

April 20, 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: Fiscal Year 2023 Operations and Maintenance Funding for the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge System

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

Thank you for your continued work to enhance our nation's prized public lands. Without a supportive budget and your efforts to maintain it, we would be unable to conserve our waters and lands, nor could we safely fish or hunt on them. We were especially happy to see the increased budget in FY 2022 to \$519 million for the U.S National Wildlife Refuge System (the System) and we appreciate the President's proposed budget of \$597 million for the System. Both these actions are strong, necessary steps towards enhancing this vital public land system.

We are writing today to express our support for continued funding increases to the System. As you start working on the FY 2023 appropriations bill and developing budget items for the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, we hope you provide the System with an even more robust funding increase.

Since 2010, visitation to the System has increased 36 percent, now hosting over 61 million annual visitors. At the same time, the System's budget has remained generally stagnant, not growing in tandem with the System's expanding needs. This 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 a wildlife refuge. On some wildlife refuges, there are no regular, on-site staff due to these shortages. In

addition, the lack of funds has hampered the ability for the System to uphold its conservation mission. More specifically, 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.

It is important to our organizations that responsible, accessible opportunities to fish and hunt on wildlife refuges continue to grow. We appreciate the Biden Administration opening 2.1 million acres in the System to angling and hunting, just as we appreciated the Trump Administration opening 2.3 million acres. However, without a further increased budget for the System, the ability to keep expanding this access and ensuring that visitors can recreate safely and responsibly may be hindered.

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 waters we fish in and the wildlife and land we hunt on, as well as the species that call those places home, it is our responsibility to keep caring for the System. 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 near and far can enjoy these prized waters and lands.

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

Sincerely,

American Fly Fishing Trade Association Fisheries Fund
American Sportfishing Association
Archery Trade Association
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
Boone & Crockett Club
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
The Conservation Fund
Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports
Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
Far Bank
Izaak Walton League of America
National Deer Association

National Wildlife Federation
National Wild Turkey Federation
Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever
Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society
Safari Club International
Seek Outside
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Union Sportsmen's Alliance
Wild Sheep Foundation
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute
Wildlife Mississippi
The Wildlife Society