

PUBLIC EMPLOYEES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

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America's Most Imperiled Refuges

Ten of the Most Vulnerable National Wildlife Refuges

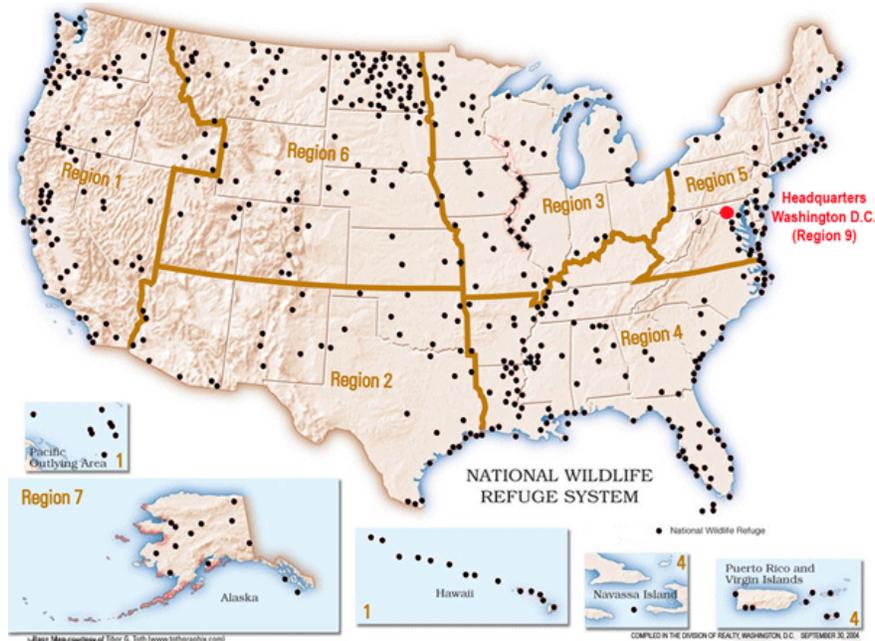
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Summary

National Wildlife Refuges are supposed to shelter countless migratory waterfowl, native mammals, reptiles and amphibians but many refuges themselves are under siege. In this special report, PEER profiles National Wildlife Refuges from regions across the country facing the most acute threats from human activities. The pressures facing these ten refuges range from oil drilling to encroaching development, from mining to road-building. All of these threats are motivated by politics – politics pushing new human uses incompatible with the mission of these refuges.

The National Wildlife Refuge System was commissioned by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 when he designated Florida's Pelican Island as America's first wildlife refuge. The purpose of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to "conserve fish, wildlife, and plant resources and the habitats they depend on for the benefit of the American people." What Roosevelt sought to protect was a piece of American history as vital as any artifacts or relics of bygone days – the land itself.

Today the system encompasses more than 540 refuges in all 50 states.



Based upon interviews with refuge staff, PEER identified the *Ten Most Imperiled Refuges in the U.S.* The threatened refuges are located from the Yukon in Alaska to the Florida Keys:

- **Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (AZ)** – border wall and border control issues;
- **National Key Deer Refuge (FL)** – sprawling development and auto traffic;
- **National Bison Range (MT)** – paralyzing dispute over tribal demands for refuge control;
- **Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (NC)** – road construction;
- **Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (AK)** – land exchange for oil & gas drilling;
- **Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge (NY)** – limestone quarry;
- **Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge (MI)** – agricultural pollution;
- **Baca National Wildlife Refuge (CO)** – oil and gas drilling;
- **Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (AZ)** – uncontrolled off-road vehicle abuse
- **San Pablo Bay and Marin Islands National Wildlife Refuges (CA)** – water pollution and sprawl.

