

**TESTIMONY OF JAMES KURTH, ACTING ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE, ON RECENT TRENDS CONCERNING ANNUAL BUDGETS FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES**

September 24, 2008

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Chairwoman Bordallo and Members of the Subcommittee, I am James Kurth, Acting Assistant Director of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify on evaluations of the National Wildlife Refuge System's performance.

Your invitation asked that we comment on a recent report developed by the General Accounting Office (GAO) at the request of Congress that focuses on Refuge System funding from 2002 to 2007. We have had the opportunity to review a draft of the final version of this report and are currently developing an official response. Therefore, we are unable to provide formal comments on that GAO report at this time.

Recently a report was prepared by Management Systems International (MSI) at the request of the Service in response to a need identified by the Administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), to conduct independent evaluations of the the Refuge System program's effectiveness. PART is a management tool used by the Executive Branch to assess the performance of federal programs and to drive improvements in program performance. The PART evaluation includes questions that ask whether federal programs periodically undergo independent reviews of their performance. The MSI report was commissioned to address this issue. The Service agrees with the majority of the conclusions in the MSI report, as detailed below, and plans to follow a number of its recommendations for improving the Refuge System.

The Service takes this report very seriously. We look at the report as a healthy exercise in objectively reviewing the Refuge System and as a tool to provide us with feedback on both the strengths and weaknesses of our operations. Consequently, the Service is already moving forward to use the findings and recommendations in the report in constructive ways to improve the Refuge System and better fulfill its mission.

**National Wildlife Refuge System**

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is 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. The Refuge System is the world's preeminent system of public lands devoted to protection and conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats.

Today, the Refuge System receives over 36 million visitors every year and includes over 96 million acres of land and water spanning more than half of the globe. If a line was drawn from Guam National Wildlife Refuge in the Western Pacific Ocean to Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge in the Virgin Islands, that line would be about 9,500 miles long, east to west. A line drawn from Arctic National Wildlife Refuge at the top of Alaska to Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in American Samoa would be about 5,000 miles, north to south. The Refuge System is a geographically diverse land, coastal and ocean conservation network. Refuges vary in size from the tiny half-acre Mille Lacs Refuge in Minnesota to the massive 19 million acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. In total, the Refuge System contains 548 refuges and 37 wetland management districts.

The Refuge System's 2008 operations and maintenance budget of \$434 million funded the work of more than three thousand employees operating at more than 300 staffed offices around the world. As expected, our workforce contains many biologists and professional wildlife managers, but also contains professional educators, law enforcement officers, heavy equipment operators, fire fighters, real estate appraisers, business managers, and more than a few pilots and boat captains. From a budgetary standpoint, the Refuge System must be viewed as a large organization that requires many diverse and specialized functions to operate effectively.

To fully understand the purpose of the Refuge System, we must also remember why it was created. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge in 1903 when he reserved Florida's Pelican Island as a place where nesting birds would be protected from overexploitation. President Roosevelt was a bold conservationist, and in his autobiography he wrote proudly of establishing 51 "National Bird Reservations" during his Presidency. Nearly all of his reservations are now units in the Refuge System. In regard to this work, Roosevelt remarked:

*"The creation of these reservations at once placed the United States in the front rank in the world work of bird protection. Among these reservations are the celebrated Pelican Island rookery in ... Florida; ... the extensive marshes bordering Klamath and Malheur Lakes in Oregon; ... and the great bird colonies on Laysan and sister islets in Hawaii, some of the greatest colonies of sea birds in the world."*<sup>1</sup>

President Roosevelt foresaw that saving places where wildlife was abundant would make the United States a world leader in conservation and make our Nation wealthier. Our ability to conserve wildlife is still an important part – and an important symbol – of the American spirit. The Refuge System thus represents places where habitat and wildlife are so rich that it is in the American public's interest to ensure those habitats and wildlife are conserved for present and future generations.

