

**STATEMENT OF DAN ROSS, VIRGINIA STATE CHAIRMAN
DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.**

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

**CONCERNING:
H.R. 3979, THE KEEPING AMERICA'S REFUGES OPERATIONAL ACT
NOVEMBER 15, 2017**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Dan Ross and I am Ducks Unlimited's Virginia State Chairman. Although I am missing opening day of goose and duck season in Virginia, I am more than honored and humbled to testify today in support of the Keeping America's Refuges Operational Act, which is sponsored by my friend Congressman Rob Wittman and Congressman Hakeem Jefferies, both champions of conservation. I have served as a volunteer for Ducks Unlimited since 2006, and I have worked through the ranks of our volunteer system, beginning as the chair of our local committee and now serving as the Virginia State Chairman.

Ducks Unlimited has been a continental leader in waterfowl conservation for more than 80 years. Our mission is to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. These wetlands and habitats, many of which are included in the National Wildlife Refuge system, provide measurable economic and tangible natural infrastructure benefits to other wildlife and the people who enjoy and value them. We work in Canada, Mexico, and every state in the United States. Since 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 14 million acres of habitat, including 47,571 acres in my home state of Virginia. These accomplishments are vital to sustain populations of waterfowl and other wildlife.

Ducks Unlimited has a special tie to one National Wildlife Refuge that sits on the border of Virginia and North Carolina. One of our members, Mr. Wayne Jarman, has a close family connection to Joseph Knapp, one of the founders of Ducks Unlimited. Because of this connection, Mr. Jarman also hunts waterfowl on the property formerly owned by Knapp. While part of the Knapp property is still privately owned, most of it is now part of Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge. Because it is now operated as a refuge, it is enjoyed by thousands of Virginians and others who engage in outdoor recreation. Like many other refuges, Mackay Island faces many management and funding challenges, which this legislation will help address.

With more than one million members and supporters nationwide and over 16,000 members in my home state of Virginia, Ducks Unlimited represents a significant conservation voice for migratory birds and the landscapes that support them. Our work is science-based. We use reliable information from the disciplines of wetland ecology, waterfowl biology, hydrology, civil engineering, and landscape ecology to develop, implement, and adapt waterfowl and wetland conservation actions. We collaborate with many public agencies, private businesses, and organizations as well as farmers and ranchers to conserve the most important landscapes used during migratory birds' life cycles, including breeding, migration, and wintering habitats. These partnerships are essential for conservation, and we support legislation and policy that advance

wetland conservation and related economic, natural infrastructure, and wildlife and fish population growth on behalf of Americans.

The Keeping America's Refuges Operational Act of 2017 (KARO) will reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge System volunteer, community partnership, and education programs. These programs help ensure Americans like me can hunt, fish, visit, and explore wildlife for generations to come. Without refuge work accomplished by volunteers to maintain the 561 National Wildlife Refuges and 14 refuges in Virginia, these natural resources and waterfowl havens would be hard pressed to stay productive, open, and operational.

Further, volunteers like me and other Ducks Unlimited members donate millions of hours to improve refuges. Our work ranges from removing invasive weeds to building needed infrastructure. In fact, in Fiscal Year 2016, 40,000 volunteers donated 1.4 million hours. These donated hours are equivalent to nearly 1,000 full-time employees, or about 20 percent of the work completed within the refuge system. These numbers demonstrate that without volunteer support facilitated through KARO, some of our most treasured natural resources would be at risk.

Support for our refuges is not only essential for wildlife and their habitats but also for the economy. According to a recent poll by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 101.6 million Americans participated in wildlife-related outdoor recreation last year. Unfortunately, while the number of people participating in fishing and wildlife-watching has increased, participation in hunting dropped by about 2 million people to a total of 11.5 million hunters. Total expenditures by hunters also declined 29 percent from 2011 to 2016, from \$36.3 billion to \$25.6 billion. The top reason the number of hunters is declining is 'not enough access to quality places to hunt or fish,' which is one more reason why keeping our refuges open and operational is essential to keeping the heritage of sportsmen and women alive. Public lands like National Wildlife Refuges provide quality places to pursue waterfowl and enjoy many other wildlife species, and Americans (and Ducks Unlimited members) depend on them!

Conclusion

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify regarding this important legislation. With your continued support of this program, our nation's refuges will remain essential and well-managed habitats that support our migratory bird populations, wetlands and other habitats as well as our nation's economy.

I look forward to working with your committee and our many partners as the KARO Act moves forward, and to continue to support the benefits the bill would provide to wildlife and the millions of people who enjoy or work in the outdoors.

Mr. Chairman, the more than one million members and supporters of Ducks Unlimited and I thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.