

**TESTIMONY OF JIM KURTH
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THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE
ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS,
ON H.R. 638, THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE REVIEW ACT, H.R. 1300, TO
REAUTHORIZE THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM VOLUNTEER AND
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP ENHANCEMENT ACT, AND H. R. 1384, THE
WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CONSERVATION SEMIPOSTAL STAMP ACT.**

April 25, 2013

Introduction

Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Jim Kurth, Chief for the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), with the Department of the Interior (Department). I greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to testify on three bills that affect the Refuge System. My testimony provides a brief overview of the Refuge System and the Administration's views on each of the bills. The Service greatly appreciates the Subcommittee's continued leadership and support for the Refuge System.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Encompassing more than 150 million acres of land and water, the Refuge System is the world's premier network of public lands devoted solely to the conservation of wildlife and habitat. The Refuge System preserves a diverse array of land, wetland, and ocean ecosystems spanning over half the planet – from Guam, American Samoa, and other remote Pacific islands, north to the high arctic of northern Alaska, east to the rugged coastline of Maine and south to the tropical U.S. Virgin Islands. National wildlife refuges are found in every U.S. state. In total, the Refuge System now contains 561 refuges.

The management of each refuge gives priority consideration to appropriate recreational uses that are deemed compatible with the primary conservation purposes of the refuge, and the overall purpose of the Refuge System. The Refuge System offers about 47 million visitors per year the opportunity to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, as well as learn about nature through environmental education and interpretation. Currently, approximately 329 units of the Refuge System have hunting programs and approximately 271 have fishing programs. With its widespread presence and history of working with partners, the Refuge System also plays a key role in supporting innovative, community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and connect people with nature.

In addition to conserving America's great wildlife heritage, the Refuge System is an important part of local economies. The presence of a national wildlife refuge in a community often offers significant economic benefits in the form of jobs and visitor spending in local stores, hotels, and service stations. As noted in a resolution supporting National Wildlife Refuge Week passed by the Senate in September 2012, for each dollar appropriated to the Refuge System, national wildlife refuges generate about \$4 in economic activity, totaling nearly \$1.7 billion and helping sustain 27,000 jobs in local communities.

The Refuge System is bestowed with an important charge, one that faces ever increasing pressures and difficulties. Populations are growing, the amount of undeveloped land is declining, the economic environment is challenging, and we are faced with conservation crises on many fronts. We, the Service, must be strategic, flexible, and responsive in protecting declining undeveloped lands to ensure sufficient habitat is maintained to support America's wildlife populations in the future. We must also continue to support our partners and the thousands of Americans who volunteer to help us overcome these growing challenges to conserve the Nation's wildlife and its diverse and unique habitats.

H.R. 1300, to Reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act

The Administration supports H.R. 1300 and we appreciate the support shown by Representative Runyan and Ranking Member Sablan for our volunteer programs. The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnerships Enhancement Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-242) amended the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 to promote volunteer programs and community partnerships for the benefit of national wildlife refuges. This important statutory authority was reauthorized by the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-327), a law that also made permanent the pilot projects, removed the cap on the number of projects the Service could establish, and authorized \$2,000,000 each fiscal year through 2009 for the projects. H.R. 1300 would amend the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742f(g)) to reauthorize volunteer programs and community partnerships for the benefit of national wildlife refuges for 2014 through 2018.

The Enhancement Act (Act), as amended, has enabled the Refuge System to expand its volunteer programs and encourage environmental education efforts. The Act also helps the Service develop and grow community-based partnerships with refuge Friends organizations. These locally established, nonprofit citizen organizations have many different names, but they all share a passion for wildlife and our love of wild places. They are some of the Service's best ambassadors to local communities – sharing knowledge, information, and their passion with their neighbors. They help conservation happen at the local level.

The Enhancement Act helps the Refuge System meet mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 by strengthening public involvement and partnerships that support the six priority wildlife-dependent public uses, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation.

