

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

**STATEMENT OF JAMES R. WALTMAN
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THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY
BEFORE THE FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE
REGARDING THE OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
SYSTEM
SEPTEMBER 19, 1996**

The Wilderness Society appreciates this opportunity to testify on an issue of such importance to the nation's fish and wildlife and to our 315,000 members. The Wilderness Society is a non-profit membership organization devoted to preserving wilderness and wildlife, protecting America's prime forests, rivers, deserts, wetlands, and shorelands. Like other organizations testifying at this hearing, the Society has had a long-standing commitment to the sound management and well-being of the National Wildlife Refuge System. For us that commitment dates back to our founding in 1935 by Aldo Leopold and other ecologists and professional land managers. Our interest was expressed in the 1950s by the successful efforts of Olaus Murie, our president at the time and himself a former Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, to establish the magnificent Arctic National Wildlife Range on the northern slope of Alaska.

The Wilderness Society is very pleased to be a member of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (C.A.R.E), a diverse group of more than 15 organizations with a common goal of securing adequate funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System. While the various organizations that make up CARE may have different priorities, we all agree that the Refuge System is a national treasure that needs and deserves much greater attention and support than it has received in past years. In that light, we appreciate the two hearings that this Subcommittee has held on this subject and the modest increase for operations and maintenance funding requested by the administration. We hope Congress will supplement the level proposed by the administration's with additional funding for this critical program.

You have asked us to give our assessment of the Refuge System's operations and maintenance backlog, the appropriateness of acquiring new refuge lands, and the value of refuge planning. Before answering those specific questions, I would first like to lay out our vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The questions posed by the Subcommittee should be answered in the context of this vision.

A VISION FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The National Wildlife Refuge System is in the truest sense, the living part of our national lands. Refuges are places where we can feel, with more confidence than anywhere else in our country, that wildlife comes first. The System provides an insurance policy for our wildlife heritage -- protecting the biological, recreational, aesthetic, economic, cultural, inspirational, and medicinal values that are so critical to our future.

Our vision for the Refuge System is a broad habitat-based land system at the forefront of the nation's wildlife and ecosystem conservation efforts. In that spirit, refuges should be staffed by the nation's most highly trained and skilled conservation biologists and wildlife managers. Refuges should have research and inventory systems in place to enable them to provide an early warning system of trends in wildlife populations and ecosystem integrity. Refuges should be on the cutting edge in determining optimal habitat and population management strategies and be adequately funded and staffed to implement these strategies. Refuges should be models and

catalysts for wildlife conservation efforts on surrounding federal, state, and private lands -- as Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie envisioned, the refuges should be "anchor points for biological diversity." And refuges should be known for providing the highest quality opportunities for environmental education and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation, including wildlife observation, fishing, hunting, and nature photography. The system can and should provide invaluable experiences through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.

Of particular interest to The Wilderness Society, the Refuge System should be at the forefront of efforts to protect and recover threatened and endangered species and to prevent other species from ever becoming threatened or endangered. This testimony will focus on that aspect of refuge management and protection.

REFUGES PLAY A KEY ROLE IN CONSERVING ENDANGERED SPECIES

Long before there was an Endangered Species Act, the Refuge System was there to protect and restore imperiled species. In the early years of the century, President Theodore Roosevelt established refuges to save our egrets, herons, terns, gulls and other birds from the market hunters who sought plumes for the feathered hats that were the height of fashion in those days. Roosevelt also established refuges to save the large mammals -- bison, elk, and antelope -- that were also threatened with extinction. Waterfowl were the focal imperiled species of the 1930s and 1940s and the focus of much expansion of the Refuge System.

We note with disappointment that while this Congress and its predecessor have invested great effort in evaluating and proposing amendments to the Endangered Species Act, to our knowledge not a single hearing has been held to review opportunities to improve endangered species conservation on the Refuge System. Clearly, efforts to conserve species on refuges are more cost effective, more lasting, and less controversial than similar efforts on private lands or "multiple use" public lands. The National Wildlife Refuge System has been right under our noses as a premier endangered species conservation tool, but so far we appear to be largely missing it.

The American public can be very proud of our National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge System is the only network of federal public lands that have been established specifically to conserve fish and wildlife. The System covers more than 92 million acres and includes units in all 50 states and several US territories. Extending from arctic Alaska to the subtropical Florida Keys, from coastal Maine to the far Pacific Islands, the Refuge System is the most comprehensive network of protected fish and wildlife habitats anywhere in the world.

