

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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Testimony By  
Dr. Rollin D. Sparrowe, President  
Wildlife Management Institute  
Before The  
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife & Oceans  
U. S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
September 19, 1995

Mr Chairman:

My testimony is a purposely broad statement of concerns that the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) have in the operation and maintenance of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Our alliance was formed early in 1995 and is based on the unifying concept that maintenance and management of habitat provided by national wildlife refuges and their surroundings are essential to fish and wildlife populations. Our common interest is to help provide resources needed for refuges to function as intended since the first refuge established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903.

The main reason for forming our alliance is the long-term shortage of funds to operate and manage national wildlife refuges. This funding need has been documented with systematic appraisals by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The shortage significantly limits the Service's ability to appropriately manage fish, wildlife and their habitats. In many cases, programs are not funded to allow compatible beneficial public uses such as environmental education, fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing. Many refuges have been established and managed mainly in custodial fashion, and even after many years are not fulfilling the full purpose for which they were established.

Each of our organizations has unique relationships with national wildlife refuges, which several will describe in testimony. For example, one of my predecessors at the Wildlife Management Institute, Dr. Ira Gabrielson, served as the first Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and had a major role in establishing the National Wildlife Refuge System. Our Institute was substantially responsible for the addition of Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey, and Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. In my 22 years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I conducted research on national wildlife refuges, visited many repeatedly for sightseeing, hunting or fishing, wildlife viewing, or in an administrative role over the refuge division. I was directly involved in planning and budget preparation for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Mr. Chairman, many CARE member groups have helped the refuge system for decades. Ducks Unlimited, for example, has supplied millions of dollars in cooperative habitat improvements on and adjacent to refuges. The Izaak Walton League of America was instrumental in creating the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which has purchased more than 1 million acres for refuges since 1967. The League and its chapters were directly involved in establishing the Upper Mississippi Wildlife and Fish Refuge, National Elk Refuge, and helping with other specific refuges. Other members of CARE have impressive and deep commitments to the refuge system. Some of those groups are here and will elaborate on their commitments during their testimony.

The Wildlife Society, the 9,500-member organization of professional wildlife biologists, and the American Fisheries Society, the 9,200-member scientific organization representing professional fishery biologists, both have worked for and supported the professional framework within which refuge managers apply their trade. The CARE group believes that the wildlife refuge system contains examples of lands managed in the highest professional traditions for sustaining habitats, fish and wildlife, and enjoyment of them by people. Effective science-based management of fish and wildlife is important for refuges and drives our interest in seeing them meet their full potential.

Over the past two years CARE has requested and received detailed information from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about the refuge maintenance backlog and consequences of the chronic funding shortfalls, details of which the Service provided for the record at a hearing before this Subcommittee on July 25, 1996. One major strategy for coping with the problem is cost reduction, which the Service has employed widely. During the past 15 years, refuges have been managed in complexes rather than individually, many have no staff present on a regular basis, and expenditures for operational tasks have been deferred. Programs such as wildlife monitoring, boundary posting, planning, and recreational program administration have been cut back. Another strategy, cost sharing, occurs through the Challenge Cost-Share Program, matching projects funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and state administration of selected programs particularly in recreation. In addition, cost recovery through user fees is currently under consideration by the Congress. While we are interested in seeing the results of the experimental fee demonstration program initially authorized in the 1996 Omnibus Appropriations bill, we do not believe that a recreation fee system provides the answer to the refuge system problem. Indeed, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's FY 1997 Fisheries and Wildlife Assessment concluded that "relying on user fees or increasing fees within reason will not impact the O&M problems significantly." Moreover, fee collection would be unlikely to generate significant additional revenues in numerous units of the refuge system.

CARE members believe in and encourage cost reduction and cost sharing in every way practicable. However, the public good cannot be fully served without significant additional federal dollars being appropriated in the future. The value of this nation's investment in national wildlife refuges must be protected for future generations. The Department of the Interior, with the aid of Congress, could narrow this funding gap considerably with targeted additional funding for operation and maintenance. We recently met with Interior officials to urge that they elevate the priority of funding operation and maintenance on refuges. We offered to help sell the idea to the public and Congress. We also strongly suggested that the benefits of such funding be documented as this investment is made. We were assured the Secretary is supportive of the need.

It is important to explain why the Service continues to purchase refuge land while experiencing the maintenance backlog. In the past, parcels of public lands have been converted into refuges, and some whole refuges have been purchased by others and donated to the Service. By far, however, refuge acquisitions are done through a process of planning and publicizing the intended geographical extent of a refuge, and then pursuing acquisition almost solely on a willing seller basis. Such acquisitions in established refuges can take decades, and currently make up the bulk of annual land purchases. For example, the refuge at Cape May, New Jersey initially contained more than 250 individual properties and is being acquired gradually as willing sellers are identified.

New refuges must be added over time on an "as needed" basis. This does not constitute irresponsible expansion of the system, but rather an attempt to forestall more dramatic problems with species extinction or reductions. While CARE groups believe that addressing the operation and maintenance funding backlog is a high priority, we recognize the cost effectiveness of initiating new refuges selectively as needed.

