

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

---

### Statement

---

**TESTIMONY OF  
DOUGLAS B. INKLEY, Ph.D.  
SENIOR SCIENCE ADVISOR  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS  
RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ON  
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CENTENNIAL ACT  
H.R.4442  
June 15, 2000**

On behalf of the millions of members and supporters of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chairman and Subcommittee members for the opportunity to testify on the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act (H.R.4442). I would also like to express our thanks to the sponsors of H.R.4442 - Rep. Saxton, Rep. Young, Rep. Miller (CA), Rep. Faleomavaega, Rep. Dingell and Rep. Cunningham - for introducing this legislation.

I am Doug Inkley, Senior Science Advisor for the Office of the President at the National Wildlife Federation. We are the nation's largest not-for-profit conservation education and advocacy organization with more than four million members and supporters, eleven field offices and forty-six state and territorial affiliates. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) was founded in 1936 at a meeting called by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to discuss the deterioration of America's natural resources. A well-known political cartoonist of the era, Jay "Ding" Darling, advanced the idea of a federation to provide a united voice for the wide array of people and groups nationwide that shared a concern for wildlife and natural resources. Ding Darling is also known for his contributions to the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), as he founded the Federal "Duck Stamp" Program, which provides funding to purchase refuge lands, and drew the first Duck Stamp ever issued. Today, he is honored by the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a 12-mile long, five thousand acre, subtropical barrier island along the Gulf Coast of Florida, near Fort Myers. Its shallow bays bordered by mangrove trees and magnificent white sandy beaches are home to, among many other wildlife species, ospreys, raccoons, brown pelicans, and alligators.

This hearing sets the stage for what will be an important event for America in 2003 - the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of our nation's first National Wildlife Refuge, Florida's Pelican Island, by President Theodore Roosevelt. This action was critically important, as it expressed the sentiments of the public that the nation's fish and wildlife resources would be conserved for future generations, rather than exploited into

extinction. Today, the 93 million acre National Wildlife Refuge System is recognized worldwide as an outstanding conservation achievement. It is an achievement of which we should all be proud.

## **FISH AND WILDLIFE**

To put our remarks on H.R.4442 into proper context, please allow me to first review the importance of the more than 500 National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) within the Refuge System, for fish and wildlife conservation. The Refuge System provides requisite habitats for a diverse array of fish and wildlife, including more than 700 bird species, 200 mammal species, 250 reptilian and amphibian species and more than 200 species of fish. In fact, it harbors 180 federally threatened or endangered animal species and 78 federally threatened or endangered plant species, including manatees, whooping cranes, and loggerhead turtles to name just a few. Fully 10% (56 refuges) have been established under the authority of the Endangered Species Act to conserve threatened and endangered fish and wildlife.

The Refuge System harbors numerous wildlife spectacles. The 3,500 pound manatees ('sea cows') congregate at the Crystal River NWR in Florida. Up to 35 species of migrating shorebirds gather at the Grays Harbor NWR in Washington every spring, including hundreds of thousands of dunlin and western sandpipers which build up fat reserves for their nonstop flight to the Arctic where they will breed. In Utah, hundreds of thousands of white-faced ibis and white pelicans nest at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. More than 7,500 elk make their way to the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming every winter, providing magnificent viewing opportunities.

## **VISITOR USE**

The National Wildlife Refuge System is also a vital resource for people. Of the 93 million acres of land and water, fully 98 percent is open to the public. Visitors engage in wildlife-dependent recreation including birdwatching, photography, hunting, environmental education and fishing. Of the more than 34 million annual visits, 16 million visits are for observing and photographing wildlife. Another 11 million visits are for the purpose environmental education and interpretation programs. Without refuges, these opportunities for wildlife watching/photography and environmental education would be either scarce or otherwise unavailable. For example, the Bayou Sauvage, Minnesota Valley, and Don Edwards San Francisco Bay NWRs are virtually within the city limits of New Orleans, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, respectively. Environmental education programs are in place on 230 refuges.

## **H.R.4442 - THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CENTENNIAL ACT**

Based on the importance of the National Wildlife Refuge System for fish and wildlife conservation and the enjoyment of our nation's citizens, NWF supports the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act.

H.R.4442 will increase public awareness and use of refuges by promoting the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Refuge System. This celebration will be facilitated through the appointment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Commission (Commission). So that the Commission has sufficient time to carry out its functions of planning for the Refuge Centennial Celebration, we recommend the addition of the following language at the end of Section 3(b)(2):

"The President shall make appointments to the Commission within 90 days of the passage of this Act."

