

# Committee on Resources,

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

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### Witness Statement

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Testimony By  
Curtis (Buff) Bohlen, Chairman  
National Wildlife Refuge Association  
before the Subcommittee on  
Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans  
Committee on Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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Mr. Chairman,

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (Association) is grateful for this opportunity to discuss the financial needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System). We greatly appreciate the leadership shown by you and this Committee in addressing this important issue.

Our Association is the only national membership organization dedicated solely to protecting and perpetuating the National Wildlife Refuge System. Our mission is to preserve and enhance the integrity of that System as the nation's most important network of diverse and strategically located habitats set aside for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and plants. To this end we are constantly seeking ways to strengthen the System, whether it be reviewing and commenting on refuge management policies, facilitating discussion among interested parties or helping to reduce the funding backlog for operations and maintenance. .

Currently, there are 538 national wildlife refuges comprising more than 93 million acres. These lands are the only federal lands dedicated, as their primary purpose, to the conservation of wildlife. They are located in every state of the nation.

Unfortunately, the refuge system was grossly neglected for many years. I hasten to add that the hardworking men and women who dedicate their lives to the management of these lands have not been a cause of this neglect. Rather, it has been a chronic shortage of financial resources that has left us with a system that is unable to achieve its full potential. We hope, through the work of this Committee that this deficiency will be corrected.

The needs of the System are well documented, but, unfortunately, may not be well known. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) was the first agency in the Department of the Interior (DOI) to systematically document and catalog the needs of its lands. They painstakingly developed the Maintenance Management System (MMS) and the Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS). These systems became the model for other DOI agencies to follow. DOI has now improved these systems and the Service is working with other agencies to harmonize definitions and the tracking process used to identify unmet needs.

Since its initial development, the MMS database has identified a backlog of maintenance needs that exceeds a cost of \$830 million. While that is a large number, it is a manageable number. In fact, we are pleased to report that, with the help of Congress, significant inroads have been made in addressing basic maintenance projects within the System. However, while progress is being made, the crisis that the System is facing is far from over. Let us set a goal to eliminate this backlog by the time of the Centennial.

Unfortunately, the picture for the operational needs of the System is not as rosy.

I will discuss these in a moment. Suffice it to say, significant additional resources will be required.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is a member of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE). This group of 19 organizations joined together for the common goal of obtaining additional resources for the Refuge System. CARE spent considerable time and energy examining the MMS and RONS databases and developed a long term plan to address those needs. A copy of this plan, entitled, Restoring America's Wildlife Legacy, is attached. CARE's goal is to have a fully functional refuge system by the 100th Anniversary in 2003. It is important to note that our definition of a fully functional refuge system is modest in light of the documented needs. Even with this modest definition and without the added responsibility given to the System by the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, we believe that the System needs an increase in its appropriation of at least \$200 million annually to meet this goal. CARE is presently updating its plan to include the costs of fully implementing the extensive planning processes prescribed in the Act. The revised figures will be available soon.

As I mentioned earlier, the Service also developed a database of unmet operational needs. Currently, the RONS database has identified needs in excess of \$1.2 billion. This number represents the opportunities that a fully functional System could take advantage of. However, both Congress and CARE have worked with the Service to further screen and prioritize these identified needs into what is now called "Tier 1" of the RONS database. Even with this screening process, Tier 1 has identified high priority projects that require an additional \$355 million annually.

The types of projects contained in the Tier 1 list are those that begin to implement the Refuge Improvement Act. These projects include inventorying and monitoring biological resources, enhancing priority wildlife-dependent public uses, controlling invasive exotic species and preparing Comprehensive Conservation Plans. All of these projects require not only funding, but also an increase of staff to get them done. Unlike maintenance, operational projects are, for the most part, people. Downsizing the federal government and implementing the Refuge Improvement Act are clearly in conflict. At this point, further progress in reducing both the maintenance backlog and operations needs requires more staff. The current staff is spread so thin that adding responsibilities is not a viable option.

At present approximately 280 refuges (53 percent) do not have any full time staff and less than 15 percent of refuge visitors have an opportunity to interact with refuge staff. It is important to note that most of the "staff" that visitors contact are actually volunteers. Without volunteer efforts the refuge system would be in even more dire straits. Most refuges lack maps, signs and simple brochures that would enhance a visitor's experience and increase the public's understanding of the goals of the System. While the System does not want to be a National Park Service, it should strive to provide high-quality, wildlife-dependent, recreational and educational experiences that are supported by basic informational material. Unfortunately, the current budget does not allow such a "luxury."

We are grateful to this Committee for the Refuge Improvement Act, much needed legislation which

clarified the mission of the system, identified six priority wildlife-dependent activities and set forth an aggressive planning process to determine the future management of the various refuge units. Significant new resources are needed to implement this legislation. The Service's planning process is well underway and, I am happy to report, improving steadily. Currently, almost 100 Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) have been initiated, of which twenty-two have been completed. According to reports we are receiving from our members, each successive plan is more complete and involves more public input. The improvements result partly from new policies issued by the Service on how to conduct these planning exercises and partly because refuge staff are learning how best to create these important documents. Unfortunately, over 200 additional plans are required. Given the current availability of resources, I seriously doubt whether the Service will be able to complete so many plans in the time frame called for in the Act.

We also hope that these plans do not become a cruel joke played on the public. The Service is developing these plans in good faith and actively seeking involvement from the neighbors, nearby communities, interested organizations, state wildlife agencies and federal agencies. Essentially, the Service is asking a broad segment of the public to help it determine what role a particular refuge should play in conserving wildlife and providing wildlife-dependent recreation. The collective vision of this process is then synthesized into the CCP. We strongly support this process. However, if the government asks people for their vision, we must be prepared to commit the resources needed to have that vision come to fruition. I hope this will be the case.

Finally, I want to congratulate this Committee on the successful passage of the Refuge Centennial Act at the end of the last session. This act calls for two important items. First, it created a Centennial Commission to help guide the Service in planning the celebration activities for this momentous event. Second, it calls for the Service to develop a "legacy plan" to insure that the Refuge System meets its obligations under the Refuge Improvement Act and other laws. As mentioned earlier, the Improvement Act has the potential to become the blueprint for our collective vision of what the System should be. We urge you to follow the development of both the plan and the activities of the soon-to-be-created Commission to ensure that the will of Congress is followed. We also hope that you will continue to provide the leadership needed to resolve this crisis.

Mr. Chairman, the National Wildlife Refuge Association stands ready to assist you in whatever way we can. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

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