The Refuge System is a source of pride in the American consciousness. Evidence of this pride can be seen in the number of volunteers and Friends organizations formed to help local refuges function. People understand the value contained in National Wildlife Refuges and as a result every year more than 30,000 citizens volunteer their time to help their local refuges. The

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<sup>1</sup> *An Autobiography* by Theodore Roosevelt. Published by Macmillan, 1913.

monetary value of their work last year alone was calculated at more than \$25 million. The Service is indebted to these volunteers for their hard work and support for the Refuge System.

### **The Management Systems International (MSI) Report**

The Service contracted with Management Systems International (MSI) to complete an independent evaluation of the Refuge System in response to a need identified through the Administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). The PART is a management tool used by the Executive branch to assess the performance of federal programs and to drive improvements in program performance. The PART helps inform budget and management decisions and identify actions to improve program results. The purpose of PART assessments is to review overall program effectiveness, from how well a program is designed to how well it is implemented and what results it achieves. As such, the PART examines those factors within the control of the program as well as factors that may influence the program. The PART asks programs whether they periodically undergo independent reviews of their performance. The MSI report was commissioned by the Service to address this issue for the Refuge System program.

In order to make the report as valuable as possible, the Service asked MSI to ensure that the report was independent and objective. We also facilitated surveys of our staff, provided MSI with information in our data systems, and reviewed their recommendations for feasibility, but did not provide feedback on whether we agreed with MSI's findings or recommendations. The final report, entitled "An Independent Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System" took two years to complete. It contains what we believe is a very comprehensive and objective evaluation of the Refuge System's strengths, weaknesses, performance and information gaps. It concludes with a summary rating of how effective the Refuge System is with respect to each of twelve strategic goals identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Strategic Plan. The Service does not agree with all the findings and recommendations in this report, but we agree with many and are already moving forward to address them.

The twelve strategic goals evaluated in the MSI Report are identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Strategic Plan. They primarily align with our functional areas. They include:

- Conserve, manage, and where appropriate, restore fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats
- Provide quality environments and adequate water
- Ensure that unique values of wilderness, other special designation areas, and cultural resources are protected
- Welcome and orient visitors
- Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation and education opportunities
- Facilitate partnerships and cooperative projects to engage other conservation agencies, volunteers, Friends groups, and partners in the Refuge System mission
- Protect resources and visitors through law enforcement

- Provide infrastructure and equipment adequate to support mission and maintain it in good condition
- Complete quality and useful comprehensive conservation plans on schedule and with full engagement of partners
- Strategically grow the Refuge System
- Reduce wildfire risks and improve habitats
- Promote and enhance organizational excellence

In short, the report concludes that the Service is “highly effective” in one strategic goal, and “effective” in four others. The report also finds that we are “partially effective” in four goals, and “ineffective” in two. MSI concluded that they were unable to evaluate the goal of providing quality environments with adequate water because of a lack of information.

The Refuge System was found highly effective in the goal of facilitating partnerships and cooperative projects to engage others in our conservation work. The evaluators looked at how Refuge System staff work with volunteers, Friends groups, State partners, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other agencies and found that we do a very good job of developing these relationships and using them to help accomplish the Refuge System mission. We are especially proud that the results from the survey of the state wildlife agencies – some of our most important partners – found that 88 percent of state agencies rated their relationship with individual refuges between good and excellent. Similarly, 93 percent of all our partners, which includes State agencies as well as NGO’s and Friends organizations, rated the quality of their relationship with individual refuges between good and excellent. We feel these are impressive results for an organization the size of the Refuge System, especially considering the difficult and complex nature of many of our resource management challenges.

For eight of our twelve strategic goals the Refuge System was rated in the mid-range of effective to partially effective. These included some of our most important core functions, such as conserving fish, wildlife and habitat, and delivering visitor services. The Service will focus heavily on addressing these recommendations. These conclusions highlight some of the common challenges we face across the Refuge System, such as: addressing invasive species issues, securing adequate water supplies, and delivering quality educational and interpretive programs. The MSI report is the most complete evaluation we have of those operations, and it makes many detailed recommendations on how the Refuge System might improve our performance in these areas. We have already formed teams of staff to review these recommendations and develop action items to improve our performance in these key areas.

