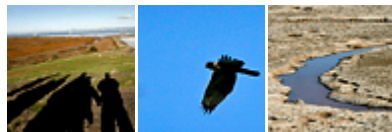


[Wildlife refuges on life support](#) [Flat budgets imperil future of the system](#)

- [Paul McHugh, Chronicle Outdoors Writer](#)

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A caged canary in a coal mine, it's not. Actually, it's a brown pelican rookery found on a Florida river. But the plight of Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge -- declared as the nation's first such refuge by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1903 -- warns of a crisis beginning to sweep over the entire National Wildlife Refuge System. Eventually, it can hit refuge units in the Bay Area.

System-wide problems stem from stagnant budgets, endlessly deferred maintenance and seriously over-stretched agency personnel. These combine to render threadbare an important network designed to preserve habitat and wildlife (including endangered species) and provide public education and recreation.

The situation is worsened this year by the failure of the 109th Congress to pass federal funding bills before its members beat feet out of Washington at the end of the session. That means refuge funding will limp along at the lowest possible level under a "continuing resolution" regimen, probably until September.

At Pelican Island on Florida's east-central coast, staffing by members of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has fallen from six to two, curtailing refuge work, restricting public visitation and threatening the end of a wildlife festival that has been a 14-year-long tradition. Its last gasp could come as early as next year.

After creation of that first Florida refuge, the nation's refuge system grew to a behemoth of 96 million acres that now includes 545 individual refuges, 75 wildernesses and 1,000 miles of Wild & Scenic river -- all overseen by the USFWS. However, though much has been added to the system over the past century, budgets didn't rise to match the obligations.

Watchdog groups claim the backlog on infrastructure such as levees, visitor centers, offices and maintenance buildings, fences, restrooms, parking areas and signage is in the \$2.5 billion to \$3 billion range.

The annual operating budget for this entire refuge system, after reaching a high-water mark of \$390 million during the run-up to the refuge-system centennial in 2003, has stalled and begun to drop. Refuge advocates claim, after analyzing USFW figures, that for the system to work properly, annual appropriations should be around \$700 million.

"Consider rising costs for fuel, equipment and salaries, and you can see the USFW must get \$16 million more added to its budget each and every year, or the service is looking at a de facto cut of that size," said Sean McMahan, director of the national land stewardship campaign for the National Wildlife Federation, a nonprofit educational and watchdog group based in Reston, Va.

"So, the system now faces a tremendous crisis, after having to make do with less for years,"

McMahon said. "They've laid people off in the Southeast and Northeast regions, including mission-critical staff like biologists. These cuts will go nationwide. They will affect visitor services, interpretation, habitat and wildlife. You'll see reductions in law enforcement, treating invasive species and using prescribed burns.

"It's really going to affect the quality of the experiences Americans have when they visit National Wildlife Refuges. It has started on the East Coast, but make no mistake, it will affect refuges across the country."

Defenders of Wildlife, another nonprofit group, quoting congressional testimony, says the USFWS has lost 600 staffers nationwide in the past two years (for a 7 percent reduction), and faces another 10 percent decline in the Northeast Region alone. It warns that soon seven refuges in that area will have no staff at all, including Great Bay in New Hampshire, Plum Tree and Martin in Chesapeake Bay.

CARE (the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, a coalition of 21 sports and conservation groups) claims that nine of 10 refuges in the northeast won't be able to meet even basic operating costs by 2013.

The Southeast Region, with 128 refuges on 4 million acres, already has let go 10 percent of its workforce, and more workers are scheduled for departure. An official planning document for the region states that "core mission functions will be maintained at least minimally on each refuge."

But it admits that more than a third of the refuges will lack full-time personnel. And Pelican Island will be "losing its only public-use staff and eliminating all active outreach at the nation's first national wildlife refuge."

Grady Hocutt, a 30-year veteran of the USFW, calls himself, "an old duck farmer." This former refuge manager now works as a college instructor, and as the "refugekeeper" for PEER (Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility). One of Hocutt's pet peeves is "the euphemism they use for mothballing a refuge. They say they'll 'put it in preservation status.'

"Well, if there's no active law enforcement at a site, there will be trespass and poaching," Hocutt said. "Structures and dikes will fall down, and the invasive plants will sprout up. Try to come back in five years and fix it, and you'll find all your problems have grown much, much worse."

Despite this tide of dire assessments, Marge Kolar said, "The sky is not falling on the entire refuge system." Things don't look quite so bleak in the West. Yet.

Kolar has been USFW chief of refuges for California and Nevada for just more than a year. Previously, she served as manager of the San Francisco Complex of seven refuges (spanning the Bay Area from the Antioch Dunes to the Farallon Islands) for 11 years.

"What's precipitating this is a finding at the national level, that with our overall budget staying flat, too much of our funding was going into staff salaries," Kolar said. "A directive went out that all regions would have to get salaries down to the 70-80 percent range, so the rest could be available for maintenance, supplies, training and everything else.

"Fortunately, in this region, my predecessors had already done a good job of hitting that proportion," Kolar said. "We're not in such bad shape. We'll be able to skate through this at least until 2009. After that, we can't predict. The problems seen now in the East might show up here."

That doesn't mean there are no present challenges.

Mendel Stewart, who took Kolar's old job in the San Francisco Complex, cites two. Lange's metalmark butterfly, one endangered species under USFW care, plunged in numbers by 90 percent from last year, in its prime habitat at Antioch Dunes. And 9,600 acres of salt ponds acquired for restoration as habitat in Don Edwards San Francisco Bay refuge came with 70 miles of levees that must be stabilized to prevent flooding in South Bay shoreline cities. This headache is now one more USFW responsibility, without a corresponding increase in the refuge baseline budget, although temporary add-ons have been granted.

Among assets, Kolar and Stewart number support from local foundations (the Hewlett, Packard and Moore foundations, and the Goldman Fund) that help fund new work on the ponds and levees, grants from the Coastal Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board. A sportsmen's group, Ducks Unlimited secured a grant for Bair Island restoration.

They say Sen. Dianne Feinstein has proven a dedicated and reliable backer of local refuges, at the federal level.

In addition, the Bay Area is notable for a large amount of civic volunteerism that helps plug gaps in refuge operations. Volunteers contributed 39,000 hours last year, doing everything from bird counts to habitat restoration and leading interpretive wildlife walks.

"Citizen volunteers perform the bulk of our outreach now," Stewart said. "These people listen more, and care more, than in many other places. They always look over our shoulders, which is a good thing. It's not just blind support. They tell us if we're doing good, or not."

National Wildlife Refuge information

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official site, fws.gov/refuges

National Wildlife Refuge Association, links to more than 220 local refuge "Friends" groups, www.refugenet.org

San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society, primary support group for local refuges, annual festival, www.sfbws.org

Friends of the San Pablo National Wildlife Refuge, North Bay work, annual Flyway Festival, www.pickleweed.org

Salt-pond-restoration project updates, southbayrestoration.org

San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, guided tours and volunteer opportunity, www.sfbbo.org

Point Reyes Bird Observatory, tours, education, projects, www.prbo.org

Save The Bay, tours, education, issues, www.savesfbay.org

The Bay Institute, ecosystem restoration, www.bay.org

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, national issues, www.peer.org

National Wildlife Federation, protection of wildlife and habitat, www.nwf.org

Defenders of Wildlife, endangered species, wildlife conservation,

www.defenders.org

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