

EVAN HIRSCH
PRESIDENT
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION

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

HEARING ON THE IMPACT OF HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA ON THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Evan Hirsche, and I am the president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). On behalf of the NWRA and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals, nearly 110 refuge Friends organization affiliates and thousands of concerned citizens throughout the United States, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the issue of damage to America's national wildlife refuges caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only network of Federal lands managed for the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitat. President Theodore Roosevelt created the first national wildlife refuge (NWR) in 1903 on Florida's Pelican Island to protect brown pelicans as well as egrets and herons from commercial hunting. Today, the Refuge System, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), consists of 545 refuges in all 50 states and most U. S. territories.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster in U.S. history, struck the Gulf Coast, causing unprecedented damage to national wildlife refuges in the region. In the wake of Katrina, 16 national wildlife refuges were closed. Only a few weeks later, Hurricane Rita slammed into Louisiana near the Texas border, causing further damage to refuges in the Gulf. Hurricanes Rita and Katrina caused extreme devastation along the coast; however, the effects were also felt as far inland as Arkansas, where refuges experienced storm-related impacts such as damaged roads from flooding, downed trees and debris build up.

Mr. Chairman, before I discuss the damages to refuges by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, I believe it is important to recognize that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was out in front on conducting humanitarian efforts and helping local communities immediately following these terrible storms. The Service brought its equipment and expertise to aid those devastated by Katrina and Rita, including providing 20,400 meals, disposing of more than 100 truckloads of debris, and housing Red Cross and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) workers, among other things. While FEMA provided reimbursement for certain activities, the total non-reimbursed costs to FWS for incident operations was approximately \$6.6 million.

Hurricanes in 2005 (Dennis, Katrina, Rita, and Wilma) affected 66 national wildlife refuges, located in eight states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas), with damages to facilities and infrastructure totaling approximately \$170 million. In addition, damages to habitat and natural resources on refuges are estimated by FWS to be approximately \$88 million. Costs related to hazardous materials (HAZMAT) and debris on refuges remains mostly unknown. However, cost estimates for surface clean up and removing subsurface tanks range from \$10 million to \$50 million at Sabine National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana alone.

Total facility and natural resource damages from the 2005 storms exceed \$270 million. This represents approximately 70% of the Refuge System's total FY2006 Operations and Maintenance funding (\$382 million). If the Refuge System does not receive sufficient emergency funding to recover from the damages caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we fear that refuges throughout the country—already stretched to the breaking point—will not recover from the extensive burden the storms add to an already crippling funding situation.

The National Wildlife Refuge System as a whole continues to be crippled by a lack of sufficient funding and resources, with the top-tier operations and maintenance backlog alone registering at \$2.7 billion. Funding shortfalls limit the ability of refuges to successfully conduct important biological programs and hire critical staff, while also hindering opportunities for the public to engage in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

While significant strides were made to reduce the budgetary shortfall in connection with the 100 th anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System in 2003—and we extend our appreciation to Congress and members of this Committee for those increases—funding since that time has been stagnant. Recently, the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse group of national conservation and sporting organizations that I chair, sent a letter to Capitol Hill recommending that Congress approve hurricane supplemental funding for the Refuge System of at least \$132.4 million, as requested by President Bush. While this amount does not cover all hurricane damage costs, when combined with the \$30 million already approved by Congress, it should provide for the fundamental facility needs of hurricane-affected refuges. Nevertheless, the NWRA and CARE urge the Congress to appropriate an additional \$88 million to address habitat and natural resource damage on hurricane-affected refuges in a third supplemental funding bill this year.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita resulted in tremendous destruction of national wildlife refuge facilities and natural resources. At Sabine NWR, where the eye of Hurricane Rita passed directly over the refuge, five of eight buildings were immediately condemned, while the remaining 3 need extensive repairs before they can be occupied again. In fact, NWRA staff and other CARE representatives visited Sabine after the storm and witnessed the extensive damage to boardwalks, bathroom facilities and the headquarters buildings firsthand. With the damage to public-use facilities and extensive distribution of HAZMAT, it is clear the refuge poses a public health risk and must remain closed until these issues are resolved. At Delta NWR in Louisiana, where Hurricane Katrina made its landfall, the headquarters building, along with all refuge facilities, was almost completely destroyed. FWS staff returning after the storm were greeted by a refuge boathouse crushed beneath a 900-ton barge. Big Branch Marsh NWR in Louisiana also suffered extensive damages. The refuge needs funding to replace a number of vehicles, and repairs are necessary for the visitor center, administrative building and roads, among other things.

Habitat and natural resource damage from hurricanes Katrina and Rita was equally devastating and widespread. Vast areas of coastal wetlands in the Gulf Coast region have been converted to open water by the two storms. According to the FWS, satellite imagery of Southeast Louisiana shows that more than 100 square miles of coastal wetlands have been transformed from marsh to open water. In addition, approximately 150,000 acres of coastal wetlands and bottomland forests on national wildlife refuges were damaged. Aquatic habitats are choked by debris, silt, oil, chemicals, and other hazardous wastes. Wintering waterfowl numbers are down 75% at Bayou Sauvage NWR in Louisiana and 70% at Delta NWR, while 70% of endangered red-cockaded woodpecker nesting trees were lost at Big Branch Marsh NWR.