Finally, two strategic goals that were found to be ineffective included law enforcement and strategic growth. The Department of the Interior and the Service have directed numerous reforms in the refuge law enforcement program following two reviews by the Departments Inspector General in 2001 and 2002. The events of September 11, 2001, also added additional focus to our law enforcement program and additional responsibilities related to national security. Most of those reforms are complete. However, the decision to transition away from dual-function officers to a force composed completely of full-time officers has been especially challenging to implement. The Refuge System committed to making this transition and envisioned a way it could be done smoothly without a loss of law enforcement capacity.

Unfortunately, the phase-out of dual function officers and a corresponding phase-in of full time officers has not evolved as planned. Nevertheless, we have made refuge law enforcement a top priority for the Refuge System and it remains one of the keenest challenges the Service faces today. For example, in 2008 we used \$3 million of an increase refuge operations funding to provide for twenty new full-time officer positions.

The MSI report also rates the Service ineffective in the area of strategic growth, citing as the primary reason the rate at which land is being added to the Refuge System and the fact that this rate has declined significantly over the past few years. This is not unplanned as we believe that it is appropriate for the Refuge System to slow its rate of land acquisition in a period when the Refuge System is challenged to maintain the acres it already has under its jurisdiction. We believe this is a key to strategically grow the refuge, along with working with partners and increasing support and participation from conservation partners and the public. The MSI report looked solely at the physical growth aspect of the goal. We are cognizant of that fact that the cost of land changes, and in those situations where we need to acquire additional land to complete a refuge or expand a refuge that is located in a biologically rich location, our we must use our various authorities to our fullest ability with the tools we have. The Refuge System does not have to own every acre that needs protection, and we are working with our partners to use innovative approaches to land protection. For example, for years the Service has worked with conservation partners to look across biological landscapes and make collaborative decisions about what organization can most effectively protect what area. The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument created in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands in 2006 is a recent example. The Refuge System is a major partner in management of the National Monument, and in tandem with other federal agency and state partners we help protect more than 139,000 square miles of marine habitat – a much bigger accomplishment than any one organization could ever hope to accomplish.

### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Perspectives**

The MSI examined trends in the annual operating budgets of the Refuge System and the impact on Refuge System performance. Not surprisingly, some broad patterns emerged regarding the Refuge System. These broad patterns are important to consider but also need to be carefully evaluated because they provide one view of the trends which have been the context for many of our management decisions over the past few years.

The MSI report references statistics that compare funding to FY 2003 which was the Centennial of the Refuge System. Additional funds were provided by Congress to the Refuge System in FY 2003 and FY 2004 related to the Refuge System Centennial. Specific activities and projects were funded and were never meant to establish a new long term funding operations budget baseline. A better comparison would have been FY 2001 or the beginning of the Administration. When comparing refuge funding in FY 2008 to the FY 2001 appropriated level of \$300 million, adjusted for inflation, the Refuge System budget has outpaced inflation by \$75 million or 21 percent. This is one of the largest increases in the Service for any program.

For the past two years, the Refuge System has been reexamining its workforce and realigning staffing to better meet today's challenges in wildlife conservation. The Refuge System has

already undertaken a number of steps to better deliver its mission in a performance-driven, priority-based manner. These steps include:

- Strategic planning at the Department, Service, and Refuge System level;
- Targeted increases for the Refuge System's highest priorities including invasive species control, borderland security, and maintenance at targeted refuges;
- Use of "service zones" for refuge law enforcement and heavy equipment operations; and
- Complexing of individual refuges where appropriate, such as in areas that are in close proximity, rather than dividing staff and resources among each refuge.