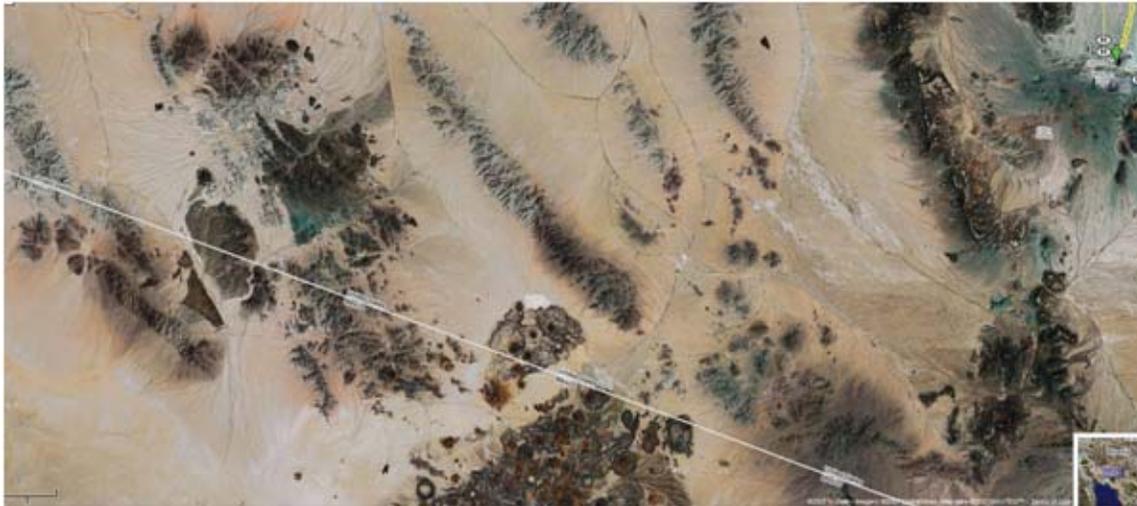
Each of these threatened refuges has a different story, but they all share the peril of politics undermining the mission of wildlife protection. PEER hopes that by drawing attention to the plight of these wildlife sanctuaries they stand a better chance of defeating the threats they face.

While the ten refuges profiled by PEER are facing acute threats, there also appears to be widespread and growing concern throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System. A 2007 survey of all Refuge Managers by PEER yielded these results:

- Nearly two out of three (62%) do not feel the refuge system is accomplishing its mission;
- More than two in three (67%) are no longer “optimistic about the future of the refuge system”. A similar percentage (65%) rates morale as either poor or “at an all time low; and
- A strong majority (57%) lacks “confidence in the current leadership of the Fish & Wildlife Service.” Not a single refuge manager registers strong confidence in agency leadership.

While adequate funding is crucial, as the Bible says, man does not live by bread alone. For refuges that means leadership support to turn back threats to the very mission of the refuge. Refuges are small slices of habitat vital to wildlife that withstand the human intrusions highlighted in this report.

CABEZA PRIETA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



On the border. Cabeza Prieta NWR. Town of Ajo in Pima County AZ is at top right.

PHOENIX, AZ. – Spanning more than 800,000 acres, Cabeza Prieta is the third largest national wildlife refuge in the continental US. Seven rugged mountain ranges cast shadows over valleys once swept by lava. Giant saguaro cactuses, towering over the Sonoran Desert, create homes for birds and insects.

Endangered Sonoran pronghorn, lesser long-nosed bats and other wildlife need this refuge to survive and recover. Far from a barren desert, Cabeza Prieta NWR harbors as many as 400 species of plants and more than 300 species of animals. Keeping the wildlife safe from careless human activity is a high priority on the refuge.



The refuge shares a 56-mile border with Sonora, Mexico. Failed border policy that pushes migrants to remote areas is a huge problem for refuge protection.

In 1990, over 90 percent of the refuge was designated by congress as wilderness. To help maintain the wilderness character of Cabeza Prieta refuge, no vehicle traffic is allowed

except on designated roads. The Cabeza, however, is still deeply cut by off-road ruts created and used by smugglers and the US Department of Homeland Security. The desert ecosystem is fragile, and tracks made by vehicles or people can remain for hundreds of years.

The impact of the illegal immigration situation is higher now than it ever was. The Bush Administration is planning to put up a 700-mile double fence along the southern border of the United States, dividing the Sonoran desert and blocking important migration routes. The impact on the ecosystems that transcend boundaries with our neighbor Mexico would be catastrophic.

Many animals from javelina, wildcats, and Cabeza Prieta's own endangered species, the Sonoran Pronghorn, will be negatively affected by the fence.