A fundamental concept of the Service's mission is to work with others to conserve wildlife for future generations. We recognize that to be successful we must inspire the American people to connect with their wildlife heritage and participate as stewards of our system of lands. Volunteers play a vital role in helping communities establish this connection to nature. They are individuals who are inspired to serve their communities and the Nation, parents who want to be good stewards of the land and set examples for their children, retired people willing to share their wealth of knowledge, concerned citizens of all ages who want to learn more about conservation and how they can make a difference, and passionate people who enjoy the outdoors and want to conserve these resources for future generations. They help implement conservation measures, provide environmental education and recreational opportunities to the American people, organize and carry out special events, and perform many other valuable services for fish and wildlife conservation and for the Refuge System and its visitors. These volunteers donate millions of hours of their time each year and those volunteer hours continue to increase.

In Fiscal Year 2011 (FY11), 46,880 volunteers contributed over 1.7 million hours of work to benefit Service programs. This is equivalent to 826 full-time employees. In dollars, the value of their vital work in FY11 alone was nearly \$37 million. In Fiscal Year 2012 (FY12), the volunteer program skyrocketed with over 56,000 individuals, nearly 43,000 of which volunteered for the Refuge System alone. These volunteers donated over 2.15 million hours of their time, equivalent to over 1,000 full-time employees. Their donated time is valued at almost \$47 million, leveraging appropriated volunteer funding at a ratio of \$10 of volunteer services for each dollar appropriated to coordinate volunteers.

H.R. 638, the National Wildlife Refuge Review Act

The Administration appreciates the subcommittee's interest in the process to establish new refuges, and Congressional review and approval of new refuges. We also appreciate the importance of prudent decision-making regarding new refuges, especially in light of the challenging economic times we face, when it is more important than ever that we ensure the wise expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

The Service recognizes the importance and value of legislatively creating refuges. Many refuges, such as Red River National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, were established by acts of Congress and fulfill a valuable conservation purpose, support local economies, and are enjoyed and supported by local communities. Establishment of refuges by statute is a very important method of conserving wildlife and habitat in the Refuge System.

However, the Administration strongly opposes H.R. 638. The bill would impede the Service's ability to be strategic, flexible, nimble and responsive in capitalizing on situations that present the best opportunities to strategically grow the Refuge System, as we have been directed by Congress. When priority conservation needs and values, public support, and the presence of willing sellers align to allow for the establishment of a new refuge, the Service must maintain the ability to act quickly and efficiently in taking advantage of such opportune situations. The Service's administrative decision to authorize the creation of a new refuge is then subject to Congressional oversight when lands or easements are acquired with appropriated funds, or the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, which includes Members of the House and Senate,

approve land acquisition using funds from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. H.R. 638 is unnecessary to assure Congressional oversight and it injects greater uncertainty into the process of establishing a new refuge, which could dissuade willing sellers and land donors.

Under the current administrative process, the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Service, is directed by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Sect 4 (4)(C)) to “plan and direct the continued growth of the System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystem of the United States, to complement efforts of States and other Federal agencies to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats, and to increase support for the System and participation from conservation partners and the public.”

Conserving wildlife through land protection is an adaptive and public process, founded on scientific data, driven by our mission to conserve habitat and ecosystems. We use the best scientific processes and data to identify gaps in the conservation estate – which we define as lands that are protected at local or landscape scales by private, state, or federal partners. We are also asked to look at specific areas as potential new wildlife refuges by organizations, local communities, Members of Congress, and States. Once a conservation need is identified, a preliminary proposal is submitted to the Service’s Director for approval to develop a detailed Land Protection Plan. Development of a Land Protection Plan is a public planning process, during which we reach out to state agencies, local communities, Congressional offices, conservation and sports groups to inform and help shape the plan. The Service uses the best available scientific information to analyze the effects of the Land Protection Plan and alternatives on the physical, biological, social and economic environment. Congressional delegations and committees are informed at key points in the process. The completed Land Protection Plan is submitted to the Director for review and approval as a new refuge. Not all preliminary proposals and Land Protection Plans are approved.

The process for studying and approving new refuges is an extensive and transparent effort founded on science, public input, and partnerships. It requires flexibility to respond to new information and input from the public and partners, and once the final plans are completed, it requires decisive action for approval or denial. Often, there is a limited window of time to protect key wildlife habitat and ecosystems. Without a level of relative certainty in the process, and the ability for the Service to act relatively quickly, potential land sellers and donors may choose options that lead to the development of their land and a lost conservation opportunity. Conversely, there are other times where there is more flexibility to complete the process over longer timeframes.