The Refuge System is making a great contribution to endangered species conservation. Fifty-eight refuges have been established specifically to protect scores of threatened and endangered species -- from golden-cheeked warblers to loggerhead sea turtles, Columbian white-tailed deer to West Indian manatees, Iowa Pleistocene snails to Ash Meadows blazing stars. Another 302 refuges provide listed species with habitat at some point during their life cycles. More than 230 endangered and threatened species occur on national wildlife refuges and more than 350 candidate species have been recorded on refuges. More than 50 refuges provide designated critical habitat covering nearly half a million acres, and seventeen refuges are involved in listed species propagation and release programs. As a testament to the success of refuge management, according to Fish and Wildlife Service reports, 55 percent of the endangered and threatened species that occur on national wildlife refuges are stable or improving, while only 32 percent of species not found on refuges are stable or improving. Of those species that have had a special refuge designated for them, 68 percent are improving or stable.

Piping plovers are rebounding on the Atlantic coast thanks in part to efforts at E.B. Forsythe (New Jersey), Parker River (Massachusetts), Chincoteague (Virginia), and other refuges. Whooping cranes have increased

significantly thanks to habitat protection and management at Arkansas NWR (Texas). Aleutian Canada geese numbers have increased in the last few years with assistance from San Joaquin NWR and other refuges in California's Central Valley. The masked bobwhite quail is making a comeback due to protection and reintroduction efforts at the Buenos Aires NWR (Arizona). Three endangered fish and half a dozen endangered plants are stable thanks to the Ash Meadows NWR (Nevada). Mississippi sandhill cranes are increasing in numbers thanks to the refuge established for and named after that endangered bird. The Delmarva peninsula fox squirrel is making a comeback on the Eastern Shore thanks in large part to recovery efforts at Blackwater NWR (Maryland), and Chincoteague NWR. Survival prospects for the Lange's metalmark butterfly and the Contra Costa wallflower have been greatly enhanced by the protections afforded to these species at Antioch Dunes NWR (CA).

FUNDING WOES ARE HOLDING THE REFUGE SYSTEM BACK

Unfortunately, throughout the system, the vision is struggling to survive. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that the National Wildlife Refuge System is operating with a maintenance backlog of \$440 million and an annual operations deficit of at least \$149 million and perhaps as much as \$308 million. The litany of problems caused by this funding shortfall is imposing. Chronic underfunding in past years has led to the degradation of refuge habitats and wildlife populations. Invasions of exotic species, inadequate water supplies, and other problems plague many refuges, undermining their ability to meet their wildlife objectives. Deteriorating fences are allowing cattle and other livestock to trespass on a growing number of refuges, including Cabeza Prieta NWR in Arizona. Funding shortfalls have also put at risk popular wildlife-oriented recreation programs. An increasing number of refuges have been "complexed" leaving many of them without permanent staff or direct funding. Currently only 290 of the 508 refuges are staffed and some 250 formerly filled field station positions are now vacant. For example, the new Cape May refuge, which has been hailed as a potential gem in the system, recently lost its full time refuge manager position.

Fewer and fewer refuges have been able to hold full time biologist positions. As a result, even routine research and inventories are not being performed. According to a Fish and Wildlife Service database developed during the preparation of the 1992 draft Environmental Impact Statement on the Refuge System, only 59% of refuges had conducted breeding bird surveys, 32% had conducted full inventories of their mammals, 30% had inventoried their plants, 20% had inventoried their fish and reptiles, 18% had inventoried their amphibians, and only 5% had inventoried invertebrates. Only 28% of the refuges indicated that they had inventoried their biological communities and 15% indicated that they were incorporated into a state natural heritage program. Without a full understanding of what resources it harbors, the Refuge System can not meet its potential to nurture our wildlife heritage.

Management programs to help recover endangered, threatened, and candidate species, by restoring habitats and addressing resource threats are left unaccomplished on an increasing number of stations. The Fish and Wildlife Service reports a maintenance backlog of \$13.6 million and \$46.9 million in unmet operations funding for endangered species efforts on refuges. For example:

The Crocodile Lakes NWR (Florida) has no staff based within two hours of the refuge. As a result, poaching of this endangered species continues. The refuge needs at least one full time employee.

The Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR (Mississippi) needs funding to build new holding pens for this endangered species. Ten of 19 endangered Mississippi sandhill cranes were killed by predators which broke through a deteriorating holding pen prior to the birds release.

Piping plover breeding success has dipped at the E.B. Forsythe NWR (New Jersey) after sustained increases, perhaps because the refuge lost its seasonal position in charge of monitoring and protecting the birds from disturbance. The refuge needs funds to fill this position.

Salinas River NWR (California) aspires to eradicate exotic plants and restore native buckwheat, the host plant for the endangered Smith's blue butterfly, but needs funds to do so.

Malheur NWR (Oregon) desperately needs funds to build fish screens on its irrigation system to protect the redband trout, a candidate species for listing.

Illegal dumping continues on the Lake Wales Ridge NWR (Florida) which has been established to protect endangered plants. The refuge needs a staff presence to combat this threat.