The wall would be a double-edged sword for the refuge. On one hand, it would prevent illegal immigrants, who leave garbage, create fires and abandon vehicles in the refuge that cannot easily be removed, from entering. On the other hand, the wildlife in the refuge know nothing of borders or politics, and the impact on them would be detrimental. Studies have shown that artificial boundaries have a great impact on local fauna, and even the humans who share the same space. Fences built in the Okavango Delta in Botswana have led to the death of migratory mammals, which were unable to reach sources of water. A fence built near the border between India and Pakistan, designed to keep Pakistanis out, has instead disrupted the migratory routes of bears and leopards, leading to dangerous encounters between the animals and humans.

Not only will migration routes be severed, but the construction of a double-walled fence without any corridors for wildlife to use is costly, and will cause a great number of human disturbances to the area. From the construction of the fence to the maintenance of it, humans will forever scar the landscape of the Cabeza Prieta refuge. The refuge will become more like a zoo; wildlife will have nowhere to go but roam inside the refuge's walls. But, unlike a zoo, resources are not constantly given to the animals, and disturbances in their population numbers will occur.

According to Roger DiRosa, manager of Cabeza Prieta NWR, a solution to the border issue is to erect vehicle barriers, allowing animals to migrate through but not motorized vehicles.

NATIONAL KEY DEER REFUGE

MIAMI, FL. – National Key Deer Refuge (NKDR) is located in Monroe County, Florida, mainly on the Lower Keys, with one-third on Big Pine and No Name Keys. It shares its land with three other refuges: Great White Heron, Key West, and Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuges. Established in 1957 and spanning 84,000 acres, the refuge sees 90,000 visitors annually. The keys located in this refuge show a vast range of biodiversity. From different gradients of ecosystems like tropical hardwood to pine forests to important marine and mangrove habitats, it is a place like no other.

Key deer, an endangered species in the NKDR, is dog sized, standing less than three feet high at its shoulder. It has shown a substantial recovery from its 1930's population of 50 deer to today's number of more than 700.

Human interaction with the deer has caused more harm than good by creating not only a cute deer in one's back yard but also splatter on the asphalt on



the road. Illegal roadside feeding of the deer contributes to 70% of the annual mortality of the deer, and many hazards of close human contact also affect their population, including getting tangled in wire and debris, and attacks by dogs. These are not, however, the only consequences of human interactions.

Urbanization is also a major threat to this refuge and its biodiversity. Commercial and residential construction is on the rise surrounding the refuge, causing irreversible impacts to not only habitat but fauna too.



As seen in many cities around the United States, wildlife has grown to be a nuisance to urbanites. NKDR is no exception to this, and some of the locals have taken a liking to more-than-accidental deaths of the deer. Some citizens of Big Pine Key are angry that Key Deer are still on the endangered list when they seem so prevalent in their neighborhoods. There have been several cases of locals intentionally killing the deer, and the refuge has even received threats via e-mail concerning the deer.

Maintaining a refuge that is filled with not only key deer but also 21 other federally listed endangered species is no easy task, especially when the deer have seemingly lost their fear of humans who feed them.

BISON RANGE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

MOIESE, MT - The National Bison Range is considered the “crown jewel” of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This year, the NBR celebrates its 100th anniversary. The refuge is a piece of American history. This past is kept alive by respecting and maintaining the animals that have been living on the range for ages. Bison, once endangered, now roam across the conserved plains of Montana. Originally 500 American Bison, one of the main species protected on the refuge, called the range their home, but now only 280-300 bison live on the range.

A variety of animals such as black bear, coyote, and pronghorn also live on the range but with lesser restrictions. Yet mammals are not the only beautiful sight at Bison Range; several species of birds, including various raptors, waterfowl and land dwellers make it their home as well.

Riparian habitats are filled with migrating birds and endemic species. Freshwater fish and waterfowl are important in keeping the range pristine. Maintaining water quality by keeping nonnative fish plant species out is a small price to pay for keeping native species at the river banks in.

In December 2004, over the objections of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service refuge managers, political appointees in the Interior Secretary's office imposed a one-year agreement turning over half the positions, functions and funding of the National Bison Range to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). Problems with the arrangement escalated until December 11, 2006, when the Fish & Wildlife Service cancelled the deal with the tribes citing both non-performance and harassment of refuge staff.

Despite this termination by the Fish & Wildlife Service, its parent agency, the Interior Department, announced its intention to negotiate a new pact, but nearly 18 months later talks remain at an impasse. In the meantime, the staff and management of the NBR remain in limbo, unsure if their positions or duties are about to be bargained away. The budget, work plans and staffing levels for this refuge remain up in the air.



