

TESTIMONY OF CAROLINE BROUWER
VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE
IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 6734, KEEP AMERICA'S REFUGES OPERATIONAL ACT AND
H.R. 6427, THE RED RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE BOUNDARY MODIFICATION ACT

MARCH 29, 2022

Dear Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Caroline Brouwer, and I am the Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022 and in support of the volunteers and community groups including Friends organizations who do so much to support our wildlife refuges.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is a non-profit exclusively focused on protecting and promoting the 850 million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the world's largest network of lands and waters set aside for wildlife conservation. Founded in 1975, the Refuge Association's mission is to conserve America's wildlife for future generations through programs that protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries. We rally together refuge Friends groups and volunteers, birders, hunters, anglers, ranchers, students and other conservation nonprofits to create a collective voice for the Refuge System. We work closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help staff efficiently and effectively accomplish an ambitious conservation mission for the benefit of the American public by protecting endangered species, ensuring biological diversity and maintaining habitat for all the wildlife that call the Refuge System home.

The Refuge Association strongly supports H.R. 6734, the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022, which reauthorizes the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act (VCPEA). Originally enacted in 1998 and reauthorized in April 2018, this legislation enables the Refuge System to expand its volunteer programs and partner with community groups such as Friends organizations who increase public awareness of the natural, historical, and cultural resources of their local national wildlife refuge and the entire Refuge System.

The VCPEA also allows refuges to receive donations and other contributions from individuals, groups, or partner organizations, provides for expansion of volunteer programs, and streamlines administrative and contracting processes for partnership development. In an era where private public partnerships are allowing cash-strapped agencies to expand community programs and work with non-federal partners, this act helps both refuges and communities increase refuge educational programs and public awareness of the Refuge System and its resources.

In short, H.R. 6734, and the law it reauthorizes, allows volunteers and Friends groups to more fully participate in their local refuge. Refuges belong to each American, and community involvement and support is critical to their success.

H.R. 6734 is not just supported by the Refuge Association but by the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, American Fisheries Society, American Sportfishing Association, Defenders of Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, Izaak Walton League of America, National Wildlife Federation, the Wilderness Society, and many other diverse partners. We believe it is very important for this law to be reauthorized and for Congress to show its strong support for the thousands of volunteers who work on refuges each year.

Giving Back – How Volunteerism Helps Deliver the National Wildlife Refuge System Mission
Volunteers and Friends are the backbone of the Refuge System. Simply put, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) could never accomplish what they do without the contribution of Friends and volunteers. The last two years of the nation dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 have heavily impacted Friends and volunteers on refuges. The vast majority of visitor centers are just now starting to reopen, and many volunteer opportunities have been eliminated or postponed.

It is very difficult today to provide the Subcommittee with a full picture of the work that Friends and volunteers provide to the Refuge System, due to the shuttering of refuge nationwide since March 2020. Prior to COVID, annually, Friends and volunteers provided an additional 23% of work on refuges throughout the nation. For instance, the Refuge System currently has fewer than 2800 FTE (full time equivalent) positions nationwide. Volunteers provide the equivalent of an additional 700 FTEs through their work.

Friends and volunteers typically do everything from banding birds and raising fish at fish hatcheries, to conducting archery training and elementary school programs. In a typical year, anywhere from 35-40,000 volunteers contribute between 1-1.5 million volunteer hours every year, valued at an estimated \$28.54 per hour. This works out to a more than \$30 million benefit for the Refuge System – or a 6% boost to their appropriated budget. These are, of course, pre-pandemic values, and we look forward to a time when volunteers can again flock to refuges.

There is a wide range in hours for volunteers—some work the equivalent of full-time hours, and others volunteer just a few hours a week or month or during particular seasons or special events. But each volunteer and Friends member lends something valuable to their refuge, whether it's a special skill such as wildlife biology or teaching, or assisting with clean up after a storm or working in the visitor center store. Unfortunately, nearly all refuge visitor centers were closed for the duration of COVID-19, and many are just now starting to open.

We do note, however, that volunteers cannot replace the work of refuge staff. There are certain things that volunteers simply cannot do, including managing the refuge, law enforcement, or running the maintenance or biology programs. There is a need and a place for volunteers, but they must have adequate supervision and guidance from trained, expert staff members. And most importantly, refuges must be adequately funded, so that volunteers can supplement the critical work of the professional staff of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Americans Want to Contribute

The United States is a nation of givers and volunteers. Recent statistics show that volunteerism declined slightly during our recent recession but still remains one of the highest rates on the planet at about 44% of the population. Volunteering is an American value and can be seen in Refuge System volunteers who come in every political stripe, from every race and ethnicity, and every socioeconomic community. Because refuges are local and a part of communities, volunteering is a local way to give back for many nature enthusiasts.

