

HR 4973
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE VOLUNTEER IMPROVEMENT
ACT OF 2010

My name is William B. Swift and I represent the Rappahannock Wildlife Refuge Friends of which I have been a Director since 2004. I submit this testimony to the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife for their hearing on Thursday, May 6, 2010 on H.R. 4973, the "National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act of 2010".

I live near the town of Montross in Westmoreland County in the Northern Neck of Virginia. Westmoreland County dates back to the earliest history of Virginia and was the birthplace of presidents George Washington, James Madison and James Monroe as well as of Civil War General Robert E. Lee. Although growing in population and commerce, the area is still largely rural in nature with farmland, forest, rivers, creeks and ponds in abundance. If one likes to fish, hunt, hike, birdwatch or otherwise commune with nature, opportunities are everywhere. It was these qualities and others which led my wife and I to move to Montross from Northern Virginia upon our retirement in 1998.

Soon after relocating we saw an article in the local newspaper saying the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge was looking for volunteers. We contacted the refuge and began volunteering a day or two a month. The refuge was not fully staffed at the time and our activities were coordinated by the wife of the refuge biologist. She was not a Fish and Wildlife Service employee and so was a volunteer herself. We did lots of grunt work such as weeding, cutting brush and pulling poison ivy vines off tree trunks. No matter how much I tried to cover up with gloves, long sleeves, etc, I got one of the worst cases of poison ivy I'd had in many years.

At this point, some background on the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge may be helpful. As refuges go, it is relatively young. It acquired it's first land, an eleven hundred acre parcel on Cat Point Creek in Richmond County Virginia in May of 1996. Acquisitions continued steadily in 1998 and 1999. On April 1, 1999 the Wilna Tract, consisting of over 970 acres on the Rappahannock River, also in Richmond County, was purchased. Wilna is the headquarters of the refuge, housed in a recently rehabilitated mid nineteenth century farm house. This is the point at which my wife and I began volunteering.

With the arrival of refuge manager Joe McCauley in 2000, things began to move apace. Today, the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge consists of twenty six parcels containing over eight thousand seven hundred acres along the Rappahannock River. The land is unspoiled with grasslands, forest, water access and vistas beyond compare. In my opinion, it is a very valuable asset to the Northern Neck/Middle Peninsula area, the State of Virginia and the Nation. Some of the issues that continue to be dealt with are: general maintenance of facilities, helping refuge staff implement the refuge's comprehensive conservation plan, informing the public that the refuge is there and how they can enjoy it, and assisting with invasive species control and other habitat management issues.

In the Spring of 2004, the refuge staff hosted a dinner for volunteers and other interested parties. The purpose of the gathering was to "explore" the formation of a Friends Group to support the refuge. Upon arrival, we discovered that in addition to refuge staff, members of Friends Groups from other refuges were in attendance. After a nice meal, the "explorations" began led by the other Friends Groups. While all agreed that establishing a Friends Group was a good idea, nobody wanted to take the bull by the horns and make it happen. At that point, we were advised that all exits were secured and nobody was leaving until we had a Friends Group up and running! While that may have been a bluff, it did result in the formation of the Rappahannock Wildlife Refuge Friends. From that somewhat precipitous beginning involving six or seven people the group has grown to sixty-five (65) dues paying members. Some are active volunteers, others less so but all, by their membership support the Group's mission statement which is:

The Rappahannock Wildlife Refuge Friends is an independent, nonprofit group of individuals dedicated to supporting the National Wildlife Refuge System. We also promote awareness of the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge through education and support.

Although the group draws its membership from across the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, volunteers are united by a single purpose: to make the refuge a showplace for those wishing to experience the natural beauty of eastern Virginia. In recent years, the Friends group has participated in local festivals, established a native plant garden and wildflower garden, assisted in construction and maintenance of over 3 miles of scenic hiking trails and participated in tree counts, tree plantings and bird counts. It sponsors the refuge's annual Kid's Fishing Day and has assisted in the erection of numerous information kiosks and other structures and facilities on the refuge. The group hosts a quarterly "Naturally

Speaking” lecture series featuring experts in all aspects of nature and wildlife. In 2008, we applied for and received a \$6,000.00 Chesapeake Gateways grant from the National Park Service which was used to develop and produce brochures and kiosk information panels for the John Smith Interpretive Water Trail along Mount Landing Creek in Essex County. Members of the Friends Group have participated in Representative Wittman’s Environmental Advisory Committee and attended National Wildlife Refuge Association conferences. Some members who regularly volunteer for construction and maintenance tasks on the refuge have been trained and certified by the Fish and Wildlife Service to operate equipment such as chain saws, skid loaders, mowers and tractors. The refuge also provides required protective gear to permit volunteers to operate this equipment properly and safely.

