Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 19, 2008

The Honorable Norman Dicks, Chairman
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Appropriations Committee
B-308 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Todd Tiahrt, Ranking Member
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Appropriations Committee
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Tiahrt:

As Members of Congress who value our nation's magnificent wildlife heritage, we write to thank you for your strong support of our National Wildlife Refuge System and to respectfully request your consideration of continued investment in our nation's magnificent wildlife heritage in the fiscal year 2009 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. We thank you for your strong leadership in providing a critically needed increase for the operations and maintenance of the Refuge System in fiscal year 2008. In order to achieve the long term goal of overcoming years of under funding and mounting challenges, an annual funding level to restore our nation's magnificent wildlife heritage of $765 million by fiscal year 2013 has been identified, and it is estimated that an increase to $514 for fiscal year 2009 would go a long way in helping to meet that goal. With this in mind, we hope you will continue your leadership in restoring our Refuge System by supporting a further increase in funding for fiscal year 2009.

In order to overcome decades of inadequate funding and accumulating challenges, we agree with a diverse range of stakeholder organizations that the Refuge System needs $765 million in annual operations and maintenance funding by 2013. Without steady and incremental progress toward this relatively modest goal of $765 million, the Refuge System will be increasingly unable to properly administer its nearly 100 million acres, host educational nature programs for schoolchildren, restore degraded wildlife habitat, and much more. Worse, if additional increases are not provided, the Refuge System, having already eliminated 300 jobs in the last few years, will soon be forced to place another 250 jobs on the chopping block. The nearly $40 million increase provided in the final FY 2008 bill was a significant first step toward restoring the commitment first made to America's wildlife by Teddy Roosevelt more than 100 years ago; let us continue that commitment and reinvigorate our 548 wildlife refuges with a target of $514 million in FY 2009.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is our nation's wildlife trust. America is blessed with an astounding diversity and abundance of wildlife, and the Refuge System forms the core of our commitment to maintaining this American treasure for generations. Nearly 40 million Americans enjoy visiting the Refuge System each year, and their travel and recreation generates $1.7 billion in sales to regional economies, and creates more than 27,000 jobs and $543 million in employment income. Our Refuge System is the premiere wildlife system in the world, yet years of accumulating debts are putting this national treasure at risk.

The Refuge System faces a rapidly rising operations and maintenance backlog in excess of $3 billion. Each year, rising fixed costs erode the funding provided – the Refuge System needs an increase of at least $15 million each year just to break even. Though the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has implemented cost saving measures, the Refuge System has reached a tipping point. Over the past year, FWS announced a massive downsizing plan for the Refuge System in response to budget shortfalls that would, if fully implemented, result in a devastating 20 percent cut in staff. Scores of refuges will be

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completely de-staffed, significant acreage will be remotely managed by distantly located staff, and services to the public and wildlife will be significantly cut, including loss of law enforcement, hunting and fishing programs, invasive species control, species restoration, and environmental education and other public use programs. Many of these dramatic cuts have already occurred, but we can still avoid the worst of the downsizing by increasing the budget now.

We applaud the FWS for making difficult choices in the face of budget shortfalls to strategically allocate their limited resources. However, these are choices the agency should not be forced to make if our nation is serious about keeping our long-standing commitment to the national network of wildlife conservation lands first envisioned by President Theodore Roosevelt and more recently in passage of the bipartisan 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. An investment in the Refuge System to carry this commitment far into the future is sorely needed.

The $434.1 million funding level included in the final FY 2008 bill was a significant down payment in putting the Refuge System on the road to recovery. However, even this amount still fell nearly $17 million below the inflation-adjusted FY 2004 level, the high water mark for the System at its centennial. While the inflation-adjusted level for FY 2009 would total $466 million, we believe the FY 2009 Interior appropriations bill should provide funding commensurate with the importance of the Refuge System to our natural heritage. We support recommendations in "Restoring America's Wildlife Legacy," a thorough analysis developed by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), that, to adequately fund the Refuge System, the annual operations and maintenance budget should total $765 million by FY 2013. Gradual increments to reach this level over the five-year period would require FY 2009 funding of $514 million. We urge you to include or make significant progress towards this level in the FY 2009 bill.

We stand ready to work with you to ensure this important federal lands system is maintained for the American public. Again, thank you for your leadership in supporting and safeguarding our National Wildlife Refuge System.

Sincerely,

Ron Kind, CWRC Co-Chair

Jim Saxton, CWRC Co-Chair

Mike Thompson, CWRC Co-Chair

Michael Castle, CWRC Co-Chair

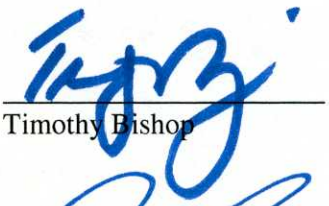
Nick J. Rahall, Chairman
Natural Resources Committee

Henry Brown, Ranking Member
Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee

Madeleine Z. Bordallo, Chairwoman
Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee

Mark Udall

James Langevin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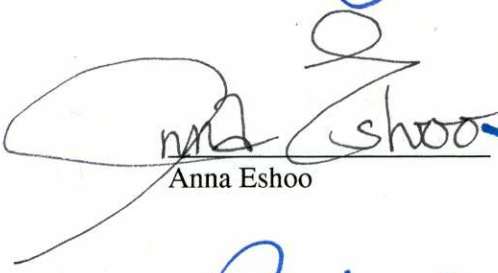
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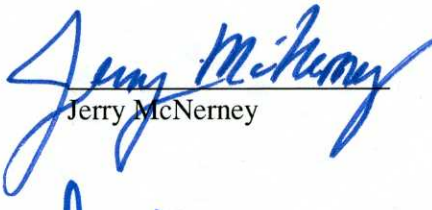
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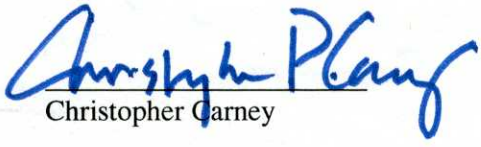
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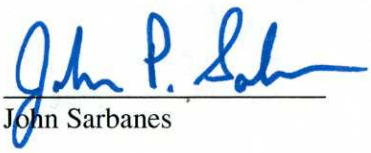
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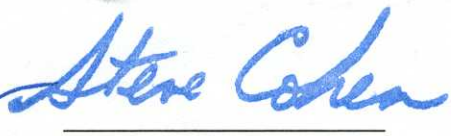
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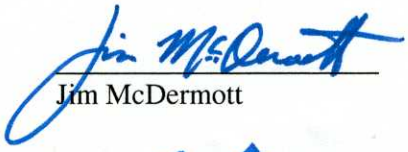
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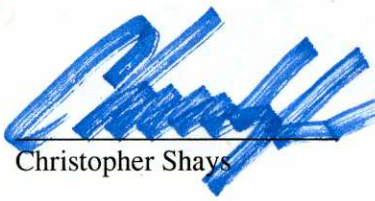
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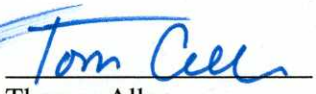
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