Balcones Canyonlands NWR (Texas) has been established as an important part of the federal share of efforts to recover the golden-cheeked warbler, but needs funds for habitat assessments and management to meet its objective.

Carolina Sandhills NWR (South Carolina) holds the largest refuge population of endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers and has plans for hardwood understory management needed by the birds, but these are left unfulfilled due to budget shortages.

Ellicott Slough NWR (California) has plans to install tunnels beneath a road on the refuge to help protect the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander but lacks funds to build the tunnels.

Completion and management of the National Key Deer Refuge (Florida) is the primary recovery action for the endangered Key deer. But mosquito ditches across refuge lands can be a death trap for the tiny deer. The refuge needs funds to re-fill the ditches.

While the task of making the Refuge System whole by its 100th anniversary in 2003 may seem daunting, it is well within reach compared to efforts for some other federal programs. While we support adequate funding for the national parks, it is noteworthy that the administration's proposed increase for the National Park Service for FY1997 actually exceeds the entire budget for the National Wildlife Refuge System. While some additional funds may be found in fee collection, new concessions policies, cost reductions, and cost sharing, the bulk of the work must be done with federal appropriations. Congress can start the System's recovery by appropriating at least the administration's requested increase for refuge operations and maintenance.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE REFUGE SYSTEM

Sound planning is an important process for any successful entity, whether it be a large corporation, a small town, or a national wildlife refuge. To properly manage the national wildlife refuges, the Fish and Wildlife Service must conduct thorough planning for these important public resources with full and open public involvement. Planning is needed to determine what biological resources and public opportunities exist on the refuge and surrounding areas; to decide what is needed and desired on the refuges in the future; to determine what threats exist to refuge resources; and finally to build a road map to address the threats and achieve the objectives established in the plan. We fully support the administration's proposed \$2.5 million increase to expand comprehensive refuge planning.

LAND ACQUISITION CONTINUES TO BE CRITICAL

Much has been said about the Fish and Wildlife Service's ongoing land acquisition program. Some argue that the Service should suspend further expansion of the System in light of its funding woes. But this thinking is short-sighted. It would be like saying that underfunded school systems should stop taking in new students. We can't do that. The mission of the Refuge System is to conserve wildlife. The System must continue to expand to

meet the greatest wildlife conservation challenges of the day -- just as schools need to expand to meet their mission of teaching out children.

In fact, targeted land acquisition can actually reduce long-term management costs of refuges and certainly will reduce long term costs for the Fish and Wildlife Service by helping prevent species from needing to be added to the endangered species list in the first place and recovering those that are listed.

For years, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been working to complete the National Key Deer Refuge with funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The greatest factor in the deer's mortality has been auto collisions. If nothing else, such acquisition will reduce the ultimate total number of people who move into the deer's habitat and build a house, reducing the total number of cars, pizza delivery boys, and others driving through the refuge, reducing the staff time spent chasing after cars, pizza delivery boys and others driving too fast through the refuge, and reducing road kills. Without completion of this refuge, the very purpose that the refuge was established back in the 1950s is in jeopardy.

Land acquisition also supports numerous goals simultaneously. Expansion of the Back Bay NWR (Virginia) with funds from both the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (the "Duck Stamp Fund") is not only helping to improve habitat for migratory birds, it is also helping to restore Back Bay, a once famous fishery that has declined due to degradation of water quality. Habitat restoration on the new refuge lands, through either active or passive management, will reduce sedimentation and contamination of the bay and allow for the restoration of the fishery.

The Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge in coastal Alabama was established to protect disappearing natural coastline and the species that depend on the area, including the endangered Alabama beach mouse. Unfortunately, acquisition funding has not been consistent. As a result, private landowners within the refuge are now seeking to develop their property. The Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species staff are working on a Habitat Conservation Plan to allow development to proceed on land that the Fish and Wildlife Service refuge staff had planned to acquire. Its quite possible that costs for the Service's involvement in the HCP are comparable to what it would have cost to acquire the land in the first place.

CONCLUSION

This testimony has focused on endangered species in the Refuge System because we believe that the public cares deeply about our imperiled wildlife heritage. However, protected wildlife habitat in the Refuge System that supports whooping cranes, Key deer, Florida panthers, masked bobwhite quail, and other endangered species automatically supports hundreds of other species, including those popular for viewing, hunting, or fishing.

The National Wildlife Refuge System faces many challenges as it prepares for its 100th anniversary. Those who care about the System should not just look at the current problems but decide what our vision for the System will be for the twenty-first century. To meet our vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System, the operations and maintenance of the Refuge System must be adequately funded, the system must receive comprehensive conservation planning, and the System must continue to expand to address the wildlife conservation challenges of the day.

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