

**STATEMENT OF
WILLIAM P. HORN
ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES SPORTSMEN'S ALLIANCE
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS,**

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Mr. Chairman: On behalf of the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance (USSA), I appreciate the opportunity to testify today regarding operations and management funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System. USSA was organized in 1977 for the purposes of protecting the American heritage to hunt, fish, and trap and supporting wildlife conservation and professional wildlife management. It pursues these objectives at the federal, state, and local level on behalf of its over 1.5 million members and affiliates.

USSA has been deeply involved in Refuge management issues since it intervened in litigation in the 70's to defend duck hunting on units of the Refuge system. USSA was a founding member of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) and heavily engaged in the 1997 enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (NWRISA). My personal involvement and commitment to the Refuge system extends to my service as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks under President Reagan and the privilege of serving as the Chairman of the National Wildlife Refuge Centennial Commission in 2002-2003.

In relative terms, the Refuge System has been the red headed step child of public lands systems within the Department of the Interior. While billions of dollars have been lavished on the smaller National Park system (the National Park Service operating budget is well north of \$2 *billion*), the Refuge system operating budget is less than one-quarter of Parks funding. The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is to be commended for having done a fine job over the years for doing much more with less compared to its sister bureau. Nonetheless, FWS continues to fall behind in its ability to effectively manage the Refuge system and the maintenance backlog continues to grow. This trend puts the Refuges at risk. Federal funding limitations and the nation's debt crisis mean it is highly improbable that this trend can be reversed by expanded appropriations. These facts mandate a fresh look at how the Refuge system should be operated and funded.

USSA recommends that FWS, and the Congress exercising its oversight authority, carefully consider the following options to redress the Refuge operations and maintenance problems: (1) scrutiny of funding priorities including an emphasis on actions that do not increase operations and maintenance costs; (2) more efficient means of actually managing Refuge units by contracting out management, pursuant to applicable federal Refuge management standards, to state fish and wildlife agencies which can provide management services for lower costs compared to federal personnel; (3) determine if expanded user activities and associated reasonable fees can enhance management and operations revenues; and (4) changes in law or regulations as may be necessary to authorize or facilitate these kinds of actions. Only a

comprehensive effort to look at priorities, cost reductions, and non-appropriations revenue enhancements will reverse the present adverse trends.

Spending priorities must be thoroughly reviewed. We would suggest that wholesale land acquisition, which can add to long-term operations costs, be a diminished priority. Increasing land acquisition funding (via the Land and Water Conservation Fund) 63 percent to \$140,000,000, as requested by the Obama Administration, while the Refuge operations budget remains flat at \$503 million, makes little sense. Land acquisition via the Duck Stamp funded (i.e., hunter funded) Migratory Bird Fund and via partnership cost-shared programs such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund make sense during a period of budget restraint. This ensures that opportunities to add important habitats to the federal conservation estate can be realized. Similarly providing a reasonable level of acquisition funds via LWCF also enables FWS to purchase inholdings or take advantage of other unique acquisition opportunities. A fiscally prudent acquisition program should focus on unique opportunities to acquire high value lands where federal dollars are stretched via partnership arrangements that bring private monies to the table or less costly easements, compared to full fee purchase, are the target. A smarter acquisition program should enable significant funding to be redirected, in whole or in part, to Refuge operations. Such redirection of funding priorities could make a major contribution to enhancing Refuge system management.

In a similar vein, USSA was struck that “stimulus” funding added to the Refuge system’s maintenance backlog. Appropriated federal dollars were used to construct new visitor centers, creating new maintenance obligations, at multiple Refuges and fish hatcheries. The best advice to give a man in a hole is “stop digging.” Yet the Administration keeps digging and making the maintenance “hole” deeper by spending limited federal monies on capital projects creating more maintenance needs. Different priorities are needed to reverse the present adverse trends.

Personnel costs dominate the Refuge operations budget. Present estimates are that the average FWS employee working for the Refuge system costs over \$90,000 a year. This amount reflects salary, benefits, and associated costs. If a Refuge unit needs five staff to manage it, the personnel costs come in at \$450,000 per year. In contrast, most state fish and wildlife agencies have lower personnel costs. USSA conducted an unofficial survey and found that wildlife professionals are retained by state agencies for substantially lower costs. Many state agencies could provide the same five staff (with comparable professional wildlife training) for 20 to 30 percent less cost. We strongly recommend that FWS look to contracting state fish and wildlife agencies to administer Refuge units. FWS might be able to “hire” – via contracting – the same number of professionally qualified staff for a lot less money. This would enable FWS to stretch its dollars and still put the boots on the ground to effectively manage the federal units.

I would note that the 1997 Refuge Act includes language expressly authorizing this very approach (see section 5(b)(5) P.L. 105-57; 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(b)(4)). Congress and the Clinton Administration recognized that such flexibility could become important in the future and anticipated allowing FWS to make such arrangements. Any state agency hired to provide such management services would do so consistent with the purposes and mission of the Refuge unit as specified in the 1997 Act. Hence there is no need to worry that a state wildlife agency contractor would administer a unit in derogation of the applicable federal legal standards.

FWS and Congress also need to look at enhancing revenues from Refuge users. Authority to allow Refuge entrance and user fees was enacted in the mid-1980s during a similar period of federal budget restraint. However, the Senate then insisted that most of these dollars (approximately 80%) be directed to land acquisition accounts and only 20 percent to operations. We suggest that this 80/20 split be revisited and the bulk of such revenues be directed to Refuge O & M.

In addition, more activities should be subject to reasonable fees. As you know, the hunting and fishing community pays a multiplicity of license and stamp fees as well as federal excise taxes on equipment. These monies are the backbone of wildlife conservation funding. We are prepared to pay additional reasonable fees for Refuge uses to help secure the system. However, it is imperative that other users – who have traditionally paid nothing for the privilege of using and enjoying Refuges – step up to the plate to pay their share. More revenue from Refuge users is a way to provide more secure funding to augment appropriated dollars.

This combination of actions – different spending priorities that minimize the creation of new maintenance obligations, contracting out to state wildlife agencies to reduce Refuge operations personnel costs, and enhanced user generated revenues – can put the Refuge system on a more sound financial footing. Most of these actions are presently authorized by existing law. However, Congress should take action – in either the authorizing or appropriations arenas – to direct and facilitate this suite of solutions. USSA stands ready to work with the Subcommittee, and FWS, to achieve these goals and secure the future for our incomparable National Wildlife Refuge system.