

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

Witness Statement

Daniel P. Beard
Chief Operating Officer
Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
WILDLIFE REFUGES:
The Crisis Facing
The National Wildlife Refuge System
March 29, 2001

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of National Audubon Society's one million members and supporters throughout the Americas, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System. With 530 refuges spanning all 50 states and U.S. territories, and a total acreage comparable to the state of Montana, the Refuge System is the world's largest system of lands dedicated first and foremost to wildlife conservation. The Refuge System has great potential to be the world's model of wildlife conservation while providing a host of world-class opportunities for compatible wildlife-related recreation such as bird watching, hunting and fishing. As one of the founding members of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), Audubon has worked to ensure this potential is fulfilled through increased appropriations for refuge operations and maintenance needs. Working with members of this subcommittee and others, these efforts have met with success. We are pleased that the Congress has approved increases averaging \$30 million per year over the past four years.

Unfortunately, the increases in funding have not been fast enough to prevent serious problems from arising. As we indicated in our recent report, the National Wildlife Refuge System is a system in crisis.

Numerous threats, such as incompatible uses, the spread of invasive species, declining water quality, and increasing rates of habitat loss, are harming birds and wildlife on refuges across the country.

There are two reasons for this state of affairs. First, the long-standing backlog of critical operations and maintenance needs is an underlying cause of the crisis. Second, there is a serious problem of institutional neglect within the Interior Department toward the Refuge System. I'd like to discuss each of these issues.

The Longstanding Backlog of Critical Operations and Maintenance Needs

First, despite some successes, the Fish and Wildlife Service generally lacks the fundamental capacity with which to adequately address these serious threats to our nation's resources. With its 94 million acres, 5,000 buildings, 6,500 miles of roads, 2,700 miles of dikes, thousands of water control structures, 34 million

visitors and 2,000 species of birds and wildlife, the Refuge System has a massive set of needs that expands each year. These needs include both 1) a maintenance component, which addresses the System's deteriorating infrastructure and provides basic visitor services such as signs and trails; and 2) an operations component, which provides refuges with the tools they need to provide adequate services to the public and conserve wildlife. The operations component includes staffing for scientific studies and comprehensive plans, projects for recovering endangered species and controlling invasive species, and efforts to monitor wildlife and restore habitat.

The operations and maintenance backlog facing the Refuge System is nearly \$2 billion and growing, though recent congressional attention has caused the rate of growth to slow considerably. Currently, maintenance needs exceed \$830 million and operational needs total \$1.13 billion. As a result of recent congressional oversight, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has made an effort to prioritize these needs. In the highest priority tier of their two-tiered system, FWS has identified \$344 million in operational needs. These needs are categorized as: 1) essential staffing, 2) mission-critical projects, and 3) new and significantly-expanded refuges.

Critical Operational Needs

To illustrate these high-priority needs, let us turn to the Fish and Wildlife Service's mission-critical projects to control invasive species – harmful nonnative plants, animals and microorganisms. The Fish and Wildlife Service has identified \$30 million in Tier 1 operational needs to address invasive species threats to wildlife habitat on refuges. These needs are increasing rapidly as the problem, and awareness of the problem, grows. In 1999, the Refuge Operating Needs System database included funding needs of \$44 million for invasive species management. By July of 2000, that number had increased by nearly 300 percent to \$120 million.

Invasive species are like a wildfire out of control. Each year in America, invasive species damage and destroy more than 3 million acres of natural habitat. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that 6 million acres of refuge land are damaged and destroyed just by invasive plant species alone. As you know, Mr. Chairman, invasive animal species are just as destructive. On Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Maryland, invasive nutria have destroyed 7,000 of the 17,000 acres of marsh, and the refuge continues to lose between 500 and 1,000 acres per year. On Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, invasive zebra mussels are killing native mollusks while invasive plants are wiping out wetlands needed by the refuge's waterfowl population.

Invasive species affect hundreds of refuges across the country. This is a crisis of epidemic proportions, and we hope the subcommittee will turn its full attention to addressing it.

A quick glance at the operational and maintenance needs of Blackwater Refuge illustrates the need to address the crisis and the backlog. Since 1989, Blackwater NWR has increased in acreage by more than 80 percent. Exotic and invasive species, human population growth, and other factors threaten the very existence of the refuge's wetlands and wildlands. Mandated to protect, conserve, and manage endangered species and migratory birds, Blackwater's intricate and intensive management and monitoring programs require a strong biological program. Biologists are needed to help develop a control strategy for the invasive nutria. Funding is needed for marsh restoration. Opportunities exist to improve wildlife observation and environmental education, implement MoistSoil management for shorebirds, and provide more food for migratory birds by improving water management capabilities. None of these improvements can occur if the operations and maintenance backlog is not addressed.

Need for Improved Science

The impact of the operations and maintenance backlog is also seen in the Fish and Wildlife Service's need for improved science to support management decisions and comprehensive conservation planning. The Fish and Wildlife Service has been working to move toward an ecosystem approach, yet the Service lacks basic staffing and other resources to support efforts to implement ecosystem management.