The Refuge System analyzed the operational budget for each field station and found that the amount spent on salaries varied greatly, with some field stations spending more than 90 percent of their budget solely on salaries and benefits, leaving limited funding for management flexibility. The Refuge System has determined that the desirable ratio of salaries to management should be around 80:20 based on the particular circumstances at each individual refuge. Within each of the Service's regions, the Refuge System developed a workforce plan with the goal of achieving this desirable ratio in order to best accomplish the mission of the Refuge System. One result of the workforce plans was to prioritize refuges. In some cases lower priority refuges are managed remotely (i.e. without staff on site) and others are managed as part of a larger Refuge Complex. While there have been permanent staff reductions through retirement or attrition, overall Refuge System FTEs have increased by 296 or roughly 11 percent since 2001 in part because of the increased use of temporary staff. Clearly, the input of resources into the Refuge System's conservation efforts are related to the outcomes we measure. Refuge system budgets have focused on funding the highest priorities within among the many needs identified.

We appreciate the fact that MSI's independent evaluation found our volunteer programs and community partnerships to be highly effective. We have grown our volunteer workforce from fewer than 5000 in 1980 to more than 32,000 today. They contribute 1.5 million hours of work worth over \$25 million. Since 1994, we have also grown from 75 community support or "Friends" groups to 250. These citizen conservationists greatly enhance the wildlife conservation and visitor services programs on refuges. Without them, we could not effectively fulfill the mission of the Refuge System.

We have taken other innovative approaches to enhance our effectiveness and stretch our dollars. We have reduced the emphasis on building large, expensive visitor centers and focused on small scale, low maintenance, construction project we call "visitor facility enhancements" or VFEs. These projects include observation platforms, photo blinds, fishing piers, boardwalk trails, and boat ramps and other similar enhancements. These smaller, simpler facilities cost less, make our dollars go farther, and increase the outcomes in our visitor services programs.

Managing the Refuge System through these times has also taught us some important lessons and forced us to rethink how we do business. We have established a clear program that sets priorities for national wildlife refuges. If budgets do not keep pace with increasing costs, we focus our resources on the highest priority areas. We believe it is essential for refuge managers to have adequate funding to cover operational costs, provide training, and fund priority projects. We consider this "management capacity" an essential component in individual national wildlife refuge budgets.

The MSI report ended their analysis in FY 2007. We would like to note that in FY 2008 Congress appropriated a \$36 million increase in refuge funding. We believe that if the review had included FY 2008, the MSI report would have found an improved effectiveness in several areas that they considered. For example, we have hired an addition 20 new full-time law enforcement officers and assured every refuge has its targeted ratio of management capacity funds to salary.

As mentioned above, we believe the MSI report contains some excellent ideas on improving effectiveness of our programs, and we are in the process of developing an action plan that will carefully evaluate how we will move forward with this information. The Service is committed to achieving our strategic goals and will set clear priorities for addressing the recommendations in the report.

## **Conclusion**

We have had the opportunity to review a draft of the final version of the GAO report and are currently developing an official response. In regard to the MSI report, we agree with many of the findings of the MSI report and plan to implement a number of its recommendations. We believe the report will be an important tool to help the Service better deliver the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System to the American public.

The Service has worked hard at all levels to address the circumstances described in the report and has made difficult choices and set clear priorities. We have continued to ensure that the Refuge System remains the world's preeminent system of public lands devoted to protection and conservation by developing a strategy to manage through a period when we had to tighten our belt financially. We have developed and implemented strategic workforce plans to guide these decisions, and refuge managers have acted prudently and prioritized their resources and their work. Many times those decisions were not popular, but we believe they were needed. We will continue to work with our partners, volunteers, Friends groups, and State fish and wildlife colleagues to stretch our dollars and deliver effective wildlife and habitat conservation and visitor services.

The Service greatly appreciates the interest and strong support of Chairwoman Bordallo and Members of the Subcommittee for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you.