National Wildlife Refuge Association

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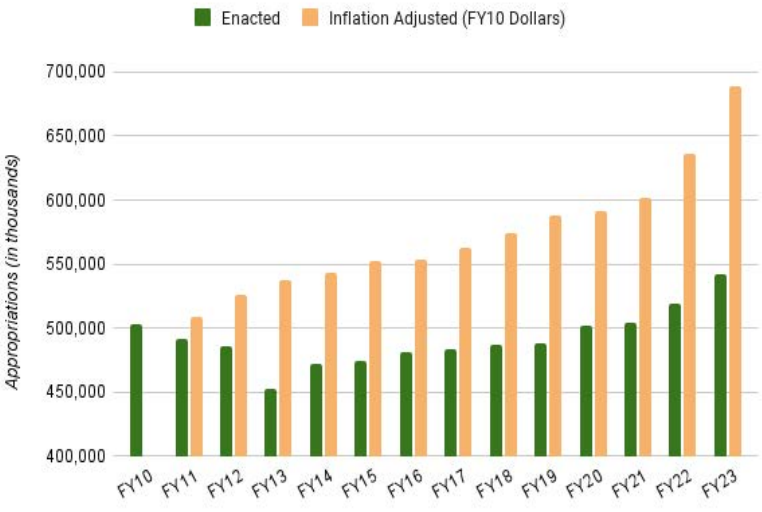
Funding Challenges of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The world's largest network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation

An Eroding Refuge System

Our national wildlife refuges are essential for protecting biodiversity and climate resilient habitats, providing community-driven conservation, and expanding wildlife dependent recreational opportunities nationwide. However, increased funding needs paired with a stagnant budget has led to a Refuge System that is quickly eroding in habitat management and an ability to even keep refuges open.

The $503 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY2010 is worth approximately $689 million today (as of November 2022), yet actual funding sits at a mere $541 million. The failure to offset the impacts of inflation has resulted in a Refuge System long strained under the weight of critically low staffing levels and lost capacity. In this age of rapidly worsening biodiversity and climate crises, we must invest as much funding as possible today so these protected areas are available tomorrow for shifting conservation needs.



Refuge System Operations & Maintenance Appropriations
FY 2010 - FY 2023 Appropriations vs. Consumer Price Index (CPI) Inflation

The Refuge System needs at least $1.5 billion to effectively fulfill its conservation mission, provide opportunities for wildlife dependent recreation, and connect communities to nature.

The Staffing Crisis

Over 800 positions have been lost since FY2011--an enormous 25% loss in capacity. All refuges should be staffed with a refuge manager, biologists, wage grade staff, visitor services staff, and specialists. However, no refuges are fully staffed, and more than half of refuges have zero staff on site. Many refuges are closed to the public and are completely unmanaged. Our analysis of staffing needs estimates that an additional $560 million is required to hire enough staff to reach full staffing capacity.

As an example of these dire staffing challenges, there are currently 214 law enforcement officers patrolling 850 million acres of land and water. Excluding the water acres, that's an average of 440,000 acres per officer, leaving much of the Refuge System virtually unprotected. In many cases, one officer alone is responsible for an entire state, with their refuge units hours away from each other. Similar examples can be made of impacts from the loss of biological, maintenance, and visitor services staff.

PROGRAM STAFF	FY2011	FY2022	Actual Need*
Wildlife and Habitat Management	1,562	1,201	3,840
Refuge Maintenance	712	523	1,325
Refuge Visitor Services	640	470	1,595
Refuge Law Enforcement	250	214	425
Conservation Planning	80	16	152
Total FTEs	**3,244**	**2,424**	**7,337**

*estimated

Rising fixed costs are also eating into increases in appropriations–increases that are not keeping up with inflation. It costs the Refuge System an estimated $3 million for every one percent raise in payroll costs. System-wide, the modest funding increase provided in FY2022 did not even cover the cost of the scheduled 1% federal wage increase. Without base increases in the budget to cover these fixed costs, several much-needed positions are eliminated every year.

A Growing Refuge System

Despite only minor increases in funding for the last 13 years, the Refuge System has added 14 new refuge units and hundreds of millions of acres of marine national monuments. It has also added new services, such as the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program launched in 2012 that seeks to address inequalities in recreational access and conservation participation. This program has dramatically changed the way conservation is delivered to communities, and visitor numbers have grown to over 67 million visitors a year in FY2022--an increase of 34% since FY2010. While the additional acreage, the creation of the urban program, and the increased visitors have enhanced the Refuge System and benefited the communities around these refuges, this growth has also put more pressure on the already stressed and underfunded System.



USFWS staff shows a young visitor a Monarch caterpillar on a leaf/credit USFWS

Public Lands Disparity

The Refuge System and the National Park System protect our nation's natural places and have similar land bases--95 million acres and 84 million acres, respectively. But their wildly disparate funding levels paint a grim picture for the only system of federal lands focused primarily on wildlife conservation and habitat. The National Park System receives $35 per land acre and has 1 staff per 4,200 acres. In comparison, the Refuge System receives $5.46 per land acre and has 1 staff per 39,191 acres. When accounting for water acres, the Refuge System budget is a mere .64¢ per acre. An increase in funding is necessary to bridge this gap and meet essential conservation goals.

Conservation Planning Backlog

A backlog of 200 Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) has also strained the System as funding for planning has largely been eliminated due to budget cuts. Planning is at the core of Refuge System management, but more than 40% of refuges have an outdated CCP or no plan at all. Increased funding for planning and management staff will allow the US Fish and Wildlife Service to begin to address this backlog and provide more of the tools it needs for active water management, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species eradication.



USFWS staff planting Seaside Goldenrod to improve Roseate Tern habitat/credit USFWS



Volunteers relocating loggerhead turtle eggs to a site less vulnerable to ocean changes/credit USFWS

Volunteers Add Needed Capacity

Volunteers are a significant part of the Refuge System workforce and participate in almost every aspect of refuge work. They provide additional free labor equaling 20% to the Refuge System workforce and account for over a million hours of work every year. Volunteer programs are critical for the operation and maintenance of refuges, as the Service is unable to meet these needs alone while operating on a shoestring budget. Unfortunately, many volunteer programs have been cut back or completely eliminated due to lack of supervision from professional full-time staff or necessary infrastructure. For the Refuge System to realize its full potential, sufficient funding to support a vibrant corps of volunteers is essential.

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