

Testimony of Denis Mudderman, Board Member and Volunteer
Tamarac Interpretive Association (Friends of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge)
Before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Concerning Fiscal Year 2009 National Wildlife Refuge System Appropriations

April 25, 2008

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Tamarac Interpretive Association, the friend's organization of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota, I am submitting testimony for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. We support a funding level of \$514 million in FY 2009 for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance (O&M) account and adequate funding for Visitor Services.

Last year Congress responded to years of inadequate funding with an increase of \$39 million, bringing funding to the National Wildlife Refuge System to \$434 million. The President's proposed budget for FY09 of 434.1 million represents the same level of funding as the current fiscal year. In order to maintain services and programs from the previous year, the National Wildlife Refuge System budget must increase by \$15 million each year. The \$15 million amount is derived from increases for cost-of-living for FWS personnel, growing rent and real estate costs, increasing energy prices, and other cost increases, while sustaining current levels of visitor services and wildlife management. The crisis that the Refuge System faces is that multiple years of stagnant budgets prior to FY07 have resulted in a \$3.5 billion Operations and Maintenance backlog. Backlogs, and what amounted to budget cuts prior to FY07, have forced plans for a 20% downsizing of the workforce. Across the Refuge System, refuge visitors often show up to find roads and visitor centers closed, observation platforms and hiking trails in disrepair, and habitat restoration and school education programs eliminated. Invasive plant species are taking over and with a deficiency of more than 500 law enforcement officers, illegal activities such as poaching and trespass are on the rise. The \$514 million target includes the required annual \$15 million increase plus begins to address the backlog crisis so that the Refuge System can fulfill its responsibility to administer nearly 100 million acres, nature programs, habitat restoration projects, and more.

Focusing on the challenges in the Midwest region, a year ago, the 20% workforce reductions required 71 positions to be cut, including 27 in Minnesota. These Minnesota lost positions included 9 managers/resource specialists, 6 park rangers, 6 biologists/biology technicians, 3 maintenance workers, and 3 administrative staff. In addition to position cuts in the field, reductions also included Region Office management divisions. Minnesota's 15 refuges alone have 441 unfunded, yet essential projects, totaling \$51.5 million. In the maintenance area of operations for Minnesota overall, the backlog exceeds \$64.0 million, which severely impedes refuge staff from protecting wildlife habitat and providing for recreational opportunities.

The impact of this budgetary operations and maintenance backlog is also felt at Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge. The loss of one of the station's maintenance positions (that has yet to be refilled), has resulted in creating a backlog of repairs and regular maintenance of facilities, vehicles, refuge roads, parking areas, and hiking trails. Since the remaining maintenance position is seasonal, there has been reduced snow removal on refuge roads, parking areas, and at the Refuge Headquarters/Visitor Center. With public lake accesses not being plowed on a regular bases, ice fishermen have had a more difficult time getting out on the ice to fish. During the muzzleloader deer season some hunters were unable to access portions of the refuge because of snow-blocked roads where no one was available to plow. Deer hunting on the refuge is not just a recreational opportunity, but it is critical for management of the deer population and conserving a healthy habitat. Maintenance backlogs include the need to repave our Visitor Center parking lot and our Chippewa picnic area restrooms need to be updated. At our Visitor Center/Refuge Headquarters, continuing water leakage has caused an assortment of damage and problems, including the lost productivity from moping up water after each heavy rain.

Our wider community, with Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, as its commercial and population center, is also host to Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge and the Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District. The budget crisis has resulted in the lost of one staff position at the nearby Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District causing the elimination of biological surveys used to influence wildlife habitat restoration and land protection activities. Local partnerships have been strained due to lack of staff. In addition, the entire staff of Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge was reassigned to Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District along with the elimination of the Hamden Slough's refuge manager position. This transfer of refuge staff has resulted in a diminished capacity to intensively manage Hamden Slough habitats. These staff reductions and reorganizations have also impacted Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge. Not only must Tamarac refuge staff deal with backlog and reduced operational funding, but their duties frequently now included those of Hamden Slough and the Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District, further decreasing wildlife management at Tamarac.

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1938 to serve as a breeding ground and sanctuary for migratory birds and other wildlife. Tamarac Refuge's 42,724 acres lies in the heart of one of the most diverse vegetative transition zones in North America, where tall grass prairie, northern hardwood and boreal forests converge. These transitional habitats provide a haven for a diversity of wildlife species and some, such as the timber wolf, are at the extreme edge of their range in Minnesota. While the needs of wildlife are the first priority, Tamarac Refuge also provides many opportunities for visitors to enjoy and learn about our natural world through wildlife-compatible activities. These six priority public uses, set by legislation, include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation.

Banking on Nature 2006: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation, found that national wildlife refuges are major economic engines for their communities. Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge generated final demand totaling nearly \$1.6 million with associated employment of 24 jobs, \$491,200 in employment income and \$235,600 in total tax revenue. Put another way, for every \$1 of budget expenditure there was a \$2.5 economic effect.

Public visitation at Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge continues to rise, going from 58,500 in FY 2006 to 63,000 visitors in FY 2007. Our Visitor Center received 6,950 visitors in FY 2007. While the number of ‘visitors’ are the actual count of people, the number of ‘visits’ indicates the number of times people participate in an activity. The total estimated visits for the refuge in FY 2007 were 87,146. Available data from FY2006, show 3,800 people visited the refuge for big game hunting, 1,300 for small game, 1,525 for migratory bird hunting, 4,000 for fishing, 31,700 for wildlife observation, 15,000 for birding, and 6,000 for hiking nature trails. The *Banking on Nature 2006* study determined that this visitation resulted in \$1,211,700 of recreation expenditures, of which \$1,045,700 were from non-residents.

