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WILDLIFE REFUGES

Trends in Funding, Staffing, Habitat Management, and Visitor Services for Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Statement of Robin M. Nazzaro, Director
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Highlights of [GAO-08-1179T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Wildlife Refuge System, which is administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the Department of the Interior, comprises 585 refuges on more than 96 million acres of land and water that preserve habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife. Refuges also provide wildlife-related activities such as hunting and fishing to nearly 40 million visitors every year.

GAO was asked to testify on a report that is being released today, *Wildlife Refuges: Changes in Funding, Staffing, and Other Factors Create Concerns about Future Sustainability* ([GAO-08-797](#)), which (1) describes changing factors that the refuge system experienced from fiscal years 2002 through 2007, including funding and staffing changes, and (2) examines how habitat management and visitor services changed during this period. For this report, GAO surveyed all refuges, visited 19 refuges in four regions, and interviewed refuge, regional, and national officials.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1179T](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLIFE REFUGES

Trends in Funding, Staffing, Habitat Management, and Visitor Services for Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

What GAO Found

In its September 2008 report, GAO reports that for fiscal years 2002 through 2007, the refuge system experienced funding and staffing fluctuations, the introduction of several new policy initiatives, and the increased influence of external factors such as extreme weather that threaten wildlife habitat and visitor infrastructure. Although core funding—measured as obligations for refuge operations, maintenance, and fire management—increased each year, inflation-adjusted core funding peaked in fiscal year 2003 at about \$391 million—6.8 percent above fiscal year 2002 funding. Inflation-adjusted core funding ended the period 2.3 percent below peak levels, but 4.3 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels by fiscal year 2007. Core refuge staffing levels peaked in fiscal year 2004 at 3,610 full-time equivalents—10.0 percent above the fiscal year 2002 level—and then declined more slowly than funding levels. By fiscal year 2007, staffing levels fell to 4.0 percent below peak levels, but 5.5 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels. Through fiscal year 2007, the number of permanent employees utilized by the refuge system declined to 7.5 percent below peak levels. During this period, refuge system officials initiated new policies that: (1) reduced staff positions and reconsidered how they allocate funds and staff among refuges to better align staff levels with funding; (2) required refuge staff to focus on a legislative mandate to complete refuge conservation plans by 2012; (3) shifted to constructing a larger number of smaller visitor structures, such as informational kiosks, and fewer large visitor centers to spread visitor service funds across more refuges; (4) increased the number of full-time law enforcement officers and their associated training requirements; and (5) resulted in additional administrative work. During this period, external factors, such as severe storms, that complicate refuge staffs' ability to protect and restore habitat quality also increased.

GAO's survey of refuge managers showed that changes in the quality of habitat management and visitor service programs varied across refuges during the study period. Habitat conditions for key types of species improved about two times more often than they worsened, but between 7 percent and 20 percent of habitats were of poor quality in 2007. Certain habitat problems increased at more than half of refuges during this period, and managers reported that they increased the time spent on certain habitat management activities, such as addressing invasive plants, despite declining staffing levels. However, several managers GAO interviewed said that staff were working longer hours without extra pay to get work done, and managers expressed concern about their ability to sustain habitat conditions. While the quality of all six visitor service programs was reported to be stable or improving between fiscal years 2002 and 2007 at most refuges, two programs—environmental education and interpretation—were considered poor quality at one-third of refuges in 2007. Changes in the time spent on visitor services varied considerably across refuges, and managers noted that visitor services generally are cut before habitat management activities when resources are limited. Managers are concerned about their ability to provide high-quality visitor services in the future given staffing and funding constraints.

Madam Chair and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on our nation's wildlife refuges. The National Wildlife Refuge System, administered by the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), comprises about 585 refuges and wetland management districts on more than 96 million acres of land and water that provide habitat for millions of waterfowl, other migratory birds, endangered species, and other plants and wildlife. In addition, refuges host about 40 million visitors each year who take part in one or more of the refuge system's six wildlife-dependent visitor activities—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation—and other recreational activities. The refuge system employs more than 4,000 staff dispersed in its offices across the country and spans all 50 states and several U.S. territories. FWS manages its refuges through its headquarters office in Washington D.C., eight regional offices, and hundreds of field offices located on or near refuge lands. Individual refuge offices may report directly to a regional office (we refer to these as “stand-alone” refuges), or may be grouped with other offices into a “complex.”

