

April XX, 2022

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chair
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies Appropriations
131 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies Appropriations
125 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Chair
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: FY 2023 Funding for National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

Thank you for your continued work to ensure the integrity of our national wildlife refuges. The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the largest network of public lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation. The fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget of \$519 million for Refuge Operations and Maintenance offered a small increase to help the Refuge System keep pace with fixed costs and salary increases, but it did not address systemic habitat needs compounded by a decade of underfunding. The undersigned groups are writing to express support for continued funding increases, and request that the appropriations committee fund Refuge Operations and Maintenance at \$712 million in FY 2023. Our millions of members – bird watchers, hikers, hunters, anglers, wildlife professionals, and conservationists – use and enjoy national wildlife refuges and support careful stewardship of the System for their own and future generations.

The Refuge System has grown since 2010, when funding was at its highest level, adding 2 million land acres, 13 national wildlife refuges, and 597 million acres of marine national monuments. Visitation rose markedly in FY 2020 and FY 2021, to more than 60 million visitors, as Americans turned to national wildlife refuges for safe places to recreate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this 38% increase in visitation since 2010, Visitor Services is funded at just \$77.2 million in FY 2022, \$2.7 million less than a decade ago, even before adjusting for inflation.

As funding levels have plummeted, the Service has had to eliminate more than 1,000 full-time positions—25 percent of staff. Staffing shortages have put additional pressures on the System. Many refuges are now managed as complexes, resulting in many more refuges that are regularly unstaffed until a staff member can travel to more distant properties. Funding is not available to hire biologists, visitor services staff, law enforcement, and maintenance staff. These shortages severely hamper the Fish and Wildlife Service's ability to develop the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, which targets investments in historically excluded communities and seeks to address racial inequalities in recreational access and conservation participation. This program was not funded at all between 2017 and 2020 and was funded at just \$6 million in FY 2022. This level is far short of the \$50 million the Service requires to deliver on its commitments to racial equity, social and environmental justice, and natural resources conservation at the 101 urban national wildlife refuges, partnership cities, and bird treaty cities included in the program.

Conservation planning and wildlife and habitat management are crucial to achieving the conservation mission of the Refuge System and fulfilling the purposes of each refuge unit. Invasive species and habitat loss are the two greatest threats to federally listed threatened and endangered species and overall biodiversity. Invasive species are one of the most serious threats to native plants, fish, and wildlife populations. Increased funding for planning and management will provide the Service with more of the tools it needs for active water management, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species eradication. It will also allow the Service to begin to address the backlog of more than 200 comprehensive conservation plans that are older than fifteen years, and therefore out of compliance with the Refuge Improvement Act.

Our national wildlife refuges are essential for protecting biodiversity, climate resilient habitats, and cultural resources, improving landscape connectivity, and expanding recreational opportunities nationwide. Despite the increase provided in FY 2022, funding is far below the FY 2010 inflation adjusted level of \$636 million. We recommend a minimum of \$712 million to begin to address the real need.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Defenders of Wildlife
National Wildlife Refuge Association
The Wilderness Society