The lakes area in Northwestern Minnesota, like the areas around other refuges near populated areas, has been rapidly developing with lakeside and rural seasonal and year-round homes. With diminishing habitat, Tamarac’s 42,724 acres are a key “refuge” for migratory bird and other wildlife production. Due to the same developmental pressures, the Tamarac NWR is also increasingly an island of relatively natural forests, lakes, marshes, and prairie. Development and “No trespassing or hunting” signs proliferating across the landscape also make Tamarac NWR an important remaining public hunting area. Several lakes on the refuge are open to fishing, providing a fishing experience on a more pristine lake. Tamarac NWR also has an active visitor services and education program, with interpretive trails, observation decks, guided tours, special weekend interpretive opportunities, and a visitor center. Last year, Tamarac staff provided programs for over 4,000 students and adults. With the refuge’s primary purpose of migratory bird and wildlife production, these additional and sometimes competing uses are managed well. Tamarac NWR, as all refuges, is completing a Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan with input from public hearings, to better balance public use while maintaining its first priority of the protection of wildlife and habitat. Increasing visitation makes the job of balancing wildlife and people evermore important; a critical time for needing staff and resources.

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge is also a key resource for area schools and science education. In FY07, 4,100 school children participated in environmental education programs at Tamarac and 2,795 off-site. Other educational programs for families in 2007, accounted for 2,636 additional participants. For example, first graders from Frazee, Minnesota, come each May to plant trees, finding the funding themselves for the seedlings. Aida wrote back to the refuge the following: *I learned about planting pine trees. I heard the male frogs singing a song to the lady frogs in the pond. I learned about ant hills. I learned how trees grow. I also learned about deer scat. I saw ducks in the pond.* Last year, third graders visited Tamarac NWR from Moorhead, Minnesota, saw Eagles and Osprey for the first time, and marveled at a giant nine foot high beaver dam. The most creative were teachers and students from Detroit Lakes (Minnesota) Middle School that combined multiple subjects in completing several global positioning system exercises at the refuge. In addition to math, science, and technology, their work included writing, two examples follow: **Tamarac**, By Levi Johnson: *As I stepped off the bus. To my wonder. Bright red and golden leaves hanging from the trees. Sun so bright. Crisp fall air. Crisp, crunchy leaves under my feet. Friends laughing as they walk. Back to the bus we go.* **Tamarac**, By Rheanna Lind. *I slowly strolled through the tall grasses; Hoping not to trip and fall, Listening to the leaves crack under my feet, watching a mouse, my heart skips a beat. I gaze around watching the grass sway; My director yells it’s time to go away; I look around one last time; goodbye wildlife, goodbye Tamarac.* Without needed refuge funding that deals with the

operational deficit and maintenance backlog, for school groups, it could be a more permanent goodbye.

The Tamarac Interpretive Association, the friends group of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge, was founded in 1992. Our mission is to facilitate activities and programs that interpret, protect and restore the natural and cultural resources of the refuge. We work to support the refuge in any way we can and that is requested. We have been involved in assisting with interpretive and educational programs, improving of visitor center exhibits, assisting with special events, developing a library of educational materials, and we support the refuge's volunteer program. We operate a gift shop of wildlife and nature themed books, clothing, and other items. All proceeds, along with friends' group dues and other contributions, go to help us in our refuge supporting mission. With the mounting pressure on refuge budgets and staff, our friends group wrote and received a grant that helped to equip our friend's office with needed technology and upgraded our gift shop cash register and inventory system, all with the goal of enabling to do more.

Our friends group has no paid employees; all our time is volunteer time. In FY07, 109 volunteers at the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge donated 4,584 hours, up from 3,860 the year before. Forty-eight people volunteered regularly. Individuals assist the refuge with biological field studies, environmental education, facility maintenance, visitor center hosts, leading tours, and many other functions. In 2006, a FWS funded observation deck was totally constructed with volunteer labor. With the savings, binoculars and spotting scopes were purchased for the visitor services program. Last fiscal year, I was able to provide 1,376 volunteer hours and this fiscal year I have 978 to date. I've only been volunteering a few years, but then there are others who have been volunteering for many years. Ruth Dienst, for example, has volunteered leading refuge tours since 1992, and organized refuge tours from area resorts starting 16 years earlier. Health almost stopped her volunteering, but last summer she was driven to the refuge for each week's refuge tour. She delights visitors with her knowledge of plants and wild edibles, and she always brings her wild jams and teas for visitors to sample. There are many individual stories of commitment from dozens of hours a year to hundreds a year. Across the refuge system in 2006, 36,169 volunteers contributed 1,447,421 hours with a value of \$26,111,475.

We as volunteers and we as refuge friends groups can only do so much. Refuge system funding that amounts to annual cuts have not only eliminated any slack, but has produced maintenance and program backlogs. The refuge system faces a crippling budget backlog of more than \$3.5 billion. Funding pressures on our nation's wildlife refuge system are no longer a matter for refuge staff doing more with less, simply, less will be accomplished. As volunteers and members of friends groups, this situation severely stresses us. Our role is not to fill in staff and budget shortfalls. Yet, we try and do what we can.

We are exceedingly grateful for the subcommittee's support of \$451 million for FY08. As dedicated friends groups and volunteers, there is no greater affirmation of our work and our shared commitment to our nation's refuges. We urge funding our refuge system in FY09 at the \$514 level.