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**Testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee
On Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Concerning Fiscal Year 2013 Appropriations
March 21, 2012**

Chair and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Friends of the Refuge Headwaters (FORH), thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak before you about the fiscal year 2013 Interior Appropriations bill and the impact this bill will have on the Refuge we support: the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Upper Miss Refuge). We ask that you to support the President's funding proposals for programs in the NWRS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Below I will begin by briefly describing FORH, the Upper Miss Refuge, and use of the Refuge by 3.7 million visitors per year. With respect to the Upper Miss Refuge in particular, I will explain the importance of the following allocations:

- \$495 million for Operations and Maintenance (O&M) of the NWRS. This includes \$80 million for Visitor's Services, and \$39 million for Refuge Law Enforcement;
- \$700 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This includes \$150 million for the NWRS.

You have been strong supporters of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), and we thank you for that. Yet the Refuge System has endured significant cuts during the last two fiscal years, the cuts reduced an already austere budget, and they have negatively impacted the people who use the Upper Miss Refuge and who deeply care about it, as well as the wildlife that is the reason for the Refuge's existence. I will illustrate this to you below, and show how additional cuts will have harmful consequences out of proportion to any money saved by carrying them out. Finally, I will describe how deeply people care about the Upper Miss Refuge and their commitment to paying for its proper management.

While our testimony will focus on the Upper Miss Refuge, we are very proud to be part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. We don't presume to speak on behalf of the more than 550 Refuges, nor from the more than 230 Friends groups. But we are confident that those Refuges share similar challenges and successes, and if you could hear the testimony of more Friends you would find many of the same themes below.

The Friends of the Refuge Headwaters (FORH)

FORH is an all-volunteer group that began in 1997. Our mission is to support the Refuge's goals of sustaining diverse and abundant wildlife as well as providing compatible recreation, education, and interpretation to the public. Our current activities include sponsoring public outings for fishing, birding, canoeing, planting trees, removing invasive species, surveying

Refuge users, holding public events with expert speakers, monthly meetings, and advertising and communicating through print, electronic, and social media.

The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

The Refuge winds through 261 miles of the Upper Mississippi River across four states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. It comprises 240,000 acres of bottomland forests, wooded islands, marshes, backwaters, and upland prairies. It has more than 300 species of birds, more than 100 species of fish, and more than 50 species of mammals, as well as 250 bald eagle nests and 5000 heron and egret nests. The Refuge is part of one of the four major waterfowl migration flyways in the U.S., where birds must find reliable food, water, and resting places: during fall migration you can find hundreds of thousands of waterfowl using the Refuge on a single day.

But the Upper Miss Refuge is not just for wildlife. It's also a paradise for people. Minnesota is known as the land of 10,000 lakes and there are just as many lakes in Wisconsin, but not the part of Minnesota and Wisconsin where I live. We live in the land of the land of the Mississippi River, and thankfully, the land of the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Public Use of the Upper Miss Refuge

So I will now describe for you how much people use this Refuge and how deeply they care about it. That's not hard for me to do, because I'm one of them. I'm out on the Refuge a lot and for many reasons. I fish year-round, from my boat, shore, or ice, and in the fall I hunt on the Refuge. You'll find my wife and I on backwaters or pools in our canoe or kayaks, sometimes with friends, exploring and observing wildlife. We take walks through the bottomland forest or upland prairie, on trails, on ice-covered channels in the winter, or on levees. We walk or drive to observation platforms to watch birds. We often join with friends to take one or more boats to an island shore for a picnic. On a warm summer day we may swim at the riverside bathing beach directly across the river from Winona.

People like us make 3.7 million visits per year to the Refuge to hunt, fish, watch wildlife, boat, canoe, camp, or just walk. That's because the Refuge is not put away behind a fence or distant from the cities that dot the river. It's our backyard. That's why it's so heavily used by families, schools, colleges, youth groups such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and many others. If you drive through my town—Winona, Minnesota—or through other towns and cities along the river, you'll see boats on trailers parked in side-yards, driveways, and often on the street. They're fishing boats with rod holders and trolling motors, pleasure boats with picnic and swimming gear, or hunting boats painted camo and surrounded by a cattail fence, or airboats used by trappers. Inside our garages, in the backyard, or on the side of the house you'll find canoes and kayaks.

Any week of the year that you go out into the Refuge, you'll find people: a couple of dozen anglers in boats and on shore at a pool below a dam (the Refuge receives more than 1 million visits annually for fishing), a group of boats pulled up on the sandy beach of an island to swim and picnic on a summer day (more than 1.3 million visits for such activities), bunches of duck hunters heading out from landings on a fall morning (300,000 waterfowl hunters), or birdwatchers lining the sides of an observation platform (300,000 visit to observe wildlife or for

education). And they're not just in the easy-to-reach places. You've canoed far back into a remote maze of islands, pulled your ice-fishing sled as far down a channel as you can stand, or stalked through the forest with your gun until you may be lost. And you think you're alone. Around the corner comes another person, maybe doing the same thing you are, but just as likely there for another reason. But they wouldn't be there if the Refuge was not.

