

**TESTIMONY OF KEVIN FOERSTER, REGIONAL CHIEF, PACIFIC REGION,
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE,
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS, AND INSULAR AFFAIRS ON THE MIDWAY
ATOLL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

November 20, 2014

Good afternoon Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Kevin Foerster, Regional Chief for the National Wildlife Refuge System in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region within the Department of the Interior. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and Battle of Midway National Memorial (Memorial). Funding, conservation, staffing, and safety challenges have caused the Service to suspend visitor services at the Refuge, which also affects the public's ability to experience the Memorial. The Service is working to restore those visitor services, despite the challenges we face. We look forward to discussing them with you today.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is the world's premiere network of public lands devoted solely to the conservation of wildlife and habitat. The Refuge System encompasses over 150 million acres of land and water and preserves a diverse array of land, wetland, and ocean ecosystems. The Refuge System offers about 47 million visitors per year the opportunity to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, as well as learn about nature through environmental education and interpretation. These visitors make refuges an important economic driver for local communities, generating nearly \$2.4 billion each year. Investing in the Refuge System is a sound use of taxpayer dollars as each dollar appropriated for the Refuge System returns nearly \$5 in economic benefits. Refuges also provide local communities with other valuable ecosystem services, such as improved water quality, increased property values, and access to quality wildlife-dependent recreation.

In the Pacific Region, there are 67 national wildlife refuges and five national monuments located in Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. These refuges encompass wetlands, estuaries, grasslands, nesting seabird colonies, forests, remote atolls with extensive coral reef ecosystems, high mountain deserts and all of the variations in between. In the 2013 Banking on Nature Report, a report on the economic benefits of national wildlife refuge visitation to local communities, the Service estimates that nearly eight million people visited Refuges in the Pacific Region, generating over \$320 million for and supporting almost 5,000 jobs in local communities.

However the Refuge System, with all its benefits, is facing ever increasing pressures and difficulties. Populations are growing rapidly, the amount of undeveloped land is declining, the economic environment is challenging, and we are faced with conservation crises on several fronts. As a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011, the Refuge System saw flat and declining budgets for three consecutive years, and we have had to make tough decisions and set priorities within the funding available.

In the Pacific Region, this has led to the reduction of capacity and staff positions. The Service is prioritizing capacity and staff where we can provide the most benefit for wildlife and the most opportunity for public use. Across the Refuge System in the Pacific Region, the Service is working to balance its mission, as directed by Congress, to protect America's natural resources, while also providing opportunities for public use, when compatible with the purpose for which the Refuge was established.

Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial

Of the refuges and within the monuments in the Pacific Region, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and Battle of Midway National Memorial is one of the most unique. It provides vitally important habitat for a host of species and it represents a singular confluence of natural, historical, and cultural significance in the Pacific Ocean Basin. In addition to Midway Atoll's designation as a Refuge and a National Memorial, it is a part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, an UNESCO World Heritage Site. Midway Atoll's unique natural resources include support to at least 21 species of seabirds totaling more than 3.5 million individuals. It is the site of the largest annual congregation of nesting albatrosses in the world, with more than one million individuals of three different species depending on the atoll each year. An estimated 70 percent of the world's population of Laysan albatross nests on Midway Atoll annually – more than anywhere else on earth. In addition to the birds, the nearly 1,500 acres of terrestrial habitat host 24 important native plant species, and the federally endangered Laysan duck and short-tailed albatross. The 580,000 acres of marine habitat provide homes to a resident population of spinner dolphins, the federally endangered Hawaiian monk sea, and more than 250 species of reef fish and invertebrates, with some of the highest level of reef fish endemism rates recorded in the world.

Henderson Field on Midway Atoll is also a Federal Aviation Administration designated Extended Twin-engine Operations Site providing an emergency landing site cooperatively operated by the Service and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for nearly 35,000 jet aircraft transiting the Pacific Ocean.

The lands and waters of the Refuge were designated the Battle of Midway National Memorial on September 13, 2000 – the first national memorial to be designated on a National Wildlife Refuge. The Service takes our role as trustee for this historic atoll seriously, honoring the sacrifice and courage of our veterans and conserving America's natural heritage.

In 1942, during World War II, the Japanese forces sought to expand their zone of defense in the Pacific. Their plan was to establish a diversionary attack of the Aleutians in Alaska, thereby forcing U.S. carriers to race to their rescue. The Japanese carriers could intercept and destroy them at sea, moving on to the primary goal of securing Midway Atoll and using it as a strategic

point to take on and defeat the United States. However, the Americans were able to break Japanese naval code and anticipated the attack. Between the fourth and sixth of June, 1942, U.S. forces successfully defended Midway Atoll—sinking four Japanese aircraft carriers, effectively eliminating the Imperial Navy, and changing the course of the War in the Pacific.

Midway Atoll became an “overlay” national wildlife refuge in 1988, while still under the primary jurisdiction of the United States Navy. With the closure of Naval Air Facility Midway Island in 1993, there began a transition in mission at Midway from national defense to wildlife conservation. Administration of Midway Atoll was transferred from the Navy to the Department of the Interior on October 31, 1996.

Midway Atoll is best known for its pivotal role in World War II, but its historic significance dates back well over a century. In 1903, the Commercial Pacific Cable Company constructed five concrete and steel structures that housed a community of over 30 people on this remote island in the Pacific. The first around-the-world telegram, which was issued by President Theodore Roosevelt on July 4, 1903, went through the Cable Station at Midway Atoll. Midway Atoll was also a landing site for Pan Am Clippers travelling across the Pacific Ocean in the late 1930s and today it functions as an emergency landing facility for twin-engine jet airplanes travelling across the Pacific. As recently as July 2014, a United Airlines Boeing 777 made an emergency landing at Midway Atoll with 352 passengers onboard.

