

November 15, 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. We appreciated the small increase in the fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget for the Refuge System to help address fixed costs like salary increases; however, it did not address systemic needs of the Refuge System compounded by a decade of underfunding. Current funding is only \$16 million over the FY 2010 level in nominal value. The Refuge System needs a substantial increase in funding to account for inflationary costs, salary increases, and the significant increase in visitation and land base of the Refuge System. 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.

The undersigned groups are writing to express support for continued funding increases, and request that the appropriations committee allocate at a minimum \$574 million – the funding level in the House-passed Interior, Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill– for National Wildlife Refuge System operations and maintenance in the final FY 2023 appropriations legislation. 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 has increased 38% since 2010 and 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, including for wildlife dependent recreation like angling, hunting, wildlife observation, and education. Yet, funding levels have not kept pace with the increase in visitors and other operations and maintenance needs.

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. 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 fulfill its mission on behalf of the American public.

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. The 1997 Refuge Improvement Act mandates the creation of Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) for each refuge or complex of refuges, outlining the general management goals, and those plans are to be updated at least every fifteen years. Currently, there is a backlog of more than 200 comprehensive conservation plans that are older than fifteen years, and therefore out of compliance with the Refuge Improvement Act. We appreciate the \$5.684 million that was allocated for conservation planning in the Senate appropriations committee released text, and encourage the conference committee to recede to this Senate funding level.

Invasive species are one of the most serious threats to native plants, fish, and wildlife populations. Increased funding for planning and management will also provide the Service with more of the tools it needs for active water management, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species eradication.

Additionally, the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, which targets investments in historically excluded communities and seeks to address racial inequalities in recreational access and conservation participation, was not funded at all between 2017 and 2020 and was funded at \$6 million in FY 2022. This level is short of what the Service requires to deliver on its commitments to racial equity, social and environmental justice, and natural resources conservation, and we encourage funding increases to this program in the final legislation.

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 \$689 million. We appreciate the increased funding levels in the FY23 House-passed bill and Senate committee’s released text, and we urge Congress to pass at

least \$574 million for the National Wildlife Refuge System's operations and maintenance account so the agency can address the growing needs.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

Alaska Wilderness League

American Fisheries Society

American Hiking Society

American Rivers

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Black River Audubon Society

Blue Goose Alliance

Center for Biological Diversity

Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates

Colorado Wild Public Lands

Defenders of Wildlife

Ducks Unlimited

Endangered Species Coalition

Environment America

Environmental Law & Policy Center

Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges

Friends of Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Black Bayou, Inc.

Friends of Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Hart Mountain

Friends of Louisiana Wildlife Refuges, Inc

Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Outer Island National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge
Friends of the Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges
Friends of Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Hispanic Access Foundation
Izaak Walton League of America
League of Conservation Voters
Marine Conservation Institute
National Audubon Society
National Marine Sanctuary Foundation
National Ocean Protection Coalition
National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
Natural Resources Defense Council
Oregon Natural Desert Association
Oregon Pack Works
Patagonia
Rocky Mountain Wild
Safari Club International
San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council
Sierra Club
The Corps Network
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Trout Unlimited

Waterway Advocates

Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society

Western Watersheds Project

Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association

Wildlife Management Institute