My testimony is based on a report that is being released today, *Wildlife Refuges: Changes in Funding, Staffing, and Other Factors Create Concerns about Future Sustainability* (GAO-08-797), which describes changing factors that the refuge system experienced from fiscal years 2002 through 2007 and how habitat management and visitor services changed during this period. For that report, we obtained and analyzed funding and staffing data; surveyed stand-alone refuges and refuges within complexes and received an 81 percent response rate; visited headquarters, 4 regional offices, and 19 refuges; and conducted phone interviews with officials at the other 4 regional offices and about 50 additional refuges. We conducted this performance audit from July 2007 to September 2008 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In summary, we found the following:

- For fiscal years 2002 through 2007, funding and staffing levels for the refuge system fluctuated, several new refuge system policy initiatives were

introduced, and the influence of external factors such as extreme weather and human development that affect refuge operations increased.

- Survey responses and interviews with refuge managers indicated that the change in the quality of habitat and visitor service programs, as well as changes in the amount of time devoted to these activities, varied across refuges during our study period. Given recent funding and staffing changes, and other factors affecting refuges, managers expressed concerns about their ability to provide quality habitat and visitor service programs into the future.

Numerous Changes Affected Refuge Management

From fiscal years 2002 through 2007, several changes occurred that affected refuge management including changes in funding and staffing levels, refuge system policy initiatives, and the influence of external factors, such as extreme weather and human development.

Fluctuations in refuge funding. Inflation-adjusted funding (in 2002 dollars) for core refuge system activities—measured as obligations for refuge operations, maintenance, and fire management—peaked in fiscal year 2003, for the celebration of the refuge system’s centennial, at about \$391 million—6.8 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels—and then declined quickly to 4.7 percent below peak levels by fiscal year 2005, before increasing again to 2.3 percent below peak levels in fiscal year 2007; it ended 4.3 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels.¹ In nominal dollars, core funding increased each year over the time period from about \$366 million in fiscal year 2002 to about \$468 million in fiscal year 2007.

At the refuge level, inflation-adjusted core funding at refuges varied considerably during the time period, with about as many losing funding as gaining funding since fiscal year 2002. Specifically, from fiscal year 2002 through fiscal year 2007, core inflation-adjusted funding decreased for 96 of 222 complexes and stand-alone refuges and increased for 92, with funding remaining about the same for 34.² The magnitude of the changes in

¹We adjusted nominal dollars using the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Price Index for Government Consumption Expenditures and Gross Investment (federal nondefense sector), with 2002 as the base year, which assigns greater weight to changes in federal workers’ compensation than do other indices.

²We defined funding increasing or decreasing by 5 percent or less over the time period as staying about the same. Four refuges incurred no obligations during the fiscal year 2002 to 2007 time period.

core funding at the refuge level were also more pronounced than for the trend overall. Specifically, core funding for 39 complexes and stand-alone refuges decreased by more than 25 percent during this time period.