The local atmosphere is also charged with tension and occasional hostility.

What should be the happy event of its centenary celebration is rife with uncertainty, as the National Bison Range remains a political football in a high-stakes game played out in Washington, D.C.

PEA ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

MANTEO, NC— Pea Island NWR is located on less than 6,000 acres of land on the north end of Hatteras Island, a coastal barrier island and part of a chain of islands known as the Outer Banks. Approximately 13 miles long, Pea Island NWR is made up of ocean beach, dunes, upland, fresh and brackish water ponds, salt flats, and salt marsh.

Pea Island NWR boasts of more than 365 bird species, with large concentrations of ducks, geese, swans, wading birds, shore birds and raptors. In addition, the refuge is home to 25 species of mammals, 24 species of reptiles, and 5 species of amphibians.

Several shorebird nesting areas and wading bird rookeries are located on the refuge. Its endangered and threatened species include loggerhead sea turtles and piping plovers, which depend upon its beaches and dunes as nesting grounds.

As a coastal barrier island, this refuge is subject to constant erosion. Over time, the highway access to Pea Island – the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge and North Carolina Highway 12 – have

become damaged, and both state and federal transportation agencies have concluded that the Bonner Bridge and NC 12 need to be closed or replaced.



Several alternatives to replacing Bonner Bridge were evaluated, and in 2003, federal and state agencies reached agreement on building a bridge across Pamlico Sound and by-passing the refuge altogether. Local concerns about the cost of the Pamlico alternative reached Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, who decided to support replacing Bonner Bridge and NC 12. In so doing, Secretary Kempthorne overruled the longstanding U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

position that reinforcing the road through the eroding coastal habitat threatens the refuge itself.

The basic problem is that Pea Island NWR, as a barrier beach, is not a fixed landform and is constantly moving through erosion. Coastal storms frequently force the closure of NC 12, which requires constant maintenance to remain operable. The concern is that while the short Bonner Bridge could easily be replaced, it would connect to a road that could never be made safe and reliable without massive engineering support – work that would most definitely harm the fragile, shifting habitat of Pea Island. At absolute worst, the bridge could be left standing in the ocean as a mute monument to quick fixes.

A final decision by the North Carolina Department of Transportation is expected soon. Meanwhile, the planned road replacement hangs like a sword of Damocles above Pea Island.

YUKON FLATS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Fairbanks, AK — Yukon Flats NWR consists of 11 million acres, with the Yukon Flats its center, surrounded by uplands, and encircled by highlands. The Yukon River bisects the refuge and its lower tributaries swell in flood season to cover vast areas of wetlands.

Located on the eastern side of the state along the Canadian border, Yukon Flats NWR is considered one of the greatest waterfowl breeding grounds in North America.

Yukon Flats NWR is also the location of a massive land-for-oil swap that aims to open much of eastern Alaska up to petroleum development. The land exchange is moving quickly despite the absence of any land appraisals for the more than half-million acres involved. One preliminary estimate puts potential undiscovered Yukon oil resources at one-third the size of Alaska's largest North Slope field.

Under the agreement, the Interior Department would give up 110,000 acres of land and subsurface rights, as well as subsurface rights for another 100,000 acres of the Yukon Flats NWR to a Native Corporation called Doyon, Ltd. In return, Interior would receive 150,000 acres of Doyon refuge in-holdings and the Doyon would waive rights to 53,000 more acres. Then, depending upon the oil and gas developed by Doyon and its value, Interior could get additional lands and a small royalty.



Currently, there is no oil development in the region. The trade would put the refuge's most commercially promising areas under corporate control and facilitate pipelines to carry oil and gas to market. The net result will sweep a vital wildlife refuge into an oil rush, crisscrossed with pipelines and roads.

Further, the Yukon northern boundary directly abuts the southern boundary of Arctic NWR. It is not rocket science to understand what such a land exchange would do to the controversy about the exploration of Arctic NWR.



The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the exchange outlines a panoply of potential detrimental impacts, including higher air pollution, discharge of greenhouse gases, “excessive draw down of surface waters,” loss of wetlands from drainage to build oil platforms, as well as threats to water quality and the risk of oil spills.

