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**TESTIMONY
FOR THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES
CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2013 APPROPRIATIONS**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Friends of the Potomac River Refuges and its 136 members, we would like to thank the committee for their strong support of the National Wildlife Refuge System and for giving us the opportunity to submit testimony. We are a nonprofit volunteer organization whose purpose is to promote conservation, awareness, and appreciation of the wildlife and habitats of the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex and to provide assistance to Refuge programs. We urge you to show your continued support of the National Wildlife Refuge System by approving the President's FY 2013 budget request of \$495 million for the operations and maintenance of the world's premier system of public lands and water set aside to conserve America's fish, wildlife, and plants. This level of funding will maintain existing management capabilities.

Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex

The refuges that comprise the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex are approximately 25 miles from Capitol Hill in northern Virginia. They border the Occoquan River as it meets the Potomac River. The complex is made up of three refuges: Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR, Occoquan Bay NWR, and Featherstone NWR.

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR is in Fairfax County, Virginia and is the oldest and largest refuge within the Complex containing 2,277 acres. Residents of the Mason Neck Peninsula saw the need to preserve bald eagle habitat and worked with Fish and Wildlife Service to create the first national wildlife refuge specifically created for the protection of bald eagles. The newest refuge in the complex is Occoquan Bay NWR, which was 640-acres of military surplus lands, that now provides essential habitat for over 200 species of birds and has been designated by Audubon as an Important Bird Area. The smallest refuge in the complex is Featherstone NWR containing 325 acres of marsh and riverine habitat important to both waterfowl and eagles.

In addition to providing critical habitat for wildlife in an urban environment the refuges are places where residents and visitors can enjoy nature and experience the diversity of plants and animals. Visitors enjoy birding, photography, hiking, hunting, and even biking and kayaking. Students, whether from surrounding school districts or those schooled at home, come to the refuges to observe environmental concepts and gain an appreciation for environmental stewardship. Many a scouting merit badge has been earned learning about wildlife and

volunteering on a refuge.

Current Challenges and Needs

Even though there were meaningful funding increases to the National Wildlife Refuge System in fiscal years 2008-2010 the Potomac River Refuges still struggle with the impacts of budget cuts in fiscal year 2006. At that time the staff was reduced from eight to six full-time employees.

Effects of FY 2006 Cuts: As a result of those budget cuts two positions were eliminated and have not been replaced. Biological programs have been generally suspended and maintenance has been curtailed. Research and investigation on the refuge by graduate and local universities have mostly been eliminated since there is no staff available to oversee the programs. Some habitat management is continuing, however monitoring of the treatments and management actions are not being conducted.

Maintenance of the six-miles of trails, nine-miles of roads, and other facilities has been reduced and delayed. When storm events wash debris or drop trees across trails or roads they may remain obstructed for weeks reducing the public's access to the refuge. Maintenance that is deferred continues to be added to the Refuge System's \$2.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog.

Law Enforcement: The presence of a law enforcement officer has improved safety. Prior to his arrival the refuges were plagued with prostitution, homeless camps, poaching, drugs, gangs, and illegal trespass. These refuges are in an urban area and so they will never be crime free, but the presence of law enforcement has greatly reduced illegal activities and improved safety for visitors and wildlife. The International Association of Chiefs of Police did an analysis of the Refuge System's law enforcements needs in 2005. The Association recommended a force of 845 full-time officers yet the Refuge System only has 246 officers to protect resources and visitors on the 150 million acre System. We ask that you budget \$39 million for Refuge Law Enforcement.

Visitor Services: While over 1.8 million people live within 20 miles of these refuges in the Washington Metropolitan Area, services for potential visitors are very limited. The refuges lack the facilities to greet and orient visitors. For years the Potomac River Refuges have been on the Service's short list for a visitor/administration building, yet nothing has happened. The Refuge System has almost \$1 billion worth of construction needs. Staff is currently housed in an office park miles away from the refuges. Without facilities and staffing the Service is only able to reach approximately one percent of the surrounding population. Visitor enhancements will provide greater efficiencies and economic impacts. Refuges that offer a board range of programs generate more visits, create more jobs, and provide more income to the local communities.

Volunteer Programs: Refuges need the staffing and facilities to draw visitors in, entice them to volunteer, and become stewards of the refuge and their communities. Friends groups and other volunteers contribute nearly twenty percent of all the work hours on refuges. At Potomac, volunteers are picking up trash, mowing, presenting interpretive programs, organizing festivals, and assisting staff. Could we do more? Yes, but there are obstacles that prevent volunteer programs from reaching their full potential. Without staff to oversee and interact with volunteers, projects are not done and volunteer retention is difficult. The National Wildlife Refuge System needs to invest \$80 million in Visitor Services in order to capitalize on the opportunities to

involve the public in fulfilling its mission.

