

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE, AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE ON HR4442

THE "NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CENTENNIAL ACT"

By: Gary J. Taylor, Legislative Director

International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I am Gary Taylor, Legislative Director of IAFWA, and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee today in support of HR4442. All 50 State fish and wildlife agencies are members of the Association. As you are well aware, Mr. Chairman, the Association has a long standing interest and involvement in the National Wildlife Refuge System, which, to paraphrase the 1968 Leopold report, stands as testimony to the science and practice of wildlife management. The Association was instrumental in the deliberations leading to the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997; the Association has been a member of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) coalition since its inception; and the Association and our member State Fish and Wildlife agencies continue to work closely with the USFWS in implementing through regulation, the provisions of the 1997 Organic Act. We look to HR4442 to facilitate public support for the NWR System and its role in conservation of our Nation's fish and wildlife and the habitats on which they depend.

The Association, founded in 1902, is a quasi-governmental organization of public agencies charged with the protection and management of North America's fish and wildlife resources. The Association's governmental members include the fish and wildlife agencies of the states, provinces, and federal governments of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. All 50 states are members. The Association has been a key organization in promoting sound resource management and strengthening federal, state, and private cooperation in protecting and managing fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public interest.

Let me start, Mr. Chairman, by again thanking you, the full committee Chairman Cong. Young, Cong. Dingell, and Cong. Miller for your continued vision and leadership in providing the appropriate legislative direction for management of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The 1997 Act, completed after years of bi-partisan discussion and deliberation, truly represents a benchmark in the history of the System that will stand with President Roosevelt's establishment of the first NWR in 1903. In establishing a statutory mission of the System "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats...for the benefit of present and future generations...", Congress has affirmed that NWRs are for fish and wildlife conservation first, setting them apart in this perspective from our other federal public lands. No less important is Congress' direction to the FWS in the 1997 Act that "compatible wildlife dependent recreational uses are the

priority general public uses of the System and shall receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management." Both of these tenets of the Act will long serve the public in providing direction to FWS in management of the System. We also appreciate, Mr. Chairman, the direction in the 1997 Act to the FWS to effectively coordinate management of fish and wildlife within the System with the State fish and wildlife agency of the State in which the Refuge is located, since states have primary and broad authority for fish and wildlife conservation within their borders, even on most public lands. This legislated coordination is good for fish and wildlife resources, good for our citizens, and just makes good common and economic sense.

The purposes of HR4442 appropriately derive from Congressional direction in the 1997 Organic Act. It seems pretty fundamental to good business that raising awareness of the need for and role of the System, and the public's opportunity to appropriately use and enjoy our Refuges, is essential to their continued support. Time and again, Mr. Chairman, the hunters and anglers of this Nation have demonstrated their willingness to support and pay for fish and wildlife conservation. As manifested by the tremendous grassroots national support for the Conservation and Reinvestment Act, we are seeing the same level of enthusiasm and support for dedicated funding for conservation now, once the public is made aware of the needs. We would urge the Commission to be created by HR4442 to always be mindful that appropriate use and enjoyment of Refuges and their fish and wildlife resources under the direction of the 1997 Act will be absolutely essential to engender continued support of the System.

You asked for our observations on a few additional issues with respect to the System in general. Let me briefly share a few thoughts with you.

I think the biggest challenge facing the NWR system is the same that all natural resource conservation in this country is confronted with, and that is a lack of adequate funds. As you know, Mr. Chairman, during the last 25 years, conservation as a percent of the federal budget has been cut in half. The consequence of this is that management of our public lands such as the Refuge System fall further behind, and, in general, we continue to add more fish and wildlife species to the threatened and endangered species list since our resource agencies simply don't have the fiscal capability to respond to early warning signs of decline. As you know, it is easier and less expensive to conserve species than it is to recover species. The CARE coalition has shown significant success in securing needed appropriations for the System and we would hope the Commission closely coordinates its efforts with that coalition. Also, we are hopeful that the Conservation and Reinvestment Act will be enacted into law this year, with the potential to make available over the proposed 15 year life of the bill almost \$3 billion for rehabilitation of federal and Indian lands, including Refuge lands.

On the issue of the proposal to establish a separate National Wildlife Refuge Service, Mr. Chairman, the Association believes that this is NOT a well-advised idea and would oppose any such effort to do that for many reasons. As a parallel to learn from, one simply has to look at the recent fate of the effort by this Administration to set up a separate agency for biological surveys and research in the Dept. of the Interior. However well-intentioned, this proposal, which the Association did not support, lifted funding and staff from all Interior bureaus (85% from FWS), and, in short, through a torturous process, this "agency" has ended up as a division under the US Geological Survey. In our assessment, fish and wildlife research needs to satisfy on the ground problem solving for our federal and state agency biologists continues to be inadequately and poorly served by this organizational structure. Simply put, the Association sees no credible substantiation that would support removing the NWR System from the USFWS.

Finally, on the need to prepare a long-term plan to address priority operations, maintenance, and

construction needs of the System, we would again encourage continued close coordination by the Commission and the USFWS with the CARE coalition. This effort, which Dr. Sparrowe will amplify on, has, in working closely with the Refuge Division of the USFWS, made significant progress in identifying needs and securing appropriations to address the backlog of operations and maintenance projects within the System. I believe it is fair to say that the needs tracking system developed by the FWS is looked to as a model by other Interior agencies.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the Association appreciates your support of the NWR System and the role that HR4442 can play in building public awareness and support for this System. The Association encourages the FWS to redouble their efforts to closely coordinate management of individual Refuges with the State fish and wildlife agency in the State in which the unit is located. The USFWS has made a good start, but as with any bureaucracy, there is institutional inertia to be overcome in the field in moving from point A to point B in the way they do business. For all the reasons articulated in the legislative history of the 1997 Organic Act, close coordination with the State fish and wildlife agency benefits not just our fish and wildlife resources, but our citizens as well. It is simply the exercise of good government to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives with the subcommittee and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

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