

**TESTIMONY OF CAROLINE BROUWER
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS**

IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 3979, KEEP AMERICA'S REFUGES OPERATIONAL ACT

NOVEMBER 15, 2017

Dear Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Caroline Brouwer, and I am the Director 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 2017 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. 3979, the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2017, which reauthorizes the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act (VCPEA). Originally enacted in 1998, this legislation enables the Refuge System to expand its volunteer programs and partner with community groups such as Friends organizations who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.

H.R. 3979 is not just supported by the Refuge Association but by American Fisheries Society, American Sportfishing Association, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Defenders of Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, Izaak Walton League of America, Marine Conservation Institute, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, The Corps Network, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, The Wildlife Society, and Trout Unlimited.

The VCPEA also allows refuges to receive donations and other contributions from persons, groups, or partner organizations, provides for expansion of volunteer programs, and streamlines administrative and contracting processes for partnership development. In an age 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. 3979, 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. 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. Annually, Friends and volunteers provide an additional 20% of work on refuges throughout the nation. For instance, the Refuge System currently has 3500 FTE (full time equivalent) positions nationwide. Volunteers provide the equivalent of an additional 700 FTEs through their work.

Friends and volunteers do everything from banding birds and raising fish at fish hatcheries, to conducting archery training and elementary school programs. Close to 42,000 volunteers contribute in excess of 1.5 million hours every year, valued at an estimated \$23.56 per hour. This works out to a total of \$30 million in benefit for the Refuge System – or a 6% boost to their appropriated budget.

There is a wide range in hours for volunteers—some work the equivalent of full time hours, and other 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.

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.

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%. 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 socio-economic community. Because refuges are local and a part of communities, volunteering is a local way to give back for many nature enthusiasts.

Serving our Country in New Ways: Veterans Give Back

For the past several years, Team Rubicon has partnered with the National Wildlife Refuge System to train volunteers and disaster relief responders. Team Rubicon is a non-profit organization that unites the skills and experiences of military veterans and first responders to create emergency response teams. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's heavy equipment training has expanded the team's capabilities and provides a trained volunteer cadre that can assist in projects on national wildlife refuges. Training in the use of heavy equipment and firefighting also improves the veterans' chances of finding jobs that require these skills.

The Refuge Association recognized Team Rubicon at our Awards Dinner in May 2017. This organization, founded in 2010 after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, has moved from providing international disaster relief to domestic disaster relief. The Refuge System, with its ability to provide a location for classes and projects for volunteers to complete using their newly-acquired heavy equipment skills, and Team Rubicon, have forged a strong partnership that has benefited the entire country with this team of highly trained volunteers.

New Audiences for Volunteering: Urbanites

The USFWS has launched a remarkable program to help support refuges that are close to urban centers, with the ultimate goal of reaching the 80% of Americans who live in urban centers. Based around the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the SoCal Urban Wildlife Refuge Project will build enthusiasm for understanding science and growing future conservationists through outdoor learning, service and stewardship of natural habitats, conservation based work for disadvantaged young adults, and enjoyment of being exposed to nature. Other urban programs have been started in Portland, OR, Albuquerque, NM, and Philadelphia, PA, and more are expected to expand into other areas such as Louisiana and Michigan.

Volunteers came out last winter to plant hundreds of acorns to restore oak woodland habitat at the San Diego Refuge's interpretive loop trail. Using either coast live oak and Engelmann oak acorns, Refuge and Earth Discovery Institute staff guided 25 volunteers in planting the acorns, and covered them with "duff," which is soil including mycorrhizae fungi, fallen leaves, and debris taken from established oaks. Oaks have suffered losses in the San Diego area from wildland fire, pests, and drought, and projects like this to renew oaks are important to keeping these iconic trees in our natural landscapes.

Carolyn Vance, a longtime volunteer at Seal Beach NWR, often leads birding tours and monthly cleanup projects. Earlier this year, she helped coordinate a single day environmental education program aimed at engaging girls. The Pearls in the Wild event had 30 attendees, where they toured the native plant garden, learned how to test water quality in the marsh, and constructed miniature nesting platforms for Ridgway's Rails.