The Austerity in which the Upper Miss Refuge Operates

The Refuge is understaffed for many positions and has been for years. For example, four law-enforcement officers patrol 261 miles of river and 240,000 acres over four states with over 3.7 million visitors. That is an impossible task. Not only is that level of enforcement inadequate for the safety and protection of visitors and wildlife, but it is a threat to the officers themselves. The officers patrol alone and are often far from other enforcement agencies. Imagine how it feels to cruise toward an isolated island beach at night to confront 100 intoxicated people—and you're alone. For another example, two Rangers and four Visitor Services Coordinators plan and carry out activities with thousands of visitors and must often simply say no to requests for programs from schools, youth groups, and many others.

Other key positions are simply vacant. The Refuge has 51,000 acres of floodplain forest but no Forester, getting guidance instead from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Forester. Yet those same forests are declining due to invasive insects, plants, and trees such the Emerald Ash Tree Borer beetle, Buckthorn shrub, Oriental Bittersweet vine, and Black Locust tree. There is likewise no Fisheries Biologist, a position that provides a crucial link to states. Thus the Refuge has little or no say in fish management, fishing tournaments, commercial fishing, fishing seasons, fishing methods, or even catch limits, though fishing is an extremely popular activity on the Refuge and has large impacts on it. Even in the face of an advancing threat like Asian Carp, which have caused severe harm to fish populations and injuries to boaters, the Refuge can do little. In addition, there is no Private Lands Biologist to reach out to adjacent private landowners and help them restore fish and wildlife habitat on their lands through both FWS and USDA programs.

In other cases lack of funding means the Refuge cannot carry out its obligations. Currently the Refuge has authorized \$2.25 million for land acquisition through the LWCF and has land acquisitions waiting for either appraisals, signed purchase agreements, or final closing to fulfill its obligations for these funds.

Consequences of the FY2011-2012 Budget Cuts for the Upper Miss Refuge

The FY2011 and 2012 cuts have had many negative consequences, but I will mention just two. First, the Refuge has reduced the number of people it hired seasonally, most of whom are young people taking part in the Student Temporary Experience Program (STEP). As a result, high-school and college students lost an important path for gaining direct on-the-job experience. Second, the Refuge has reduced its outreach programs for the general public at weekend and evening events, most often within the communities adjacent to the Refuge. Not only does this mean less education, interpretation, and recreation for children and adults, but it also means fewer volunteer opportunities on the Refuge, fewer contacts between Refuge staff and volunteers and local citizens and leaders, and a decrease in tourists who support local economies.

Consequences of a 10% Budget Reduction for the Upper Miss Refuge

The Refuge is understaffed and absorbed cuts in FY 2011 and 2012. To carry out a further cut of 10%, the Refuge would eliminate special hunts for the disabled, youth, and others requiring special accommodations. All weekend environmental education and interpretation programs would be eliminated. Visitor centers would not provide weekend or evening hours for the public. In addition, there would be reductions in environmental education programs for schools, weekend outreach/interpretation programs regarding fish and wildlife and other refuge programs, restoration projects with state and other federal agencies, oversight of trust species (bald eagle, endangered species), and law enforcement including search and rescue operations, drug enforcement and accident investigations, hunting and fishing contacts, refuge trespassing, and habitat destruction. Clearly, these actions will have harmful consequences for wildlife and for the people who use the Refuge, and they can be avoided.

Economic Benefits of the Upper Miss Refuge

The authors of an economic study that is now eight years old¹ found that the Refuge generated over \$19 million annually in expenditures and economic value, \$98 million in economic output, 1,266 jobs with an income of \$21.4 million, and federal, state and local taxes of \$10.4 million. Given the importance of Refuge to the economies in four states and in the lives of the several million people who use it, the budgets for the two refuges is remarkably small. So funding of the Refuge has huge leverage. That's one of the reasons why reducing the budget will have such large negative consequences and increasing the budget would have similarly large positive consequences.

Public Commitment to the Upper Miss Refuge

The people who use it have strong feelings about the Upper Miss Refuge. We truly care, because it's a big part of our lives. That Refuge is part of our regional heritage, just as the National Wildlife Refuge System is part of our national heritage. We also have strong expectations for it. We want it taken care of so that it's there not just for us, but also for our children and grandchildren and beyond. That's why this region's biggest news last week was that all three species of Asian carp had been caught in the river in one day by commercial fishermen. That news made us scared, depressed, and to be honest, angry. Because those fish threaten the Refuge that we care about so much, we saw that threat coming years ago, and there was a failure to address it.

We're also willing to pay for management of the Refuge. In 2008, by statewide referendum, Minnesotans voted by a large margin to increase our sales tax by 3/8ths of one percent for three decades. 80% of the new revenues are dedicated to protecting, restoring, and improving wildlife habitat, surface waters and ground water, and parks and trails. Iowans passed a similar amendment in 2010, but are waiting on their Legislature to put their wishes into action. I'm confident the voters of Wisconsin would do the same if they had the opportunity, as would the voters of many other states. We Americans care deeply about our lands, waters, and wildlife. Doing so is a proud part of our history, as evidenced by more than a century of commitment to our National Wildlife Refuge System. We ask that you carry on this tradition.

¹ Caudill, J. 2004a. The Economic Effects of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge: Baseline and Effects of Alternatives. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arlington, VA. 32 pp.