In order to properly manage refuges, refuge managers must first understand the ecosystems within which their refuges are situated. To understand these systems, managers must identify the structures, components, processes, and linkages among ecosystems; identify current ecological trends and conditions; identify minimum ecological conditions necessary to maintain or restore ecosystems; and identify effects of human activities on ecological conditions.

Little of this information is available to most refuge managers. A survey of refuge managers in the early 1990s found that only 60 percent of refuges have inventories of bird populations, and for other groups of species the numbers are less than 30 percent. Without knowledge of the condition, trends, and responses to management of biological systems, refuge managers will struggle to develop and implement management plans in a proper manner.

By extension, without this baseline scientific information, the Fish and Wildlife Service will not be able to complete plans that meet the data needs outlined in their planning policy issued May 25, 2000 pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. In this policy, managers are directed to identify and describe the structures, components, and functions of the ecosystem(s) of which the planning unit is a part. Although the policy allows that "a lack of data should not delay the completion of the plan," a lack of data will compromise the quality of the plan and its likelihood that it will effectively serve its primary purpose of conserving refuge resources.

Need for Better Planning

Since the passage of the Refuge Improvement Act in 1997, the Fish and Wildlife Service has completed 22 Comprehensive Conservation Plans. At current funding levels, the Service will not complete a plan for each refuge in time to meet its statutory deadline of 2012. The process is demanding of limited refuge staff. They must compile and analyze background information, plan and conduct public meetings, synthesize input from various government agencies and the public, and develop and analyze alternatives and draft plans. Lacking adequate funding and staff, refuges often do not have the resources to develop quality plans within acceptable timeframes. Further, they are often diverted from other critical duties.

The Tier 1 operational priorities prepared by the Fish and Wildlife Service include mission-critical projects to improve science and develop comprehensive plans. Improved science would not only improve the quality of the plans but would improve nearly all conservation-related aspects of refuge operations, from endangered species recovery to restoration of habitat.

Need for Essential Staffing

To improve science and planning, the Refuge System will need the essential staffing necessary to manage its lands effectively. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that 1350 Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) are needed immediately if the Refuge System can meet its basic responsibilities and its core mission. This includes 388 biologists, 163 managers, and 114 resource specialists who will vastly improve the capacity of

the Fish and Wildlife Service to produce high-quality conservation plans and otherwise conserve and protect refuges across the country.

At Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge in Massachusetts, for example, minimal staff and resources have been assigned to manage a significant biological resource. Two staff members, a manager and a biologist, are responsible for the refuge's maintenance, law enforcement, research, monitoring, public outreach and educational programs. This refuge contains 2,750 acres of sand dunes, freshwater ponds, and marshes that provide one of the few secure nesting and staging areas for migratory shorebirds in the state. To adequately protect the resource, the Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded the refuge needs a core staff of six FTEs, including biologists, public outreach specialists, and law enforcement personnel. At current staff and funding levels, the refuge is forced to operate hand-to-mouth, buildings are dilapidated, and the resource is left at risk.

For Monomoy NWR, Blackwater NWR, and hundreds of other refuges that face imminent threats and struggle every day to accomplish their basic mission, increased funding will help to address the problems these areas face. Funding can put more and better scientists doing more and better science out on refuges, it can improve the system's dilapidated infrastructure, and it can provide basic services to refuge visitors like maps, brochures and trails. It can improve every facet of refuge operations and significantly improve our nation's efforts to conserve birds and wildlife.

Money is not the only problem

The second major problem facing the Refuge System is equally challenging. If money were the only problem facing the system, it would be a simple matter to work with the appropriations committee to secure the funds. But money is not the only problem.

The Refuge System is still largely invisible to the average American and lacks consistent and focused attention from its leadership. The Fish and Wildlife Service faces difficult organizational challenges, including both the need to move toward an ecosystem approach and the need to reconcile many disparate and competing priorities. As you know, Mr. Chairman, Audubon supports elevating the Refuge System to coequal status with its sister land systems such as the National Park System.

The Department of the Interior, and especially the Secretary, needs to be an advocate for our Refuge System. The Department needs to resolve jurisdictional disputes over harmful public uses and to better manage ecological areas that transcend jurisdictional boundaries. The Army Corps of Engineers must also be investigated, to ensure that its processes do not lead to the destruction of valuable national assets in the Refuge System.

* * * * *

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the operations and maintenance backlog facing the Refuge System presents a profound challenge to the Fish and Wildlife Service as they attempt to manage the Refuge System under the Improvement Act of 1997. Efforts to improve science, complete adequate plans, provide basic services to the public, and protect birds and wildlife and their habitat are jeopardized by a lack of essential staffing and funding for mission-critical projects. We hope you and the members of this subcommittee will work to ensure that these critical needs are addressed.

But money is not the only problem. We hope this subcommittee will continue to attack the crisis in the

Refuge System by investigating the issues of institutional neglect, jurisdictional conflicts with other government agencies, and the impacts of the Army Corps of Engineers on refuge resources.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be pleased to answer any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

#