



National Wildlife Refuge Association

Senator Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader

Senator Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader

Senator Patrick Leahy
Chair, Committee on Appropriations

Senator Jeff Merkley
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, & Related Agencies

Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro
Chair, Committee on Appropriations

Congresswoman Chellie Pingree
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, & Related Agencies

Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House

Congressman Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader

Senator Richard Shelby
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies

Congresswoman Kay Granger
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations

Congressman David Joyce
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies

November 15, 2022

Dear Senators and Representatives:

The National Wildlife Refuge Association requests your attention to the urgent situation facing the National Wildlife Refuge System as a result of Hurricane Ian, particularly the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel, Florida. The Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), is in dire need of disaster relief funding. We respectfully urge you to ensure that all refuge needs arising from Hurricane Ian are addressed as you negotiate the next disaster relief portion of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 appropriations bill, or the next emergency supplemental disaster relief package before Congress.

We understand the damages to the Refuge System from Hurricane Ian total approximately \$120 million, or 23% of the current budget for Refuge System Operations and Maintenance. Additional funding is necessary to repair losses to critical habitats, repair damages to refuge facilities and equipment, and remove debris and hazardous material. We also request \$520 million in additional resources for the USFWS to begin implementing nature based solutions and resiliency projects to help mitigate damages from natural disasters in the future.

One of the refuges directly hit and impacted the most by Hurricane Ian is the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, sustaining approximately \$26 million in damages. The refuge was established in 1945 to protect one of the country's largest undeveloped mangrove ecosystems. It is not only one of the crown jewels of the Refuge System; it is also a jewel of its surrounding

community and one of Florida's most popular birding destinations, attracting nearly one million visitors annually. While the refuge typically generates a significant positive impact on the Southwest Florida economy, serious impacts to vegetation, boardwalks, observation decks, solar panels and other Visitor & Education Center roofing have left the refuge closed indefinitely. The lack of power and limited effectiveness of generators have meant no air-conditioning and issues inherent with humidity and dampness. It is critical that these issues be addressed as soon as possible.

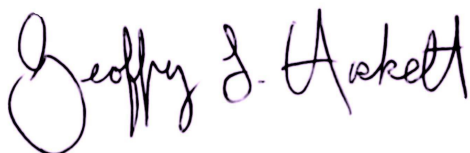
While a significant amount of damage was caused by Hurricane Ian, several other natural disasters have impacted the Refuge System in FY2022 alone, such as floods, tornadoes, fires, and landslides. We are requesting, at a minimum:

- \$120 million to address damages from Hurricane Ian;
- \$160 million to address additional disaster damages throughout the Refuge System during FY2022; and
- \$520 million towards the USFWS to implement nature based solutions and resiliency projects.

The impacts are not restricted to just the refuges that have been directly impacted by natural disasters. Without adequate emergency funding to recover from the damage caused by these events, all refuges will suffer. The Refuge System, already chronically underfunded, will be forced to divert funds from other regions and programs to address the serious public health and safety issues caused by these disasters. The Refuge System is already stretched to the breaking point, with a staggering operations and deferred maintenance backlog of over \$1.15 billion. If the Refuge System does not receive adequate supplemental funding to recover from the damages caused by Hurricane Ian and other disasters, we fear that refuges will not recover from the extensive burden Ian adds to an already crippling funding situation.

Again, we urge Congress to include adequate additional funding for the Refuge System in the next disaster relief portion of the FY2023 appropriations bill, or the next emergency supplemental disaster relief package before Congress. Thank you for your attention to this urgent and critical matter.

Sincerely,



Geoffrey L. Haskett
President
National Wildlife Refuge Association

CC:

Senator Marco Rubio
Senator Rick Scott
Congressman Byron Donalds