

National Wildlife Refuges

From Arctic tundra to Sonoran desert, cypress swamps to tallgrass prairie, the Maine woods to prairie potholes, the National Wildlife Refuge System encompasses some of the most biologically rich lands and waters in the world.



Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas

The Wilderness Society's Goals for the Refuge System

Address the Funding Crisis and Promote Expansion

Inadequate funding has put our national wildlife refuges at risk. Staffing shortfalls, a decline of wildlife habitat, deteriorating facilities, and inadequate water supplies are just a few of the problems on our refuges that must be addressed through increased appropriations.

Also underfunded is the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) (see section 11), a farsighted and bipartisan program established by Congress in 1964 to preserve public lands, protect wildlife habitat, and enhance recreational opportunities on refuges.

Advance Wilderness

These wild places are part of our nation's natural legacy; designating wilderness on our refuges will protect entire ecosystems, irreplaceable fish and wildlife habitat, and America's heritage.

Defend and Maintain Biological Integrity

The mission set forth in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation of wildlife and plant resources and their habitats for present and future generations of Americans.

America's National Wildlife Refuges

From wetlands to forests, prairies to seashores, the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) includes more than 96 million acres of some of the most visually stunning and biologically diverse lands and waters in America. These wild lands harbor more than 20 million acres of designated wilderness and more than 50 million acres of potential wilderness.

There is a national wildlife refuge in every state and territory of the nation. Alaska boasts the most refuge acres, while North Dakota has the largest number of refuges. Unlike other conservation systems, the East Coast has hundreds of national wildlife refuges. And there is a refuge within an hour's drive of almost every major city. The Refuge System contains a diverse array of habitats from the bog marshes of J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, to the dry plains of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana. In addition to providing critical habitat for thousands of species, the Refuge System filters drinking water for communities, reduces flooding, and provides places for wildlife dependent recreation such as hiking, photography, hunting, and fishing.

With the rapid conversion of natural habitats to housing complexes, shopping malls, and other development, America's fish and wildlife are threatened as never before. Today, more than ever, our national wildlife refuges are a critically important natural resource.

Refuge Improvement Act

The Wilderness Society proposed and worked for more than a decade to pass organic legislation for the National Wildlife Refuge System. That effort succeeded in 1997 with passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act.

The Refuge Improvement Act mandates that in administering the Refuge System, the Secretary of the Interior shall provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats within the Refuge System, and directs the Fish and Wildlife Service to prepare Comprehensive Conservation Plans for each national wildlife refuge. These plans direct management of the refuge for 15 years and provide an opportunity for the public to influence management of the Refuge System. The Act's vision is to ensure that planning efforts consider biodiversity, ecosystem level conservation, and wilderness preservation as vital concepts in wildlife management. The plans are an important tool for identifying and recommending wilderness.

Refuge Wilderness

Congress passed the Wilderness Act in order to "secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." For this purpose, Congress established a National Wilderness Preservation System of federal lands "where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The Refuge System harbors some of the most spectacular areas left in America. Currently there are 73 wilderness areas in the Refuge System, covering about 20 million acres and comprising about 20 percent of both the Refuge System and the total wilderness acreage in the country. Expanding wilderness designation on refuges fits into the vision promoted in the Fish and Wildlife Service publication, *Fulfilling the Promise*, which emphasizes that long-term refuge planning look at biodiversity, ecosystem level conservation, and wilderness preservation as vital concepts in wildlife management.

Existing and potential designated wilderness areas are resources whose value must be addressed on each refuge; in fact, the Refuge Improvement Act requires that wilderness reviews be conducted as part of the Comprehensive Conservation Planning process that is required for every refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge System: Inadequate Funding Strains Public Use and Habitat Management Programs

The 96 million acre National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), plays a vital role in providing wild land and natural habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife. All while strengthening local economies. Unfortunately, the places that protect thousands of birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and fish and the lands that contain more than 20 million acres of wilderness and 1,400 miles of wild and scenic rivers are at risk due to severe budget cuts and chronic under funding.