The refuge’s annual Kids’ Fishing Event is one of the more rewarding events of the year. My wife Betty has served as staff photographer for the event, and I have helped bait many a hook for youngsters who are just learning the art of angling. Similar events occur across the country on refuges, like Ruby Lake in Nevada, where refuge partners organized a fishing event at this remote field station that attracted 150 people, including 48 young anglers.

We also work closely with scouting groups. One of our Eagle Scouts is close to becoming an employee of the Fish and Wildlife Service, having joined the Student Career Experience Program. We are currently working with two new prospective eagle scouts who wish to complete projects on the refuge. Refuge staff are gearing up for the Boy Scout Jamboree which will be held at nearby Fort A.P. Hill in July. Scouts and refuges are a natural combination, here and at places like Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where scouts donate hundreds of hours collecting elk antlers to be auctioned in support of future scouting program development.

One of the many things we are proud of is that all four refuges in the Eastern Virginia Rivers Complex are part of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. As you probably know, the Bay is our Nation’s largest estuary, but it has been suffering from pollution, over-fishing, and other ailments for years. We are trying to help the refuge contribute to improving the health of the Bay through habitat protection and by suggesting ways that we can all help this treasured resource literally in our backyards. My wife and I joined other volunteers in establishing and maintaining a native plant garden on the refuge that teaches visitors about the benefits of native plants for native wildlife, and how to avoid propagating non-native plants, which can often turn out to be invasive.

I have talked about the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife

Refuge and about our supporting Friends Group. Now, I would like to say a little about what being a volunteer at the refuge has meant to me personally. I grew up a city boy in Arlington, Virginia. Fortunately, my father took me fishing and camping from an early age. From him I learned an appreciation of nature and the great outdoors which has continued to this day. When we retired, we moved to our former "Getaway Home" on a beautiful lake, perfect for fishing, boating and swimming. So I had my opportunity for communing with nature right in our own backyard. But as I am fond of telling my children, "old people like to feel useful". We got involved in community activities and as Hospice volunteers. When the opportunity to volunteer at the Refuge came along, we decided to check it out. In my experience, the seemingly small decisions we make in life often have the largest impact. Becoming a volunteer at the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge has had a very positive influence on my life. The group of volunteers I work with come from all backgrounds and walks of life - doctors, engineers, businessmen, teachers, policemen, government employees and bankers. All bring various background skills and talents to the table. All are focused on assisting the refuge staff to make the refuge the best it can be today and for posterity. The refuge staff is also a pleasure to work with. They are a professional, dedicated and resourceful group. With a staff of seven, Joe McCauley manages not only the Rappahannock River Valley Refuge but also the James River, Presquile, and Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuges which together comprise the Eastern Virginia Rivers National Wildlife Complex encompassing almost seventeen thousand five hundred acres. As you can imagine, Joe's resources are stretched pretty thin. I know from listening to Joe talk about the situation, how much he depends on volunteers to meet his goals and objectives. I suppose we are all vain enough to think we have done something to make our world a better place when we leave it than when we entered it. Through business, civic contributions or philanthropic works we hope to leave something that will survive us. My business career was thirty three years in the Savings and Loan Business. No financial institution I ever worked for exists anymore and even the banks that took them over have been merged out of being. So I leave no legacy in that regard. But when I help build something on the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, I have a reasonable expectation that its benefit will outlast me considerably. My proudest achievement as a refuge volunteer was to design and with the able assistance of the sole Refuge maintenance worker, build a sixteen foot long bridge part of a two mile wildlife observation trail. If, sometime in the future, someone who does not know or care who Bill Swift is or was, reads an information panel and takes a brochure from a kiosk I've helped to build and walks down a trail and across the bridge I helped build and say "Boy, I like this place", then I will indeed have left a worthwhile legacy.

In summary, I believe very strongly in our National Wildlife Refuge System. I believe it is a national asset worth protecting and nurturing. Refuge managers need the assistance of dedicated volunteers to supplement their limited staff and resources. In order for volunteers to function effectively and safely, they must be well trained, adequately equipped and properly supervised. Passage of HR 4973, The National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act of 2010 will provide funds to help them do that job.

Thank you for allowing me to testify.