

The National Wildlife Refuge System

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the nation's only set of federal lands dedicated to the conservation and management of America's native wildlife. It is the largest and most diverse network of conservation lands and waters in the world, encompassing more than 850 million land and marine acres across dozens of unique habitat types.

Refuges are Economic Engines

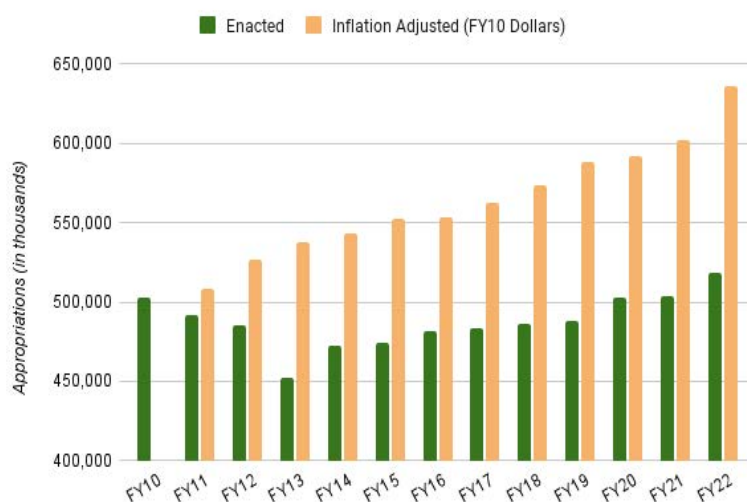
Over 64 million people annually visit the nation's 568 refuges, which are found in every state and territory, whether for hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, education, recreation, or photography. This generates over 41,000 jobs and provides more than \$3.2 billion in economic output each year. For every dollar appropriated to the Refuge System, an average of nearly five dollars is returned to local economies.

A Growing Refuge System

With only minimal increases in funding since FY2010, 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 racial inequalities in recreational access and conservation participation. This program has dramatically changed the way conservation is delivered to constituents, and visitor numbers have grown to over 64 million visitors a year in FY2021--an increase of 38% 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 Service.

Stagnant Funding Versus Inflation

The \$503 million appropriated to the Refuge System in FY2010 is worth approximately \$641 million today (as of January 2022), yet actual funding sits at a mere \$519 million. The Refuge System requires a substantial increase in funding to its Operations and Maintenance accounts to account for inflationary costs, salary increases, and the significant increase in visitation and land base of the Refuge System since FY2010.



Refuge System Operations & Maintenance Appropriations
FY 2010 - FY 2022 Appropriations vs. Consumer Price Index (CPI) Inflation

Critical Investments are Needed

Much has changed since FY2010, and increased funding needs paired with a stagnant budget has led to a Refuge System that is quickly eroding in habitat maintenance and an ability to even keep refuges open. The failure to offset the impacts of inflation is a major reason for the dramatic decrease in staffing and capacity on refuges. 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.

Staffing Levels in Constant Decline

Nearly 1,100 positions have been lost since FY2010 when the budget was funded nearly the same as it is today--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.

As an example of these dire staffing challenges, there are currently 250 law enforcement officers patrolling 850 million acres of land and water. Excluding the water acres, each federal refuge officer patrols 400,000 acres

on average. In many cases, one officer alone is responsible for an entire state, with their refuge units hours away from each other. The Service estimates that 1,150 officers are required to reach full law enforcement staffing across the System.

Rising fixed costs like annual pay increases 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.



USFWS crew clears a road after Hurricane Harvey/ credit USFWS

Maintenance and Conservation Planning Backlog

The Refuge System has an operations and deferred maintenance backlog of over \$1.15 billion. Since 2005, refuges have been battered by many natural disasters, including droughts, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes, sustaining over \$790 million in damages.

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 will allow the 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.

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 of .61¢ per acre--a mere fraction of what other land agencies receive per acre. Unfortunately, many volunteer programs have been cut back or completely eliminated due to lack of necessary infrastructure or supervision from professional full-time staff. For the Refuge System to realize its full potential, sufficient funding to support a vibrant corps of volunteers is essential.



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