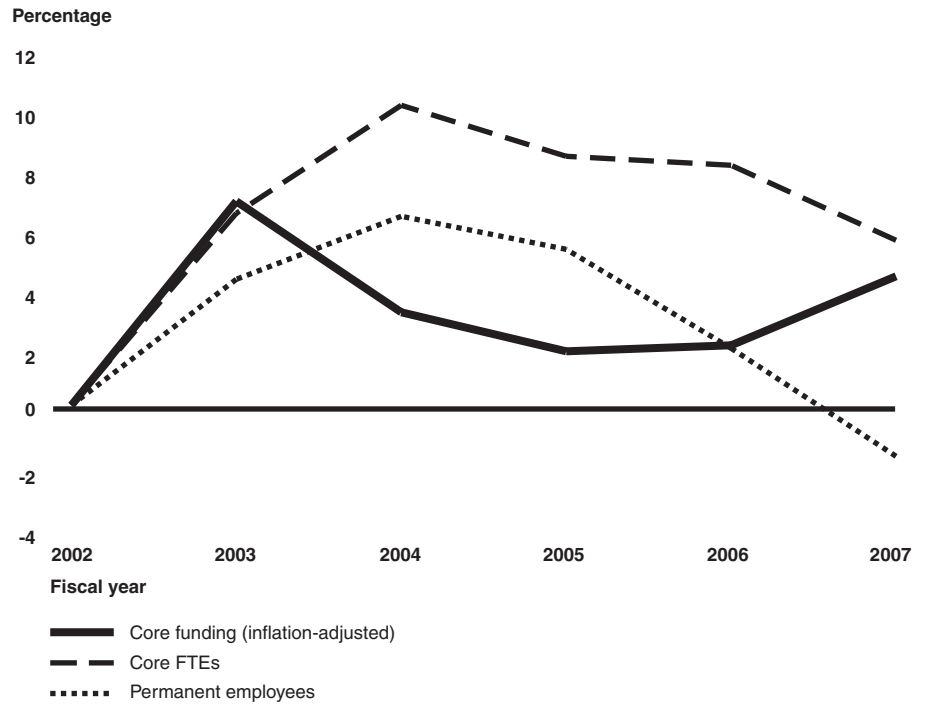
Fluctuations in staffing levels. Staffing levels for core refuge activities (core staffing), as measured by full-time equivalents (FTE) the refuge system actually used, peaked one year later than core inflation-adjusted funding and then declined more slowly.³ Specifically, core staffing, which includes operations, maintenance, and fire management, peaked in fiscal year 2004 at a level 10.0 percent higher than in fiscal year 2002, but declined after that to 4.0 percent below peak staffing levels in fiscal year 2007. This level, however, was still 5.5 percent higher than the staffing level in fiscal year 2002. While operations and maintenance FTEs increased 3.6 percent overall during our study period, they ended the period down 6.9 percent from their 2004 peak. Fire management FTEs, on the other hand, increased 14.3 percent over fiscal year 2002 levels.⁴

Similar to FTEs, the number of employees on board in refuge system positions also declined after peaking in fiscal year 2004. Through fiscal year 2007, nearly 375 employees were lost from the refuge system's peak staffing levels, a reduction of 8.4 percent over this period. About three-quarters of this loss came through a reduction in permanent employees (a 7.5 percent reduction), which refuge managers and regional and headquarters officials told us are a key measure of the effective strength of the workforce available to conduct core refuge activities because they represent employees on board indefinitely. Though 38 complexes and stand-alone refuges increased their permanent staff by more than 5 percent since 2004, more than three times as many lost at least 5 percent. Figure 1 compares the trends in the refuge system's core funding, staffing, and permanent employee levels during our study period.

³Actual FTEs, representing staff time charged to specific activities at complexes and stand-alone refuges, are reported in the Federal Financial System. They differ from budgeted FTEs, which generally represent the operations and maintenance staffing ceiling for the refuge system in a given fiscal year and are reported in the annual Fish and Wildlife Service budget justifications.

⁴About 38 percent of the increase in fire management activities over the study period was due to an increase in emergency wildfire suppression, prevention of further degradation, and rehabilitation of burned areas.

Figure 1: Comparison of Cumulative Percentage Change in the Refuge System's Core Funding, Core FTEs, and Permanent Employees, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007



Source: GAO analysis of Fish and Wildlife Service data.

New policy initiatives. Several new refuge system policy initiatives were implemented during this period:

- Recognizing that funding declines after 2003 were exacerbating an already high proportion of staff costs in refuge budgets, regional offices began to (1) reduce staff positions through attrition and by further consolidating some stand-alone refuges into complexes, and (2) categorize refuges into three tiers for the purpose of prioritizing funding and staffing allocations among refuges. These measures are primarily responsible for the decline in FTEs and permanent employees from fiscal year 2004 peak levels and the shifts in staffing among complexes and stand-alone refuges.
- Recognizing that the refuge system was not on pace to meet a mandate in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 to complete conservation plans for each refuge by 2012, refuge system officials created a completion schedule and, beginning in 2004, began requiring staff at refuges to turn their attention to completing the plans. While refuge

officials believe that they can meet the deadline, current information shows that some plans are behind schedule.

