The National Wildlife Refuge System

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (Service) National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the nation’s only set of federal lands dedicated to the conservation and management of America’s native wildlife. It is the largest and most diverse network of conservation lands and waters in the world, encompassing more than 850 million land and marine acres across dozens of unique habitat types.

Refuges are Economic Engines

Over 64 million people annually visit the nation’s 568 refuges, which are found in every state and territory, whether for hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, education, recreation, or photography. This generates over 41,000 jobs and provides more than $3.2 billion in economic output each year. For every dollar appropriated to the Refuge System, an average of nearly five dollars is returned to local economies.

A Growing Refuge System

With only minimal increases in funding for the last 12 years, the Refuge System has added 14 new refuge units and hundreds of millions of acres of marine national monuments. It has also added new services, such as the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program launched in 2012 that seeks to address racial inequalities in recreational access and conservation participation. This program has dramatically changed the way conservation is delivered to constituents, and visitor numbers have grown to over 64 million visitors a year in FY2021—an increase of 38% since FY2010. While the additional acreage, the creation of the urban program, and the increased visitors have enhanced the Refuge System and benefited the communities around these refuges, this growth has also put more pressure on the already stressed and underfunded Service.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association requests $712 million for the National Wildlife Refuge System in FY2023

Stagnant Funding Versus Inflation

The $503 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY2010 is worth approximately $641 million today (as of January 2022), yet actual funding sits at a mere $519 million. Much has changed in the last 12 years, and increased funding needs paired with a stagnant budget has led to a Refuge System that is quickly eroding in habitat maintenance and an ability to even keep refuges open. The failure to offset the impacts of inflation is a major reason for the dramatic decrease in staffing and capacity on refuges.

FY2023 Appropriations Request

The National Wildlife Refuge Association requests $712 million in FY2023 for Refuge System Operations & Maintenance. This is the bare minimum of what the Refuge System needs to function, but the long-term need is well over $1 billion. In this age of rapidly worsening biodiversity and climate crises, we must invest as much funding as possible today so these protected areas are available tomorrow for shifting conservation needs.
Maintenance and Conservation Planning Backlog

The Refuge System has an operations and deferred maintenance backlog of over $1.15 billion. Since 2005, refuges have been battered by many natural disasters, including droughts, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes, sustaining over $790 million in damages.

A backlog of 200 Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) has also strained the System as funding for planning has largely been eliminated due to budget cuts. Planning is at the core of Refuge System management, but more than 40% of refuges have an outdated CCP or no plan at all. Increased funding for planning and management will allow the Service to begin to address this backlog and provide more of the tools it needs for active water management, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species eradication.

Volunteers Add Needed Capacity

Volunteers are a significant part of the Refuge System workforce and participate in almost every aspect of refuge work. They provide additional free labor equaling 20% to the Refuge System workforce and account for over a million hours of work every year. Volunteer programs are critical for the operation and maintenance of refuges, as the Service is unable to meet these needs alone while operating on a shoestring budget of .61¢ per acre—a mere fraction of what other land agencies receive per acre. Unfortunately, many volunteer programs have been cut back or completely eliminated due to lack of necessary infrastructure or supervision from professional full-time staff. For the Refuge System to realize its full potential, sufficient funding to support a vibrant corps of volunteers is essential.