

TESTIMONY OF JEFF TRANDAHL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION
BEFORE THE HOUSE NATIONAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
REGARDING H.R. 767, REFUGE ECOLOGY PROTECTION,
ASSISTANCE, AND IMMEDIATE RESPONSE ACT
JUNE 21, 2007

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (Foundation), I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify regarding H.R. 767, the Refuge Ecology Protection, Assistance, and Immediate Response Act. The Foundation has always enjoyed a close relationship with the Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee and we look forward to working with Chairman Bordallo, Ranking Member Brown, and the other members during the 110th Congress.

Congress established the Foundation in 1984 as a private 501 (c)(3) organization dedicated to the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and other natural resources. We serve as the official foundation for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In addition, the Foundation has partnered with 20 other federal agencies and more than 50 corporations to leverage funding for conservation. Through fiscal year 2006, the Foundation has accomplished our mission by supporting 8,865 grants and leveraging over \$374 million in federal funds for more than \$1.2 billion in on-the-ground conservation. This has resulted in more than 18.35 million acres of restored and managed wildlife habitat in all 50 states, the U.S. Territories, and in over 50 countries; new hope for countless species under stress; new models of private land stewardship; and the development of the next generation of conservation leaders.

Our efforts encompass many boundaries and missions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service including partnerships directly benefitting the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) and targeting the eradication and control of invasive species. One of our staff members, David Brunner, Director of Special Funds, was named by Secretary of Interior, Dirk Kempthorne, in November of 2006 to the National Invasive Species Council (NISC). The Foundation is honored to share with the Subcommittee some of the lessons we have learned through the management of these grant programs.

Invasive Species and the Pulling Together Initiative

Invasive species are one of the greatest threats to fish, wildlife, and plant biodiversity facing the United States today. On public and private lands and waters of this country, invasive species negatively impact the natural systems on which we all depend. Unfortunately, the effects of invasive species are clearly visible across the NWRS, the very areas that have been

set aside to try and protect native plant and animal communities. In order to help address the problem of invasives, the Foundation has created programs and funded projects focused specifically on the task of invasive species management, eradication, and prevention.

One such program, the Pulling Together Initiative (PTI) was created to specifically address the large scale problem of invasive plants in the United States. The Foundation, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service, brings together landowners, citizen groups, and weed experts to develop and implement strategies for managing invasive plant infestations on public lands, private working lands, and other natural areas. PTI has become one of the nation's leading forces against invasive plants using this cooperative approach.

The projects supported through PTI have been instrumental in leading the way in invasive plant management across the country. The most successful approach to addressing invasive species is through Weed Management Areas (WMA) – groups of public and private landowners working together using natural rather than political boundaries. PTI helps create local WMAs, funds their work, holds national conferences to disseminate successful techniques for use on WMAs, and educates local communities about the magnitude of the crisis posed by the spread of invasive plants and what they can do to help address the problem. The projects supported through PTI have been instrumental in guiding invasive plant management across the country. Since 1997, PTI has funded 431 projects and put \$41.3 million on the ground for invasive plant management.

Interest in the PTI program has rarely been stronger. During this past year, the Foundation was only able to fund one-fourth of the total funding requested. Numerous organizations apply for funding through the PTI program including refuges, refuge friends groups, and many other groups performing on-the-ground conservation efforts on, or directly benefiting, a refuge. Examples of some of the PTI projects funded on refuges include:

- The Verbesina Control on Midway Atoll project which supported the efforts of volunteers to remove the invasive weed, Verbesina, and replace it with native plants to prevent its reestablishment on the Atoll;
- A partnership funded in central and western Washington between the Fish and Wildlife Service, county weed boards, irrigation districts, and private landowners to survey, treat and monitor salt cedar on three National Wildlife Refuges; and
- A grant received by the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge in Maine to engage the local town leadership, citizens, and conservation organizations in community-based invasive species control.

Working with the National Wildlife Refuge System

The NWRS encompasses 540 refuges and 3,000 waterfowl areas on 95 million acres across the United States and territories. There is a refuge in every state, providing numerous opportunities for the public to access a wide array of natural areas. The Foundation works closely with the NWRS on a number of different programs which benefit those landscapes. Some of our current partnership programs directly related to the NWRS includes the Friends Group Grant Program, Nature of Learning, Centennial Scholarship Program, and the Preserve America Grant Program.