- To help spread visitor service funds across as many refuges as possible, refuge officials began placing a greater emphasis on constructing smaller visitor facility structures, such as informational kiosks and restrooms, at a larger number of refuges rather than constructing a smaller number of traditional visitor centers.
- To improve safety and address other concerns, refuge system management began an initiative to increase the number of full-time law enforcement officers and their associated training and experience requirements. However, refuge officials told us that they need to hire about 200 additional officers in order to reach the minimum number needed to provide adequate protection to refuge resources and visitors.
- Various refuge system, FWS, and Interior policies increased requirements on nonadministrative staff to enter additional data into certain systems and respond to numerous data calls. Refuge system officials are beginning to implement changes to reduce some of these administrative burdens.

Increasing external factors. The influence of external factors—those outside the control of the refuge system that complicate refuges’ abilities to protect and restore habitat quality, including extreme weather and development on adjacent lands—increased over this period. For example, refuge managers reported that between fiscal years 2002 and 2007, the influence of development—such as the expansion of urban areas and the conversion of off-refuge land near refuges to agriculture or industrial use—increased around refuges and contributed to refuge habitat problems for almost one half of the refuges. Such development can pollute refuge lands and waters and make it more difficult to maintain viable, interconnected habitat in and around a refuge’s borders.

Changes in Habitat Management and Visitor Services

From fiscal years 2002 through 2007, several changes occurred in refuges’ habitat management and visitor services, creating concerns about the refuges’ abilities to maintain high quality habitat and visitor services in the future.

Habitat management. Habitats on refuges for five types of key species—waterfowl, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, candidate threatened and endangered species, and state species of

concern—improved between fiscal years 2002 and 2007—about two times as often as they worsened (see table 1).

Table 1: Change in Habitat Quality by Species Type, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Species type	Percent of refuge habitats where quality improved	Percent of refuge habitats where quality stayed the same	Percent of refuge habitats where quality worsened
Waterfowl	36	47	18
Other migratory birds	40	44	17
Threatened and endangered species	28	52	11
Candidate threatened and endangered species	33	47	14
State species of concern	29	54	13

Source: GAO.

Note: Refuge managers identified habitat quality for specific threatened and endangered species, candidate species, and state species of concern occurring on their refuges that are aggregated into these general “types of species” categories. Not all species occurred on every refuge. Some rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding and survey responses such as “no basis to judge.”

Refuge managers reported two to nearly seven times as often that habitats for several types of key species were of high quality than low quality in 2007 (see table 2). Habitat quality is determined by the availability of several key components, including fresh water, food sources, and nesting cover, among other things, and the absence of habitat problems, such as invasive species. High quality habitat generally provides adequate amounts of each of these main habitat components and is not significantly affected by habitat problems, while low quality habitat generally lacks these components and may have significant problems; moderate quality habitat has a mixture of these attributes.

Table 2: Habitat Quality by Species Type, Fiscal Year 2007

Species type	Percent of habitats reported as high quality	Percent of habitats reported as moderate quality	Percent of habitats reported as low quality
Waterfowl	41	39	20
Other migratory birds	47	47	7
Threatened and endangered species	48	40	12
Candidate threatened and endangered species	37	46	17
State species of concern	47	41	13

Source: GAO.

Note: Refuge managers identified habitat quality for specific threatened and endangered species, candidate species, and state species of concern occurring on their refuges that are aggregated into these general “types of species” categories. Not all species occurred on every refuge. Some rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Complicating habitat management is growing pressure from increasing habitat problems occurring on refuges and the influence of external factors. Our survey found that invasive plant species and habitat fragmentation—the disruption of natural habitat corridors, often caused by human development activities—were the leading problems, affecting 55 percent and 44 percent of refuges, respectively, and both were increasing on more than half of refuges. Managers at refuges close to urban centers showed us busy roads adjacent to their refuge that have cut off natural habitat corridors, leading to animals trying to cross them or cutting them off from other members of their species, leading to genetic homogeneity and inbreeding. Managers of more rural refuges talked about increasing pressures to convert lands to agricultural uses, citing factors such as the increasing price of corn, or to industrial uses, such as oil and gas development.