The Refuge System's 548 refuges create a national network of lands for the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants, as well as offer a variety of recreational and educational opportunities to a broad and diverse group of users. With 40 million visitors annually, refuges generate over \$1.7 billion in revenues that benefit nearby communities. Protecting this valuable resource for the enjoyment of future generations of Americans is imperative. Immediate attention is needed and Refuge System funding must become a national priority.

Operations and Maintenance Funding Needs

In 2008, the Refuge System funding level was about \$434 million, far less than what is needed to fully fund the Refuge System. A 2007 estimate of System's budget operational needs was \$765 million; however many believe the estimate is nearing the \$1 billion mark.

Due to increased fixed costs, rising fuel bills and other factors the Refuge System needs to grow by at least \$12 million annually just to keep pace with inflation. In addition, nearly \$1.5 billion is needed to reduce the Refuge System's operations and maintenance funding backlog. Inadequate funding is taking a toll on visitor services, wildlife and the Refuge System's mission of conserving plants and animals for future generations. After years of operating and working under the constraints of a federal appropriation that has been level funded, the National Wildlife Refuge System has reached a crisis point. With ever-escalating fixed costs, rising salaries, and other growing operational expenditures related to increased public use and visitation, refuges can no longer keep pace. Across the country, refuge managers are forced to cut back or eliminate staff, education programs and conservation activities.

Without sufficient funding, the Service cannot effectively manage and restore wildlife habitat, safely maintain facilities and provide quality education and outdoor recreation programs for millions of visitors. These persistent funding shortfalls have led the Service to withdraw staff and reduce programs that manage public access and other activities from dozens of refuges. A reduction of services means refuges will suffer from severe deteriorating conditions. Law enforcement, trail maintenance, wildlife management, habitat restoration, facilities maintenance, recreational activities, and educational programs are all in jeopardy. Insufficient staffing equates to diminished public use and lands managed to protect native wildlife and plant species will be neglected. Treasured by sportsmen's groups and other conservationists, recreationists, families, teachers, and students, refuges should be protected for future generations.

Grappling with Inadequate Funding

A 2008 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that refuges do not have adequate resources to meet their strategic goals and address problems such as invasive species control and law enforcement. The report states that "maintaining the refuge system as envisioned in law ... may be difficult in light of continuing federal fiscal constraints and an ever-expanding list of challenges facing refuges,"

During the assessment of the system, refuge managers told the auditors that habitat for migratory birds declined in about 17 percent of refuges from 2002 to 2007. Invasive plant species and habitat fragmentation plagued nearly half of refuges. And environmental education and interpretation—two key visitor service programs -- were considered poor quality at one-third of refuges.

Budget shortfalls are a critical problem facing the Refuge System, which has lost 227 staff from 2005-2007. Staff cuts mean that routine maintenance activities are cut, essential science-based programs to protect wildlife and their habitat are compromised, and programs for sportsmen, educators, school children, families and other wildlife refuge visitors are abolished.

America's National Wildlife Refuge System, comprising nearly 100 million acres currently receives \$434 million per year—an average of just \$4.34 per acre. A 2008 report issued by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) illustrates how refuges are vastly under-funded, leading to unstaffed refuges and closings; unsafe roads and trails; decreased safety; millions of acres of invasive species; unprotected at-risk species; and hundreds of layoffs. More specifically the report states that,

- One in three refuges are operating without a single staff member
- The System has already cut 300 staff positions; without adequate funding increasing, plans for a 20 percent staff reduction will resume
- Unfunded projects regarded as “Mission Critical” total more than \$115 million
- The system needs 845 full-time law enforcement officers, but currently has just 180—one officer for every 555,000 acres
- The System only invests 0.67 percent of its value in annual maintenance
- More than two million acres have already been lost to invasive species, placing threatened and endangered species at even greater risk

Refuges Need the Land and Water Conservation Fund

Acquisition of critical wildlife habitat through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) benefits refuges confronted with encroaching development. Targeted land acquisition and strategic growth of the Refuge System allows refuges to meet their mission to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and restoration of fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats. (See section 11 for more information on the LWCF)

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