

March 17, 2023

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on the
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
531 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on
the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
2308 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
2413 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
2084 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
2354 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

**RE: Fiscal Year 2024 Operations and Maintenance Funding for the U.S. National Wildlife
Refuge System**

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

On behalf of the undersigned hunting and fishing organizations, thank you for your ongoing work to enhance our nation's prized public lands. Without a supportive budget or your efforts to maintain it, we would be unable to properly steward our waters and lands, nor could we safely fish or hunt on them. We were especially pleased to see the budget increase in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 to \$541 million for the U.S National Wildlife Refuge System (the System) and we are extremely appreciative of the President's proposed budget of \$624 million for the System. Both these actions are strong, necessary steps to enhance this vital public land system.

We are writing today to express our support for continued funding increases to the System. As you begin work on the FY24 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, we urge you to provide the System with an even more robust funding to correct both historic underfunding and meet the growing needs of the System.

Hunting and fishing are fundamentally linked to the System, and trace back to earliest days of the refuge System. With the passage of the Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, Congress recognized wildlife-dependent recreational uses — which includes hunting and fishing — as priority uses in refuge planning and management. Therefore, ensuring accessible opportunities to fish and hunt on wildlife refuges continue to grow remains critically important for our organizations. We applaud the Biden Administration decision to open over 2 million acres in the System to angling and hunting, and deeply appreciated the Trump Administration actions to open 2.3 million acres. These activities provide the opportunity for more citizens to safely enjoy wildlife refuges with their families and bolster the strong contributions outdoor recreation provides for our economy and local communities.

Despite its many benefits for hunters and anglers, the System is at risk. Since 2010, visitation to the System has increased 38 percent, now hosting over 65 million annual visitors. At the same time, the System's budget has remained generally stagnant, not growing alongside the System's expanding needs. This funding crisis has led to a loss of over 800 full time employees throughout the System, including law enforcement officers who serve to maintain visitor and community safety on refuge lands. On some refuges, lack of funding means, there are no full-time, on-site staff. The funding shortfalls hamper the System's ability to uphold its conservation mission — many wildlife refuges have been unable to keep management plans current. Over 40 percent of these plans, known as Comprehensive Conservation Plans, are outdated despite their requirement by law to be revised every 15 years. As such, refuge management is not keeping pace with today's challenges and opportunities.

Since its establishment in 1903, the System has been our best example of how to balance conservation and recreation on federal public lands. To date, there are 567 wildlife refuges that manage 760 million marine acres and 95 million land acres. With its primary mission of conservation, the System helps conserve 2,000 different species, including 1,000 species of fish, 700 species of birds, 250 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 220 species of mammals. Currently, 75 percent of wildlife refuges are open to the public, with 376 open to angling, 427 open to hunting, and 101 urban refuges.

As stewards who care about the wellbeing of our wildlife, fish, lands, and waters, it is critical that opportunities to hunt and fish on responsibly managed refuges continue to grow. With a significant increase in appropriations to the System, vacant positions can be filled, conservation goals can be reached, management plans can be updated, and more people can enjoy all these prized waters and lands have to offer.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to continued collaboration honoring this System.

Sincerely,

American Sportfishing Association
Archery Trade Association
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
California Waterfowl
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Orion: The Hunter's Institute
Pheasants Forever
Pope & Young Club
Quail Forever
Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society
Safari Club International

Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
Houston Safari Club
Izaak Walton League of America
Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society
National Bobwhite & Grassland Initiative
National Deer Association
National Shooting Sports Foundation
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wildlife Federation
North American Grouse Partnership

Texas Wildlife Association
The AFFTA Fisheries Fund
The Conservation Fund
The Wildlife Society
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Whitetails Unlimited
Wild Sheep Foundation
Wildlife Forever
Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society