H.R.4442 also directs the Secretary of the Interior to develop a long-term plan for meeting the staffing, operation, maintenance and construction needs of the Refuge System. Under the leadership of the Wildlife

Management Institute, NWF has been pleased to work with the Cooperative Alliance on Refuge Enhancement (CARE) in recent years to advocate for Congressional appropriations for Refuge System operations and maintenance. H.R.4442 will help specify the needs we have been working to address. Once these needs have been identified, they will provide the requisite information to manage and operate the refuge system with greater efficiency and effectiveness for wildlife conservation and refuge visitors.

## CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

While the Refuge System is magnificent, significant challenges now and in the future will both increase its importance and place it at greater risk. The nation's precious fish and wildlife resources continue to be assaulted by the growing pressures of urban development and agriculture. Refuges will become increasingly important, and in many cases the last stronghold, for many species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must be prepared to meet these new conservation needs while balancing the demand of a growing human population looking for increased wildlife-associated recreational opportunities on refuges.

Refuges will also be increasingly challenged by off site activities which affect the air, water quality, and water quantity within refuges. For these refuge 'islands' to thrive we need to ensure that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works cooperatively with neighboring land owners to develop mutually beneficial plans to ensure the lands around them are managed in concert with refuge objectives.

Refuges are already being challenged. Just one example is the White River NWR in Arkansas which harbors the nation's single largest population of wintering mallards. It has been designated as a "Wetlands of International Importance" and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt has compared it in ecological value to the Everglades. Featuring some of the most important and extensive bottomland hardwood swamps of cypress and oak trees remaining in the lower Mississippi River basin, it is also home to black bears and songbirds. Yet, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers currently is proposing two massive projects on the White River. One is a \$40 million navigation project which would dredge and dike 250 river miles, including more than 100 miles through the White River NWR and nearby Cache River NWR. The second is a \$300 million irrigation project to divert water from the river for agriculture. These controversial projects are opposed by many farmers and local leaders as well as conservationists and resource agencies because they would dramatically reduce river flow, lead to major wetlands loss, and increase pollutant loads through the refuges. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to be commended for its efforts to save these refuges. In the *Troubled Waters* report released in March 2000, Taxpayers for Common Sense and the National Wildlife Federation identified the irrigation project as the first of the 25 most wasteful and environmentally damaging Corps projects nationwide. NWF is working hard to stop this waste of taxpayer dollars and save the White River and Cache River NWRs.

Another example of ongoing threats to a refuge is the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, in which NWF has taken a special interest. The 400,000 acre refuge is the largest east of the Mississippi River and protects one of the nation's largest intact swamps. It boasts a vast array of plant species including carnivorous plants such as the hooded pitcher plant. Animal species include the endangered woodstork, sandhill cranes, gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, black bear, the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker and more than 15,000 alligators. NWF is deeply involved with retiring the titanium mining rights that threatened the very existence of this national treasure. In addition, NWF is working to protect the natural resources surrounding the Okefenokee swamp in an effort to keep it a fully functioning ecosystem. Our multifaceted approach includes working with local landowners, providing technical support, and facilitating the development of an education and research center located at Folkston, Georgia, the gateway to the Okefenokee.

## REFUGE ADMINISTRATION

You also asked NWF to comment on the recent proposal to establish a separate national Wildlife Refuge Service. While we understand and appreciate the reasons that such a proposal has been made, we believe that Congress has already taken the requisite steps to ensure a better future for the National Wildlife Refuge System as operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. First, following the leadership of this subcommittee and with the endorsement of the National Wildlife Federation, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. This Act, for which the Refuge Planning Policy regulations were finalized on May 25, 2000, will guide the National Wildlife Refuge System well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Second, and again following the leadership of this subcommittee, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act, which encourages volunteer activities on refuges. It is our belief that H.R.4442 will further augment these two important pieces of legislation, by raising public awareness of the National Wildlife Refuge System in its 2003 centennial celebration.

## CONCLUSION

As our continent becomes increasingly urbanized, the challenges facing fish, wildlife and refuges will grow. But, for a moment, the National Wildlife Refuge System deserves to be celebrated. From the massive caribou migration on the north coast of Alaska in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the home of the manatee in southern Florida on the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, the Refuge System is essential to conservation of wildlife across the continent. H.R.4442 will help celebrate this world-class conservation network and ensure its well-being as we work to meet the challenges of the future.

In closing, we wish to thank this committee for its support of the National Wildlife Refuge System. We look forward to an expedient markup and final passage of H.R.4442.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions that Members may have.

# # # # #