New Audiences for Volunteering: Urbanites

Back in 2017, when I previously testified in support of this legislation, I spoke of the new program begun by the Service to direct more resources towards urban refuges. This program was fairly new at the time, but in the intervening 4.5 years, the urban program has boomed. The first designated urban national wildlife refuge, the San Diego NWR Complex, has created a model for the rest of the country to follow- a large community network of highly motivated individuals and organizations who are rapidly building out the most substantial and impactful volunteer and community programs in recent memory. Their goal is to reach beyond the boundaries of the national wildlife refuges and into communities across the nation, to connect all Americans through dynamic outreach and by cultivating innovative partnerships across multiple sectors.

The urban program has pushed far beyond the boundaries of the first designated urban refuges, and is now making huge impacts in Portland, OR, Albuquerque, NM, Philadelphia, PA, Minneapolis, MN, Detroit, MI, and others. Since 2016, volunteers and nonprofits have installed native habitats at two Title I schools in Los Angeles, which were previously all concrete and asphalt, and a third is currently being developed. In what used to be a verdant floodplain, students had no access to grass or shade, let alone a space that would encourage native plants, animals, insects, and birds to return. This project, run by Los Angeles Audubon, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Wildlife Federation, has seen dozens of bird species in the 5,000 square foot space at one school. The second school has a smaller space, but an even bigger bang for their buck - nearly 70 different species have been documented at the habitat, including a rare burrowing owl.

Experience and Expertise: Retired Professionals Amplifying Refuge Resources

One of the most notable examples of a retired professional finding a purpose on a national wildlife refuge is the late Bob Ebeling. A booster rocket engineer working for a NASA contractor, Mr. Ebeling was one of five scientists who tried and failed to convince their bosses and NASA to abort the launch of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. Mr. Ebeling and his colleagues realized that because of the freezing temperatures the night before, the O-ring seals that prevent burning rocket fuel from leaking out of booster joints would stiffen. Despite presenting the hard data to his superiors and advocating for delaying the launch, his advice was rejected and the fateful launch was a go.

After the loss of Challenger, Mr. Ebeling retired from NASA and moved back to his native Utah. He turned his engineering prowess from rockets to refuges, and led a team of volunteers in the restoration of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge after catastrophic floods broke through the Great Salt Lakes' impoundments, virtually destroying the refuge in the 1980s.

The more than 10,000 hours Mr. Ebeling spent at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge earned him the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Award from President George H.W. Bush in the 1990s. He never stopped working at the refuge after leading that reconstruction team in the 80s, and could often be found in the refuge's Education Center teaching visitors of all ages about the natural world and fascinating wildlife at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge System Awards—2021

Each year, the National Wildlife Refuge Association is honored to present awards for Volunteer of the Year and Friends Group of the Year. Last year, the 2021 award for Volunteer of the Year was presented to Mary and Kevin Weiler, volunteers at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. Working well beyond the hours required by their volunteer agreements, they contribute long hours at special events and/or come in to work extra days, beyond their normal schedule. When told that they should enjoy their day off and not overwork themselves, Mary simply replies "But you need the help!"

When COVID-19 struck, Mary and Kevin continued to volunteer at the refuge. As a retired nurse, Mary became a leader in implementing health and safety policies for the visitor service program. Although Mary and Kevin Weiler have only been volunteering with the National Wildlife Refuge System for a little more than 5 years, they have each contributed over 7,000 hours of service, splitting their time between Merritt Island NWR and the Long Island NWR Complex.

In 2021, our Molly Krival Refuge System Friends Group of the Year award went to the Friends of St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, also in Florida. As the Friends President, Phillip Pollock represents 230 Friends Group members. During the 34 years of their work, the Friends of St. Marks have restored the St. Marks lighthouse and long-leaf pine restoration. These restored areas are home to two key species: the Red-cockaded woodpecker and the Frosted flatwoods salamander. The Friends group also funds environmental education interns, transportation scholarships, and a Monarch Milkweed Initiative.

Volunteering on National Wildlife Refuges spans all age groups, professions, geography, and time commitments to provide the System with a wealth of knowledge and abilities. We ask this committee to support these volunteers in their efforts to make our country stronger by giving back to their communities and back to our nation. We strongly support H.R. 6734 and urge you to pass it from this subcommittee, full committee, and the full House of Representatives.

H.R. 6427, the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Boundary Modification Act

The National Wildlife Refuge System also supports H.R. 6427, the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Boundary Modification Act. Ducks Unlimited has acquired 3,300 of waterfowl habitat just outside the current acquisition boundary of the Bayou Pierre Unit of the Red River NWR in Louisiana, and we believe this property would be a suitable addition to the refuge. This modification is also supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Thank you very much for your time and attention, and I look forward to working with the Natural Resources Committee to ensure these two bills are passed into law.