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**Testimony
For the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
Concerning Fiscal Year 2008 National Wildlife Refuge System Appropriations
April 19, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Friends of the Potomac River Refuges, we are submitting testimony for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. We support a funding level of \$451.5 million in FY 2008 for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance (O&M) account, adequate funding for Visitor Services, \$1 million for the Volunteer Invasive Monitoring Program and grants for invasive work with Friends, and an add to FWS' construction budget of \$750,000 for the design and engineering of the administrative/visitor contact building at Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

The National Wildlife Refuge System budget must increase by \$15 million each year just to maintain the same level of services and programs as in the previous year. The \$15 million increase accounts for cost-of-living increases for FWS personnel, growing rent and real estate costs and other cost increases, while sustaining current levels of visitor services and wildlife management. Funding the O&M account at \$451.5 million would allow the Refuge System to avoid additional employee layoffs and reductions in services that are important to our refuge, our members and the over 40,000 people who visit the refuges that make up the Potomac Complex each year, while also preventing the current \$2.75 billion O&M backlog from growing larger.

Budget reductions over the last two years have severely impacted the Potomac River Refuges in Northern Virginia. The complex is comprised of Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR, Occoquan Bay NWR, and Featherstone NWR. This complex is approximately 20 miles from Capitol Hill. Each was established through strong public support and effort in recognition of their importance as representative pieces of this region's distinctive, but fast disappearing, natural environment. Mason Neck's woodlands and Potomac shoreline has been instrumental in the recovery of the bald eagle; Featherstone provides sanctuary for native flora and fauna dependent on tidal wetlands; and Occoquan Bay includes a unique of habitats of great importance to migratory waterfowl and songbirds and other wildlife. Each refuge and the complex plays an indispensable role in preserving the natural character of Northern Virginia.

As part of FWS Region 5's workforce plan the 71 national wildlife refuges in the Northeast region have been classified as "stay strong", targeted, or de-staffed. The region has chosen to direct resources to "stay strong" refuges to avoid "across-the-board mediocrity that would result from proportionately equal budget cuts at each refuge." To our dismay the Potomac River NWR Complex is classified as a targeted reduction refuge.

Budget reductions have resulted in the reduction of 2.7 staff positions at the Potomac River Refuges. During FY 2006 the only biologist and one of the two maintenance worker positions were eliminated. Staff cuts resulted in program elimination therefore impacting FWS' ability to manage habitat and wildlife. Wildlife surveys, research and investigations, biological monitoring, and invasive species control have been curtailed or eliminated. In addition, maintenance and support of public use facilities/activities including trails, roads, and programs have been reduced.

We believe the management at this complex has demonstrated fiscal responsibility and forethought. Yet as they look at the draft budget they received last month for FY 2007 they now see they have been operating in the red since October 1, 2006. This is the result of fixed costs at the refuges and salary costs which were passed on to the complex from the region. If some additional pay act funds and other actions by the region do not reduce the current deficit of these refuges they will be forced to make more drastic cuts in the overall programs.

The House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee should provide strong funding for Refuge System Visitor Services programs and Visitor Facility Enhancement Projects. Visitor Services funding pays for many Friends and volunteer programs. We depend on this funding for programs that allow us to remain effective stewards of our refuge.

Recognizing invasive species as a top threat to our refuge lands, we also ask the committee to continue their support by again providing \$1 million "for cooperative projects with [F]riends groups on invasive species control." This funding supports worthy programs like competitive grants for Friends groups and the Volunteer Invasives Monitoring Program. Utilizing the energy and enthusiasm of Friends and volunteers is a proven, effective and economical partnership for the National Wildlife Refuge System and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

Invasive species are changing the habitat and adversely effecting native plant and animal species at the Potomac Refuges. The lack of a biological program leaves these invasive species unchecked. The spread of Japanese stiltgrass and mile-a-minute in the woodlands throughout the refuges are adversely impacting the regeneration of the forest floor and understory habitat. The health of one of the largest great blue heron colonies in the Mid-Atlantic is dependent upon the health of these woodlands

Our local refuges are also threaten by illegal activities occurring on them. Documented activities are: trespass, gangs including MS-13, drugs, and undocumented aliens establishing camps. Recently, visitors notified law enforcement of prostitution activity occurring in the parking lot of Occoquan Bay NWR. We believe some of these activities can be curtailed if refuge staff had an increased presence on the refuges. As mothers we are concerned about the safety of children and other visitors. Currently, the staff is housed miles away from any of the refuges in a strip mall along Route 1 in Woodbridge. Vehicles and other equipment are stored at a rented garage a mile away from the office. Response to habitat, wildlife or visitor needs can take hours given the notorious Northern Virginia traffic. This situation creates numerous inefficiencies and safety issues.

FWS Region 5 has acknowledged the need for an administrative/visitor contact station at Occoquan Bay NWR by listing it as their number one priority for building construction funds. However, even with this acknowledgment there is no funding in the President's FY08 budget for construction of this facility. We are urging this subcommittee to provide \$750,000 for the design and engineering of this facility. For preservation of the habitat and wildlife, safety of the visitors and enhancing the efficiencies of the staff; planning of this facility needs to occur now.

In conclusion, the Potomac River Refuges provide a wonder environment for plants and animals that we must treat with care and vigilance. The flora and fauna utilizing these refuges and the entire Refuge System are fundamental to our nation. When Teddy Roosevelt established the Refuge System in 1903, he recognized these lands and the creatures dependent upon them were essential to our nation's development and would continue to be a vital part of our children's futures. The Friends of the Potomac River Refuges ask you to provide adequate funding for this refuge complex and the entire Refuge System to conserve our children's natural heritage.

On behalf of the Friends of the Potomac River Refuges we thank you for your consideration of our requests. If you have any questions, we would certainly be happy to help in any way.

Sincerely,
Joan Patterson and Annette Baker-Toole