

Regional Office Hours  
U.S. Representative Lori Trahan Staff  
June 8, 2023  
Hudson Town Hall  
Hudson, MA 01749

My name is Paula Goodwin, President of Friends of the Assabet River, Oxbow, and Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuges. I have been a member of the Friends group since 2014.

The Friends group is a small, all volunteer nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to supporting and protecting the Assabet River, Oxbow, and Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuges. The Friends operate a Nature Store and offer Speaker Programs about conservation topics. Member dues and donations provide funding for Refuge enhancement projects and the Blanding's turtle repatriation program.

Our Friends group was started as Friends of the Assabet River NWR, to protect the land which is now the Assabet River NWR. This land has seen multiple uses, from its use by Native Americans, 17th through 20th Century farming to its use as a military reservation beginning with World War II. The military transferred ownership to the Fish and Wildlife Service in 2000.

In 2022, the Friends of the Assabet River NWR expanded their scope to include the Oxbow and Great Meadows NWRs. The Friends now support three of the eight Refuges that make up the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The Friends group merger ties together support and advocacy for important habitats that meet the needs of a wide variety of migratory birds, mammals, plants, reptiles, and amphibians.

Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex includes eight refuges, around 19,000 acres, 18 towns, 2 tribes, and many partners. Oxbow, Assabet River and Great Meadows NWR's are in the third congressional district.

The purpose of all three Refuges is for use as inviolate sanctuaries for wildlife, for migratory birds, for fish and wildlife oriented recreational development, the protection of natural resources and the conservation of threatened or endangered species. The Blanding's turtle conservation program occurs across all three Refuges. Depending on the policies and procedures for each refuge, the complex offers hunting, fishing, environmental education, interpretation, wildlife observation and wildlife photography. The Refuges are primarily visited by members of the communities that surround the refuges.

In 2022, the Assabet River NWR hosted the Massachusetts Professionals of Color in the Environment Annual Networking Event, an Intern Collaboration Day with 22 interns from the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service, Mass Audubon, and the National Park Service, and a Storywalk provided by First Connections funded through a racial equity grant.

At the Great Meadows NWR Concord Unit, recreation fee equipment is being updated, new ADA compliant waterless vault toilets are being installed and the entrance and parking lot are being re-paved.

Projects at the Oxbow NWR included partnering with Devens with a Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment and maintenance of a public trail which was cleared in March 2023. The Partnership also received a Wild and Scenic Grant for interpretive signage and establishment of a pollinator meadow. An Earth Day Open Streets and Greenways Event with the communities of Ayer and Devens was hosted by the Refuge. An ADA compliant walkway at the Bill Ashe Boat Launch is now allowing for more accessibility to boating activities on the Nashua River. Over the winter months, on Tank Road, the failing culverts were replaced with low water crossings, and vegetation was cleared on each side of the road.

If all goes well, over the next few years, the plans are to fill a maintenance position for the Complex, establish new headquarters at Assabet River NWR, make much needed road/trail improvements, work on a proposed dorm for seasonal staff, and construct a new maintenance shop.

The Refuge System is facing a staffing crisis that threatens its ability to protect biodiversity and provide recreational opportunities for all. Despite being essential for protecting endangered species, conserving habitats, and connecting communities with nature, the Refuge System has lost over 800 permanent positions since fiscal year (FY) 2011, resulting in an enormous 25% loss in capacity.

The \$503 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY2010 is worth nearly \$700 million today (as of January 2023), yet actual funding in FY2023 sits at \$541 million—a mere .64¢ per acre. The failure to offset the impacts of inflation has resulted in reduced essential services. No national wildlife refuges are fully staffed, and more than half have zero staff on-site, leaving many refuges closed to the public and completely unmanaged. Much of the Refuge System is virtually unprotected due to the lack of law enforcement officers, with some officers covering entire states and refuge units hours away from one another. The staffing shortage also impacts refuge volunteers.

Rising fixed costs are also eating into minor increases in appropriations—increases that are not keeping up with inflation. It costs the Refuge System an estimated \$3 million for every one percent raise in payroll costs. System-wide, the modest funding increase provided in FY2022 did not even cover the cost of the scheduled 1% federal wage increase. Without base increases in the budget to cover these fixed costs, several much-needed positions are eliminated every year. Despite an effectively declining budget since FY2010, the Refuge System has experienced exceptional growth with multiple new refuge units, hundreds of millions of acres of new marine national monuments, along with new services like the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program. While the additional acreage, the creation of the urban program, and the resulting significant increase in visitation have enhanced the Refuge System and benefited the communities around these refuges, this growth has also put more pressure on the already stressed and underfunded System.

At the Assabet River, Oxbow, and Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, the impact of staffing challenges has affected Visitor Services, Maintenance and Law Enforcement. Since March 2022 there has been only one Visitor Services staff. This lack of staffing has curtailed popular public programs such as nighttime Full Moon walks. It has not been possible to offer Scouts and Girl Scouts the opportunity to earn badges and patches in Conservation and Nature programming. Due to lack of maintenance staff, the Friends provide funding for snow removal and lawn mowing at the Assabet River NWR. Volunteers who offer their time cannot be trained or supervised due to lack of supervision from professional full-time staff. Law enforcement is supported by local community police patrols.

Visitation to each of the 3 Refuges for 2021-2022 demonstrates the appreciation for time spent in the beautiful natural surroundings that each Refuge provides. In 2022, Oxbow NWR was visited by 51,000 people, Assabet River NWR was visited by 87,000 people and Great Meadows NWR was visited by 462,000 people. During the first week in June 2023, at the Assabet River NWR alone, during separate one-hour observations, 8-10 cars were counted arriving, as well as bicyclists. Visitors can enjoy time in the refuges from dawn to dusk each day.

The National Wildlife Refuge System protects endangered species and habitats, provides recreational opportunities, and connects communities with nature. Our biodiversity and climate are at risk, and these protected areas are crucial for their preservation. It's time to invest in our national wildlife refuges and prioritize staffing for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Now is the time to act and ensure the future of this vital System and the wildlife it protects.