Much interest is focused these days on endangered species, fish and wildlife diversity, and their high social and economic value. National wildlife refuges often provide, in a geographically limited area, the needs of fish and wildlife that formerly occupied much more dispersed habitats which no longer exist. They constitute an investment in lowering future costs by preventing declines which require more drastic measures, such as listing as threatened or endangered.

Refuges offer many examples of success. Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas played a major role in restoring the endangered whooping crane from less than 20 individuals decades ago to more than 130 currently. Refuge lands in migration routes north to Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park have helped sustain the whooping crane's recovery. National Elk Refuge in Wyoming provides core habitat for wintering Rocky Mountain elk--exemplary of a solution to growing urbanization of wildlife winter ranges in the Rocky Mountains. During the past six years in South Carolina, 10,448 acres have been acquired for the establishment of the Ace Basin National Wildlife Refuge in one of the largest undeveloped estuaries on the Atlantic coast. This federal commitment has been an important component of a broad-based conservation effort in and around the estuary by state, other federal agencies, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, and local private land owners. As a result of these commitments, approximately 200,000 acres are now being managed cooperatively to help bald eagles and wood storks, both listed species.

Just 10 years ago, North American waterfowl were in crisis, having declined to all time record low numbers during extended drought. The managed lands and more stable water levels of national wildlife refuges helped sustain the dwindling flocks until the rains returned, and habitat is once again more widely favorable. North American waterfowl are on their way to the largest fall flight in almost 30 years during the coming months. Refuges were a vital part of that recovery.

Some refuges' situations are complex. Several CARE members are involved in current efforts to complete the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge by securing lands passed to Native peoples during the 1979 Native Land Claims settlement process. These groups would like to help government secure the refuge before financial needs of Native peoples dramatically alter some of the most unspoiled fish and wildlife habitat in North America. Some CARE members have been responsible for significant sums of privately donated funding going toward this effort.

CARE members unanimously support preparation of conservation management plans for all refuges and the periodic review of those plans. By a public planning process, the interests of various constituent groups can best be accommodated and the fears of landowners about refuge creation and management can be alleviated. Clearly stated purpose, specific acquisition intents, easements, or other land management arrangements can be provided. Assured public uses, often traditionally occurring at the time of purchase, or clear justification for ending uses if needed, can be out front for all to see. Finally, such plans can provide a blueprint for the Congress and the American people to determine what is wanted in the refuge system and what the costs will be. We still are awaiting a system-wide plan from the Department of the Interior.

Some CARE members are particularly concerned that funding shortages might limit recreational uses by their constituents on refuges. The record shows an addition of 47 new refuges open to hunting and 26 refuges open to fishing and other compatible uses. Member groups recognize that management programs must be funded and increased in effectiveness or such opportunities will be lost. Significant opportunities for economic benefits to local communities through bird watching, hunting, fishing, or other uses will be lost if these programs are not enhanced.

Finally, this unique alliance, as you referred to it in your opening statement on July 25, 1996, wishes to suggest a desired future condition for the National Wildlife Refuge System. That goal is one in which all refuges are fully staffed and operating in a manner sufficient to achieve the individual and collective purposes for which they were established. And, the habitat base provided by refuges and their surroundings sustain fish and wildlife that meet the needs of people, whether for viewing, study, hunting, fishing or merely for the sake of perpetuating wildlife and its values. CARE members can unite behind a system of wildlife lands and waters that:

- Provides important habitats for migratory birds and for the recovery of species threatened with extinction .
- Serves as a catalyst for conservation of the nation's diverse array of fish, wildlife and other biota.
- Is widely recognized for scientific excellence in the management of wildlife and habitat.
- Sustains habitats and fish and wildlife that provide exceptional public opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.
- Sets a standard of excellence for environmental education.
- Serves as a model for cooperative management with surrounding public and private lands.
- Provides a measure against which the use or abuse of unprotected lands can be measured.
- Is managed as a true system, with appropriate staffing and operating funding to fulfill its mission.

We appreciate the attention of this Subcommittee to the important issue of management and operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Our member groups are committed to working with this Subcommittee, with each other, and with the appropriate agencies to assure a brighter future for these vitally important landscapes which serve fish, wildlife and people.

### **Members of Cooperative Alliance of Refuge Enhancement**

**American Fisheries Society**  
**American Sportfishing Association**  
**Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation**  
**Defenders of Wildlife**

**Ducks Unlimited**  
**International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**  
**Izaak Walton League of America**  
**National Audubon Society**  
**National Rifle Association of America**  
**National Wildlife Federation**  
**National Wildlife Refuge Association**  
**Safari Club International**  
**The Wilderness Society**  
**The Wildlife Society**  
**Trout Unlimited**  
**Wildlife Legislative Fund of America**  
**Wildlife Management Institute**

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["Return to Committee Home Page"](#)