



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Washington, D.C. 20240



In Reply Refer To:
FWS/ANRS / 055789

SEP 27 2013

Memorandum

To: Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

From: Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System, *James W. Keith*

Subject: Effects of Budget Reductions and Sequestration on the National Wildlife Refuge System

Funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System has been reduced by \$50 million since FY10. The most dramatic cut was caused by sequestration, which cut \$33 million in FY13 alone. The Refuge Annual Performance Plan (RAPP) compiles information that reveals whether the Refuge System is meeting its performance targets. We have just received FY13 RAPP reports from the field. These data show that performance has declined in many important categories, including habitat condition, habitat management, hunting and fishing, volunteerism, scientific research, and more.

Maintaining high quality habitat for fish and wildlife is the most important work on refuges. Without high quality habitat, refuges would find it difficult or impossible to accomplish refuge purposes and fulfill the mission of the Refuge System. Unfortunately, between FY2010 and FY2013, we saw a 9% decline in the number of upland acres receiving needed management and a 5% drop in open water acres receiving needed management. As management attention declines, invasive species cement their foothold. Over the same period, we treated 37% less acreage for invasive plants and accordingly saw a 60% drop in the acreage where control of invasive plants was achieved. The number of invasive animal populations we controlled has decreased by 46% since FY10.

Information on our use of prescribed fire to reduce hazardous fuels in FY13 is still being compiled. In FY09 we used prescribed fire to reduce hazardous fuels on more than 400,000 acres. Last year we treated 206,913 acres. This year we expect to treat approximately 100,000 acres.

Habitat improvement and restoration are two key elements of providing high quality habitat. However, the number of acres of forest/shrubland improvement has declined by 51% since FY2010, while wetland acres restored has declined by 77% and riparian miles restored is down 19%. Refuges are doing less in many other habitat-related areas, too, including farming (-20%), mowing/haying grasslands (-20%), acres of managed moist soil units (-21%), and more. The decline in habitat quality is hitting both refuge lands *and* waters, as the 303d impaired surface water acreage has increased by 23.5%.

Since FY10, we are conducting 15.5% fewer research studies annually and there has been a 14% drop in the number of Inventory & Monitoring surveys. Refuge managers need current, accurate data to inform important management decisions and the decline in available information is troubling.

Demand to use and enjoy refuges continues to grow with a 6.7% increase in visitation from FY10 to FY13. Wildlife observation visits are up 12% and photography visits are up 33%. Both hunting and fishing visits are down more than 3% since FY10, and there's been a 2% drop in the number of visitors who stop at a visitor center or contact station. As refuges lose staff who had been dedicated to visitors and volunteers, we've seen a 8.6% drop in the number of volunteers—a disturbing trend given the Service's increasing reliance on volunteers for maintenance, interpretation, visitor center operations, and much more.

We face an unknown future where we are hoping for the best and planning for the worst. In a July 11, 2013 memorandum to the Regional Refuge Chiefs, I requested they begin a workforce planning process that would help set priorities and guide us into the future using budget planning targets we were given for FY14 and FY15.

We have analyzed those plans and have identified 455 positions that we would need to eliminate from FY12 levels to meet planning targets. These plans set clear priorities we will propose if we prepare an operational plan for FY14. We must provide for resource protection and visitor safety and will not propose any reduction in our law enforcement and fire management capacities. Our deferred maintenance funding is already inadequate and cutting it will only increase future costs. We will focus our visitor services programs at urban and other high visitation refuges. Volunteer and community partnership work will be a priority. At refuges with lower visitation, most interpretive and environmental education efforts either will be conducted by volunteers or will cease. We would find it necessary to eliminate our entire planning line of work in order to meet FY15 targets. As many as twenty refuges may be completely de-staffed. We agreed to target a disproportionate amount of staff and funding reductions in Regional and Headquarters offices in order to continue as much of our on-the-ground conservation work and visitor service as possible.

We hope that the Service's budget request will be considered favorably by the Congress. It reflects our plans for the National Wildlife Refuge System. But if we continue to see the sequester remain in place and are forced to absorb further reductions, we are prepared to make the difficult decisions required to implement them. We must also be prepared to see our performance data show a continued significant decline in our conservation work and visitor services. The results for our national wildlife refuges, the communities that benefit economically from them, and the citizens that enjoy them will be consequential. We will not be able to maintain the level of stewardship people expect of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A summary of the RAPP data is provided below.

Measures for which performance declined >50% from FY10 to FY13

1. Acres of forest/shrubland improvement (-51%)
2. Wetland acres restored (-77%)
3. Open water acres restored (-84%)
4. Acres of non-native, invasive plants controlled (-60%)

Measures for which performance declined 25-50% from FY10 to FY13

1. Acres treated for non-native, invasive plants (-37%)
2. Number of invasive animal populations controlled during the year (-46%)

Measures for which performance declined 15-25% from FY10 to FY13

1. Number of population management actions (-23%)
2. Number of research studies (-15.5%)
3. Acres of moist soil managed (-21%)
4. Acres of farming (-20%)
5. Acres of mowed/hayed grasslands (-20%)
6. Acres managed by "other" techniques (-15%)
7. Riparian miles restored (-19%)
8. Number of surface water acres impaired according to state 303d listings (-23.5%)

Measures for which performance declined 3%-15% from FY10 to FY13

1. Number of I&M Surveys accomplished (-14%)
2. Uplands receiving needed management (-9%)
3. Open water receiving needed management (-5%)
4. Total refuge acres receiving needed management (-6%)
5. Restoration deferred on upland acres (-4.5%)
6. Restoration deferred on wetland acres (-12.5%)
7. Acres of water-level manipulation (-8%)
8. Total hunt visits (-3% from FY11 to FY13)
9. Fishing visits (-3%)
10. Upland game hunt visits (-6%)
11. Big game hunt visits (-3% from FY11 to FY13)
12. Number of volunteers (-8.6%)
13. Volunteer hours (-3% from FY11 to FY13)
14. Total "other" recreational participants (-7%)

Measures for which performance increased from FY10 to FY13

1. Number of visitors (6.7%)
2. Waterfowl hunt visits (4.4%)
3. Other Mig bird hunt visits (8%)
4. Number of foot trail/pedestrian visits (11.5%)
5. Number of auto tour visits (13%)
6. Number of boat trail/launch visits (15%)
7. Wildlife Observation visits (12%)
8. Photography participants (33%)
9. Interpretation participants involved in programs/talks (41%)