The transaction is classified as “an equal value exchange” even though no appraisals have been conducted. Waiting for appraisals, however, would delay the deal until the next administration.

IROQUOIS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Alabama, NY – The Iroquois NWR lies along the Atlantic Flyway, making it a key stopover for tens of thousands of migrating Canada geese each year. Besides waterfowl, migrating shorebirds, such as yellowlegs, dowitchers, sandpipers, killdeer, American woodcock and snipe, make Iroquois landings. The refuge also hosts two active bald eagle nests, as well as major use by immature eagles.

The 11,000-acre refuge is also home to 42 species of mammals, such as muskrat, red fox, eastern cottontail, and river otter. Similarly, a wide variety of fish species including northern pike, bass, black crappie, bullhead, carp, sunfish and yellow perch reside in refuge waters.

Located in western New York State, the Iroquois NWR is sandwiched by state wildlife management areas totaling 8,000 acres, thus enhancing its attraction to all forms of wildlife, including several state-listed threatened species.



A private corporation, Frontier Stone LLC, has filed application for a 174-acre quarry for limestone and dolomite to be situated adjacent to the refuge. The hydrological parameters and impacts of the quarry operation are not known, but federal and academic experts are concerned that blasting and water draw-downs from the quarry site could negatively affect water levels in refuge pools and the vegetation and animal species which depend on those pools.

The entire wetlands complex in Iroquois NWR may be joined in a closely-related hydrological unit. To date, there has been no characterization of ground-water or surface water flow from the quarry toward the Iroquois NWR. Such a characterization, however, is beyond the requirements of New York State for private quarry applicants.

The U.S. Geological Survey has proposed to undertake a comprehensive study of the hydrology but no sponsor has come forward to fund it. So, without a public agency willing to step up and undertake the review needed to prevent unnecessary damage to the refuge hydrology, the fate of the Iroquois waters is murky, at best.

SHIAWASSEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Saginaw, MI – Shiawassee NWR covers 95,000 acres immediately south of Saginaw, Michigan. Its rivers, marshes, grasslands and forests are home to 278 bird species, including visits by an estimated 25,000 geese and 40,000 ducks each year. It is home to a wide diversity of wildlife, including 29 mammal species, 70 fish species and 19 reptile and amphibian species.



The refuge is formed by the confluence of three rivers, making its waters both its greatest asset and threat. These rivers drain vast agricultural districts, producing corn, soybeans and sugar beets, as well as large factory farms (concentrated animal feeding operations or CAFOs), industrial sites and municipal wastewater.

As a result, Shiawassee NWR's most fundamental problem is water quality. The Saginaw River, which flows through the refuge, is the state's largest; it is also capable of flooding and overtopping refuge dykes within 24 hours of precipitation. The Saginaw River carries with it waste from former and current heavy industrial and chemical plants located along its tributaries. Adding to this pollution burden are several sewage treatment plants, which add harmful nutrients, especially phosphorus, to the

river. Dow Chemical at Midlands adds dioxin and other chemicals while mercury loading occurs from fallout precipitation from downwind coal-fired power-plants.

Adding to Shiawassee's quality and management problems are off-refuge mandates. Shiawassee administers 116 "farmlands" commissioned by the Farm Service Agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the decade beginning in the mid 1980's. The number of agricultural districts covering some 1,150 acres spread across 120 miles is the highest for any refuge in the region. Most are less than 50 acres, many are unmarked and their boundaries have become muddied by property transfers. The refuge also is in charge of four islands (over 3000 acres) in Lake Huron – part of Michigan Islands NWR. These locales are embroiled in biological controversies and also create distance and access problems.

Encroaching residential development along its border with Saginaw City also presents another challenge – crime. In 2006, the refuge documented 700 law enforcement incidents on its lands. The effects of this urban interface are well beyond the capability of the Shiawassee NWR and its small staff to cope.

BACA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (BACA NWR)

Crestone, CO – Baca National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Colorado's largest refuge, encompasses 92,500 acres in the San Luis Valley, a high mountain desert in south-central Colorado.



Authorized in 2000 with passage by Congress of the "Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000," the refuge is situated within a few miles of Great Sand Dunes National Park, and is administered as part of the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex that includes Alamosa and Monte Vista Refuges. As the Baca NWR's Conceptual Management Plan (CMP) states, the authorizing

legislation aimed not only to protect the region's "incredibly unique sand dunes ecosystem," but also the "exceptional ecological, cultural, and wildlife resources of the area."