Congress has an important voice during the establishment of new refuges, and a variety of means to provide input. During the refuge planning process, Congressional members and committees are kept informed, and have the opportunity to review plans and consult on Service efforts. Congress can also designate new refuges directly through legislation. The appropriations process also provides Congress with options to guide refuge establishment. Congress appropriates funds for the purchase of lands and waters, and for operational support. Congressional members from both the House and the Senate also sit on the Migratory Bird

Conservation Commission. In all situations, the Service welcomes and values Congressional input.

Establishing refuges through administrative authority and support from Congress has been highly successful and critical to establishing a network of lands and waters that conserve America's natural heritage. Below are examples of how this process has been successful, and why it is essential.

The broad suite of refuges established across the waterfowl flyways to provide stopover and wintering habitat for ducks, geese, swans and many other migrating birds reflect the value of the administrative process of creating refuges. The vast numbers of waterfowl and wetland birds enjoyed by the hunters and bird watchers of the American public today would not have been possible without having a flexible process to identify and protect key habitat. One of these refuges is the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. It is comprised of about 46,000 acres of coast estuaries, beaches, sand dunes, and pine-oak woodlands. The refuge was first established by administrative action in 1939 as Brigantine Refuge with a second refuge, Barnegat, in 1967 to provide stopover habitat for migrating waterfowl, and especially as critical wintering habitat for about 75 percent of the black duck and Atlantic brant in the United States. These two refuges were combined and renamed by Congress in 1984 in memory of the late conservationist Congressman from New Jersey, Edwin B. Forsythe. The refuge also provides key nursery habitat for many sport fish, such as striped bass, nesting habitat for the threatened piping plover, and migration habitat for thousands of migrating songbirds. Within sight of the Atlantic City skyline, the refuge receives a quarter of a million visits a year including 2,500 hunting and 27,000 fishing visits. Visitation to E.B. Forsythe Refuge contributes an estimated \$2.8 million a year to the local economy with total direct and indirect contribution at \$4.4 million. This translates to a \$5.05 economic benefit for every dollar appropriated.

Opportunities for conservation through the establishment of national wildlife refuges serve the public in unexpected ways. Big Muddy National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri was established soon after catastrophic flooding in 1993 on the Missouri River. Congress supported the effort with emergency supplemental funding (P.L. 103-75, P.L. 103-211). The Service completed the land protection studies that resulted in the administrative establishment of Big Muddy Refuge, and allowed use of the funds to buy land from willing sellers. In addition to conserving important wildlife habitat, it allowed the people whose lives were crushed by the regular flooding to sell the land at fair market value and start over elsewhere. Shifting land use from residential and agricultural uses in flood prone areas reduces the economic impact of flooding while supporting conservation and recreational goals. The refuge consists of nearly 17,000 acres and the Service is re-establishing river and floodplain habitat. The endangered pallid sturgeon, an ancient species of fish, is benefiting from these conservation efforts. The refuge also receives an average of 25,000 visits a year.

Refuges are also established to protect and restore marquee ecosystem types, which results in numerous benefits to the American public. Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana, was administratively created in 1994. The refuge resulted from a grass roots effort by the local community leaders and a variety of landowners wishing to preserve open space in New Orleans. The Conservation Fund purchased and donated

3,660 acres of wetland to the Service as the first acquisition for this refuge. The 17,000 acre refuge protects and restores the largest undeveloped natural area of the lake's north shore. The complex of marshes, hardwood hammocks and pine flatwoods provide important habitat for a number of species listed under the Endangered Species Act, such as red-cockaded woodpecker, brown pelican, bald eagle, and American alligator. The brown pelican and bald eagle were delisted because of successful efforts to protect habitat and recover the species – refuges were a key part of the success. Protecting endangered species habitat in refuges can also help to take pressure off of private landowners and public works projects – abundant species habitat that is permanently protected creates greater opportunities for sustained species recovery. The abundant fish and wildlife at Big Branch Refuge draw more than 300,000 visits a year, with 129,000 enjoying hunting and fishing. It is also recognized as a hub for environmental education and wildlife-related recreation, which fosters and creates a strong conservation ethic within the community and contributes to the local economy.

