

## **National Wildlife Refuges: Death by a Thousand Cuts?**

Author: PARKS, NOREEN

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# National Wildlife Refuges: Death by a Thousand Cuts?

NOREEN PARKS

**T**here's no other wildlife conservation network like it in the world—547 reserves covering nearly 100 million acres (40.5 million hectares) of wetlands, forests, grasslands, islands, and deserts that support thousands of plant and animal species, including 260 listed as endangered or threatened. Once a crown jewel of our national heritage, now the National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) system itself is under threat because of severe budget shortfalls, dwindling personnel numbers, and a staggering backlog in maintenance and operations. For years, refuge managers have tightened their belts and made do with less, and now some observers fear that a hundred years' worth of conservation efforts are crumbling.

Michael Woodbridge, of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, testified before a House of Representatives subcommittee on 20 July 2006 that, on average, the refuges get less than \$4 per acre (\$10 per hectare) to manage and restore essential wildlife habitat, conduct research and monitoring, maintain facilities and equipment, and oversee recreational and educational activities for their 40 million-plus annual visitors. Funding for the refuge system within the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) budget has in recent years approached only about \$400 million, a figure well below the amount refuge advocates believe adequate. At the same time, USFWS estimates show that operations costs such as salaries, fuel, and supplies are inflating by roughly \$15 million a year, says USFWS spokesman David Eisenhower. "Unfortunately, it appears these tight budgets are not going away soon," he adds.

One dire consequence of the budget shortfalls has been the steady erosion in staff. By 2009, 565 positions—including 475 permanent field staff—will be eliminated, according to Eisenhower. The number of unstaffed refuges will increase from 188 in 2004 to 221 in 2009,

when they will make up 40 percent of all refuges. In the Pacific region alone, the reductions will eliminate almost a quarter of the positions held by biologists at the refuges, and only six full-time law enforcement staff will remain to cover the region's 64 refuges.

The public has stepped up to the plate to help address the manpower deficit by forming 250 refuge "friends" groups, says Desiree Sorenson-Grove, of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. "Volunteers shoulder about 20 percent of the work, but sadly, sometimes they show up for projects and there's no one to supervise," she says.

Another outcome of the deepening cutbacks is the mounting backlog in maintenance activities (facilities repairs, equipment purchases, and so forth), and mission-critical work such as biological monitoring, habitat management, and species recovery and visitor programs.

The cost of this deferred work now stands at a whopping \$2.75 billion, according to a recent report by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 21 wildlife, sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations. "The refuges have been hammered by bad budgets for decades," says Sorenson-Grove. "They have gone through all the fat and they've now hit the bone."

Refuge managers attested to the growing crisis in a 2006 survey by the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). About nine out of ten of the managers who responded say the funding for salaries and fixed expenses "is declining in real terms," and nearly three-quarters of those who responded estimate that staffing levels for their refuges fall more than 25 percent below core requirements. Nearly two-thirds agreed the refuge system is "not currently accomplishing its missions," and they are "no longer optimistic about the future of the refuge system." Grady

Hocutt, a 30-year veteran refuge manager now with PEER, says, "Morale is at rock bottom. What really jumped out from the survey was the increasing frustration of managers over having to spend more and more time justifying their actions with bureaucratic bean counters, instead of carrying out their missions."

Earlier this year, 30 senators and 80 members of the House of Representatives signed letters urging their respective appropriations committees to boost the 2008 NWR budget to \$451.5 million—an increase meant to compensate for inflation since 2004. On 23 May, the House Interior and Environment appropriations subcommittee approved a bill fulfilling this request, and advocates are hopeful that this portends full congressional approval of the increase. But CARE's analysis shows that considerably more resources are needed to comply with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57), rehire the necessary staff, restore 4 million acres (1.6 million hectares) of debilitated habitat, and carry out other congressional mandates. The CARE report recommends an annual funding level of \$765 million by 2013.

The prospects for such a hefty budget increase are hardly promising, even though the consequences will most likely be irreversible if things keep going as they are, Hocutt warns. "As longtime managers and other personnel leave, we're losing hundreds of years of collective experience," he says, "and as programs and projects that took decades to develop are mothballed, our wildlife loses precious ground."

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*Noreen Parks (e-mail: nmparks@nasw.org) is a freelance science and environmental writer based in Port Townsend, Washington.*

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