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.

50 Years of Service at Hagerman NWR in Texas

Another retiree who has contributed over 50 years of service to the National Wildlife Refuge System is Karl Haller, a volunteer at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Texas since 1963. Mr. Haller was still conducting refuge bird surveys in 2013, as he had done every week for half a century. He has single handedly contributed to a scientific database that has proved invaluable for understanding bird trends in a time of drought and climate change.

Mr. Haller's passion for nature and his social engagement engaged everyone from refuge staff to visitors. He started building bird feeders in his backyard at age 8, and taught himself about birding while becoming a charter member of the birding club in his hometown of Wheeling, WV. He discovered the Sutton's warbler in West Virginia.

In 1995, Mr. Haller was awarded the National Wildlife Refuge Association's Volunteer of the Year Award.

Going the Extra Mile – the New Way of Volunteers: RVer

The Refuge System is working to engage the growing number of Americans living full or part time in their recreational vehicles. Each refuge is different but on average, by volunteering 20-40 hours or more per week, a person can live on a refuge free of charge. Many refuges require a commitment of 3 or more months at a time, but this can be a win-win for both a refuge and the RVer.

George and Peggy Harrison are resident Volunteers on Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. They live in their own camper trailer, and the refuge supplies a pad with full hook-ups. In return, they are obligated for 24 hours each per week of volunteer service. But, for 7+ years, the Harrisons have spent 7-8 months a year working more than full time on these refuges, and they also assist with the nearby Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge.

The Harrisons have become the mentors and "house mom and dad" to the refuge's intern program—the interns have them on speed-dial for when they need a jump or get a vehicle stuck

or advice; they counsel and guide and provide all kinds of support for these young conservationists, in addition to all the work they do for the refuges at the same time.

Volunteering in Virginia

When the Rappahannock River Valley NWR went looking for local citizens to form a Friends group, Ann and Frank Graziano stepped up. That was in 2004 and they are still going strong. They have combined for over 6,200 volunteer hours, building visitor facilities, organizing special events, applying for and receiving grants, and serving as ambassadors to the community. We can count their hours, we can see their accomplishments, but in truth, their contributions to the refuge are immeasurable.

The Rappahannock River Valley NWR is one of the 4 refuges in the Eastern Virginia Rivers NWR Complex along the west side of the Chesapeake Bay. The Complex has one maintenance position. In February 2015, an EF-3 tornado smashed through one of those refuges, Rappahannock River Valley NWR. Hundreds of twisted and uprooted trees fell on refuge trails, mangled observation platforms were lifted off their foundations and debris was scattered all across managed refuge grasslands and other habitats. Volunteers sprang into action and today all facilities on that refuge unit have been repaired or replaced, and visitors can once again enjoy the soul nourishing beauty that this refuge has to offer.

The Grumpy Old Men Construction Company

One group of volunteers at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida was affectionately known as the “Grumpy Old Men Construction Company” aka “the Grumps”. The number ranged from three to eight individuals depending upon the time of year and when the “snowbirds” are down from the north. They came every Wednesday and worked for 4 hours. They did all kinds of hands-on, sawing and hammering type work, ranging from building benches for the public to use along the trails, or decorative trash bins (garbage cans inside a wooden frame), or repairs to boardwalks.

Their visits normally involved stopping by to talk with the refuge manager or staff to complain...thus the grumpy part of their name. The complaints ranged from politics to local events to their thoughts on refuge management. Refuge staff greatly enjoyed their visits. When the refuge manager transferred away from the refuge, the “grumps” made him an official member of the group and presented him with a baseball cap that read “The Infamous Grumps”.

Retiring from Volunteering at Ohio Refuge

At the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in Ohio along Lake Erie, the pied-billed grebes, American coots and greater yellowlegs that are common sights at in the fall are oblivious to their dependency on volunteers such as Al and Betty Schlecht. The Schlechts, and other volunteers like them, have helped preserve the birds’ habitats and protected their numbers, with little appreciation from the birds themselves. They recently retired from volunteering in visitor services, but Mr. Schlecht has volunteered since 1986, and Mrs. Schlecht since 2000.