At the same time, refuge managers reported increasing the time spent on a number of key habitat management activities on many refuges between fiscal years 2002 and 2007 (see table 3). Importantly, time spent on developing comprehensive conservation plans, which are required by the Improvement Act, increased for 59 percent of refuges during our study period. In addition, refuges that increased the time spent on habitat management activities were about three times more likely to report that

habitat quality for waterfowl and other migratory birds improved rather than worsened.

Table 3: Habitat Management Activities That Increased the Most at Refuges, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Activity	Percent of refuges that somewhat or greatly increased time spent on activity	Percent of refuges that somewhat or greatly decreased time spent on activity
Addressing invasive plants	61	9
Conducting comprehensive conservation planning	59	6
Coordinating with nearby landowners	49	7
Conducting habitat restoration projects	48	14
Conducting routine habitat management activities	43	18
Conducting inventory and monitoring surveys of habitat conditions	41	19
Conducting inventory and monitoring surveys of wildlife populations	39	21

Source: GAO.

In light of increasing problems and threats affecting refuge conditions, as well as recent funding and staffing constraints, refuge managers and regional and headquarters officials expressed concern about refuges' abilities to sustain or improve current habitat conditions for wildlife into the future. Even though our survey showed that a large number of refuges increased staff time on habitat management activities, some refuge managers we interviewed explained that staff were simply working longer hours to get the work done. Several refuge managers repeatedly indicated that despite growing habitat problems, an increasing administrative workload, and reduced staffing, they are still trying to do everything possible to maintain adequate habitat, especially habitats for key species, such as waterfowl, other migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species. Several managers said that attention to key habitats is the last thing that will stop receiving management attention in the event of declining funding. Several managers even said that they have to limit the amount of time staff spend at the refuge, as these employees are working overtime without extra pay.

Visitor services. Our survey found that the quality of all six wildlife-dependent visitor services was stable or improving between fiscal years 2002 and 2007, according to the vast majority of refuge managers responding to our survey. Most notably, environmental education and interpretation programs showed the largest percentage of refuges reporting improvement, although these programs also showed the largest percentage reporting declines as well, as compared to other visitor services (see table 4).

Table 4: Change in Quality of Visitor Services Programs, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Visitor service	Percent of refuges reporting improved quality	Percent of refuges reporting quality stayed the same	Percent of refuges reporting quality worsened
Hunting	26	65	9
Fishing	19	68	13
Wildlife observation	36	56	8
Wildlife photography	27	65	8
Environmental education	40	39	22
Environmental interpretation	47	38	15

Source: GAO.

Note: Some rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Our survey found that four of the six key visitor services provided to the public were of moderate or better quality at most refuges in 2007, but environmental education and interpretation were reported to be low quality at about one-third of refuges (see table 5). Managers told us that education and interpretation are among the most resource intensive visitor service programs and, for these reasons, the programs are often among the first areas to be cut when a refuge faces competing demands.

Table 5: Quality of Visitor Services Programs, Fiscal Year 2007

Visitor service	Percent of refuges with high or very high quality programs	Percent of refuges with moderate quality programs	Percent of refuges with low or very low quality programs
Hunting	56	35	9
Fishing	33	44	23
Wildlife observation	55	35	10
Wildlife photography	42	41	17
Environmental education	36	31	33
Environmental interpretation	32	36	32

Source: GAO.

Note: Refuges may not have programs in all six areas.

A major factor influencing the quality of visitor services—beyond the abundance of fish and wildlife populations—is the amount and quality of refuge infrastructure and the availability of supplies. For example, the availability of trails and tour routes is essential to providing the public with access to what refuges have to offer and is generally important for supporting any type of visitor service activity. Hunting and fishing infrastructure depend largely on physical structures such as duck blinds, boat launches, and fishing platforms. Providing wildlife observation and photography opportunities simply require adequate access to the refuge, but can be enhanced through observation platforms and photography blinds. Environmental education depends on physical infrastructure, such as classrooms, and supplies, such as workbooks, handouts, and microscopes. Environmental interpretation also depends on physical infrastructure such as informational kiosks and interpretive signs along trails.

