BioOne COMPLETE

The Cost of Conservation: The National Wildlife Refuge System

Author: Smiley, Sarah A.

Source: BioScience, 58(11) : 1014

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: https://doi.org/10.1641/B581104

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/BioScience on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

The Cost of Conservation: The National Wildlife Refuge System

SARAH A. SMILEY

More than a century ago, the federal government established the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants, as well as their habitats; today the NWRS manages more than 40 million hectares of federal land on 548 individual refuges. However, several reports warn that the system lacks the financial and personnel resources—including biologists—necessary for carrying out its mission effectively.

A report prepared for the NWRS by Management Systems International (MSI), an international development firm, determined that three core NWRS operations have been severely affected by declining funding: (1) law enforcement, (2) the pace of realty acquisition, and (3) biological surveys and monitoring. MSI also determined that the NWRS has failed to meet some of its own strategic goals, largely because of an 11 percent decline in real purchasing power between 2002 and 2007. A $36 million boost in funding for fiscal year 2008 partly offset the decline, but the problem is resurfacing: appropriations for FY 2009 show little promise of increased funding for refuges.

Addressing NWRS funding at a recent congressional hearing, Noah Matson, of Defenders of Wildlife, said, "The Refuge System now needs an additional $20 million each year simply to pay its staff, put gas in the trucks, and keep the lights on."

The needs of NWRS go beyond paying the electric bill. According to the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), visitor and habitat management services are of unequal quality across the refuge system. At underfunded refuges, between 7 and 20 percent of habitats were in poor condition in 2007. "Insufficient resources to hire and retain full time staff and conduct management activities in visitor services has forced the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to scale back core operations," said Delegate Madeleine Bordallo (D–Guam), of the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Oceans, during a September 2008 hearing on the status of the NWRS. James Kurth, acting assistant director of the NWRS, explained to the subcommittee, "If budgets do not keep pace with increasing costs, we focus our resources on the highest priority areas."

The NWRS has prioritized by establishing a strategic workforce plan. The upshot has been a net loss of jobs—the GAO reported that permanent employee numbers for 2007 were 7.5 percent below peak levels. The reduction in staff has impaired the ability of the NWRS to meet objectives, with MSI reporting that 84 percent of refuge managers feel that they do not have enough people on board to meet their core conservation mission.

Staff cuts have not been equal across functions. The refuge system's *Strategic Workforce Planning Report,* released in June 2008, notes that between 2001 and 2006, the number of permanent employees in Wildlife and Habitat Management decreased by 4 percent (34 positions), while other divisions such as fire and law enforcement increased their workforces, reflecting current NWRS priorities. The report further states, "The reduction in Wildlife and Habitat Management is somewhat surprising as this function is a key component of carrying out work on the ground and achieving Refuge System goals."

In a program that prides itself on the motto "Wildlife first," the loss of staff biologists has slowed work, and wildlife inventory and monitoring has consequently declined. MSI reports that "only 11% of refuge managers surveyed described the current level of inventory and monitoring work as being mostly or fully sufficient." In addition, 41 percent of refuge managers state that there is less monitoring occurring now than five years ago. Former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt warns, "You can't manage a refuge if you don't know what wildlife and habitat is present or how wildlife and habitat is responding to management and external threats." MSI's recommendation is simple: hire additional biologists.

The GAO notes that external threats to the integrity of the system are growing. Severe weather, climate change, invasive species, development, and habitat fragmentation are all issues that raise the cost of running the system. Kurth stated at the 2008 House committee hearing that the preliminary estimate of damages from Hurricane Ike to refuges on the Texas coast is $250 million. That is no small drop in the bucket for a system whose operations and maintenance budget for FY 2008 was $434 million. Delegate Bordallo cautions that "the Refuge System has reached a tipping point where it faces an uncertain future." Whether the new administration in the White House and a newly constituted Congress will tip the scales in favor of the NWRS remains to be seen.

Sarah A. Smiley (e-mail: ssmiley@aibs.org), of the Department of Biology at the University of South Florida, is the 2008 AIBS/American Society of Mammalogists graduate student science policy fellow.

doi:10.1641/B581104
Include this information when citing this material.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/BioScience on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use