The Schlechts participate in bird counts on the first Sunday of every month. They will continue to help with the bird counts, and they said they hope newcomers will join them. Their other volunteer duties include mowing, gardening and invasive species mapping. In the past few years,

they have worked mostly at the front desk, greeting and guiding visitors and assisting them in the gift shop. One of the refuge staff said of them, “They just want to help people.”

Volunteers help Alaskan Refuges from Pulling Weeds to Protecting Polar Bears

Six volunteers from Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges spent a week in June 2017 pulling white sweetclover along 150 miles of northern Alaska's northernmost highway to keep the invasive species from infiltrating adjacent Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge. In their fluorescent orange safety vests, volunteers endured long days under the nearly-24-hour-summer sun pulling weeds along the Dalton Highway aka the "Haul Road," the major route for 18-wheelers hauling equipment between Fairbanks and the Prudhoe Bay oil fields.

The weed-pullers were joined by a staff member and student intern from Kanuti Refuge as they split into pairs to pull sweetclover 100 yards from bridges on both sides of the road. The purpose behind this annual volunteer project--which has continued more than a dozen years--is to pick the sweetclover before it can flower and go to seed so the seeds can't travel down the rivers and invade the refuge. One mature sweetclover plant can produce 350,000 seeds which remain viable for 80+ years!

The Kaktovik Polar Bear Conservation Project—a collaboration between the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Marine Mammal Management Program and the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges—enabled graduate student Jacqueline Keating to volunteer for three weeks in the Native village of Kaktovik. Jacqueline conducted daily polar bear counts and outreach programs for tourists and locals in an effort related to increased polar bear concentrations and visitor use around the village. Jacqueline is completing graduate work on managing bear viewing on the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge and her volunteer assignment at Kaktovik enabled her to experience a different type of bear viewing management.

Hurdles to Overcome in Volunteering on Refuges

Unfortunately, in many cases, the desire for volunteering opportunities outweighs the Service's ability to meet them. For instance, a few years ago the Desert NWR outside Las Vegas announced they would have volunteer opportunities at their popular Corn Creek station, just a short drive from the Las Vegas Strip. The staff excitedly got coffee and doughnuts that morning – anticipating about 20 to 30 participants. To their surprise, over 250 people showed up – but with only two Service employees able to be on hand for the event, they were forced to turn people away with no capacity to accept the help.

We thank Congress for an additional appropriation in FY17 to address this very problem. In the Interior Appropriations bill, funding was added specifically to help ensure the Service can accept the help, but much more is needed.

National Wildlife Refuge System Awards—2017

Each year, the National Wildlife Refuge Association is honored to present awards for Volunteer of the Year and Friends Group of the Year. This year, the 2017 award for Volunteer of the Year was presented to Richard Esker, a former engineer. In 2003, Mr. Esker signed up to volunteer the same week he retired from Dupont and since then he has logged over 11,645 hours at the Ohio

River Islands National Wildlife Refuge along the Ohio/West Virginia border. Dick applies his innovation and critical thinking to map design for visitors and staff, refuge safety improvements, visitor center aquarium re-design, aquaculture systems construction for mussel holding, designing and building a tree nursery bed, and so much more. He is a mentor to new employees and seasonal interns. Dick is an essential asset to the team at the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife

In 2017, our Molly Krival Refuge System Friends Group of the Year award went to the Friends of Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. The Friends recognized that children today are spending less time outside and they tend to be less connected to nature. To help the kids make meaningful connections with nature, the Friends worked tirelessly in 2016 to construct the Outdoor Wonders Learning Center, an environmental education classroom for the more than 4,000 school children that visit the refuge every year. The Friends work side-by-side with the visitor services staff to provide for the needs of visitors including school children, disabled hunters, birders, bicyclists, and tourists. And perhaps most importantly, they work with the refuge manager to strengthen the relationship between the refuge and the surrounding communities.

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. 3979 and urge you to pass it from this subcommittee, full committee, and the full House of Representatives.