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REGARDING PUBLIC ACCESS TO UNITS OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

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Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am William Hartwig, Assistant Director for the National Wildlife Refuge System for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee and discuss the many opportunities for public use on National Wildlife Refuges throughout the country.

The National Wildlife Refuge System has a long history of significant contributions to the conservation of our nation's wildlife. The Refuge System had humble beginnings. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt set aside 5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as a breeding ground for birds. The Refuge System has grown tremendously over the past century. Today there are 545 national wildlife refuges and 37 wetland management districts that protect more than 96 million acres of the best fish and wildlife habitat in America. These lands are home to a spectacular collection of wildlife, from the giant moose of Kenai Refuge in Alaska to the ancient alligators of Okefenokee Refuge in Georgia. Millions upon millions of birds, more than 700 different species, use refuges as breeding grounds, as stepping stones to rest on their annual migrations, and as winter homes.

America loves the National Wildlife Refuge System. Last year nearly 40 million people visited refuges. These visitors have found great hunting and angling opportunities, intriguing interpretive and educational programs, and numerous wildlife to photograph and enjoy. Some 33,000 citizens volunteered their time to help care for these lands and provide recreational opportunities for visitors. There are 245 Friends organizations that have incorporated to help support their local refuge. Visitation, volunteerism, and community support all continue to grow.

The Refuge System has struggled at times in the past. There were conflicting views about how the Refuge System should be managed. In 1989, the General Accounting Office issued a report on the Refuge System entitled, Continuing Problems with Incompatible Uses Calls for Bold Action. Congress took that bold action in 1997 when it enacted the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act).

This new law gave the Refuge System a clear mission:

. . . 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 within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Through the Improvement Act, Congress recognized that people were essential to wildlife conservation and that citizens who were involved in using and enjoying refuges were more likely to become involved in their stewardship. The Improvement Act also recognized that deeply-rooted American traditions of hunting and fishing, and other forms of wildlife-dependent recreation, were often compatible with wildlife refuge purposes. Congress declared that with respect to the Refuge System, it is the policy of the United States that compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the System, directly related to the mission of the System and the purposes of many refuges. Congress recognized that these recreational activities generally foster refuge management and help the American public develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.

The Improvement Act made compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses the priority public uses of the System and directed that they receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management. It directed the Service to provide increased opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for hunting, fishing, interpretation, environmental education, wildlife observation, and photography.

In 2004, the Service selected the Refuge System to go through a Program Assessment and Rating Tool, or PART, evaluation. As a result of that evaluation, the Refuge System is developing a five year strategic plan to be released later this year that will serve as the basis for any future PART analysis. A primary component of the strategic plan will examine and outline how to better measure quality opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation. This examination will determine how many such opportunities currently exist, and establish goals for increasing priority public uses throughout the System.

As stated earlier, in 2004 the Refuge System welcomed nearly 40 million visitors, a 6 percent increase from 2001. Within the 40 million visits to refuges, this included approximately 2.3 million hunting visits, 7 million fishing visits, nearly 34 million wildlife observation and photography visits, and about 29 million visits involving interpretive and environmental education programs. As you can see, most visitors to refuges participate in more than one type of wildlife dependent recreational activity. Over 495 national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts are open to at least one of the six priority public uses.

The 2004 national visitor satisfaction survey, covering 47 refuges, demonstrated that 95 percent of visitors were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of their experiences while visiting refuges.

Wherever it is compatible, refuges are working to increase opportunities for quality wildlife-dependent recreational activities for the public to enjoy and appreciate their outdoor heritage. One way we have done this is through the construction of boardwalks, boat ramps, interpretive kiosks, and observation blinds. Simple projects such as these have proven to be a low cost, low maintenance, and highly effective approach for providing visitors with greater access to refuges.

The Refuge System also manages and maintains more than 2,500 miles of foot and water trails and is aggressively pursuing partnerships at the national and local levels to expand and improve our trails system.