Challenge Cost Share Program: The Challenge Cost Share program has allowed our Friends organization to leverage our time and funds to help our local refuges complete small-scale projects. We, along with other partners, have constructed overlooks and sun shelters, created interpretive signs, hosted festivals, equipped environmental education programs, and removed invasive species. In 2011 the cost share program was shelved while reforms could be made. We ask that you re-establish the Challenge Cost Share program and provide \$3.6 million in funding.

The Tale of Two Refuges

Sequestration

The Friends of the Potomac River are very concerned about the devastating impact across-the-board sequestration cuts of 9-10 percent in FY 2013 will have on our refuges and the entire Refuge System. If sequestration occurs refuge management estimates there will just enough funds to pay salaries and utilities. The impacts will affect wildlife and visitors.

Impacts on Wildlife: Managing the habitat will be staff's first goal, however management will not be as effective. The deer population, which is managed through hunts, will explode. The increased browsing of the forest floor reduces bio-diversity and decreases forest regeneration. This will affect creatures from chipmunks to the bald eagles. Invasive animal and plant species will consume native species and acres of habitat. The Northern Snakehead and other non-native species will have more opportunity to consume and displace native species. Mason Neck NWR has the largest blue heron colony in the Mid-Atlantic. Mile-A-Minute, a very aggressive herbaceous plant, has been found there and left unchecked it could smother trees that the rookery depends upon. The grasslands at Occoquan Bay NWR must be burn or mowed for nesting grassland birds. The burn program was eliminated with the loss of the biologist, and now the mowing program is in jeopardy.

Impact on Visitors: If sequestration goes into effect all refuge led visitor service programs will be eliminated. The part-time visitor service intern will be released. There will be no ranger led programs, youth fishing events, festivals at Mason Neck NWR, or scouting programs. The Fall Festival that the Friends organize will be suspended because the entire staff is involved the event and there will be no overtime funds to pay them.

Access to the refuges will be reduced. Trails and roads that are obstructed by storm events will be closed. There will be no extended hours during the summer or weekends. Regular trail and road maintenance will be deferred. Vaulted toilets will be cleaned every few weeks instead of weekly and portable toilets will be closed.

Friends and other volunteers will not be able to compensate for all of these loses. To assist with managing the habitat, volunteers need oversight and training, but there will be no funds to pay for the training. The Friends organization is willing to expand our interpretive programs; the challenge will be access, safety, and the quality of wildlife viewing.

Opportunities to Embrace

The Potomac River Refuges are the epitome of an urban wildlife refuges. Residential and

industrial developments border the refuges. The surrounding land uses create additional stresses for the refuges such as stormwater runoff, illegal trespass, and invasive species. But the surrounding communities provide these refuges and the entire Refuge System with the exceptional opportunity to engage the public and increase their awareness of the National Wildlife Refuge System and its role in conservation.

In 2011 the National Wildlife Refuge System created a vision to guide the management of the System during the next decade and beyond. The new vision seeks to make wildlife conservation more relevant to the public and engage them in the National Wildlife Refuge System. With 80 percent of Americans now living in urban or suburban areas the System is placing special emphasize on helping urban America connect with and understand the benefits of its wildlife heritage.

What better place to engage the American people than at the Potomac River Refuges? Increasingly the population has become more racially and ethnically diverse; in Prince William County less than half of the population is reported as non-Hispanic and of one race. These refuges have the potential of embracing all Americans and sharing with them our wildlife heritage.

In Summary

Wildlife Refuges matter to your constituents. Last fall, on a cold rainy day, we hosted a festival on Occoquan Bay NWR. A young mother and her four children came and all of them looked unprepared for the weather. The oldest boy gave me a dollar saying, "My mother wants you to have this." The family was living in homeless shelter, but that did not stop this wonderful woman from showing her appreciation for the natural heritage we all share and demonstrating to her child how important it is to support it. I hope all of us will follow her example.

Our members realize that our country is facing difficult economic times and we must all share in the challenges of the recovery. We thank you for the meaningful funding increases allowed the System in fiscal year 2008-2010 that provided stability to our refuges. We respectfully ask you to support the following funding allocations for the National Wildlife Refuge System that will allow the System to maintain existing management capabilities:

- \$495 million for the operations and maintenance accounts of the National Wildlife Refuge System including:
 - \$39 million for Refuge Law Enforcement
 - \$80 million for Visitor's Services
 - \$3.8 million for Challenge Cost Share
- \$37 million for the Fish and Wildlife Service construction account

The Friends of the Potomac River Refuges invite all the members of this Subcommittee, your family, and staff to visit our refuges. Please take some time from your hectic schedules, travel the 25 miles or so and enjoy one of the Potomac River Refuges. Watch the wildlife, enjoy the scenery and relax.

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