The Friends Group Grant Program, in partnership with Audubon and the National Wildlife Refuge Association, has awarded over 350 grants designed to increase the number and effectiveness of organizations interested in assisting the refuge system nationwide, such as friends groups. Another 130 grants have been awarded through the Nature of Learning partnership which supports projects with a conservation education focus that use refuges as outdoor classrooms and strive to enhance natural resource stewardship in the community. In partnership with the Walt Disney Company, the Centennial Scholarship Program awards scholarships to students who are conducting natural resource management research benefiting the NWRS. Finally, and most recently, the Foundation has partnered with the NWRS to launch the Preserve America Grant Program which supports interpretation and education of history and historic sites on refuges with a particular focus on how these sites relate to the conservation mission of the refuge.

In total, the Foundation has awarded well over 600 grants to organizations conducting work on, or directly benefiting, the NWRS. For all of the Foundation's targeted grant programs focused on the NWRS, we consistently receive two to three times as many project proposals as we are able to support. There is clearly an interest by nonprofit organizations, local communities, friends groups, and others to conduct projects improving the ecological health of our nation's refuges. Unfortunately, despite the success of these programs and the dedication of staff and resources, many refuges are increasingly becoming overwhelmed and altered by invasive species.

To our knowledge, there is no grant program that currently targets invasive species on refuges. The Foundation's PTI program is successfully helping to address some of the invasive plant outbreaks on select refuges but this is only a drop in the bucket compared to the overall need and demand. A similar demand and need can be found with non-plant invasives.

While the Foundation does not currently manage a targeted non-plant invasive species program, we have supported several eradication efforts. One extremely successful effort which should serve as a guide for the potential grant program authorized by H.R. 767 is the nutria removal on the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Nutria are invasive rodents with a beaver like appearance that are native to South America. Nutria were released in Eastern Maryland and with no natural predator their population quickly spread. As vivacious herbivores, Nutria decimated the native marsh vegetation destroying valuable coastal habitat.

Through a strong partnership between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of Maryland, which was supported in part by three grants from the Foundation, nutria were completely eradicated from the Blackwater Refuge in late 2004. Already, marsh land that had been turned into a muddy barren wasteland by nutria is returning to a vibrant and healthy marsh ecosystem.

Foundation's Lessons Learned

When the Foundation launched a small grant program with the NWRS to support projects related to the Refuge Centennial we were expecting to receive only 30 to 40 applications. We ended up receiving over 120 applications from across the United States and the U.S. Territories. Even when additional funding was provided to support a second round of grants only one-third of the projects submitted were able to be funded. Ever since this experience, the Foundation has had to be better prepared for the high demand and large number of project applications received under our refuge grant programs. If the Congress were to approve the grant program authorized in H.R. 767, we have no doubt that it would instantly be a competitive program.

The Foundation has also found, through the successes and failures of our grantees, that it is possible to effectively eradicate and control invasive species with targeted funding. These efforts can be accomplished when a coordinated strategy is taken and when the endeavor occurs immediately after an invasive is identified. Projects that also partner with the neighboring community, especially the adjacent private landowners, appear to document the most long-term successes. Since both of these factors are identified in H.R. 767 there is a strong potential that, if funded properly, the grant program authorized in this legislation could have a dramatic and positive impact on the NWRS.

H.R. 767

H.R. 767 definitely addresses an area of concern in the refuge community. Setting up a new grant program to address the many needs of the refuges concerning invasive plants and animals is much needed and we support the effort. We would like to offer a few suggestions on how to enhance H.R.767 and make the proposed Refuge Ecology Protection, Assistance, and Immediate Response Grant Program that much stronger and much simpler to implement.

We, as the official foundation of both FWS and NOAA, and a partner with multiple other agencies on these same issues, would offer that the Secretary of Interior, acting through the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, have the Foundation serve as the entity to manage this grant program. With our experience and background in the area of grant-making we would use a competitive process to rank the projects, according to pre-established priorities after which the "Advisory Committee" would make the final recommendations to the Secretary. The standards and guidelines set forth in Sec. 4 of the Bill are fairly standard for resource focused grant programs and as such would fit under our current operational structure. We would suggest adding under Sec. 4 (b) (2) Delegation of Authority, the following language between the words "instrumentality" and "the": "or appropriate

Congressionally chartered foundation.” This would allow the Foundation to be tasked by the Secretary to efficiently manage this grant program while not burdening the agency with another internal administrative function.

In Sec. 4 (d) Eligible Applicant, section (1) of the bill seems to exclude non-profit organizations that may very well be highly qualified to work on the types of projects most likely to come in during a competitive grant making process. We strongly urge the addition of non-profits to this list.

Sec. 4 (g) (1) offers for a grant for up to two years. It as been our experience that some grants may take longer to get established and implemented and that a five year window may be more appropriate. We would suggest this change.

On behalf of the Foundation, we once again thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify about the Refuge Ecology Protection, Assistance, and Immediate Response Act, and we look forward to answering any questions that might arise.