



For Immediate Release
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Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Friends from 37 States Call on Congress To Increase Refuge System Funding

Washington, DC – More than 150 "Friends Group" volunteers supporting national wildlife refuges in almost 40 states met with their legislators on Capitol Hill Monday to promote an annual budget of \$5.14 per acre for the Refuge System in fiscal year 2009. These refuge advocates sought to expand Congressional support and draw attention to the Refuge System's crippling \$3.6-billion funding backlog.

"The Refuge System funding crisis has put America's wildlife heritage in jeopardy," said Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the organizer of the Capitol Hill event. "These private citizens have come from across the country to send a powerful message to Congress that refuges are important to wildlife, local economies, and to future generations of Americans."



The more than 100-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System is America's premier network of lands and waters set aside to conserve our country's rich diversity of wildlife. The first refuge, Florida's 5-acre Pelican Island, was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903; today the System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has grown to 548 refuges in all 50 states and protects an incredible array of plant and animal species. Yet funding shortages have resulted in closed doors, hundreds of staff cuts, elimination of biological programs and curtailment of public outreach programs.

Over 200 national wildlife refuge Friends groups, representing an estimated 40,000 Americans, assist refuges with numerous projects that include habitat restoration, facility repair and construction, interpretive tours, and community outreach. Last year, these refuge volunteers conducted 30 percent of the work done on refuges.

"Despite the exceptional volunteer commitment throughout the country, refuges face countless obstacles arising from a lack of federal funding," added Hirsche. "Many refuges simply have no staff, no visitor facilities, no signs or brochures, and no way to protect the wildlife that the public has entrusted to their care. Without significant funding increases in the coming years, the Refuge System faces an uncertain future."

Established in 1975, the National Wildlife Refuge Association is the only national organization working exclusively to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System, lands and waters set aside by the American people to protect our diverse wildlife heritage.

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