



Evan Hirsche, Chair
Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement
1250 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 600
Washington, D.C. 20036

**TESTIMONY OF THE
COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT (CARE)
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
REGARDING FISCAL YEAR 2012 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

April 1, 2011

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments on the fiscal year 2012 (FY 2012) Interior Appropriations bill. The National Wildlife Refuge System stands alone as the only land and water conservation system with a mission that prioritizes wildlife and habitat conservation and wildlife-dependant recreation. Since 1995, the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) has worked to showcase the value of the Refuge System and to secure a strong Congressional commitment for conserving these special places. Located in every U.S. state and territory, refuges conserve a diversity of America's environmentally sensitive and economically vital ecosystems, including oceans, coasts, wetlands, deserts, tundra, prairie, and forests. We respectfully request a funding level of \$511 million for the Operations and Maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System for FY 2012.

This testimony is submitted on behalf of CARE's 21 member organizations, which represent approximately 14 million Americans passionate about wildlife conservation and related recreational opportunities.

American Birding Association
American Fisheries Society
American Sportfishing Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Izaak Walton League of America
Marine Conservation Biology Institute
National Audubon Society
National Rifle Association

National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
Safari Club International
The Corps Network
The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society
Trout Unlimited
U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute

Although CARE strives to make steady progress toward funding the Refuge System at \$900 million annually, a budget that more accurately reflects demands on the ground, our request of \$511 million for FY 2012 essentially maintains the Refuge System at a flat funding level. It includes only a modest increase over the FY 2010 appropriation in order to keep fuel in the trucks, pay for rising utilities and building rent, and cover other fixed costs. The Refuge System generally requires an annual increase of at least \$15 million to offset these rising costs, but our request for approximately \$8 million in additional funding for FY 2012 accounts for the current salary freeze for federal employees.

An appropriation of \$511 million in FY 2012 would stabilize the workforce by keeping workforce downsizing plans securely on the shelf, thereby reducing pressure on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to cut refuge staff below already insufficient levels. It would enable FWS staff to continue making progress toward protecting and restoring America's wildlife and habitat, and providing a positive experience for more than 45 million annual visitors who use refuges for hunting, fishing, watching wildlife, and educational programs.

This funding would also allow the Refuge System to continue its recently initiated inventory and monitoring program. The need for this program was made clear by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which forced FWS staff to hastily catalog the assets of Gulf Coast refuges in order to recoup the cost of damaged resources from responsible parties. **Currently, the only refuges in the System with a comprehensive inventory of species and water quality are those that were in the path of the oil. The inventory and monitoring program would fill these information gaps elsewhere across the U.S.**

Many years of inadequate budgets have left the Refuge System's Operations and Maintenance backlog at more than \$3.3 billion. While budget increases in FY 2008 through FY 2010 helped immensely, too many visitors still show up to find roads and visitor centers closed, viewing platforms and hiking trails in disrepair, and habitat restoration and nature education programs eliminated.

Today, more than 35 percent of America's wildlife refuges have no on-site staff, leaving no one there to unlock gates, teach schoolchildren, administer hunting programs, or carry out restoration projects. Refuges with only one or two staff lack the capacity to partner with interested stakeholders, and opportunities for volunteer involvement and leveraging of additional dollars are lost. Non-native, invasive plants have infested approximately 2.5 million acres (only 13 percent of this acreage was treated in 2010). Further, a crippling shortage of law enforcement officers has left refuges sorely under-protected from illegal activities such as drug production and trafficking, wildlife poaching, illegal border activity, assaults, and many types of natural resource violations. **Currently, only 213 full-time law enforcement officers are tasked with responsibilities and risks that the International Association of Chiefs of Police suggests be tackled by a force of 845 professional officers.**

National wildlife refuges are critically important on local and regional scales. Visitors in 2006 generated approximately \$1.7 billion in sales to local economies, creating nearly 27,000 U.S. jobs and \$543 million in employment income, and adding more than \$185 million in tax revenue. Refuges also provide important environmental and health benefits, such as filtering storm water before it runs downstream to municipal water supplies and, in many areas, reducing flooding by capturing

excess rainwater and attenuating coastal storm surges. While these benefits are undeniably significant, the Refuge System's potential remains largely untapped and unquantified.

Funding increases in FY 2008 through FY 2010 allowed for meaningful progress toward properly patrolling and enforcing laws on 150 million acres, maintaining recreation and education programs for the public, sustaining high water quality, completing habitat restoration projects, and more. Cutting Operations and Maintenance funding back to FY 2008 levels would result in the elimination of several hundred staff positions and loss of important wildlife management, education, and hunting and fishing programs. The way to keep from reversing recent progress is to fund the Refuge System at \$511 million in FY 2012.

On behalf of our more than 14 million members and supporters, CARE thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to offer comments on the FY 2012 Interior Appropriations bill.