

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

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

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

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

The Honorable Kay Granger  
Chair  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
H-307 The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
1036 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

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

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and  
Related Agencies  
House Committee on Appropriations  
1036 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**RE: FY 2024 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. At 95 million acres on land and 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters, the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the largest network of public lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation in the world. We the undersigned write to express our support for increasing Refuge System Operations and Maintenance Funding (O&M) to \$1.5 billion, a level necessary to address the systemic needs after over a decade of underfunding.

The fiscal year (FY) 2023 budget of \$541.6 million for Refuge Operations and Maintenance offered a small increase to partially offset the Refuge System's rising fixed costs and salary

increases, but it did not address systemic habitat needs compounded by a decade of underfunding. While the additional \$83.3 million requested in the President's FY24 budget is a helpful bump, it too falls substantially short of actual need—indeed, even if enacted, this would amount to lower than the inflation-adjusted \$700 million Congress appropriated in FY 2010. In order to fully reinvest in our refuges and transform them into a world-class conservation network of lands and waters, the System needs a \$1.5 billion operating budget.

Returning staffing to levels that ensure the protection of refuge values requires Operations and Maintenance Funding (O&M) of \$1.5 billion, and the undersigned groups are writing to express support for an appropriation of this amount in FY 2024. 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. Chronic underinvestment, inflation, and soaring visitation, paired with the Refuge System's enormous biodiversity and climate-resiliency values, justify this budget increase. Even with \$1.5 billion, the Refuge System would still only receive \$15.79 for every acre of land managed – less than half the National Park System's per acre funding.

The Refuge System has grown since 2010, when funding was at its highest level, adding 2 million land acres, 14 national wildlife refuges, 597 million acres of marine national monuments, and an Urban Wildlife Conservation Program that oversees 101 units. Visitation has risen 34 percent since 2010, to more than 67 million, as Americans turned to national wildlife refuges for safe places to recreate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite skyrocketing visitation, Visitor Services funding has actually decreased when adjusted for inflation, receiving just \$80.9 million for FY 2023, nearly \$30 million less than inflation-adjusted funding a decade ago. We request \$307 million for Visitor Services in FY 2024. This is a particularly large investment that reflects the bipartisan consensus in favor of responsible, ecologically-compatible public access and recreation on refuges and the need to develop stronger recreational infrastructure on use-compatible federal lands.

As funding levels have plummeted, the Service has eliminated more than 800 full-time jobs since FY2011—a 25 percent loss in capacity. Staffing shortages have put additional pressures on the System. Many refuges are now managed as complexes, resulting in many more refuges that are chronically understaffed, with remaining staff often required to travel hours between distant properties. This budget request of \$1.5 billion would enable the System to hire nearly 5,000 full-time staff, many of whom would be based in rural communities throughout the U.S. These new hires would bring the System to an appropriate staffing level and better position it to reflect the Nation's diverse and underserved communities. We believe that going above and beyond the current staffing high-water mark is necessary to realize the aspirational potential of the Refuge System, especially with the Fish and Wildlife Service having missed many of the Inflation Reduction Act's large staff capacity investments in other federal lands agencies.

Funding is not available to hire new 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 invests 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 \$7 million in FY 2023. This level is far short of the \$50 million the Service needs 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.

The Conservation Planning line item, funded at only \$3.7 million in FY 2023, stands out as a place where an increase would have a particularly large impact. Forty percent of all refuges lack a current Comprehensive Conservation Plan (required by federal law to be updated every 15 years). CCPs are crucial to achieving the conservation mission of the Refuge System, ensuring good governance, and fulfilling the purposes of each refuge unit. Working through this backlog will require more than an incremental increase. We request that you appropriate \$42 million for conservation planning in FY 2024.

Additionally, 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 wildlife and habitat management will provide the Service with more of the tools it needs for active water management, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species eradication.

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 2023, funding remains far below the level needed to meet its mission. We recommend fully funding the National Wildlife Refuge System at \$1.5 billion in FY 2024 to place a long overdue down payment on one of the crown jewels of our federal land systems.

Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,

[alphabetical signed groups]