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April 4, 2025

Testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies

Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations for the National Wildlife Refuge System

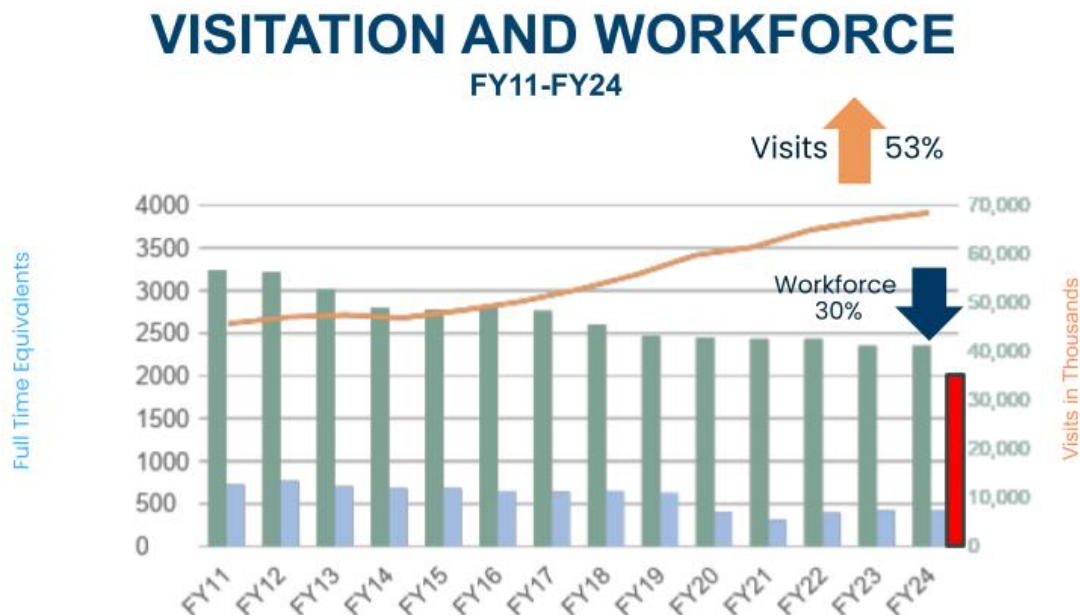
Dear Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee:

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the organizations listed on page 4. We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the fiscal year (FY) 2026 Interior Appropriations bill. **We request Congress allocate \$731 million in funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance account, the amount appropriated in FY 2010, adjusted for inflation.**

The Refuge Association is the only non-profit organization exclusively supporting the National Wildlife Refuge System. As the nation's only set of federal lands dedicated to the conservation and management of America's native wildlife, it is also the world's largest and most diverse network of conservation lands and waters, encompassing more than 850 million acres of unique habitats that our native wildlife species depend on. Our national wildlife refuges are essential for protecting biodiversity and climate-resilient habitats, providing community-driven conservation, and expanding wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities nationwide.

Staffing Decline of 30% before January 2025

Over the past 15 years, visitation to refuges has increased by over 53% while staffing has decreased by 30% - largely because annual appropriations have not kept pace with inflationary needs, leaving positions unfilled nationwide.

