

Submitted by Mark J Musaus, Vice President, Board Member for the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates

May 6, 2024

Written Testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Concerning Fiscal Year 2025 Appropriations for the National Wildlife Refuge System

Dear Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee:

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, which was formed in 2020 to support the National Wildlife Refuge System. We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the fiscal year (FY) 2025 Interior Appropriations bill. We request Congress to allocate \$602.3 million in funding for National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance account under the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

“National Wildlife Refuges are places where the music of life has been rehearsed to perfection, where nature’s colors are most vibrant, where time is measured in seasons, and where the dance of the crane takes center stage. They are gifts to ourselves and to generations unborn- simple gifts unwrapped each time a birder lifts binoculars, a child overturns a rock, a hunter sets the decoys, or an angler casts the water.” This is a quote taken from Fulfilling the Promise in the forward by then U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Director Jamie Clark

The Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates (CORFA) is a not-for-profit organization that supports more than 180 officially designated Friends Groups by FWS that support an individual or complex of National Wildlife Refuges across the United States. They are comprised of local citizens that volunteer and passionately support “their” refuge as well as citizens across the country that have visited a refuge and enjoyed that “gift” so beautifully described by Director Clark.

The gifts to the American public are not just in connecting with nature. National Wildlife Refuges provides billions of dollars in ecosystem services. Storm water attenuation, groundwater recharge, protection of important oil and gas infrastructure, and carbon storage are all important benefits that refuges provide to local communities as well as the country.

The Friends Community that supports Refuges is upset by the current conditions on refuges and concerned for their future due to the continual erosion in funding and staffing for the refuge system. Refuge staffs have been cut in half or have one staff person and most refuges are now part of a refuge complex with other refuges that have less staff. Trails are closed or poorly maintained, visitor centers are open only a

couple days a week if at all. Worse yet is the unhealthy condition of habitats the refuges manage...rusting or inoperable water control structures, increasing spread of invasive exotics, the inability to use important habitat management techniques such as prescribed fire or impoundment management. The significant loss of biologists to monitor wildlife populations and provide the needed scientific expertise to ensure healthy wildlife populations, as well as the loss of refuge law enforcement officers to ensure the safety of the visiting public and stop poaching of wildlife have greatly impacted Refuges, the "gifts" Congress authorized over the last 121 years.

In order to continue to be the greatest network and lands and waters in the world set aside for wildlife, increased funding to operate the national wildlife refuge system is desperately needed. Although the funding need is huge, CORFA understands the current budget climate. A minimum of \$602.3 million is needed to begin the road to recovery of the refuge system and the billions of dollars in ecosystem, economic, and recreational values to the American public.