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Before the

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And Oceans

Committee on Resources

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Mr. Chairman, I am Dr. Edgar C. Bristow, President of Friends of Forsythe N.W.R. Inc. (hereafter designated as "Friends"), the support group for the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. I am also President Emeritus of the Atlantic Audubon Society, the local chapter of the National Audubon Society, which is also a support group for the Forsythe Refuge. I had been a witness before this committee when the original bill was considered in June, 1997, and am here today to provide information on the effects of that bill over the intervening years, and to support the passage of H.R. 2408. I would also make some comments on H.R. 1204, a bill to establish a National Wildlife Refuge System Concession Policy.

Our Friends group had just organized and was beginning to work out our relationship with staff and the Audubon Refuge Keeper group. The employment of a Volunteer Coordinator under the terms of the bill allowed for better coordination and smoother action. Our corps of volunteers has grown to well over 100, varying in age from teen-agers to older retired folks like myself. Many activities have involved other community groups ranging from Boys & Girls clubs and scout groups to veterans groups and senior citizens. Working with the volunteer coordinator has enabled the Friends to be an effective force for providing both manpower and resources for which the refuge did not have any budgeted funds.

The Volunteer Coordinator has provided better orientation and training for all volunteers. A Garden group was established to plan and install a Native wildflower garden to enhance the appearance of the headquarters building and to serve as a teaching tool for visitors interested in planning their own gardens to benefit wildlife. A small group of handicapped citizens have also been working with the garden volunteers helping them to feel more useful.

Under the auspices of the Friends, a camera club was started and has now been incorporated into the Friends organization, providing photographic assistance to the Refuge, chronicling activities, animals, plants and other aspects of the Refuge. The group has also established a working relationship with MotoPhoto for support of photo contests, as well as expertise in film development. The Audubon Society and Friends continue to provide survey teams to do a weekly count of waterbirds using the Refuge.

Volunteers are involved in many routine maintenance jobs, including trail clearing, mowing grassy areas, checking nest boxes, monitoring the weather station, doing water quality studies in the impoundments and performing minor repairs under the supervision of the maintenance staff. All groups work smoothly together under the direction of the Volunteer Coordinator

Both Friends and Audubon, working together, have managed Refuge Day activities, International Migratory Bird day events and Make-a-Difference Day projects. Friends have operated a small gift and information shop on weekends through spring and fall, providing information, selling annual passes and selling items

related to Refuge activities such as field guides, T-shirts, hats and assorted gift items. Completion of an exhibit, preparation of a trail and auto tour route map for visitors and funding printing of a coloring book to accompany the Puppet Show "At the Refuge" are examples of other projects.

Under the guidance of the Volunteer Coordinator, Friends have developed a small model "T.R. Bear" to celebrate the start of the Refuge System by President Theodore Roosevelt during this Centennial Year. Our Friends group also funded a Centennial CD with music composed and performed by Fish & Wildlife staff and volunteers. Both items were made available to the various units of the Service at both wholesale and retail rates. All proceeds are going to benefit Forsythe Refuge.

Other activities of Friends include providing guides for tour groups visiting the Refuge, providing visiting student groups with guides and instructors, and working with staff on outreach programs. Most recently, Friends hosted a "Hooked on Fishing" day, working with grants from WalMart, local sportsmen's clubs, and the State Fish & Game Department. It is expected that this will become an annual event.

In addition to my work with our local group, I have also been part of the Friends Mentoring Program under the Friends Initiative. I have been privileged to assist several other refuge Friends groups to organize and more effectively work with their Refuge staff, and expect to continue that effort this year. Since each group and refuge presents a different set of issues, problems, opportunities and personalities, such visits provide an ever-changing array of challenges to the mentoring teams. It is my firm belief that this program has provided the units of the Fish and Wildlife System with a tool that greatly enhances their ability to interact with the public. Friends groups help to improve the public's understanding of the nature of the system and its role in caring for the natural world that is so important to us all.

Finally, observations over the past five years through our store operations, we have seen a continuing increase in public use of our Refuge. Not only are visitor numbers increasing, now reaching 300,000 a year, but we are also seeing an ethnic diversity that had not been present in the past. For many, the Refuge is a peaceful oasis conducive to quiet reflection. For others, it represents a window into the natural world that is hard to find in the midst of ever encroaching development. For some, it even represents an opportunity to get some exercise as they bicycle around our eight mile Wildlife Drive.

In summary, it is my considered opinion that the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Act has been a major success story since the original Act was passed. Its continuation will provide Refuges with willing, skilled and committed citizens to help the staff fulfil their mandates under the various laws in a more thorough and timely fashion. However, this can never be a substitute for more adequate funding for Operations and Maintenance, filling staff positions already designated and providing full funding for land acquisitions under the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

In regard to H.R. 1204, the Concessions Policy Act, there should be a specific reference under Sec. 5, (b)(2)(B) to retail sales outlets operated under a Cooperative Agreement as well as "volunteers". Many outlets are staffed only by volunteers, including ours. In some cases, regular staff may also assist. I am assuming that the determination of suitability of items offered for sale will be made by the project leader, under the authority granted by the Secretary. Friends groups should have the right of first refusal on any proposed concession. Concession service provided by Friends would be more beneficial to the Refuge, since a larger portion of the proceeds would return to the Refuge through Friends. A commercial operation would have higher operating costs, and would be returning only a percentage of the lower profits. If the Friends do not feel that they can provide such service, there would then be an opportunity for competitive bidding by commercial vendors to provide that service.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.