In addition to the sand dunes ecosystem noted above, the refuge's diverse habitats include extensive wetlands, desert shrublands, grasslands, forested areas, and riparian lands. And although biologic inventories have not yet been performed on the refuge's lands, inventories from nearby areas suggest that dozens of rare, threatened or endangered plant and animal species

are likely to be found, including the Slender Spiderflower, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and Rio Grande sucker fish. The area also contains a treasure trove of archaeological sites.

Before the government bought the land for the refuge, Lexam Energy Exploration, a Canadian company, acquired mineral rights, and the company is pressing forward with plans to drill for oil and natural gas on the refuge. A lawsuit by a local group, the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council forced the FWS to complete an Environmental Assessment, which was released in January of this year. The assessment supported the drilling of two wells, with certain environmental safeguards in place, but has been faulted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the state Division of Wildlife, local citizens and environmental groups. Results from these initial explorations would determine whether extensive oil and gas development would be pursued.

Despite the extensive opposition to the plan, Fish and Wildlife Service maintains that given the separate ownership of surface and minerals, or “split estate,” they have no grounds to prevent drilling, but can only try to mitigate surface damage. Opponents assert that instead of an Environmental Assessment, a more thorough Environmental Impact Statement should have been performed. They point to a host of potential negative consequences of the drilling operation including: habitat reduction, alteration and fragmentation; animal displacement and dangers to animals from vehicle traffic; destruction of or damage to wetlands; impacts on groundwater; destruction of important cultural/archaeological resources; and increased air pollution; as well as economic and cultural effects on the area, which attracts tens of thousands of visitors drawn to its solitude and pristine environment.



BUENOS AIRES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Tucson AZ – In southern Arizona, Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge is a grassland landscape surrounded by mountains. The refuge’s 118,000 acres also has rare desert streams rich in biodiversity. The desert grassland supports diverse wildlife including the imperiled masked bobwhite quail and pronghorns. Wetlands along Arivaca Cienega attract an abundance of life. Brown Canyon is in the Baboquivari Mountains, where a sycamore-lined riparian area winds through oak woodland.

This scenic and fragile refuge created in 1985 is increasingly at risk from reckless off-road vehicle use, especially during hunting season from fall until spring, and suffers long-term problems from border walls and militarization.



Off-road vehicles are also a growing environmental and law enforcement problem here. Sally Gall, acting refuge manager of Buenos Aires says:

“The increase in the use of those vehicles has been incredible. It has become a growing issue for us.”

Refuge staff describe the recreational ORV problem as especially bad during hunting season, generally from September through May. Too many hunters are going off-road and cross-country on ATVs, trucks and other off-road vehicles. The resulting damage fragments habitat, harms wildlife and increases the risk of unnatural fire.

Low funding prevents the Buenos Aires NWR from hiring enough rangers to effectively stop illegal off-roading on the refuge. Rangers also have a hard time dealing with off-road vehicle crimes because they spend a “very high amount, 80-100%” of their time on border-related enforcement, according to refuge staff.

Problems on the US-Mexican border due to failed U.S. immigration policies are causing great damage to this refuge. Since 2006, over 3500 acres has been closed to public use, due to border-related problems.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has built border walls on the southern end of the refuge, disrupting wildlife movements. Despite the concern, the Fish & Wildlife Service is not even able to do the “needed” monitoring of the effects of border walls on wildlife, due to lack of funding and small staff. The government also has been very slow to complete acquisition of 40 acres of private lands as mitigation for the walls. Refuge staff says they are “out of the loop” on this, and “not sure it’ll ever happen”.

The border walls have not stopped illegal immigration. People use rope ladders and simply go over or around the walls. Traffic has been pushed to the east, toward the town of Aravaca, and to the west in to the fragile Baboquivari Mountains.

The Buenos Aires refuge needs wilderness protection. The refuge also desperately needs more funding for staff and law enforcement specifically focused on protecting its resources.

Better respect for the fragile desert by DHS is also needed. Border walls should be removed and replaced with wildlife-friendly vehicle barriers which have been proven effective



elsewhere. Finally, DHS and FWS must soon complete the mitigation purchase of the old vineyard and add it to the refuge’s land base.