Our volunteer workforce and Friends organizations are an integral component of providing recreational opportunities. Many visitor centers would close and interpretive programs halt without the efforts of the citizen-stewards who volunteer their time at refuges.

We have made great progress in providing increased recreational opportunities on refuges. Yet refuges cannot be all things to all people.

The Improvement Act makes clear that the mission of the Refuge System is wildlife conservation for the benefit of present and future generations. It clearly states that all uses of refuges must be compatible with the primary purposes of individual refuges and the mission of the Refuge System. The Service has published policy and regulations on how we make compatibility determinations and we ensure the public is involved in those decisions.

In view of the fact that Congress determined that compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is an appropriate use of the Refuge System and should receive priority in our management, it follows that other uses appropriate elsewhere may not be appropriate on refuges. Refuge Managers are frequently asked to permit a wide variety of such uses. Auto shows, concerts, flea markets, and road races all have their place, but wildlife refuges may not be the appropriate place for these types of activities.

The Service has drafted policy on how managers are to determine when non-wildlife dependent recreational uses are appropriate. We have involved the public and worked closely with our State fish and wildlife agency partners to craft this policy. We look forward to issuing a final policy to assure that managers are consistent in how they make these decisions.

In addition, even appropriate uses such as wildlife dependent recreation, are further reviewed to ensure they are compatible with our wildlife conservation mission. Generally, priority uses such as hunting or wildlife observation do not present any issues. In some cases however, even priority uses are not found compatible. In those instances, the Refuge Manager may need to balance between or among competing uses or, if absolutely necessary, disallow one or more uses. Compatibility determinations are made in writing, and identify the anticipated effects of the proposed use on refuge resources.

This compatibility determination process also applies to non-wildlife-dependent recreation activities. Through this rigorous examination, in some cases compatible non-wildlife-dependent uses are allowed on refuges, such as swimming and beach activities. In these instances, the use has been found both compatible and appropriate, since such use would not materially interfere with or detract from fulfillment of the Refuge System Mission or refuge purposes.

In contrast, at Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge, the Service determined that continued use of the refuge for flying model airplanes was not compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, managing migratory birds. The model airplanes would have not only affected the wildlife for which the refuge was established, but also the visiting public seeking a wildlife-dependent experience. The refuge is simply too small to accommodate the requested activity, and refuge staff and resources are designed to monitor and maintain the facility for low impact, wildlife-dependent public uses only.

There are 27 refuges that are closed to all public entry and use. They total 16,000 acres, less than 0.1 percent of refuge lands. Most of these refuges are remote and isolated. In some cases, refuges are closed to protect the public from danger,

such as unexploded ordinance left over from past military exercises. Nomans Land Island NWR in Dukes County, Massachusetts, is one example. In other cases, refuges are closed to protect critical wildlife populations. Such is the case for the 798-acre Karl E. Mundt NWR in South Dakota which is closed to protect nesting bald eagles. Even though this refuge is closed to public access, the Service, in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, has developed a nearby observation platform and interpretive kiosk to facilitate the public enjoyment of eagles in the area. Similarly, several closed refuges also have wildlife observation and interpretive opportunities.

On other refuges which are considered open to public use, some portions of the land may be closed to certain activities. Seasonal closures and sanctuary areas are tools used to provide for public use, not curtail it. These management techniques allow us to enjoy hunting and fishing and other wildlife dependent recreation in ways that are compatible with conservation, not in conflict with it. A great example is at Pelican Island, where the original 5-acre island remains to this day an inviolate sanctuary for breeding birds. But the Centennial Trail, dedicated on the Refuge System's 100th birthday in 2003, leads visitors by restored wetlands and native vegetation to an observation tower that allows visitors to view the nesting pelicans, wood storks, ibis, and egrets from a distance that protects the birds from disturbance.

The conservation work of the Service depends on the support of citizens. Refuges are important to local communities for recreation and as part of their natural heritage. We have learned that people who use and enjoy refuges are often the best advocates for cooperative conservation efforts. We will continue to look for additional opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation while staying true to our wildlife conservation mission.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.