At Breton NWR in Louisiana, which includes all of the federally owned Chandeleur islands, an estimated 50-70% of habitat has been completely washed away, with nothing but open water in its place. Breton is the second-oldest refuge in the System, established by decree by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, and hosts up to 15% of the world's nesting brown pelicans and up to 30% of the world's nesting sandwich terns. The refuge at one time had the largest tern colony in the U.S., and more than 10,000 brown pelicans have recently been found in the island chain, along with reddish egret, American oystercatcher, and snowy plover. The islands are also an important location for wintering piping plovers and serve as a stopover site for songbirds in spring.

Sadly, the acceleration of habitat loss has been dramatic over the past few decades, with Katrina dealing a near fatal blow. We must act quickly if we are to salvage this critical bird refuge.

Levees and dikes on national wildlife refuges are important resource management tools, preventing saltwater intrusion and controlling water levels for wildlife and plants. They also support habitat for millions of migratory waterfowl. Hurricanes caused extensive damage to these water control structures, and, if left unrepaired, the impacts to habitat and migratory bird populations will be felt nationwide. Refuge levees and marshes absorb the brunt of storm surges before they reach communities. For example, at Bayou Sauvage NWR in Louisiana, levees on the refuge protect New Orleans from flooding. After the refuge levee was breached during Katrina, stabilizing the levee and utilizing the pumps that support it aided in the removal of water from New Orleans and prevented further damage to the city.

Of great concern is that many of the hurricane-damaged refuges are contaminated with HAZMAT, including Bayou Sauvage in Louisiana, Big Branch Marsh, Delta and Sabine. Of these, Sabine NWR has suffered some of the most serious and disturbing consequences. Hurricane Rita passed directly over Sabine NWR, bringing with it tons of debris from the remnants of beach communities as well as oil and gas facilities. Among the debris are thousands of refrigerators and appliances, lumber, and at least two complete tractor-trailer trucks. As we sit here today, more than 1,400 barrels of toxic liquids and gases are sinking further into the low-lying marsh right in the heart of the refuge. A report prepared for the FWS found that 115,000-350,000 gallons of hazardous liquids and gases—full of everything from oil and bleach to propane and four missing containers of chlorine gas, which kill immediately upon exposure—are contained within those barrels. The barrels have contributed to a six-mile debris field that can be seen from space. According to the report, “It is likely that, without the address of these issues, [Sabine] will be at significant risk of chemical and physical damages for decades.” In spite of this, neither the Environmental Protection Agency nor FEMA have been granted authority to work on refuge lands;

the Department of the Interior is paralyzed to act due to a lack of funding. While the hazardous debris clearly poses a serious risk to wildlife at the refuge, it is also putting groundwater for local people at risk as well as the local economy. In short, we're looking at a refuge that's been converted to a toxic dump.

Our wildlife refuges are economic engines for many local communities. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that, in FY2004 alone, nearly 37 million people visiting refuges generated \$1.37 billion of sales in regional economies, helping to create nearly 24,000 jobs and about \$454 million in employment income. At many refuges on the Gulf Coast, for every one dollar of budget expenditures, ten dollars of total economic effects are returned to the community. According to the FWS, visitation at affected refuges exceeded 4.5 million during 2005, including over 250,000 at Sabine NWR. These visitation figures were already lower than previous years, due to impacts from the 2004 hurricane season, and visitation will be dramatically decreased until public use facilities can be repaired.

As our only public lands system dedicated to wildlife conservation, the National Wildlife Refuge System is truly an American treasure. During the past 100 years, the

Refuge System has been instrumental in restoring North America's wildlife populations, providing diverse opportunities to hunt, fish, birdwatch and photograph wildlife. Moreover, wildlife refuges serve as anchors for important natural systems that help support a clean and safe environment. In the affected regions, wildlife refuges protect vital wetlands and coastal marshes, often serving as key buffers protecting communities from storm surges. As our nation begins to repair the damage from these devastating storms, we must not neglect these critical resources.

Finally, it has become common knowledge that the absence of marshes along the Gulf Coast, and the virtual elimination of marsh-buffers over the years, only exacerbated the damage of Katrina and Rita. There were enormous human consequences to this habitat neglect. It is not my role to revisit this issue again for the Committee, but simply to remind the members here that the national wildlife refuges play a major role in sustaining that barrier. Indeed, the Refuge System should be called upon to fulfill a natural resource responsibility and a human need in recovering and re-building that vital marsh-buffer.

With total damages exceeding \$270 million, the Refuge System simply cannot absorb the cost of clean up and recovery from hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Emergency supplemental funding from Congress to sufficiently address the massive facility and natural resource damages is essential to the continued viability of the entire National Wildlife Refuge System, as well as the economic and environmental well being of the Gulf Coast region.