

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

#31 - July 8, 2003

Refuge System Funding Analysis

America's National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) is woefully under funded. The Blue Goose Alliance agrees with the System's documented needs, their urgency, and the increased benefits that full funding would bring to the fish, wildlife, plants and public users of the System.

The Blue Goose Alliance is a nationwide non-profit organization dedicated to informing Congress, the public, and others about the needs of the Refuge System. It supports the efforts of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a coalition working to improve the System through increased funding. In 2001, CARE developed a well-considered proposal and set a \$700 million funding goal for 2003, the NWRS Centennial.

The Refuge System has benefitted from those efforts, but actual funding fell \$330 million short of the goal. Detrimental backlogs and unavoidable cost increases at refuges absorbed available funding before many priority activities could be undertaken. Like the constricting embrace of a mighty python, chronically inadequate budget allocations place an inexorable, irresistible and enervating pressure at the action level of National Wildlife Refuges.

Seeking solutions, the Alliance is pursuing clues in the funding history of the Refuge System and comparable conservation systems, i.e., the National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The outcome of this effort leads the Alliance to conclude that the NWRS is burdened by handicaps not hampering the NPS and USFS, such as lower annual budget-ceilings and frequent, stifling internal agency reductions. The inferior position of the Refuge System within the Fish and Wildlife Service creates these handicaps.

The Alliance recognizes that the statistics used may hazard apples and oranges comparisons. Despite this risk, many activities, programs, and functions are similar across the systems. The Alliance also acknowledges that, according to news reports and agency presentations, the other federal land conservation systems do not receive the funding they believe is needed.

Still, the vast gulf separating funding levels for the National Wildlife Refuge System from those for National Parks and Forests lacks a plausible, satisfying explanation. For example: Refuge O&M received above normal increases during fiscal 1997-2003, amounting to \$200 million. However, Park operations increased by 240% more than that. Park increases for the seven years totaled 30% more than the entire 2003 Refuge O&M funding. Forest System funding was anomalous during the period, precluding the same comparisons. Still, Forest System funding during the four fiscal years 2000-03 outgrew the Refuge System seven-year total by 28%.

Between 1994-2003, the Refuge System was enlarged 487,657 acres per year on average, or 3.9 million acres total. Thirty-seven new Refuges were established during that period. Parks and Forests during that time grew respectively 145,632 ac./yr. (1.16

m.a. total), and 107,873 ac./yr. (0.86 m.a. total). Hence, the NWRS grew three times faster than Parks, four times faster than Forests.

NWRS expansion was primarily new habitats for endangered species, compensating for serious wildlife habitat losses, and attempting to moderate migratory bird population declines. Refuge inholdings and acquisition of general wildlife habitats received minimal attention. The ongoing need to acquire quality wetlands for migratory waterfowl, to meet urgent needs for breeding, migrating and wintering habitats, has been especially well documented, and still receives highest priority. New area funding is seldom above a token, and often not even requested. Yet, the substantial demands on refuge appropriations and field stations brought by a 4% expansion in those few years cannot be dismissed lightly.

The NWRS funding justifications during those years were based primarily on the 1997 Refuge System Improvement Act, a statutory update and enhancement that requires major commitments. Legislation to guide the volunteers program, another dealing with supporting organizations, further added to the expanded workload. The NWRS Centennial celebration in 2003 also meant extra demands upon System resources. With all that growth, new mandates, effects of past shortages, and trying to spruce up and celebrate the Centennial, the Refuge System still received only \$3.36 per acre for all operations and maintenance in 2002, less than one-fifth NPS funding and not even half the per acre funding provided to the USFS.

Funding shortfall is a particular burden to National Wildlife Refuge System managers, who have even run short of the proverbial "baling wire and duct tape" solution to the deterioration at hand. It is quite clear, and widely recognized, that the "Wildlife First!" mission of the NWRS suffers from chronic funding shortages. Even with the special efforts on behalf of the NWRS by CARE's 20 well-respected organizations, recent funding increases fell short of the needs and the goal. The record shows that since 1998 Congressional appropriations consistently have been kept very close to the President's requested amount (average deviation +/- 2.8%), irrespective of other requests. The Systems enjoying agency status (i.e., Parks and Forests) once again held the advantage.

Elevating the Refuge System to full agency status within the Interior Department would redress important deficiencies it faces throughout the budgeting process. Even in "the best of times," and with the aid of influential groups, the NWRS cannot slip the burden of being weakly implanted within an agency facing urgent needs and numerous shortages, many involving constant and expensive legal challenges to the Endangered Species Act. Higher ceiling allocations at the beginning of the yearly process, and considerable freedom in developing and presenting undiluted needs directly to the Office of Management and Budget, and to the Congress, bestow advantages on the NPS and USFS not enjoyed by the Refuge System. Even minor aspects, such as strong, consistent advocacy by the respective Directors (often absent for the NWRS) send important signals to the appropriators.

America's National Wildlife Refuge System is often referred to as "America's best kept secret!" That secrecy has many drawbacks when trying to obtain resources necessary to accomplish its vital wildlife conservation mission. The Blue Goose Alliance contends, "The patient is a little better today, but may still die from the underlying malady." America's wildlife heritage deserves and needs a better prognosis. Funding for well-planned and properly executed programs would improve conditions for fish, wildlife and plants in the Refuge System. All Americans, whether visiting nearby refuges or simply enjoying boisterous, wing-filled skies each spring and fall, would benefit. The Blue

Goose Alliance is convinced that the NWRS cannot achieve such goals until elevated to full agency status, thereby removing the handicaps and facilitating success within the federal budgetary system.