H.R. 638 would create an additional, uncertain hurdle to the successful and transparent process described above; a process that has resulted in the creation of so many popular refuges that are key to wildlife conservation, valued and supported by local communities, and that contribute to numerous sectors of the economy. The bill requires action by Congress to establish new national wildlife refuges, even after an extensive public planning process based on sound scientific information and partnerships, where there is a demonstrated need to conserve wildlife habitat and ecosystems.

When the Service plans and establishes new refuges, we strive to ensure a balance between the need to act quickly and the need to gather substantial scientific information, solicit input from partners and the public, and be responsive to local needs. Requiring Congressional action on top of this will lengthen the amount of time required for approval of a new refuge and inject uncertainty in the process, delaying and perhaps losing opportunities for funding, land purchase, donations and ultimately, conservation of wildlife habitat.

H.R. 1384, the Wildlife Refuge System Conservation Semipostal Stamp Act

The Administration supports H.R. 1384, the Wildlife Refuge System Conservation Semipostal Stamp Act of 2013. The purpose of the legislation is to provide a direct opportunity for the public to contribute to funding for the maintenance backlog and operational needs of the Refuge System. We believe the legislation would accomplish this goal and would also raise awareness and appreciation of the Refuge System and its mission.

In the previous Congress (May 2012), the Service testified at a hearing before this subcommittee on the issue of the operational needs and maintenance backlog of the Refuge System. At that hearing we described the nature of the needs and how we prioritize Refuge System project spending in the context of overall Service strategic goals. The Refuge System conserves an extraordinary number of species and ecosystems, and currently, the Service is tracking about \$3.1 billion in operational needs and deferred maintenance projects, including about \$650 million in operations and \$2.5 billion in deferred maintenance in the Refuge System's \$26.5 billion portfolio of constructed assets. We would like to point out that in May 2012, the Service provided testimony that the Refuge System's deferred maintenance backlog as of the beginning

of FY 11 was \$2.7 billion. We are pleased to report that this amount has declined somewhat in the past fiscal year and now sits at \$2.5 billion as of the beginning of FY 12. We point this out as an indication that we are managing our available resources in a way that is allowing us to make progress on our backlog while still allowing us to move forward on other key projects.

Managing the Refuge System is not unlike running a large company with hundreds of branch offices. It requires simultaneous attention to both national and local issues, and a diverse and highly trained workforce that must work together for the entire operation to run smoothly. Our workforce contains mostly biologists and professional wildlife managers, but also contains professional educators, law enforcement officers, heavy equipment operators, fire fighters, real estate appraisers, maintenance workers, IT and cartography professionals, budget specialists, pilots and boat captains. With fewer than 4,000 employees working at more than 380 locations spanning all U.S. States and territories, and with only \$3.35 in appropriations for every acre we manage, the Refuge System must, and does, ensure its operations are efficient.

The semipostal stamp authorized by H.R. 1384 will provide another funding source to help support refuges. The Refuge System semipostal stamp would operate in a way similar to the Multinational Species Conservation Funds Semipostal Stamp, which was issued on September 20, 2011. As of March 2013, 20 million of these stamps were purchased raising over \$2 million for the Service's Multinational Conservation Species Funds which fund international wildlife conservation projects.

Under this model, a Refuge System semipostal stamp could generate up to \$10 million over the two year sales period if all stamps are sold. These funds would be available to fund priority operations and deferred maintenance projects. The Service would use these funds in a strategic way to provide the biggest benefit by addressing the highest priority projects as documented in our databases. Examples of needs that could be addressed include repairing visitor facilities, funding environmental education and interpretation, implementing habitat management projects, reintroducing imperiled species to previously inhabited areas, and conducting scientific evaluations needed to improve wildlife management.

While the semi-postal stamp would not, by itself, fully address the operational needs and maintenance backlog, it would address many key projects and would be helpful in raising awareness of the Refuge System and its mission.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your continued interest in the Refuge System. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to continue to conserve the Nation's wildlife. I am happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have and look forward to working with the Subcommittee as it considers these bills.