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**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

October 11, 2013

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The Honorable Daniel M. Ashe  
Director, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1848 C Street, N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20240

Dear Director Ashe:

The Committee on Natural Resources (“Committee”) requests that the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“Service”) take steps as necessary to keep and not destroy records related to the decision to order the National Wildlife Refuge System closed. Hunters, fishermen, and other visitors are now being blocked from these sites, many of which are unfenced and not regularly staffed or patrolled by permanent Fish and Wildlife Service employees. Concessionaires who provide educational, transportation, and recreational services in the Refuge system have similarly been forced to shut down.

The Service’s delay in not issuing a formal closure order until October 4, 2013, four days after the lapse in appropriations began, has created widespread confusion over the scope, necessity, and timing of the decision. It is especially troubling that the Department of the Interior has been restricting access to public lands inconsistently, closing certain high-profile areas including Refuges across the country while allowing others lands to remain open and accessible.

As for the Refuge system, recent media reports indicate that Service employees are being called in to patrol Refuge and waterfowl production areas that are not ordinarily staffed. The closure decision is restricting public access to lands in Alaska that by law are to remain accessible without fees or permits. It is also limiting access to state lands that adjoin Refuge areas, impairing state trust responsibilities over wildlife, and restricting hunting and fishing activities that are already licensed and policed by state agencies, not the Service.

It is especially troubling that the more than 43,000 volunteers who help operate the Refuge system ordinarily have been told to stand down and are not being allowed to help keep the Refuges open for public enjoyment. The Refuges that continue to employ managers, wildlife protection officers, and others as essential staff should immediately be reopened without delay and volunteers be allowed to return to their jobs at those locations.

The Committee is considering an oversight hearing in the near future and expects to issue a formal document request to better understand the closure decision. Among the issues of most concern to the Committee are the timing of the Service's closure decision; whether the Service analyzed the authority or impact to order concessionaires to cease operations; the authority to restrict access to state lands or hunting and fishing permitted under state law through closure of the Refuge system; whether any guidance or direction came from the Department of the Interior or the Office of Management and Budget to restrict public access to Refuge areas, including ones that are not ordinarily fenced or staffed; the impact of the closure decision on the operation of the federal duck stamp program as implemented by states; and any inconsistency with closures during previous lapses in appropriations.

It is expected that the Service will cooperate with the Committee's oversight by not destroying potentially responsive documents and providing records to the Committee upon request.

Sincerely,



Doc Hastings  
Chairman