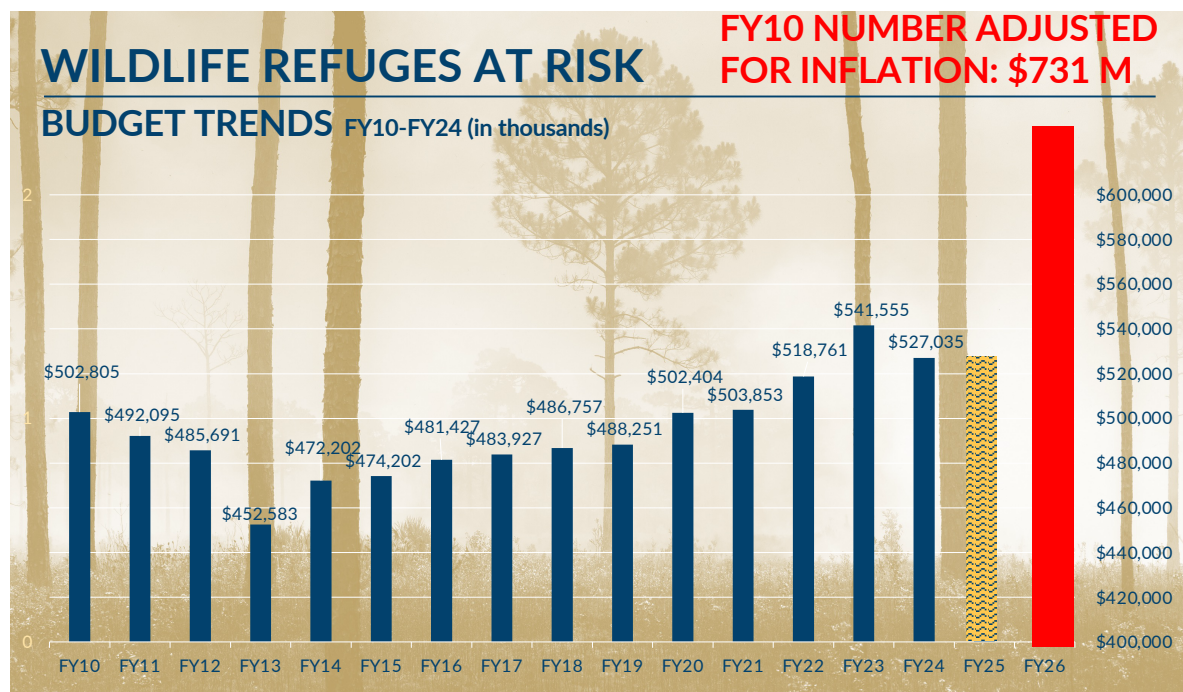


The 30% loss of staff since FY2010 was BEFORE the cuts of the past two months. Since January, the Refuge System lost an additional 10% of staff to deferred resignations and the firing of probationary staff. While some of the probationary staff have been reinstated, we are concerned that it is a matter of time before a Reduction in Force fires them again.

Next to come is the loss of institutional knowledge, expertise and leadership in the Refuge System with over 550 FWS employees taking retirement effective May 30, 2025. Of those 550 FWS staff, it is likely that at least one third, or 185 will be from refuges. We estimate that will leave just 1800-1900 Service staff to run the entire Refuge System which already has the smallest staff and budget of any of the four federal land management agencies.

Keeping Pace with Inflation

Our request is simply to allow the Refuge System to keep pace with inflation – allowing critical habitat restoration to occur and staffing to be adequate to manage trust responsibilities. We request an appropriation of \$731 million to return the System to the funding level allocated in 2010 adjusted for inflation.



The Refuge System's lack of capacity has several negative impacts on the ecological health of the Refuge System. For example, only 27% of the threatened and endangered populations occurring on refuges are monitored. This leads to compromised adaptive management capability, inability to manage invasive species, the destruction of native habitat, and the potential loss of more species. With its current resources, refuges can only successfully control 7% of the lands infested with non-native species, which has increased 30% since 2005. Planning is at the core of Refuge System management, but more than 60% of refuges have an outdated Comprehensive Conservation Plan or no plan at all. Limited capacity is hampering these efforts and severely limits landscape-level planning and adaptability to changing conditions.

Significant investments must be made today to begin working towards better outcomes for our native wildlife. The System has done excellent work to deploy creative solutions and new partnerships to manage the Refuge System as well as possible with their existing resources. But they should not have to make hard decisions every day about how to operate under this longstanding funding crisis. The insufficient funding and capacity impacts are felt System-wide, impacting not just conservation planning and wildlife and habitat management, but also visitor services, law enforcement, and maintenance. Congress must provide adequate resources to effectively administer the Refuge System.

Law Enforcement Challenges – Little Change in over 20 years due to lack of funding

Ten years ago, the International Association of Chiefs of Police stated that the Refuge System had only 20% of the recommended 1,074 Federal Wildlife Officers (FWO) needed to provide adequate public safety and resource protection. As of January 2025, the Refuge System has the lowest number of FWOs in over 15 years with just 198 officers (down from 221 just one year ago). The lack of law enforcement not only puts our nation’s wildlife resources at risk, it jeopardizes the safety of the American public as well.

