

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

**STATEMENT OF DAN ASHE
CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
BEFORE THE
FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE
REGARDING INVASIVE SPECIES CONTROL
WITHIN THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
APRIL 19, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the operational and maintenance needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge provides a great setting to consider the future of the Refuge System as it nears its 100th anniversary, in 2003. This magnificent refuge provides not only insights into the challenges facing the Refuge System, but also outstanding examples of how innovative, science-based management can address many of the threats to our nation=s wildlife heritage. This refuge is the perfect place to consider the crucial role that volunteers and community support groups, like the Friends of Blackwater, must play if we are to succeed in accomplishing our wildlife conservation mission.

Our first priority is taking care of what we have: the maintenance of the facilities and equipment we need to accomplish our mission. The Refuge System has \$7 billion worth of buildings, utilities, dikes and levees, roads, fences, dams, vehicles and tools, that we must maintain to protect their value and keep them safe and in good working order.

Refuge maintenance is addressed in three different but related programs: 1) Refuge Operations supports salaries for maintenance workers, laborers, and equipment operators; 2) Construction supports large and complex maintenance and capital improvement projects that normally cannot be accomplished in one year; and 3) the Refuge Maintenance program which supports annual maintenance, equipment repair and replacement, and deferred maintenance backlogged projects. In addition, since TEA-21, the Federal Lands Highways program helps address additional maintenance projects.

Thanks to your support, the efforts of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), our Five Year Deferred Maintenance and Equipment Replacement list, and our Maintenance Management System database, we have made progress addressing the highest priority needs of our facilities and equipment over the past few years. I=m pleased to say we have slowed the rate of growth in our maintenance backlog from 30% just a few years ago to 7% today. We currently estimate a backlog of deferred maintenance projects, including 8,092 projects, totaling roughly \$830 million, including \$172 million for equipment replacement and repair.

In fiscal year 2001, Congress appropriated a total of \$75 million for Refuge System maintenance (\$56 million in Title I and \$19 million in Title VIII) and we are receiving \$20 million annually in TEA-21 funds

through the Federal Lands Highways program. Therefore, in total, we have \$95 million available for refuge maintenance during the current fiscal year, and with this level of funding we will make additional progress toward our ultimate goal of reducing the maintenance backlog.

The President's Budget request for FY 2002 reinforces the need to take care of what we have by including a \$10 million program increase for refuge maintenance. This increase will address the most critical annual and deferred maintenance projects. The FY 2002 request will also enable us to implement a three-step approach to reducing the deferred maintenance inventory by increasing funding to hire essential maintenance workers, performing additional annual preventative maintenance, and performing additional deferred maintenance, including a \$1.8 million increase for condition assessments and improving the Maintenance Management System.

As you look around Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, you can see the difference the investment in maintenance has made. While we still have work to do, we have made progress in reducing the deferred maintenance backlog. The facilities provide a safe environment for both our employees and visitors. They are in better condition than they were five years ago. With a continued commitment to addressing these maintenance needs, we are making similar progress throughout the Refuge System.

This is important, because we have pressing operational needs on refuges. Blackwater, like many other refuges throughout the System, has a razor thin margin of flexible, operational funds that managers need to address the dynamic resource management challenges they face. For example, meeting the challenges of combating invasive species requires a substantial commitment of operational resources. The example of nutria here at Blackwater and throughout the Chesapeake Bay provides a great example.

Nutria are an exotic invasive rodent, native to South America, that have been introduced in 22 states nationwide, and affect over 1,000,000 acres of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Among areas with high nutria populations is the lower Eastern Shore of Maryland, including Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Blackwater has lost over 7000 acres of marsh since 1933, and the rate of marsh loss has accelerated in recent years to approximately 200 acres per year. Although there are many contributing factors (e.g., sea level rise, land subsidence), nutria are a catalyst of marsh loss due to their habit of foraging on the below-ground portions of marsh plants. This activity compromises the integrity of the marsh root mat, facilitating erosion and leading to permanent marsh loss. In light of the damage caused by nutria, the Service and 22 other Federal, state, and private partners joined forces in 1997 to identify appropriate methods for controlling nutria and restoring degraded marsh habitat. The Partnership prepared a 3-year pilot program proposal, which was subsequently approved by Congress, including authorization for the Secretary of the Interior to spend up to \$2.9 million over 3 years beginning in Fiscal Year 2000 (Public Law 105-322).

The Service received \$500,000 in FY 2000 to implement the three-year pilot study, *AMarsh Restoration: Nutria Control in Maryland@* in and around Blackwater Refuge. The funding came from both Refuge Operations (\$300k) and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (\$200k) funds. An additional \$500,000 was provided in 2001 and the 2002 budget also includes a request for \$500,000.