The lives of wildlife and human residents are inexorably intertwined on Midway Atoll. It is, in many respects, a little city, with all the structures, utilities, and types of equipment that are needed to function in support of the resident human community to perform the Refuge’s mission. At one time, the facilities at Midway supported more than 5,000 people. While the current resident population is approximately 40, a significant amount of the infrastructure existing upon the transfer from the Navy to the Service remains in place. The Service works to balance stewardship of the natural resources of the Refuge, commemoration of the historic significance of the Memorial, and cooperative partnerships for the preservation of both to achieve the purposes for which the Refuge and Memorial were designated.

Challenges at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial

Since 2005, the budget at the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial has been reduced by almost \$1.5 million. Last fiscal year, the operating budget for the refuge was \$3,692,155, which includes salaries for five full-time Service employees, four of whom reside on Midway Atoll. The budget reduction resulted in the loss of several Service positions, including the permanent Wildlife Biologist, Park Ranger, and Law Enforcement Officer. The loss of these positions has affected the Service’s ability to provide the visitor services program at the Refuge and this program was temporarily suspended in November 2013. In the 5 years prior to suspending the program, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge welcomed on average, a little over 300 visitors annually. Despite the budget reductions, the Service has invested in the facilities on the Refuge, such as maintenance and minor repair of 109 individual facilities. The Service intends to restore the suspended visitor services program once funding allows the operation of a safe and sustainable program that is appropriate and

compatible, pursuant to Service policy and the Refuge Improvement Act in accordance with the purposes for which the Refuge and Memorial were established.

Management is challenging on a Refuge where the scarce land is subject to wind, water, and changing sea levels. More than 1,000 miles from the nearest population center in the Main Hawaiian Islands, operation of this remote Refuge requires overcoming unique challenges. For example, although the Service purchases local goods and services found in the main Hawaiian Islands, a good portion of food and project supplies inevitably must be transported from the continental United States to Hawaii and then to the Refuge. Due to the remoteness of the station, all items needed on the Refuge must be shipped long distance by air or by boat. The transportation cost is in addition to the cost of normal goods and projects, making them ultimately much more expensive than those on continental United States. Many projects, especially building restoration, require site visits by a potential vendor, engineering firm, or a contracting officer. A single barge transporting large quantities of materials or equipment to Midway Atoll can cost approximately \$760,000 per trip.

Due to its remote location, the costly travel required to reach the Refuge, and the limited lodging facilities available, running a visitor services program is capacity intensive. Refuge and supporting staff stationed on the atoll are minimal for operations. To ensure the safety of visitors and a quality visitation experience, the Service would need to increase existing capacity. The Service intends to reopen visitor services at Midway Atoll when budgets allow for an increase in existing capacity.

The Service has worked to maintain many of the existing historic buildings on the Refuge. For example, nine officers' houses that were built in 1941 were rehabilitated and restored. Unfortunately, some of the buildings that the Service inherited have deteriorated, which can present hazards for both wildlife and people. Midway Atoll's harsh conditions (salt air, high winds, and unconsolidated substrate, etc.) cause buildings to deteriorate much faster than many comparative structures in the continental United States. In addition, many buildings were constructed and finished with lead-based paint and coral sand, and brackish water leading to corroding of the porous concrete that has not withstood the test of time.

Failing buildings and ingestion of the flaking lead paint from these buildings can harm wildlife and people. Lead poisoning has caused the mortality of approximately 10,000 albatross chicks annually, creating a conservation crisis. Beginning in 2011 and each year since, the Service has received funding from the Department of the Interior to remove lead contamination from soils where it was being ingested by albatross chicks and to take long-term action to remove the lead-based paint hazards on the Refuge from the highest priority areas. Those were identified as the Cable Station compound and the Industrial Complex. Among the four remaining Cable Station buildings that were shedding lead paint into the surrounding soil, three were removed because they were too old, deteriorated, and dangerous to stabilize and maintain. At the remaining Cable Station building, the Mess Hall, the Service installed a new roof, cleaned and encapsulated lead paint, and stabilized the structure. The Service has preserved the Cable Station Mess Hall as an example of unique architecture and early history of Midway Atoll but it too has deteriorated at a rate and to a state that is not sustainable for restoration in the long term. All the Cable Station work was done in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and in consultation

with the Hawaii State Historic Preservation Division and the Historic Hawaii Foundation. Both the Hawaiian State Historic and Preservation Division and Historic Hawaiian Foundation have been consulted on the preservation of historic resources.

Current Refuge Manager Dan Clark is a Captain in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve and has served in the active duty and Reserve armed forces for over 33 years. The Service formally recognizes the Battle of Midway every year ceremoniously and honors the sacrifice of those who gave all for our freedom. Mr. Clark has reached out to the International Midway Memorial Foundation (IMMF) since assuming his duties as refuge manager in December 2013 and he and his staff have partnered with other veterans' organizations and agencies such as the American Battle Memorial Commission (ABMC) to perpetuate the historical significance of the Refuge and Memorial. Currently, the Service, working with the ABMC, is installing a new Monument in honor of the Battle of Midway and the role of submariners in WWII. The Service will continue to work with the IMMF and other partners to honor the men and women who served during the Battle of Midway and at Midway Atoll. The Service looks forward to once again hosting the public on-site once the visitor services program can be restored.

Conclusion

The Service takes our role as trustee for this historic atoll very seriously. We will continue to work diligently to balance the natural resource stewardship needs of the Refuge while honoring our responsibility as custodians of the Battle of Midway National Memorial. Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your interest in this issue. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.