Some refuges reported that they expanded their visitor services infrastructure between fiscal years 2002 and 2007, for example, by adding informational kiosks and trails and tour routes, yet more than one-half of refuges reported no change (see table 6). Most refuges also reported that the quality of their visitor services infrastructure stayed about the same or increased since 2002.

Table 6: Infrastructure Quantity and Condition Changes, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Type of infrastructure	Quantity of infrastructure			Condition of infrastructure		
	Quantity increased	Quantity stayed the same	Quantity decreased	Condition improved	Condition stayed the same	Condition worsened
Trails and tour routes ^a	41	54	5	39	35	26
Hunting infrastructure	21	75	4	22	66	12
Fishing infrastructure	25	70	5	27	49	24
Wildlife observation infrastructure	37	60	3	36	47	17
Wildlife photography infrastructure	35	63	3	30	58	12
Education infrastructure	28	66	6	30	52	18
Interpretation infrastructure	57	38	5	50	32	19

Source: GAO.

Notes: Some rows may not sum to 100 for the quantity of infrastructure or condition of infrastructure, due to rounding.

^aTrails and tour routes can be used to support all types of visitor service programs.

Time spent by refuges on visitor services varied considerably throughout the system. Overall, at least one in five refuges reported a decrease in staff time for each visitor service area (see table 7).

Table 7: Change in Time Spent on Visitor Services, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2007

Visitor service	Percent of refuges that somewhat or greatly increased time spent	Percent of refuges that spent the same amount of time spent	Percent of refuges that somewhat or greatly decreased time spent
Hunting	29	46	25
Fishing	20	60	20
Wildlife observation	34	45	21
Wildlife photography	25	54	21
Environmental education	44	27	29
Environmental interpretation	44	28	27

Source: GAO.

Notes: Percentages in this table represent changes in staffing for those refuges that report time spent on a given visitor service. Some rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Refuge managers indicated that staffing changes and a lack of resources for increasing and maintaining infrastructure, raise concerns about their ability to provide quality visitor services into the future. Our survey results showed that the time spent by permanent staff on visitor services had been reduced at more than one-third of refuges and more than half of refuge managers reported increasing their reliance on volunteers to help manage visitor centers and deliver education programs, for example. Refuge managers are also concerned about the impact that the increasing administrative workload incurred by non-administrative refuge staff is having on the refuges' ability to deliver visitor services. Refuge managers and regional and headquarters officials expressed concern about the long-term implications of declining and low quality visitor services. Many refuge managers cited the importance of ensuring that the public has positive outdoor experiences on refuges and providing them with meaningful educational and interpretative services. Managers said that the availability of visitor services is a way to get young people interested in future careers with the refuge system and instill in children an appreciation for wildlife and the outdoors as well as an interest in maintaining these resources. In addition, visitor services are important for developing and maintaining community relationships, as the refuge system is increasingly turning toward partnerships with private landowners and other agencies and organizations to maintain and improve ecosystems both on and around wildlife refuges.

In conclusion, maintaining the refuge system as envisioned in law—where the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the refuge system are maintained; priority visitor services are provided; and the strategic growth of the system is continued—may be difficult in light of continuing federal fiscal constraints and an ever-expanding list of challenges facing refuges. While some refuges have high quality habitat and visitor service programs and others have seen improvements since 2002, refuge managers are concerned about their ability to sustain high quality refuge conditions and continue to improve conditions where needed because of expected continuing increases in external threats and habitat problems affecting refuges. Already, FWS has had to make trade-offs among refuges with regard to which habitats will be monitored and maintained, which visitor services will be offered, and which refuges will receive adequate law enforcement coverage. FWS's efforts to prioritize its use of funding and staff through workforce planning have restored some balance between refuge budgets and their associated staff costs. However, if threats and problems afflicting refuges continue to grow as expected, it will be important for the refuge system to monitor how these shifts in resources are affecting refuge conditions.

Madam Chair, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For further information about this testimony, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov. Contact points for our offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Trish McClure, Assistant Director; Mark Braza; David Brown; Stephen Cleary; Timothy J. Guinane; Carol Henn; Richard Johnson; Michael Krafve; Alison O'Neill; George Quinn, Jr.; and Stephanie Toby made key contributions to this statement.

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