The 3-year pilot program was initiated in July 2000 with the hiring of a crew of four. Trapping is occurring on 9 study sites in Maryland, 3 of which are on Blackwater Refuge. The initial focus is on live capture of animals as part of a study that will help formulate effective strategies for eradicating nutria. In January 2002, intensive harvest will be implemented on 3 study sites, while no harvest will occur on the remaining sites. This approach will allow monitoring of biological responses of nutria to intensive harvest, and will provide answers to many questions regarding effective nutria control.

The damage nutria cause to the marshes of Chesapeake Bay can be helpful in understanding the operational needs of the Refuge System. If we do not address the threats posed by invasive species, the situation worsens, and the long-term cost of addressing the problem increases. This is a story that repeats itself over and over again throughout the Refuge System. At Loxahatchee Refuge in Florida's Everglades, the exotic melaleuca tree and the Old World climbing fern have infested thousands of acres of the refuge, out-competing the native plants. As these species become more widespread, the complexity and the cost of controlling them increases. From coast to coast, from the prairies to the mountains, each State and every ecosystem of our country has its own suite of invasive species threatening the health of the land.

Other major terrestrial plant invaders on refuges include salt cedar, leafy spurge, whitetop, Brazilian pepper, purple loosestrife, Australian pine, Chinese tallow, and exotic thistles. Problem aquatic plants include giant salvinia and water hyacinth. Aquatic vertebrate invaders include tilapia, Asian carp, Asian swamp eels, and nutria; Terrestrial vertebrates include marine toads, European starling and English sparrow, and feral goats, pigs, and cats. Aquatic invertebrates include the zebra mussel. Terrestrial invertebrate invasives include the gypsy moth, imported fire ant, and Africanized honeybee.

The problems are daunting, yet in most cases we know what needs to be done. We use a variety of strategies including outreach and education to minimize spread by humans, inventory and risk assessment, mechanical controls such as machinery or water level manipulation, pesticide applications, biological controls using natural predators, grazing, and prescribed fire.

The need to address the threats that invasive species pose to the biological integrity of the Refuge System is just one example of the operational needs on refuges. Nationwide, refuge staff have identified, categorized and prioritized \$1.1 billion in refuge operational projects. There are over 300 projects totaling \$120 million to combat invasive species. Congress has provided increased resources to address invasive species each year since FY 1998, under the Aimprove habitat@ component of Refuge operations. Increases totaling \$2.7 million have been provided since 1998,

and each year Congress has funded high priority invasive species projects. Refuge operational needs and opportunities, if implemented, will forward our mission in managing refuge lands. These needs and opportunities are entered into our Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS) as they are identified by refuge staff.

To better understand the most pressing operational needs on refuges, Congress directed us -- in the Committee report accompanying the FY2000 Interior Appropriations bill -- to develop a tiered approach to identify priority operating needs; aspects of refuge management B staff, equipment, and supplies B that are basic components of carrying out management of the Refuge System. We have responded to that Congressional direction and tiered the RONS database and now have a comprehensive view of the most pressing operational needs of the Refuge System. For instance, many of our refuges do not have a full-time biologist, law enforcement officer, or the resources to support monitoring wildlife populations and habitat conditions. In some cases a full-time biologist or a law enforcement officer may not be necessary to fulfill the mission of a particular refuge; however, in many other cases, they are an essential part of the successful operation of a refuge. In addition to priority operating needs, there is a wealth of opportunity to do good things for wildlife within the Refuge System. These opportunities are included in the second tier of identified refuge operations projects.

Additionally, we have unmet needs associated with establishment of new refuges that are categorized in the

RONs database, in order to respond to GAO's report entitled, Agency Needs to Inform Congress of Future Costs Associated with Land Acquisitions. That report recommended that the Service estimate future operations and maintenance costs for each new refuge.

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your support in helping us meet our operating needs. Since 1997, funding for refuge operations has increased from \$155 million to \$225 million. Our people continue to do great work on the ground and to manage our refuges to provide tremendous benefits to wildlife and spectacular opportunities for Americans to get outdoors and enjoy their wildlife heritage. We are getting increasingly important work from a growing volunteer workforce. We are getting expanding support from our Refuge Friends groups and cooperating associations. We are growing our fee demonstration programs. In short, we are being innovative in meeting our needs, which I believe has always been a hallmark of refuge managers and the Refuge System.

The Refuge system has made substantial progress in identifying and categorizing its priority operation and maintenance needs and opportunities, an important step in developing a long-term plan for meeting those needs. In the coming months, the Service will present its findings to the Department of the Interior and OMB, and work towards developing a long-term plan to address these needs and opportunities.

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