, Joan Patterson, President of the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates.