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

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Opening Statement By
The Honorable John Fleming
Chairman, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
At the Oversight Hearing On
Operations and Maintenance Backlog Within The National Wildlife Refuge System
May 26, 2011

Good afternoon, today the Subcommittee will conduct an oversight hearing on the operations and maintenance backlog within the National Wildlife Refuge System. This is the fifth hearing this Subcommittee has conducted on this subject but the first since March 23, 2001.

While much has changed over the past ten years, I found it fascinating to review previous testimony. For instance, at the hearing on July 25, 1996, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Chief of Refuges, Dr. Robert Streeter, testified that: "We feel it is time to break that historic pattern of benign neglect in our National Wildlife Refuge System. If we were a modern business, we would be well down the road to bankruptcy."

Five years later, a new Refuge Chief, who has now been nominated as the 16th Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service testified that: "As we look to the future, our greatest responsibility and priority is taking care of what we have, the maintenance of the facilities and equipment that we need to accomplish our mission."

More recently, the 2010 Report issued by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement stated that: "Washed-out trails, leaking roofs, closed roads, and broken equipment plague the refuge system."

How do we get to this point? In 1996, when Dr. Streeter was talking about bankruptcy, the operations and maintenance backlog was \$440 million. When Mr. Ashe was addressing the Subcommittee the backlog had grown to \$1.9 billion. Today, the cumulative backlog is \$3.3 billion which includes more than 1,200 invasive species projects; 1,400 national fish hatchery projects; 3,342 "mission critical" projects; 5,994 refuge road projects and more than 12,000 refuge facilities which are in need of immediate repair.

As a direct result of this backlog, there are miles of impassable or unsafe roads, millions of refuge acres infested with invasive species, a severe shortage of law enforcement personnel and 326 refuges that are either unstaffed or closed to the public. When the Congress approved the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, a fundamental goal of that historic law was to establish the finest refuge system in the world. It is difficult for anyone to argue that we are close to achieving that goal.

What we need is a new paradigm or vision for addressing this problem. The purpose of today's hearing is to obtain the views of many of the same organizations who have testified in the past and to have an "adult conversation" on how to address this problem.

While there are no bad ideas, I would caution our witnesses and the listening public that we are not going to significantly reduce this backlog by depending exclusively on discretionary funds. It is highly unlikely that Congress is going to appropriate a huge new infusion of taxpayer money.

Instead, I would hope our witnesses would look at certain suggestions including whether a portion of money allocated to the Land and Water Conservation Fund should be set-aside for refuge operations and maintenance, whether the Service should limit their acquisition dollars to conservation easements and not fee title acquisition, if certain unstaffed refuges can be managed or transferred to States, Native American tribes or other municipalities under Memorandum of Understandings and whether the 44 million Americans who visit a refuge each year would be willing to contribute more to its upkeep through the Recreation Fee Program.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of our distinguished witnesses. I am now pleased to recognize our Ranking Democratic Member from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Congressman Sablan for any statement he would like to make.