SAN PABLO BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND MARIN ISLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

SAN JOSE, CA. – Comprised primarily of tidal marshes for migratory birds, Northern California’s San Pablo Bay NWR is one of the threatened ecosystems in the San Francisco area.

The goals of the 13,190-acre refuge are to “conserve, restore and protect bay wetlands for threatened or endangered” migrant and resident bird species. The refuge provides important habitat for marsh-dependent species like the California clapper rail, salt marsh harvest mouse and several native plant species.



However, human pressures have had major impacts on this wetland habitat; parts of the refuge have been mined, diked, and used for salt production. According to FWS, approximately 85 percent of the bay’s historic tidal marshes have been altered. This habitat loss impacts the ability of the remaining tidal marshes to take in rainfall and purify water, which affects water quality in the bay.



San Pablo Bay refuge also administers the Marin Islands National Wildlife Refuge, comprised of two islands, East Marin and West Marin, and surrounding submerged tidelands. The islands showcase one of the largest heron and egret rookeries in Northern California. West Marin Island contains the habitat for many waterfowl and wading birds such as heron and egrets, and East Marin Island provides additional nesting sites and rest spots for nearby colonies.

East Marin Island, a former vacation retreat, has been heavily overrun by invasive species including Scotch Broom, fennel and eucalyptus. Refuge managers are working to restore native vegetation and a protect the area from further human disturbance.

FINAL NOTE ON REFUGE FUNDING

The National Wildlife Refuge System covers an area bigger than Montana, providing both critical wildlife habitat and major recreational outlets, with an estimated 40 million visitors each year, including hunters and anglers. There is a refuge within an hour's drive of every major U.S. city.

Despite their wider geographic distribution and larger number of units, the refuge system has always received far less funding and fewer staff positions than other federal land management agencies. This is true, in large part, because the NWRs does not share the public support and recognition of national parks and national forests. Hence, the NWRs simply does not have the political constituency of those agencies. However the NWRs is mandated to provide intensive biological, habitat management, and wildlife research programs – as well as complex wildlife-related recreation programs and visitor and wildlife protection functions.

Despite the critical role they serve, America's refuges lack sufficient resources to fulfill their conservation mission, much less meet the needs and expectations of their visitors. The J.N. Darling National Wildlife Refuge, with 850,000 visitors annually, tried and failed for seven years to get funding to build a new visitor center. The refuge is largely dependent on the efforts of its volunteers.

In 2006, the Bush administration **cut staff at refuges by approximately 20%** on average nationwide. Although these cutbacks were lightened somewhat by a budget increase in 2007, the overall funding profile of the National Wildlife Refuge System is bleak.

In 2007, PEER surveyed all of the Refuge Managers across the country. We received surveys back from more than half (52%) of the 337 managers overseeing the 545 refuges and 37 wetlands management areas in the nation. Fiscal cutbacks were the biggest concern:

- More than nine in ten (94%) say the situation is deteriorating and that “base funding (salaries and fixed expenses) at my refuge is declining in real terms;”
- Nearly two in three (62%) conclude that the refuge system is not “currently accomplishing its missions;”
- More than two in three (72%) estimate that “staffing levels for my refuge fall [more than 25%] below its core requirements;” and
- Two out of three (66%) agree that the practice of “complexing” or consolidating refuges “is leaving refuge units basically un-staffed.”

With little or no support staff, more than three in four (86%) managers estimate that they are able to spend less than half of their time doing “conservation work, as opposed to purely administrative tasks.” Substantial percentages also claim these cuts are negatively affecting both visitor safety and protection of wildlife and habitats from poaching, excessive take and other law violations.

“Erosion of staffing is killing us,” one manager wrote in the essay portion of the survey. Another added, “Currently, the greatest factor negatively impacting our station is lack of funding.”

By way of comparison, National Wildlife Refuges receive substantially less funding than comparable federal lands. While refuges manage more land than National Parks, on a per acre basis, for **each \$1 invested in Parks, Forest Service special lands get 37 cents and Wildlife Refuges get only 17 cents** in the President’s proposed FY08 budget.

Simply put, the National Wildlife Refuge System is operating on a starvation diet. When challenges such as those profiled in this report arise, it is increasingly unlikely that refuges will have the resources to respond.

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