

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 30, 2007

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Larry Craig
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman Feinstein and Ranking Member Craig:

We are writing to express our strong support for our nation's National Wildlife Refuge System. As you move forward in developing the FY 2008 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, we respectfully request a funding level of \$451.5 million for Refuge System operations and maintenance to help meet the immense challenges faced by refuges today.

America is blessed with an astounding diversity and abundance of wildlife, and the Refuge System has been the core of our commitment to maintaining this American treasure for over a century. With a refuge in every state, almost 40 million Americans enjoy visiting the Refuge System each year, and their recreation dollars generate billions of dollars of economic activity. Ten years ago, Congress affirmed America's commitment to strengthen this conservation network with the passage of the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. Today, however, years of accumulating debts are jeopardizing the entire Refuge System.

The Refuge System faces a significant operations and maintenance backlog of more than \$2.5 billion. Each year, rising inflationary costs erode the funding provided, and we are concerned that the Refuge System has reached a tipping point. Nearly all of the regions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have implemented plans to severely cut staff and services to address flagging budgets and rising fixed costs. The remaining regions of the country will be issuing similar plans in the months to come. The restructuring plans will force a 20 percent staff reduction, leading to cuts in environmental education programs for thousands of students; de-staffing of entire refuges leaving them susceptible to invasive species and vandals; severe curtailment of endangered species recovery programs; and cutbacks of visitor hours at refuges across the country. Loss of critical refuge staff undermines the mission and mandate to provide quality habitat for wildlife and wildlife-dependent recreation for millions of people per year.

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse coalition of 21 wildlife, sporting, conservation, and scientific organizations that represent a national constituency of more than 5 million, recommends increasing Refuge operations and maintenance funding to more than \$750 million by 2013. In honor of the tenth anniversary of the Refuge Improvement Act, we recommend a modest investment of \$451.5 million for Refuge System operations and maintenance accounts for FY 2008. This amount reflects Congress' investment in the Refuge System for its centennial in FY 2004, adjusted for inflation. The FY 2004 level, \$391.5 million, was the high point for the refuge operations and maintenance accounts. Since the centennial, budgets have declined, yet the System requires a \$15 million increase each year just to keep pace with inflation and fixed costs – this amount does not even address the existing maintenance backlog or other programmatic needs. Our FY 2008 recommendation simply adds \$15 million to the FY 2004 level for each year since that time.

If we do not begin to address the challenges facing our Refuge System, we fear the national network of wildlife conservation lands envisioned by the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act will never come to fruition. We stand ready to work with you to ensure this critical federal land system is protected for the American public and future generations.

Sincerely,

Muri Feizell

Allyson Snow

Barbara Boxer

Jon Kyl

Benjamin L. Cardini

Herb Kohl

Tom F. Kelly

Jack Reed

Robert Menendez

Robert G. Menendez

Dick Durbin

John Warner

Jim DeMint

Rehgie Stevenson

J. Webb

Pat Toomey

Edward M. Kennedy

Carl Levin

Chris Dodd

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Ron Wyden

Barack Sanders

Bill Nelson

Maria Cantwell

Barack

M. J.

Ken Salazar

Susan Collins

Mike Croy

Norm Coleman