We urge Congress to prioritize the Refuge System and address the overarching funding challenges facing the few staff left to manage the System. The Refuge System needs at least \$2.2 billion in annual appropriations to effectively fulfill its conservation mission, provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation, and connect communities to nature. Our request to put the System back to FY2010 levels adjusted for inflation, is an important step towards that goal.

This testimony is endorsed by 95 organizations nationwide listed below. All are willing to answer any questions you may have about the specific impacts the lack of funding is having at their refuge and in their community. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Blue Goose Alliance	NM	Friends of Plum and Pilot Islands	WI		Wildlife Refuge		National Wildlife Refuge		McKinney National Wildlife Refuge	
Booth Society	SD	Friends of Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge	ME	Defenders of Wildlife	Friends of Seal Beach National Wildlife refuge	CA	Friends of Aroostook National Wildlife Refuge	ME	Friends of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge	CA
Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge	CA	Friends of Red River National Wildlife Refuge	LA	Ding Darling Wildlife Society	FL	Friends of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge	Friends of Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge		Friends of Swan lake National Wildlife Refuge	MO
Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates		Friends of Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge	MN	Endangered Habitats League	CA	Friends of St Croix Wetland Management District	Friends of Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge	LA	Friends of Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge	MN
Coastal Wildlife Refuge Society	NC	Friends of San Diego Wildlife Refuge	CA	Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges	AK	Friends of St Marks National Wildlife Refuge	Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge	MD	Friends of the 500th	W V
Conservation Job Board	DE	Friends of San Pablo Bay National	CA	Friends of Aransas	TX	Friends of Stewart B.				

Wildlife Refuge				Forest National Wildlife Refuge		Valley National Wildlife Refuges		Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial			
Friends of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge	NM	Friends of the Bill Williams River & Havasu National Wildlife Refuges	AZ	Friends of Haystack Rock	OR	Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges	FL	Friends of Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge	VT	International Wildlife Refuge Alliance	MI
Friends of California Condors Wild and Free (Hopper Mountain National Wildlife RefugeC)	CA	Friends of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge	FL	Friends of Heinz Refuge	PA	Friends of the Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex	OR	Friends of Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge	ME	Merritt Island Wildlife Association	FL
Friends of Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge	KY	Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge	FL	Friends of Horicon National Wildlife Refuge	WI	Friends of Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge Complex	OR	Friends of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge	WI	Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends	MN
Friends of Coastal South Carolina	SC	Friends of the Front Range Wildlife Refuges	CO	Friends of Kauai Wildlife Refuges	HI	Friends of Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge	W A	Friends of Nevada Wilderness	NV	Muscatatuck Wildlife Society	IN
Friends of Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge	FL	Friends of the Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge	W A	Friends of Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge	MO	Friends of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge	NM	Friends of Oahu National Wildlife Refuges	HI	National Wildlife Refuge Association	NM
Friends of Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge	ID	Friends of the Lower Suwannee & Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges	FL	Friends of Maga Ta- Hohpi	SD	Friends of Walkill River National Wildlife Refuge	NJ	Friends of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge	OH	Okefenokee Swamp Park & Okefenokee Adventures	GA
Friends of Eastern Neck	MD	Friends of the Training Center	W V	Friends of Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge	ME	Friends of Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge	NY	Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge	MA	Rappahannoc k Wildlife Refuge Friends	VA
Friends of Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge	NJ	Friends of the National Wildlife Refuges of Rhode Island	RI	Friends of Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge	ME	Friends of Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge	NY	Friends of Patuxent Research Refuge	MD	San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society	CA
Friends of Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge	NJ	Friends of the Refuge- Mississippi River Refuge Pools 7&8	WI	Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge	OR	Friends of Willapa National Wildlife Refuge	W A	Friends of The Write Solutions		Sandhills Prairie Refuge Association	NE
Friends of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge	IL	Friends of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge	W A	Friends of Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge	MA	Friends of Woodlands and Waters	MA	Friends of Patuxent Research Refuge	MD	The Write Solutions	NY
Friends of Hakalau	HI	Friends of the San Luis	CO	Friends of Mid- Columbia River National Wildlife Refuges	W A	Friends of Gallatin Wildlife Association	MT	Friends of Patuxent Research Refuge	MD	Wildlife Forever	MD
				Friends of Atoll National	MI	Genesee Valley Audubon Society	NY			Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association	AL